

Name _____ Date: _____

Jack Johnson

The first black heavyweight champion, John Arthur "Jack" Johnson was born on March 31, 1878, in Galveston, Texas.

Johnson's first fight came around when he was living in Boston. His opponent was a fellow longshoreman, and while the purse wasn't much—just \$1.50—Johnson jumped at the chance and won the fight. Not long after he earned \$25 for managing to stick out four rounds against professional boxer Bob Thompson.



Eager to get out of Galveston and try a life at boxing, Johnson left his home again in 1899. By the early 1900s, the 6'2" Johnson, who'd become known as the Galveston Giant, had made a name for himself in the black boxing circuit and had his eyes set on the world heavyweight title, which was held by white boxer Jim Jeffries. Jeffries refused to fight him. He wasn't alone. White boxers would not spar with their black counterparts.

Johnson was too hard to ignore. Finally, on December 26, 1908, Johnson, who often taunted his opponents as he beat them soundly, got his chance for the title when champion Tommy Burns fought him outside of Sydney, Australia. Burns, who had succeeded Jeffries as champion, had only agreed to fight Johnson after promoters guaranteed him \$30,000. The fight, lasted until the 14th round, when police stepped in and ended it. Johnson was named the winner.

From there, Johnson continued to challenge Jeffries to step into the ring with him. On July 4, 1910, he finally did. Dubbed the "Fight of the Century," more than 22,000 fans turned out for the fight, held in Reno, Nevada. After 15 rounds, Johnson came away victorious, and further angering white boxing fans who hated seeing a black man as the champion.

Jeffries was humbled by the loss and what he'd seen of his opponent. "I could never have whipped Johnson at my best," Jeffries said. "I couldn't have hit him. No, I couldn't have reached him in 1,000 years." For the fight, Johnson earned a purse of \$117,000. It would be five years before he lost the heavyweight title, when Johnson fell to Jess Willard in a 26-round bout in Havana, Cuba. Johnson continued to fight for another 12 years, hanging up his gloves for good at the age of 50.

As Johnson became a bigger name in the sport of boxing, he also became a bigger target for a white America that longed to see him ruined. For his part, Johnson loved to show off his wealth and his hatred for racial rules.

He drove expensive cars and spent money freely. In 1912, he was convicted of violating the Mann Act for bringing his white girlfriend across state lines before their marriage. Sentenced to prison, he fled to Europe, remaining there as a fugitive for seven years. He returned to the United States in 1920 and ultimately served out his sentence.

His life came to an end on June 10, 1946 when he died in an automobile accident in Raleigh, North Carolina. Since his death, Johnson's life and career have undergone a major rehabilitation. His alleged crimes are now seen as the result of racial bias in law enforcement. In 1990 he was inducted into the International Boxing Hall of Fame.