



THE SECRETARY OF THE INTERIOR
WASHINGTON

UNITED STATES
DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR

DESIGNATION OF JAMES WELDON JOHNSON PARK AS PART OF THE AFRICAN
AMERICAN CIVIL RIGHTS NETWORK

By the Secretary of the Interior of the United States of America

A PROCLAMATION

WHEREAS, the largest civil rights demonstration in the history of Jacksonville, Florida took place on August 27, 1960, when nearly 3,000 protestors peacefully demonstrated in Hemming Plaza, now James Weldon Johnson Park, as part of a coordinated effort to challenge racial discrimination; and

WHEREAS, the events that took place that day came to be known as Ax Handle Saturday and resulted in the eventual integration of public accommodations citywide after widespread racial violence; and

WHEREAS, earlier that morning, the Youth Council of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), led by African American high school student Rodney Hurst, participated in a peaceful protest by sitting at a whites-only lunch counter in the W.T. Grant Department Store in downtown Jacksonville; and

WHEREAS, this sit-in was part of a direct action campaign created by Rutledge Pearson, an African American social studies teacher and prominent local NAACP leader, who was inspired by the success of the lunch counter sit-ins in North Carolina the previous month; and

WHEREAS, when the young men and women were refused service and left the store, they were brutally attacked by a mob of Ku Klux Klan and White Citizens Council members carrying baseball bats and ax handles; and

WHEREAS, in nearby James Weldon Johnson Park, Klan members began a coordinated attack on the peaceful protestors, running them down and beating them with ax handles and bats previously hidden around the park; and

WHEREAS, the violence was first aimed at the lunch counter demonstrators but quickly escalated to include any African American in sight. Police stood idly by watching the beatings until members of a black street gang called "The Boomerangs" attempted to protect and defend those being attacked; and

WHEREAS, when the city finally deployed 200 police officers to quell the violence, 62 people were arrested, mostly Black, with many more people suffering bodily injuries from the vicious ax handle attacks; and

WHEREAS, a number of factors contributed to the wholesale violence of that day and led state NAACP leaders to converge on the City of Jacksonville to advise local officials on how to prevent violence; and

WHEREAS, Jacksonville's business community initially refused the NAACP's demands to integrate; only after the organization called for a citywide boycott of all segregated businesses did the Chamber of Commerce meet with NAACP officials and local Black organizations to reach a resolution; and

WHEREAS, the events of August 27, 1960, at James Weldon Johnson Park and the surrounding downtown area are significant as a major catalyst for the Black Freedom Struggle in Jacksonville.

NOW, THEREFORE, in recognition of the importance of James Weldon Johnson Park, located at 135 West Monroe Street in Jacksonville, Florida, and the events which occurred there on August 27, 1960, I, David L. Bernhardt, Secretary of the United States Department of the Interior, do designate James Weldon Johnson Park, which is a contributing resource to the Downtown Jacksonville Historic District and listed in the National Register of Historic Places as Hemming Plaza, as part of the African American Civil Rights Network under Public Law 115-104.

IN WITNESS WHEREOF, in recognition of this historic site, I have hereunto set my hand on this 27th day of August, the two hundred and forty-fifth year of independence of the United States of America.



Secretary of the Interior