

# Francis Johnson: Philadelphia Bandmaster and Composer

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The Penn Libraries are home to several distinguished research collections related to the musical arts in Philadelphia. Researchers from across the globe come to Penn to work with the papers of renowned Philadelphia musicians like Eugene Ormandy, Leopold Stokowski and Marian Anderson. The Rare Book and Manuscript Library also has materials associated with a number of lesser-known Philadelphia musicians who were central to the cultural life of the city. In 2006, the library acquired a collection of printed music by an important musician of early Philadelphia, Francis (Frank) Johnson (1792–1844)—a performer, bandleader, teacher and composer. From his mid-



*Portrait of Francis (Frank) Johnson (1792-1844)*

twenties until his death at the age of fifty-two, Johnson was Philadelphia's favorite dance-band leader, and his talents became known beyond his hometown through tours of the Midwest, summer residencies in Saratoga Springs and a trip to England during the last decade of his life.

Johnson was also an African American. He was born a free man and lived a free man, but this was America before the Civil War, a time when societal racism limited the activities of all African Americans. For most of his adult life, he lived in a house at 536 Pine Street (no longer standing), a part of a thriving community of free African Americans in Philadelphia. The Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission placed a marker on the site in 1992, commemorating the bicentennial of his birth.

We know little about Johnson's musical training, but by his mid-twenties he had become an accomplished violinist and cornetist. Through his virtuosity and his affable, courtly manner, he won the respect and admiration of the elite of Philadelphia society. Eventually, his musicmaking centered on two traditions of Philadelphia high society. The first was evening entertainment, for which his string and brass bands provided cotillions, waltzes and quadrilles suitable for dancing and socializing at balls as well as private parties. (He also spent his summers in Saratoga Springs, New York, where he provided music for similar functions at resort hotels.) The second tradition was regional militia gatherings, and for these, Johnson led a brass band that played marches and quicksteps for assemblies and processions. These militia groups were formed as a means of defense, but since they were rarely engaged in combat, the assemblies became opportunities for men of high society to gather and socialize, and Johnson's brass band would be hired to add an air of distinction to the events.

Johnson was known for his virtuosity as a performer on the Kent bugle—a bugle with keys, much like the saxophone, instead of valves, like a trumpet or cornet. He also played the violin. As a composer, there was nothing particularly groundbreaking about his music—which is not surprising. He was an African-American musician working within the music traditions of white society, and he adopted a style that suited the tastes of his audience. His music was light, simple and tuneful.

His band also provided music for ceremonial events, including several at the University of Pennsylvania. A Philadelphia *Daily Chronicle* article on the March 26, 1842 commencement of the Penn School of Medicine, held in the Musical Fund Hall on Locust Street, notes that “Frank Johnson’s brass and stringed instruments enlivened the meeting at intervals by playing the following pieces in excellent style,” and then lists original compositions by Johnson, Strauss waltzes, excerpts from Bellini’s *Norma* and “The Star-Spangled Banner.”

In June 1837, Johnson announced that he intended to “close his professional duties” in the fall in preparation for a trip to Europe. According to the announcement, “His principal object in making the tour of Europe is to improve his musical capacity and knowledge, so as to be able, in a much greater degree than formerly, to contribute to the gratification of the public.” There is no evidence that Johnson’s band traveled beyond London, but even so, this was the first known performance by an American music ensemble in Europe. While in London, Johnson became acquainted with the popular promenade concert tradition established by Frenchman Philippe Musard, and when he returned to Philadelphia in the fall of 1838, he began planning a series of musical soirées based on those promenade concerts. The first occurred on December 26, 1838 in the Philadelphia Museum, which had opened a few months earlier at the corner of 9th and Samson Streets.

Johnson also made regional tours of the Midwest, which advanced his reputation outside the Philadelphia area. While Johnson’s success and popularity as a bandleader insulated him from the most egregious expressions of racism in Philadelphia, when he left his hometown things were different. Johnson and his African-American band members did not always receive a warm welcome while on tour. Local bands were often resentful of the visiting musicians because they took away business. Expressions of racism toward Johnson and his band were open and often hostile. While in St. Louis in December 1842, the band was arrested for violating state and city laws that forbade free blacks from staying in the state without a license. A few months later, in Allegheny City, PA, a mob pursued the band after a concert, “hurling brick-bats, stones and rotten eggs in great profusion upon the unfortunate performers. One poor fellow was severely, it is feared dangerously wounded in the head, and others were more or less hurt” (*New York City Tribune*, June 9, 1843).

The published editions of Johnson’s music are all for piano. Before the age of radio and recorded sound, playing from sheet music was the only way for the general public to enjoy music in the home. Because the piano was the most common household instrument, publishers issued the popular music of the day—such as Johnson’s band music—in arrangements that could be performed by skilled amateur pianists.

Johnson's earliest publication was "A Collection of New Cotillins [sic], 1st Sett" (1818), and with its appearance, he became the first published African American composer. Over 250 of Johnson's compositions were published during succeeding decades, and copies for most of these have survived.

For more information on Francis Johnson—and to hear some of his music—visit the virtual exhibit *Francis Johnson: Music Master of Early Philadelphia* on the Penn Libraries website at [www.library.upenn.edu/exhibits/music/fjohnson](http://www.library.upenn.edu/exhibits/music/fjohnson)