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## **WHY MIGHT JAMES WILLIAM JOHNSON HIDE HIS TRUE IDENTITY?**

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It has been proffered that James William Johnson (1860-1934) hid his identity from about the age of nineteen; that he, and some members of his family, managed to maintain this secret well beyond his death; and that he was actually Patrick Alford, born in Illinois to Robert F. Alford and Alsa Evans (Alford).

If this hypothesis is true, that he hid his identity, it is important to know why he lived under an alias name for most of his life, and what event or events motivated him to do so. If it can be shown that Johnson had real or imagined reasons for protecting another identity, it will make clear why there are so many apparent contradictions in the records about his place of birth.

The purpose of this article is not to show where Johnson was born, but to clarify why he might have been motivated to prevaricate regarding his true identity.

There are literally no known records regarding the person called James William Johnson prior to his marriage to Sarah Jane Anderson on 10 Sep 1885 at the residence of Jane's brother in Pemiscot County, Missouri.<sup>1</sup> This vacuum of information does not prove that Johnson lived under another identity, however, such records should be available, and it is understand-

able why a researcher would expect at least some records to exist. It can *inferred* that there must be a reasonable explanation for this absence. Conversely, if it is argued that Johnson was an alias name for another individual, then there must be substantial record evidence for that alternate identity.

Johnson lived for more than a quarter of a century<sup>2</sup> before one record was filed about him. After that, hundreds of records about him have been located. Such a revelation begs the question, "When an abundance of records should be easily located, why have none been found?" Was it because he lived under an assumed identity?

The first thin layer of information was found in a hand-written document created by Elsa Allean Newton.<sup>3</sup> She was Johnson's sister's daughter. His sister was Belle Alford (Newton). In Allean's document, she connected in a precise manner the names "Paddy Alford" and "Jim Johnson," reconciling them to be the same individual. There is further documentation that clearly shows that James Johnson was called "Jim Johnson" by most people,<sup>4</sup> but "Paddy" by his sister, Susan Isabelle Alford (Newton).

Using this document as a threshold record, it is important to examine any information regarding Paddy Alford that would give rise to a name change and a second identity. It would be critical to discover what event might have predicated that identity change; when that event took place; and where it took place.

If this triggering event occurred after Johnson's marriage in 1885; if it took place in a location far removed from the geography that Johnson would have naturally occupied; or if the event was *not* of a nature to precipitate the suggested identity change, its determinate value would be significantly reduced. Addi-

tionally, if Johnson was actually Alford, he must be shown to have been connected to other members of the family known to be related to Johnson.

Dealing with the connection first, it is clear that Patrick "Paddy" Alford, who was also called "Mace", was connected as a family member as early as 1870. While living in Macoupin County, Illinois, the Alford family of Robert and Alsa was enumerated.<sup>5</sup> Counted with these parents were their children, including Susan Alford, who has been shown to be Belle Alford (Newton), sister of James William Johnson.<sup>6</sup>

Another child counted with this family was William [Thomas] Alford, who has been identified by his descendants as Richard Joseph Johnson, James William Johnson's brother.<sup>7</sup>

Other siblings include Sarah Elizabeth Alford, George "Zack" Alford, Rachel Rebecca Alford, Alsa Ellen Alford and Robert Alford, but the full connection is noted by the inclusion of nine year old Patrick Alford, aka "Patty" or "Mace" Alford.<sup>8</sup>

Having connected James Johnson to the Alford family, it is necessary to find that pivotal event which would have caused Patrick "Mace" Alford to change his identity. That signal moment came on 2 Aug 1879 in the Watson Community of Tarrant County, Texas when Mace Alford was involved in a gun fight. With him was his brother, William "Tom" Alford, who was shot in the back. Although Tom survived and went into hiding, two other individuals died. They were George White and Bill Lytle.

Subsequent to this event, on 26 Sep 1879, an indictment against Mace Alford was issued by the Grand Jury of Tarrant County for the charge of the felonious murder of George White.<sup>9</sup> After this, Patrick "Mace" Al-

ford went into hiding until James William Johnson surfaced in Pemiscot County, Missouri six years later in 1885.

From that moment on, there have been hundreds of records located, legal and personal, regarding Johnson. However, because of his shadowy past, Johnson was motivated to intentionally disguise information that might lead to his true identity, which was Patrick "Mace" Alford.

This behavior would explain why Johnson often claimed his birth place was in Tennessee, while it is clear that he was born in Illinois.<sup>10</sup> Subsequently, family members either believed the Tennessee birth place was accurate or they intentionally continued to perpetuate the informational distortion.

James William Johnson was Patrick "Mace" Alford, and the charge of murder arising out of Texas gave him ample reason to deliberately misdirect individuals and institutions, including census records, with inaccurate intelligence.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Pemiscot County, Missouri, marriage license, Book 1, page 78, James William Johnson & Sarah Jane Anderson, 10 Sep 1885; Pemiscot County Courthouse, Caruthersville, Missouri.

<sup>2</sup> Walnut Grove Cemetery Marker (Sevier County, Arkansas; also known as West Line Cemetery), James William Johnson); photographed by Holly D. Winegardner (Johnson), 15 July 1998. [He was born on 20 Jul 1860).

<sup>3</sup> Elsie Allean Newton, "History: Momma's Mother," Page 1-4; hand written manuscript, birth, marriage, and death dates, Dallas, Texas; privately held by cousin, Ema Jane McFadin, [address for private use], Arlington, Texas, 2013.

<sup>4</sup> De Queen Bee Newspaper (De Queen, AR) p. 1, col. 3-5; Sevier County Library, Sevier County, AR (De Queen). [James Johnson's Obituary].

<sup>5</sup> Year: 1870; Census Place: *Township 10 Range 7, Macoupin, Illinois*; Roll: *M593\_250*; Page: *163B*; Image: *328*; Family History Library Film: *545749*.

<sup>6</sup> Johnson, JJ, AAFA Action #58, Fall 2002, pg. 20, 21, 22, & 31, "Can Belle Newton Be Identified As Susan Isabelle Alford?"

<sup>7</sup> Interview, 2 Jan 2002, with Robert George Black by James W. Johnson, by phone from Pinellas County, Florida to Cherokee County, Georgia. Handwritten notes in possession.

<sup>8</sup> Year: 1870 Census.

<sup>9</sup> *The State of Texas vs. Mace Alford*, 26 Sep 1879, Indictment, Case No. 1784.

<sup>10</sup> Year: 1870 Census.