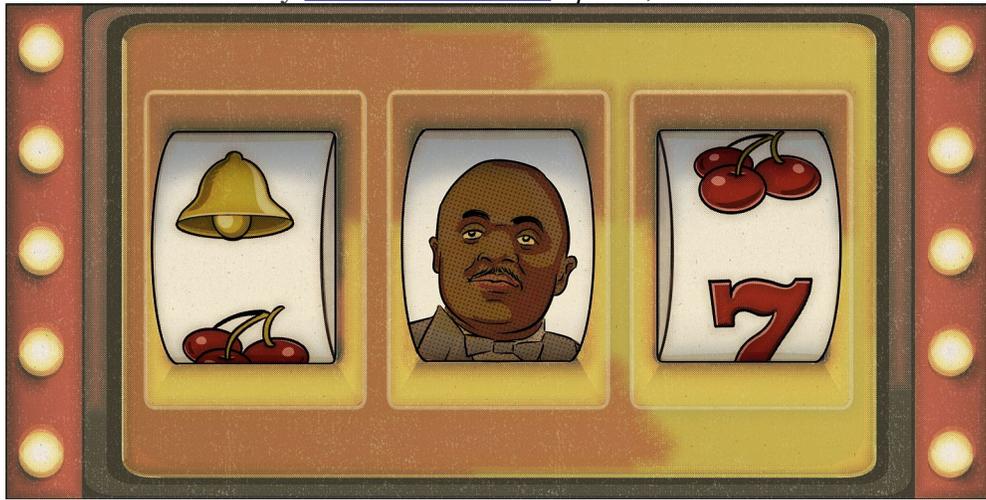


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The Black Gambling King of Chicago

By [Michael LaPointe](#) April 7, 2020



If you could trace the fate of just one dollar that passed through the hands of John “Mushmouth” Johnson, where would it lead? It probably came to his hands off a craps table or from an office of his policy syndicate, and more likely than not, it would go on to be slipped into the pocket of some crooked cop or double-dealing politician. But if Johnson, whom local papers called “the Negro Gambling King of Chicago,” managed to hold on to it, that dollar might end up supporting a hub of black music in the twenties, or the first black-owned bank in Chicago, or a poetic precursor of the Harlem Renaissance. It would grant Johnson, in death, a respectability he was denied in life.

Johnson’s life was characterized by a constant tension between philanthropy and corruption. Born to the nurse of Mary Todd Lincoln in 1857, Johnson moved from his native Saint Louis to Chicago at an early age. Some said his nickname, Mushmouth, referred to how much he cursed. Others said it was because of a “thick utterance he had in his speech when a boy.” Either way, the name signals how Johnson’s mode of expression, coupled with his lack of formal education, cut him off from genteel society. “I didn’t exactly do much book learning,” he recalled, many years later. “I went out to see where the money grew. Some of those who know me say that I found it.”

In 1882, Johnson got a job as a porter in a white-owned gambling house. He studied the business closely, and soon opened his own nickel-gambling joint on Clark Street. Johnson had a keen eye for real estate, and quickly managed to flip that location. In 1890, he took the proceeds and purchased a saloon at 464 South State Street. He called it the Emporium. It would be the seat of his gambling empire for nearly twenty years.

Decked out in Gay Nineties style, with rococo chandeliers and a bar of Honduran mahogany, the Emporium offered three stories of action: billiards on the first floor, craps and roulette on the second, and poker on the third. In order of popularity, the bar served whiskey, gin, and beer. Scorning the day's more flamboyant scarves, Johnson presided over the Emporium in a neat black four-in-hand knot, with a pin set with a small stone. As for that stone, one gambler said, "You can bet it's the goods."

The Emporium became a fixture on a block known as Whiskey Row, an area that was, to say the least, disreputable. It's where Mickey Finn famously served knockout drinks at the Lone Star Saloon and robbed his unconscious customers (giving his name to the phrase "slipping someone a mickey"). But Johnson's Emporium was held in relatively high esteem. Black or white, rich or poor, you had a place at his gambling tables. Historian Dempsey Travis quotes his father as saying, "Where else could a country boy go just ten days out of Georgia and feel like a big-time gambler for only a nickel?"

In addition to the Emporium, Johnson was heavily invested in the game of policy. Basically a lottery, policy required bettors to place money on one or more numbers between 1 and 78. Twelve numbers would be drawn from a tumbling drum, and the wins could be enormous. One common play was called a gig, the choice of three numbers that, if drawn, could pay off at a rate of 100 to 1.

Bets could be as low as a penny, and so policy was wildly popular among the poor. Some saw the game as parasitic, draining what little wealth people possessed. But as Nathan Thompson, author of *Kings: The True Story of Chicago's Policy Kings and Numbers Racketeers* (2003), told me, "Policy was the economic engine that facilitated the progress of the black community." Many jobs were required to keep the game afloat, and policy subsidized countless businesses and institutions in the community: "Black hospitals, black banks, black insurance companies, black mom-and-pop grocery stores, black political careers and law careers," Thompson said. For someone like Mushmouth Johnson, with virtually no education or access to capital, policy was a path to prosperity. As he asked the *Chicago Tribune*, "What else is there for a colored man to do?"

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Running a saloon and a policy syndicate wasn't exactly honest work. One gambler said he'd witnessed people pawning their shoes after a bad night at the Emporium, and men "playing in their underclothing on the proceeds of their outer garments." But with all the pockets Johnson had to grease, it wasn't exactly honest pay, either. To understand the fate of any given dollar from Johnson's enterprises, one must grasp the convoluted state of political corruption in turn-of-the-century Chicago.

The Emporium was located in Chicago's First Ward, which at the time was controlled by the so-called Gray Wolves, a group of aldermen who hardly attempted to conceal the depths of their corruption. "Bathhouse" John Coughlin and "Hinky Dink" Mike Kenna operated gambling houses, brazenly purchased votes, and manipulated public service contracts for personal enrichment.

If you wanted to move up in the First Ward, you had to get in bed with the Wolves, and that's what Johnson did. An early appearance in the local papers comes in 1894, during the First Ward elections. "The gamblers were out in force and were spending money for votes," said the *Chicago Inter Ocean*. Johnson "was given to understand that he would have to poll 100 colored votes in his precinct or close up his crap joint."

The bond between Johnson and the political machine only tightened with time. Soon, he was collecting \$150 a week for police protection from gamblers in Chinatown, money that in turn went to the Wolves. Johnson was subject to the same extortion. With perhaps some exaggeration (he always claimed to be poorer than he was), Johnson said he had to pay four dollars in bribes for every one he took home.

Meanwhile, in city hall, Mayor Carter Harrison Jr. was being pressured to reform the city's vice districts. Although he frequently congratulated himself on his record of reform, Harrison's efforts were, at best, half-hearted. Taking in a swath of high-profile gamblers in 1903, including Johnson, the Inter Ocean noted that "ten years ago these men were poor. The bulk of their money has been accumulated during Mayor Harrison's 'reform' administration." Every now and then, the mayor would have saloons like the Emporium raided, but these initiatives were seen as mere publicity stunts. It wasn't until a citizens' association began pressuring city hall that things started to change, and that would have fateful consequences for the saloons of Whiskey Row.

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The year 1903 began auspiciously for Mushmouth Johnson. For \$40,000, he purchased the building across the street from the Emporium. Ultimately, his enduring fortune would reside in real estate. (He claimed, "I bought a lot on a prairie where a town afterwards was located.") But 1903 would prove the most unlucky year of what he called his "troubled and busy life."

His problems began with a gambler named Thomas Hawkins. This wasn't the first time Johnson ran afoul of an unhappy Emporium patron. In 1896, he'd been shot by someone who felt he'd been suckered. But Hawkins proved an unusually persistent troublemaker. The two men fell out over an \$18.75 bet that Hawkins claimed to have won and Johnson refused to pay. It's difficult to tell who was in the right, if anyone, but Johnson was often accused of being tightfisted. "For a man that has got all the coin that Johnson is said to have, he is the closest colored man in the world," said one gambler.

The Hawkins quarrel quickly escalated. 'MUSHMOUTH' JOHNSON IN DANGER OF LOSING AN EYE, read a headline in October 1903. Johnson had been struck in the face by Hawkins, a blow that shattered his glasses and sent shards into his eyes. (He recovered from the wound.)

Perhaps fearing retribution, Hawkins became an instrument of the police, and his tip led to a Saturday-night raid of the Emporium. Hawkins was right to have been afraid; less than twenty-four hours after the raid, he was shot through the left arm and breast by a man named Moses Love. From his hospital bed, Hawkins accused Johnson of arranging the attempted murder, though the charges never stuck.

The whole thing might've blown over—just another scuffle on State Street. But the citizens' association, which was trying to hold the mayor to his reform platform, pressed him into establishing a graft committee to investigate corruption. After the shooting, Hawkins turned state against State Street, offering to testify before the committee that illegal gambling was active at the Emporium. His testimony would give the lie to the mayor's assertions that Chicago was gambling-free.

Johnson appears to have felt the committee closing in. He gave an interview to the Tribune in which he attempted to get ahead of the charges. "We used to have a little gambling here," he told the reporter, but nowadays "the dust is an inch thick upstairs." But Johnson hadn't closed the saloon for the interview, and the

Emporium was inconveniently packed. “You can’t judge by this,” he insisted. “All the rest of the week it will be like a graveyard.”

Two days later, Johnson’s saloon license was revoked. But this would be about the only thing the graft committee would accomplish. Behind the scenes, Mayor Harrison was expressing anger with the proceedings, and so, despite continued pressure from the citizens’ association, the committee eased off.

The Emporium had taken the heat for the whole corrupt system. Pointing out that Johnson, unlike the Gray Wolves, had never wavered in his loyalty to the mayor, the Inter Ocean said he’d nevertheless been “sacrificed on the altar of political expediency.” The Tribune printed an exultant limerick: “Mushmouth Johnson sat on a wall / Mushmouth Johnson had a great fall.” Meanwhile, as one member of the committee said, “The big fellows have not been reached.”

Johnson might’ve fallen, but he managed to stick the landing. A few months later, one of the attorneys of the graft committee encountered Johnson at a convention hall. After giving the attorney a warm handshake, Johnson introduced himself: “You and your graft committee had my license revoked. I didn’t think you could get it, but you did. My name is Mushmouth Johnson, and I want to congratulate you. I like a man who’s game.”

Soon enough, other issues consumed city hall’s attention, most spectacularly the Iroquois Theatre fire, in which more than six hundred people died. (It remains the deadliest single-building fire in American history.) Corruption had touched even the fire inspectors of Chicago, who’d overlooked building code violations at the Iroquois, and the mayor was embroiled in a scandal that went international. Everyone forgot about Johnson, and the roulette wheel started spinning at the Emporium once again.

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When Johnson gave an interview in 1907, it seemed like frivolous fun. He was announcing his retirement and bidding farewell to Chicago. Claiming he had only a fraction of his once-great fortune, Johnson said he’d take a trip around the world with what remained. “You’ll hear from me down in Africa shootin’ craps,” he said, unaware of what this interview would trigger.

UNIVERSITY SOCIETY GIRL PROVES NEGRESS, the papers said on July 26, 1907. At the time, Johnson’s sister Cecilia was pursuing her masters in history at the University of Chicago. By all accounts, Cecilia was deeply intelligent and intensely charismatic. An eminent member of the Phi Delta Phi sorority, she cut a glamorous figure on campus. She bought the best editions of all her schoolbooks, and during the city’s streetcar strike rode to campus in a carriage with a liveried coachman.

But according to the reports that splashed across front pages all over the country, no one at the university had known she was black. While there was never any effort to conceal the truth, she passed for white. “Feminine jealousy began to arise in the sorority,” the papers reported, both because of Cecilia’s wealth, and because “she made the biggest ‘hit’ of the society at the dances.” Her Phi Delta Phi sisters convened their own sort of committee and began investigating her background. When one of them read Johnson’s interview, which was conducted at his home on Wabash Avenue, they recognized the address as Cecilia’s. Not only was she black, she was the sister of a Whiskey Row saloon-keeper, kept in the latest fashions with “tainted money.”

Now relieved of their jealousy, the sorority girls were outraged. “We never for a brief moment suspected she had colored blood in her veins,” said one, while another added that it was just a tragic situation: “If it were not for

her color, I would willingly have her in my sorority.” Johnson, meanwhile, was disgusted. He’d witnessed every sort of mendacity and hypocrisy in his career, and said Cecilia’s “exposure” only served to expose “Chicago’s habits.” He was, he said, “glad that Chicago feels humiliated.”

But privately, Johnson was crushed by the racist abuse heaped upon Cecilia, who was forced to retreat from the academic world she’d conquered, and whom he regarded as “the brightest and most lovely thing” in his life. In September of that year, he was traveling to Kentucky from Atlantic City when he took ill with pneumonia, and died on the train. Despite his self-professed poverty, it was said that the Gambling King of Chicago’s fortune amounted to \$250,000 (about \$6.8 million today).

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In *Negroland*, Margo Jefferson writes about the black elite of Chicago, which perceived itself as “the Third Race, poised between the masses of Negroes and all class of Caucasians.” The lower classes of Black people, Jefferson writes, had “loud voices ... brash and garish ways.” Contrasting oneself with them reinforced one’s affiliation with “the colored elite ... the big families, the old families ... the pioneers.”

When Mushmouth Johnson wanted to do something positive for the community, he always had to do it indirectly. Whether it was contributing to the Baptist Church or helping to establish an old people’s home, the donation came through his mother or other relatives. His brash and garish ways, or what others called his “unsavory reputation and uncouth demeanor,” offended the black elite and prevented his open participation in civic life.

But in death, he gradually drifted over the divide. By 1933, his relatives were said to have come from “a pioneer Chicago family.”

The posthumous esteem is due, in large part, to the illustrious fate of that \$250,000 fortune. When Johnson’s sister Dora married Jesse Binga, Chicago’s leading black businessman, local papers called it “the most elaborate and the most fashionable wedding ever held in the history of the Afro-American race in this city.” Binga received \$200,000 of Johnson’s estate, which helped capitalize the Binga State Bank, the first black-owned and operated bank in Chicago.

In the arts, Johnson’s influence could be felt at the Pekin Theater, which Dempsey Travis called “the formal cradle of Negro drama in the United States.” The owner, Robert T. Motts, had worked under Johnson, and used that experience to start his own gambling business, which in turn funded the Pekin. And Johnson’s brother Elijah broke off a piece of the family fortune to build the Dreamland Café right across from Binga’s bank. Musicians like Louis Armstrong, Lil Hardin, King Oliver, and Alberta Hunter helped transform Dreamland into a major showcase of emerging black musical forms during the teens and twenties.

Johnson’s fortune even helped support the poetry of his nephew, Fenton Johnson, a key forerunner of the Harlem Renaissance. One of Fenton’s most famous poems, “Tired,” seems to look back to State Street: “I will go down to the Last Chance Saloon, drink a gallon or two of gin, shoot a game or two of dice.” One can almost hear Mushmouth Johnson’s lament after bribing yet another white Irish politician: “I am tired of work,” Fenton writes, “I am tired of building up somebody else’s civilization.”

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