

TWO AMERICAS • LUMINARIES • LITERARY

Notes of a Native Son

James Baldwin's Witness

Prepared for the Two Americas Archive

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Contribution Track • ERA V–VI • Durham & Greensboro, North Carolina

Who He Is

James Arthur Baldwin was born August 2, 1924, at Harlem Hospital, the eldest of what would become nine children. His stepfather, David Baldwin, was a strict factory worker and lay preacher who, per the Smithsonian's own account, "deeply mistrusted and expressed hatred for white people" — a worldview that clashed with young James's love of reading and theater. At fourteen Baldwin followed his stepfather into the pulpit of Mount Calvary of the Pentecostal Faith Church in Harlem, becoming a celebrated teenage evangelist known as "Brother Baldwin" for three years before he stopped preaching in 1941, later saying of the experience only that "that is what turned me into a writer."

Paris, 1948

At twenty-four, with about forty dollars and a writing fellowship, Baldwin left New York for Paris on November 11, 1948, to gain distance from the racism and homophobia of the United States. He spent much of the rest of his life moving between France and America. He had relationships with both men and women and is widely described as a gay or queer Black man, though he resisted the label "gay" as too narrow for his own self-understanding. That identity shaped both his fiction — most directly *Giovanni's Room* (1956), which his own publisher Knopf urged him to "burn" before Dial Press took it on — and his standing within the civil rights movement itself.

Go Tell It on the Mountain to The Fire Next Time

His autobiographical debut novel, *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953), drew directly on his stepfather and his own preaching years. *Notes of a Native Son* (1955), his first essay collection, remains a foundational text of American nonfiction. *The Fire Next Time* (1963), built around a letter to his nephew, became his best-known work of social criticism, a first edition of which the Library of Congress holds in its Aramont collection.

The Movement, and Its Edges

Beginning New Year's Day 1963, Baldwin toured the South for CORE, making roughly a dozen stops "from Greensboro, North Carolina to New Orleans, Louisiana and several places in between," often speaking in churches. He was photographed with NAACP field secretary Medgar Evers in Mississippi that year, months before Evers's assassination. At the March on Washington that August he attended but was not given a speaking slot — the Baldwin family's own cultural organization, *La Maison Baldwin*, states plainly that he and Bayard Rustin, both openly gay Black men, were "relegated to more behind-the-scenes roles." Weeks earlier, on May 24, 1963, Baldwin had assembled roughly a dozen Black cultural and civil rights figures — Harry Belafonte, Lorraine Hansberry, Kenneth Clark, and Freedom Rider Jerome Smith among them — for a tense meeting with Attorney General Robert Kennedy that historians credit with pushing the administration toward its landmark civil rights address.

Saint-Paul-de-Vence

Baldwin spent his final years at his home in Saint-Paul-de-Vence, France, and died there December 1, 1987, at sixty-three, of cancer. He is buried at Ferncliff Cemetery in Hartsdale, New York, beside his mother, Berdis Baldwin.

NC Local Lens

Baldwin's documented North Carolina connection runs through Durham and Greensboro, not Cumberland County — stops on his January 1963 CORE lecture tour, with a 1963 Durham photograph by Steve Schapiro among the record. No Fayetteville or Cumberland County connection is documented, and this entry claims none. A search result for "James Baldwin" and "Fayetteville" turns up only an unrelated Lumberton, NC resident of the same name who died in 2025 — not the author, and not a source for any claim here.

Sourcing Caveats for Future Sessions

Cause of death: most consolidated sources give stomach cancer; some secondary sources say esophageal — not fully reconciled here.

Extent of the Medgar Evers relationship: photographic and retrospective sources document them together in 1963 and describe them as allies; no primary source specifying a close personal friendship, as opposed to movement collegiality, was found — word carefully.

The Kennedy meeting: well documented in period reporting and later histories, but this entry's account should be checked against a dedicated primary source before any direct quotation is added.

Citations

Chicago Notes-Bibliography style, primary and institutional sources.

1. "An Honest Man and a Good Writer: 100 Years of James Baldwin," Bibliomania (blog), Library of Congress, August 29, 2024, <https://blogs.loc.gov/bibliomania/2024/08/29/an-honest-man-and-a-good-writer-100-years-of-james-baldwin/>.
2. "An Introduction to James Baldwin," National Museum of African American History and Culture, Smithsonian Institution, accessed September 13, 2026, <https://nmaahc.si.edu/explore/stories/introduction-james-baldwin>.
3. "Boots on the Ground," National Museum of African American History and Culture, Smithsonian Institution, accessed September 13, 2026, <https://nmaahc.si.edu/explore/stories/boots-ground>.
4. "Baldwin and the March on Washington," La Maison Baldwin, accessed September 13, 2026, <https://www.lamaisonbaldwin.org/baldwin-history/baldwin-and-the-march-on-washington>.
5. "James Baldwin: Biography and Quotes," American Masters, PBS/WNET, accessed September 13, 2026, <https://www.pbs.org/wnet/americanmasters/james-baldwin-about-the-author/59/>.
6. "Today in History – August 2: James Baldwin," Library of Congress, accessed September 13, 2026, <https://www.loc.gov/item/today-in-history/august-02/>.

Prepared by the Two Americas research process. Verify all figures against primary sources before publication if stronger originals become available.