

# Van W. Johnson, Sr.

## Mayor of Apalachicola, Florida - Official Biography

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**Van William Johnson, Sr.**, (born November 7, 1959) is the current Mayor of the City of Apalachicola, Florida (2007 - present), and the first African-American elected by the people to hold the office of mayor in the history of the city established in 1831. He was born the seventh out of nine children to the late Abe and Azalee Johnson, Sr., and grew up in the small historic seaport community of Apalachicola, once the third largest port on the Gulf of Mexico behind New Orleans and Mobile.



Mayor Van W. Johnson, Sr.

Johnson was raised under the shadows of his parents both of whom volunteered their time in service to the Franklin County community. As a young lad he witnessed firsthand his parents struggle for racial equality during the local civil rights movement. His father was a blind World War II Veteran that served during the European Theater in Rome, Italy and at home as President of the Franklin County Voters League and, his mother was one of the founding members and first President of the Franklin County Branch of the N.A.A.C.P.

Although it was frustrating for Johnson being a young African-American male full of hope growing up in the south to witness his parent's along with others fight to obtain the basic constitutional rights guaranteed all. However, later in life he would learn the experience was necessary towards his growth and development as an effective and compassionate leader. As the young Johnson reached adulthood he volunteered to serve in his mother's administration with the N.A.A.C.P., where he served as her 2nd Vice-President and Chair of the Legal Redress Committee.

Johnson attended Apalachicola High School where he lettered in both varsity football and basketball, and in 1978 upon graduating was selected to the "All Big Bend Conference" football team. Following high school he enrolled in Gulf Coast Community College in Panama City, Florida where he majored in Computer Science. He left college without graduating to marry his high school sweetheart, Gail "Teddy" Simmons who was with child and together raised five beautiful children: Van II, Ezekiel, Kristy, Ashley and Randall.

Soon afterwards he found a long and rewarding career in county government where he was employed by the Franklin County Board of County Commissioners. Johnson quickly ascended through the ranks to head three major components of Public Works: Solid Waste & Recycling, Animal Control and Parks & Recreation. After 30-years of service to the people of Franklin County; upon his retirement the Franklin County Board of County Commissioners adopted and passed a resolution declaring May 31, 2012, Van W. Johnson Day throughout the Franklin County community.

While an employee of county government, Johnson managed to simultaneously and effectively hold an elected office on the Apalachicola Board of City Commissioners as the Seat 3, City Commissioner. He was first elected to the commission in 1997; reelected in 2001 and ran without opposition in 2005. Midway through his third term as a commissioner he resigned to launch a bid to become the town's mayor. During his mayoral campaign Johnson faced two other candidates and characterized himself as the one that would bring transparency, integrity, fairness, and access for all to the office of mayor. The race was ultimately decided in a run-off election where Johnson soundly defeated the last remaining candidate and went on to win reelected in 2011 to a second term.

From the onset Mayor Johnson signaled his willingness to go to bat for all the residents of Apalachicola. One month after taking the oath of office he led the city into the 20-year-old Tri-State Water War Dispute between Florida, Georgia and Alabama over the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers decision to decrease the flow of freshwater down the Apalachicola-Chattahoochee-Flint river basin, freshwater historically vital to the economic livelihood of his community and the surrounding area.

In the matter, Mayor Johnson asked the Apalachicola Board of City Commissioners to adopt and pass a resolution authorizing the city attorney to enter into the ongoing litigation to protect the way-of-life of hundreds of Apalachicola and Franklin County families that for generations made a living harvesting oysters and other seafood from Apalachicola Bay.

During the latter part of 2008 Mayor Johnson undertook yet another bold initiative when he requested the city commission to establish a non-traditional city government service that utilized grant funds received from the Florida Department of Education to start what is now one of the top three afterschool and summer enrichment programs for school aged children in the State of Florida; a service normally provided by the local school district. Other communities across the state have since modeled their programs after the initiative. In addition, in 2011 the Johnson administration established a separate dedicated youth center to provide an additional safe haven for the youth of Apalachicola to gather late during the weekday and on weekends.

Under Mayor Johnson's leadership the City Of Apalachicola enhanced the quality of life of nearly every demographic within the community and surrounding area.

One of the mayor's initiatives includes the 2012 renovation of the historic Holy Family Catholic School Church building, built around 1920. The building acquired by the city in 2005 was used by the local Catholic Diocese to serve the African-American communities' religious and educational needs up until shortly after desegregation. The building was aptly renovated and adapted for reuse as a multifaceted senior citizen center and cultural hub. The project received a historic preservation award from the local Historic Society.

And in 2013 his administration made the city more user friendly for the thousands of visitors that visit the area each year by constructing a public restroom facility in the downtown commercial district.

The construction maintained the historic integrity of the district and the project received an award for new construction from the Florida Trust for Historic Preservation.

Midway through his second mayoral term, Johnson's colleagues on the Apalachicola Board of City Commissioners honored his service to the community by voting unanimously to rename the former Apalachicola High School in his honor. There's now situated in the Apalachicola community the Mayor Van W. Johnson, Sr., Recreation & Community Service Complex, which houses multiple agencies and non-profit organizations that provide a one-stop-shop for community services and recreational activities for both residents and visitors to city.

Johnson was again honored for his work as mayor by the Love Center Ministries during the 2013 Annual Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., birthday celebration hosted by the church. The ministry is the largest African-American church in the Franklin County community.

During the latter part of August 2014 Mayor Johnson became the recipient of two International Awards for his exceptional ongoing service to the residents of his community. He traveled to the Gerald R. Ford Presidential Museum in Grand Rapids, Michigan where he received the "Golden Rule International Award" from the Interfaith Peace-Building Initiative and the "Global Leadership Award" from iChange Nations.

Johnson is an avid blogger and has effectively used the social media to interact with and keep the residents of his community updated with information concerning his administration. He started blogging in 2008 shortly after his first election as mayor, and since that time his audience has grown to over 5,000 visitors per month and is listed nationwide at number 15 out of the top 50 city government blogs on the Masters in Public Administration website. His blog was also featured in the March/April edition of Quality Cities Magazine, a publication of the Florida League of Cities.

The ongoing success of the Johnson administration can be directly attributed to the many volunteers that have given of their time to serve on the various advisory boards and community projects in the city. During the 2012 National Volunteer Appreciation Week, he presented over 100 certificates of appreciation to the volunteers that work in his administration.

Without a doubt, the experience he gained from growing up under the shadows of his parents, and from his employment years in county government, along with his elected offices in city government, Mayor Johnson has carved out a unique place in the modern history of Apalachicola and Franklin County, Florida as one of the most effective and recognized local political figures.