

# Dr. Albert C. Johnston

Albert C. Johnston was a doctor in Keene during the 1940s. His family's story became the subject of a book and a Hollywood movie about race in America.

When did he do this? 1948

How old was he? 48 years old

Albert Chandler Johnston

Born: 1900 in Chicago, Illinois

Died: 1988 in Hawaii

Buried: 1988 in Keene, New Hampshire

## **Biography**

### **What was Dr. Johnston known for?**

Albert C. Johnston was a doctor in Keene who, along with his family, passed as white during the 1940s. A book was published about their story in 1948. In 1949 a Hollywood film was made entitled *Lost Boundaries*.

### **Growing Up**

Albert C. Johnston was born in Chicago, Illinois in 1900. He grew up in a time when many black families faced a lot of discrimination across the country. Many black families were moving to Chicago during the early 1900s to build a better community. Albert, himself, was a light-skinned African American.

### **Becoming Dr. Johnston**

Albert became one of two black students accepted into his medical college. He fell in love with Thyra Baumann and they were married. After school, Dr. Albert Johnston applied for jobs at many hospitals around the country. Sometimes he was not hired because he was seen as too black. Sometimes he was not hired because he was seen as too white. This was very frustrating to Dr. Johnston, who wanted a job helping people.

After many tries, he received an interview with a hospital in Maine. It was the first time that a hospital didn't ask Dr. Johnston about his race. He and Thyra decided to not bring it up, for fear that he wouldn't get the job. They kept their race a secret. Over the years, they kept this secret from everyone, even their four children. They kept their secret in 1940 when they moved to Keene, New Hampshire.

### **Jim Crow Era**

The Johnston family lived in an era when **Jim Crow laws** allowed states to segregate, or separate, people by race. Schools, public bathrooms, libraries, churches, and stores could restrict black families from going into their buildings. Maine and New Hampshire were some of the few states to not use Jim Crow laws.

Years later, Thyra Johnston remembered how difficult it was for her to live in New Hampshire while passing as a white woman. She needed to train herself to stop looking for 'black only' spaces. In her mind, she needed to learn how to identify as white. It was not easy to change who she was.

To help their children, Dr. Johnston and Thyra decided to let them grow up thinking that their family was 100% white. This was a very difficult decision. It meant that they would have to stop visiting their relatives. It meant that the children would not grow up knowing their grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins. It felt lonely, living in a new place without family.

## **World War II**

The Johnston family soon fell in love with their new home town. Dr. Johnston became Keene's first **radiologist**, a doctor who did x-rays. When World War II broke out, he wanted to serve his country. The US military needed doctors to help care for soldiers. He applied to become a medical officer in the Navy and was accepted. But when the Navy later discovered that he was actually part black, they changed their minds. He was not allowed to serve.

At the time that Dr. Johnston was trying to join the military, the Navy was the only branch still segregated. The US government did not want a black officer in charge of white soldiers. Dr. Johnston felt terrible. He had already told all of his friends and everyone at the hospital that he was leaving for the war. Thyra and Dr. Johnston decided, at that point, to reveal their secret.

## **Sharing His Secret**

One evening, Dr. Johnston spoke with his 16-year old son Albert Jr. He said, "Do you know something? You're black." This news came as the greatest shock of his son's life. He had always seen himself as white and he had always wanted to become

President of the United States. But in the 1940s, nobody would have guessed that a black man could become president.

Albert asked himself many questions, "What am I going to do when I grow up?" "Who am I really?" "How are my friends and teachers going to treat me back at school?" Albert Jr. didn't know how to feel. He became depressed. He could not do his schoolwork well. He felt like an outsider in his own town. His parents worried.

One day, Albert Jr. left home to go on a journey across the country. He visited his black aunts, uncles, and cousins. He met black lawyers, doctors, and film actors. He began to learn more about himself and feel confident that he could grow up to become something great.

### **Meeting a Film Producer**

Albert Jr. decided to go to college at the University of New Hampshire to become a music **composer**, a writer of music. One day, he visited a famous Hollywood producer who had moved to New Hampshire. Albert Jr. wanted to see more movies made about important black people in American history.

During the meeting, Albert Jr. shared what had happened to his father during the war. The film producer was very interested and he asked Albert Jr. if he could share the Johnston's story. In 1948, the family's story became a famous book and in 1949 it became a Hollywood film called *Lost Boundaries*.

## **Making a Movie**

The filmmakers worried that the movie would cause some people to get mad at the Johnstons for lying about their race. To protect the Johnstons, the family in the movie was called Carter and the name of the town was called Keenham, NH.

*Lost Boundaries* became one of the ten best films in 1949 and won an award. It was one of the first movies to talk about race in America. Some people say that the Navy was finally **desegregated** after President Harry Truman watched *Lost Boundaries*.

Suddenly, Dr. & Mrs. Johnston's secret became news all over town. It became a story that was shared all over the country. The Johnstons worried that they would lose their friends. To their surprise, most of the people in Keene supported the family.

## **What Happened Next**

After the film was made, the Johnston family continued to live and work in Keene for over 15 years. People from all around the country wrote to the Johnstons to share their own experiences with **racial passing** and **racism**. During the 1950s, Dr. Johnston and Albert Jr. traveled and gave speeches to help end discrimination against black Americans.

Dr. and Mrs. Johnston retired to Hawaii in 1966. When he died in 1988, Dr. Johnston was buried in Keene, NH. He is remembered for being a wonderful doctor and a brave man for sharing his family's story.