



*There was a man that, without him,
Atlantic City may not be what it is today*

Raymond Osbeck
Nucky Johnson's Nephew

Enoch L. Johnson - better known as "Nucky Johnson" and called "Nucky Thompson" in the "Boardwalk Empire" series - was born in 1883. When Nucky was a baby, Atlantic City had already been transformed from an offshore island, plagued by mosquitoes and greenhead flies (*Tabanus nigrovittatus*), into a Boardwalk-dominated resort town.



By the time Nucky was seventeen, Atlantic City's elevated walk and its growing beach-front area was an inviting place for tourists. This image, from the Library of Congress, reveals the town as it appeared in 1900. The view is from Atlantic City's lighthouse.



During the early 20th Century, Atlantic City's Boardwalk was extremely popular - especially on Easter Sundays when people, showing-off their spring finery, literally mobbed the place (as depicted in this [historical footage](#)). A photograph, taken on an Easter Sunday in 1905, reveals what it was like to be part of the Boardwalk's crush of wall-to-wall people.



During Prohibition - when the U.S. Congress outlawed the making, selling, transporting and consuming of alcoholic beverages - people in Atlantic City routinely disregarded the law. To use the words of U.S. Treasury agents, Nucky Johnson became "the virtual dictator" of Atlantic City because he protected those engaged in the business of (among other things) illegal, intoxicating liquor. And what a good business it was.

Although agents of the federal government tried to enforce Prohibition, people who wanted a glass (or more) of liquor routinely found ways to disregard the law. Atlantic City was in a prime location to receive alcoholic beverages which were shipped from Canada and Scotland.

Speedboats, known as rumrunners, met the cargo-laden ships offshore, then ferried the outlawed, offloaded liquor to places like Atlantic City. Nucky - the man who always wore a fresh, red carnation in his lapel - was at the hub of a lucrative, illegal transportation network. As Jonathan Van Meter tells us, in his book *The Last Good Time*:

Atlantic City had become the headquarters for the nation's most notorious rumrunners. Rum Row, some thirty miles offshore, supplied the entire country with its hard liquor . . . In and around Atlantic City, a fleet of trucks would pick up the liquor from wherever it came ashore and haul it to the distribution warehouses. (The Last Good Time, page 49.)

"Rum Row" was reportedly started by William S. McCoy - "the real McCoy" - who made incredible sums of money transporting illegal liquor on his ships. (See "Rum War," an official U.S. Coast Guard Report, at pages 13-14.)

Nucky had a saying about why he, and others, were in the business they were in:

*We have whiskey, wine, women, song and slot machines. I won't deny it and I won't apologize for it. If the majority of the people didn't want them, they wouldn't be profitable and they wouldn't exist. The fact that they do exist proves to me that the people want them. (Nucky Johnson, quoted by Jon Blackwell in *Notorious New Jersey*, at page 186.)*

One of the people with whom Nucky did business was Arnold ("A.R.") Rothstein. Notorious for *many* reasons, including allegedly "fixing" the outcome of the 1919 World Series, Rothstein (also known as "The Brain") was the inspiration for Meyer Wolfsheim (a character created by F. Scott Fitzgerald in *The Great Gatsby*).

For a time, Nucky and Rothstein worked together, via Meyer Lansky, as they dealt in Scotch whiskey:

*...for a while boatloads of aged Scotch traveled safely from Glasgow to Lansky's agents: Enoch "Nucky" Johnson in Atlantic City and Charles "King" Solomon in Boston. (See *Rothstein*, by David Pietrusza, at page 200.)*

Later, after Prohibition was repealed in 1933 - at about the time Nucky was meeting with Joseph Kennedy, Sr., father of President Kennedy - U.S. Treasury agents learned that Atlantic City's activities weren't just *protected* by Nucky Johnson:

The Treasury agents quickly realized that local law enforcement "not only were well aware of these conditions but actively regulated, protected and at times even assisted these rackets" and that this fact was "well known" to the public, who "understood" that the racketeers were paying for protection.

*Based on hearsay, they determined that the horse rooms [for gambling] had to cough up \$160 a week, while numbers banks [for more gambling] paid \$100 a week... "It was also 'understood' by the public," reported the agents, "that none of this graft went to the police officials themselves. Everyone 'knew' it went to 'Nuck' Johnson." (Quoted by Jonathan Van Meter in *The Last Good Time*, at page 61.)*

People will sometimes do, in other words, what people want to do - even when the law requires otherwise. Nucky Johnson, who was the boss of Atlantic City for thirty years, built an empire based on that fact. And ... as long as Prohibition was in force ... his wealth continued to grow.

Mable Jeffries was Nucky's first wife. Born in 1884, she was from Mays Landing, New Jersey.

Nucky's childhood sweetheart, Mable received her teaching certificate from Trenton Normal School (now the College of New Jersey). The pair, who were devoted to each other, married in 1906.

Nucky was elected sheriff in 1908, replacing his father (Smith Johnson) who then became undersheriff. Nucky's dad was a good friend of "The Commodore," Louis Kuehnle (called "Louis Kaestner" in "Boardwalk Empire"), and Nucky grew up listening to tales which The Commodore would tell.

By 1911, The Commodore had been convicted of voter fraud. We see him here, from a 1916 Atlantic City Police Department Souvenir Book.



In 1912, Mable was very ill. With a cough she couldn't shake, she had tuberculosis. Determined to do whatever he could to help his wife, Nucky accompanied Mable to a sanitarium in Colorado.

Her stay there was brief. Three weeks later, Nucky was on a train back to New Jersey. With him was Mable's coffin.

A widower for many years, Nucky finally married again on the 1st of August, 1941. Fifty-eight at the time, he was twenty-five years older than Florence ("Flossie") Osbeck, a thirty-three-year-old showgirl (whom he'd been seeing for a long time). His wedding took place the day before he was sentenced for tax evasion.



Ten days after his second wedding, Nucky began serving a ten-year sentence for failing to pay \$125,000 in taxes to the federal government. He served four years of his sentence before leaving the Lewisburg Federal Penitentiary. His first job there was working in the prison laundry.

While Nucky was in prison, Flossie and Louis Kessel—Nucky's driver, valet, bodyguard and all-around loyal friend (whose name is Eddie Kessel in the HBO series)—made the drive to Pennsylvania, where the penitentiary was located, a few times each week. In October of 1944, when they were passing through Egg Harbor City—nearly back home from their visit with Nucky—someone broadsided their limo.

Flossie survived the accident; Kessel (who had a son and three daughters) did not. Despite Nucky's most-earnest pleas, prison officials did not allow him to attend the funeral of "the best man he ever knew."



After his release, in 1945, Nucky took a pauper's oath (meaning he didn't have enough money to pay the \$20,000 fine which was part of his sentence). Here is a version of the pauper's oath:

I do solemnly swear that I have not any property, real or personal, exceeding \$20, except such as is by law exempt from being taken on civil process for debt; and that I have no property in any way conveyed or concealed, or in any way disposed of, for my future use or benefit. So help me God.

No longer the boss of Atlantic City, Nucky had been replaced by [Frank S. \("Hap"\) Farley](#). We can learn some things about Nucky's life in Atlantic City (and how he was viewed by the people in that town) from the Judge's words when he sentenced him (on August 2, 1941):

I am satisfied ... that he [Nucky] has made large expenditures and helped many people. I am also satisfied that he has done that from selfish motives for the purpose of perpetuating his own political power, and that he has made those expenditures out of funds which personally were no sacrifice for him to pay.

Judge Maris then criticized Nucky's deeds as a leader of Atlantic City. Instead of setting a good example, he:

...set them an example of cheating and defrauding the government [for failing to pay federal income taxes], which is, to say the least, shocking. (See [American Dictators: Frank Hague, Nucky Johnson, and the Perfection of the Urban Political Machine](#), by Steve Hart, at [page 142](#).)

The federal investigators who went after him had accomplished their goal. Nucky was finished as the boss of Atlantic City.

He wasn't finished with life, though.

For the next two decades, Nucky and Flossie lived on [South Elberon Avenue](#). Later they moved to [Ventnor City](#), further down the island. Farley kept Nucky as his liaison with the African-American community on [Atlantic City's Northside](#).

In 1961, Nucky said he was working on a memoir. He was calling it *Boardwalk Empire* and, according to reports, had finished about 400 pages of his story. People must have been worried about the tales such a book would tell. As Elmer Irey, once chief of the U.S. Treasury Department's intelligence unit, [noted](#):

Enoch L. Johnson made a lifetime career out of being a crooked politician and he did it under a most trying handicap. This handicap was his inordinate devotion to old brandy, young girls, and new Cadillacs - three items extremely difficult to keep hidden from the eyes of even the most supine of electorates.

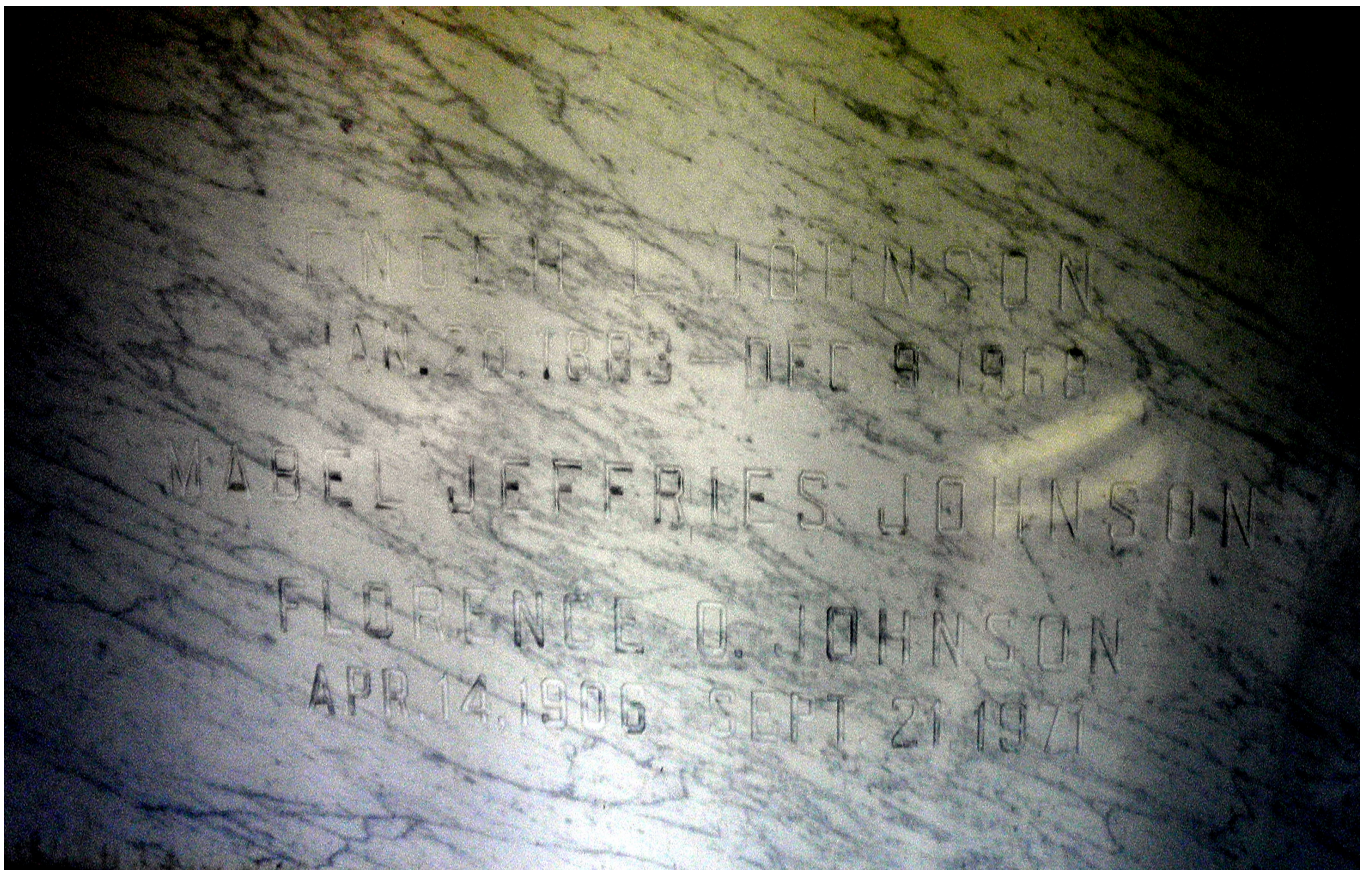
Enoch, therefore, didn't bother trying to hide his gaudy pastimes, but resigned himself to being investigated and prepared himself well for such occupational hazards.

Nucky lived twenty-three more years after he left prison. For some of those years he worked in sales for Richfield Oil Company and Renault Winery.

He died at the Atlantic County Convalescent Home in Northfield, New Jersey on December 9, 1968. He was 85 years old. His remains rest in a mausoleum at Zion Cemetery in Bargaintown, New Jersey.



The bodies of both his wives (Mabel Jeffries Johnson and Florence O. Johnson), his father (Smith Johnson), his mother (Virginia S. Johnson) and Mabel's step mother (Ida Shimp-Golden) are likewise interred in the Zion-Cemetery mausoleum.



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[Video - Lucky Luciano - Brief Bio](#)

[Video - Meyer Lansky - Four-Part Bio](#)

[Image and Short Bio - Chalky White \(based on Chalky Wright\)](#)

[Image and Short Bio - Lucky Luciano](#)

[Music Video - Nights in Ballygran - Carrickfergus](#)

[Image - Impact of Prohibition](#)

[Text - Prohibition and the Volstead Act Become U.S. Law](#)

[Music - "I Never Knew I Had a Wonderful Wife Until the Town Went Dry"](#)

[Images - Babette's Club in Atlantic City](#)

Credits:

Image of Enoch L. ("Nucky") Johnson, online courtesy [U.S. National Archives](#) and the [Atlantic County Historical Society](#).

Quoted passages from [The Last Good Time](#), by Jonathan Van Meter, online courtesy Google Books.

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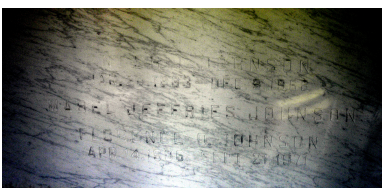
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Atlantic City at Easter

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