

McCain, others seek pardon for late boxer

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Sen. John McCain and four other members of Congress filed a petition for a presidential pardon for former heavyweight boxing champion Jack Johnson, a black man who went to jail nine decades ago for bringing a white woman across state lines.

Johnson, a Texas native, was convicted in 1913 of violating the Mann Act by traveling between states with his girlfriend Belle Schreiber.

The petition for a posthumous pardon says the prosecution was aimed solely at punishing a successful and widely popular black athlete who openly dated white women.

"The law was perverted to send a decent American to jail," McCain, R-Ariz., said at a press conference in Washington.

The prosecution of Johnson was the first time the law, which outlawed transporting women across state lines for "prostitution or debauchery or for any other immoral purpose," had been used against individual consenting adults rather than organized criminal syndicates, according to pardon papers the group filed with the U.S. Justice Department.

Johnson eventually served almost a year in a federal prison in Leavenworth, Kansas. His story is the subject of a forthcoming documentary from filmmaker Ken Burns.

The Committee to Pardon Jack Johnson, which includes Sens. Orrin Hatch, R-Utah, and Edward Kennedy, D-Mass., and Democratic Reps. Charles Rangel of New York and Jesse Jackson Jr. of Illinois, said it is seeking the second posthumous pardon in U.S. history.

In 1999, President Clinton pardoned Lt. Henry O. Flipper, a black Army officer who was convicted in 1882 of conduct unbecoming an officer. Flipper was the first black graduate of the U.S. Military Academy.

Burns, who is finishing "Unforgivable Blackness: The Rise and Fall of Jack Johnson," initiated the effort to secure the pardon. The film is scheduled to be aired on the Public Broadcasting Service on Jan. 16 and 17, the weekend of the Martin Luther King Jr. holiday.

Burns called Johnson's conviction "a palpable injustice."

Former boxing champions Sugar Ray Leonard and Vernon Forrest, as well as jazz musician Wynton Marsalis, joined Burns in advocating for the presidential action.

Johnson died in an automobile accident in 1946 at age 68.

The Justice Department will review the petition and make a recommendation to President Bush.