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Profiles of *African Americans* in Tennessee

John Hope Franklin (1915 - 2009)



John Hope Franklin, historian, Civil Rights activist, and scholar of the African American experience in the United States, was born on January 2, 1915, in Rentiesville, Oklahoma. Coming of age in America during the era of Jim Crow, Franklin became a pioneer and the preeminent scholar in his field, holding positions at some of the most prestigious colleges in the United States. As an academic with a profound understanding of the history of race relations in America, he witnessed and participated in many of the seminal events of the twentieth century, laying the foundation for a new understanding of the history of Africans across the diaspora.

Franklin's parents, Buck and Mollie Franklin, moved to Rentiesville, Oklahoma—one of the state's many small all-black townships—shortly before his birth in 1915. Franklin's father, in search of work and better opportunity for his family, opened a law practice in Tulsa shortly after his son's birth. Franklin's mother, a teacher, took young John Hope to school with her, providing pencil and paper for her son and instructing him to remain quiet while class was in session. The visits to the classroom, his mother soon discovered, provided an early start to her son's education. These visits resulted in her son starting school already knowing how to read and write.

Franklin graduated as the valedictorian of Tulsa's Booker T. Washington High School in

1931, and headed to Fisk University. His arrival at Fisk in 1931 occurred during a period of unprecedented growth at the university. Harboring dreams of following in his father's footsteps, he pursued a degree in English and had plans of applying to law school after graduation. Fisk, with its nationally distinguished faculty and talented student body, provided an environment where Franklin's inquisitive mind and budding intellect could flourish.

The young scholar soon found that his presence at the esteemed university did not insulate him from the dehumanizing and often violent effects of Jim Crow. Two events impacted Franklin's views regarding civic activism. First, the untimely deaths of Juliette Derricotte, Fisk's much-beloved Dean of Women, and a young co-ed while on a trip to Georgia troubled Franklin as a student. Both women died in 1931 as a result of injuries sustained during a serious car accident in Georgia. Although the women were still alive when assistance reached the site of the wreck, no local hospitals would admit them because of their race.

Another event involved the lynching of an African American teenager from Maury County, Tennessee. Falsely charged with the attempted rape of a white woman, Cordie Cheek's family sent him to Nashville to live with his uncle who owned a home near the Fisk campus. In December 1933, two white men abducted Cheek from his uncle's home and returned him to Maury

County, turning the boy over to a lynch mob who subsequently murdered him and mutilated his body. These events had a profound effect on John Hope Franklin and the entire Fisk community, as the group struggled for most of the spring semester, debating how to respond to Cheek's murder. Franklin took on a leadership role in these discussions.

Surprisingly, these events, although central to Franklin's development while at Fisk, did not solidify his desire to pursue a career in law. Instead, the courses he took in history under Theodore S. Currier and his growing relationship with him as a student, caused him to change his major from English to history. The pursuit of a Ph.D. in the discipline at Harvard University became his desired goal. When he applied to and received an invitation to join its graduate program during his senior year, he became the first student from a historically black college to be admitted unconditionally to Harvard. Currier also demonstrated his faith in his star student after he left the halls of Fisk University. When it became clear that his former student did not have the funds to attend Harvard, Currier took out a personal loan of \$500 to assist Franklin in meeting the cost of tuition at the school.

Franklin's years at Harvard were as eventful as those he spent in Nashville. He completed the requirements for his masters and Ph.D. in 1935 and 1941, respectively, taught at St. Augustine College in North Carolina, and convinced Aurelia Whittington, a young woman he met at Fisk, to marry him in 1940. After graduation, he held positions at Fisk, Howard University, as chair of the history department at

Brooklyn College, and at the University of Chicago. His service as chair at Brooklyn College was significant because it made him the first African American to hold that post at a major American university.

Franklin published his pathbreaking book, *From Slavery to Freedom*, in 1947. This book remains the seminal text in the history of African Americans. Nearly seventy years after its initial publication, the book remains in print, has been translated into several languages, and has sold over three million copies.

In 1982, Franklin became the James B. Duke Professor of History at Duke University. The first African-American president of the American Historical Society, Franklin received the Spingarn Medal from the NAACP, and the Presidential Medal of Freedom from President Bill Clinton in 1995, among his more than 100 honorary degrees and additional accolades.

Franklin remained a prolific writer and internationally renowned lecturer until his death in Durham, North Carolina, on March 25, 2009. Throughout his life, he provided inspiration to countless students and scholars, gave wise counsel to civil rights organizations and heads of states, and left scores of scholarly works, including his groundbreaking *From Slavery to Freedom* (1947); *The Militant South* (1956); *Reconstruction After the Civil War* (1961); *Color and Race* (1968); *A Southern Odyssey: Travelers in the Antebellum North* (1975); and *George Washington Williams: A Biography* (1985), that continue to inform and inspire generations of historians.

Learotha Williams, Ph. D.
