

# John Hope Franklin

## In Memoriam

*by Kevin Gaines*

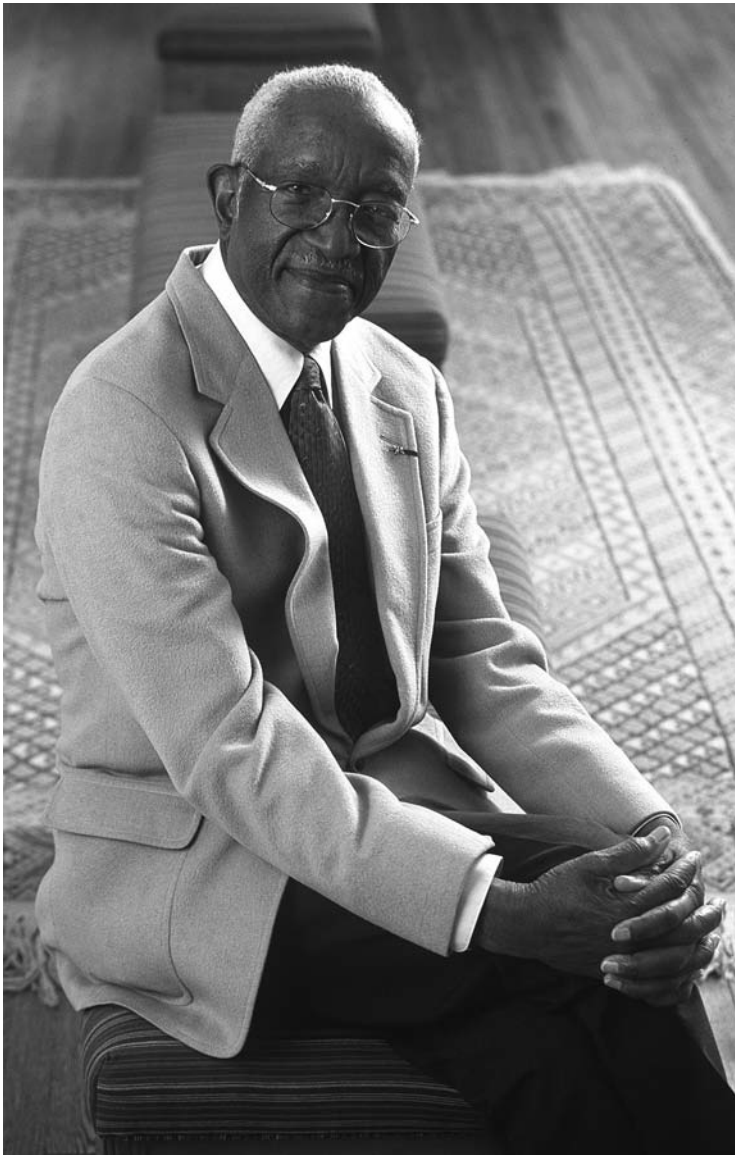


Photo: Les Todd, Duke University

When I was in graduate school in the late 1980s—during the dismaying days of American White nationalist David Duke, Willie Horton (convicted of murder while on parole and made famous by a racially charged political advertisement during the 1988 U.S. presidential race), and the War on Drugs—John Hope Franklin was a beacon of reason and resistance against the intolerant tone set by the Reagan and Bush administrations. Although his works were not assigned in my seminars in U.S. and African American history, he was of course well known to my fellow students and to me as a highly accomplished scholar whose work was synonymous with the struggle for racial equality over the better part of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century.

Like those visionary Black scholars who were his mentors and peers, W.E.B. Du Bois and Carter G. Woodson, Franklin's scholarship and teaching were an integral part of the effort to discredit the malicious propaganda that passed for the history of slavery and Reconstruction. Franklin did his work, and did it extremely well, amidst a level of pervasive bigotry and commonplace cruelty unimaginable to us, his beneficiaries. His essential dignity, graciousness, perseverance, and generosity as a teacher and mentor endowed him with an undeniable moral authority.

For decades, Franklin taught, wrote, and enlightened fellow Americans and audiences the world over about our nation's troubled history. His voice was especially important from the 1980s onward, as public sentiment and policy increasingly rejected the egalitarian goals and ideals of the Black freedom movement. Throughout, he remained the nation's outspoken conscience on issues of racial justice.

John Hope Franklin was the consummate public intellectual well before the early 1990s vogue of the so-called Black public intellectual. As is well known, he was part of the NAACP Legal Defense Fund team led by Thurgood Marshall that helped dismantle the "separate but equal" rationale for *de jure* segregation. When Du Bois was being prosecuted by the U.S. Justice Department for his political views and associations, Franklin publicly defended him while many others took cover.

And Franklin's scholarship invariably made crucial interventions. To cite just a sampling from his vast output, *From Slavery to Freedom* (1947) helped put African American history into the mainstream of the profession by insisting on the humanity and agency of Black people. *The Color Line: Legacy for the Twenty-First Century* (1993) reminded us of the casual racism at the heart of the Reagan Administration and agenda. And the thick description of Black resistance provided in *Runaway Slaves: Rebels on the Plantation* (1995, co-authored with Loren Schweninger) took on the neo-confederate myth of paternalism that some Southerners still espouse to romanticize and justify the institution of chattel slavery.

Though cheered by the recent election of Barack Obama, Franklin knew, despite evidence and examples of progress, that the cumulative effects of a history

of racism, segregation, and exclusion could not be undone or reversed without a great and concerted national effort, and that our still-segregated society has yet to complete the task begun in 1865 and revisited during the 1950s and 1960s.

I had the honor of meeting John Hope Franklin while spending a year on leave in North Carolina in 1996. At his invitation, my wife and I joined him for a leisurely lunch at the Duke University faculty club, and we had the benefit of his insights into the 1960s and African Americans' fascination with newly independent African nations. Noting the suspicion with which U.S. officialdom viewed that fascination, Franklin believed that Blacks' interest in Africa was wholly compatible with their insistence on desegregation and full equality at home.

Since then, our paths would occasionally cross at academic meetings. At such gatherings, he was instantly recognizable, gracious at the attention that his admiring fans lavished upon him. The last time I saw him was in October 2007, when he was honored by the Association for the Study of African American Life and History upon the 60th anniversary of the publication of *From Slavery To Freedom*. After a lengthy program of speeches, his remarks were worth the wait. He kept a packed audience in a Charlotte hotel ballroom alternately in stitches with his mischievous wit and spellbound by the story of his quest for the pioneering African American historian George Washington Williams.

Told of the findings of a DNA test that claimed to have pinpointed the village of his African ancestors, Franklin joked that until that moment he had long assumed his father's background was Scandinavian, and that his dark complexion was an inheritance from his mother, who was from ... Naples!

His account of his quest to locate the grave of Williams in England had the pacing of a detective story. Most importantly, Franklin's speech gave the audience an opportunity to demonstrate its profound affection and gratitude for his life and work.

John Hope Franklin inspired and touched the lives of many. He was a consummate historian, teacher, and activist—who made history. He will be warmly remembered and greatly missed. [nea](#)

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