L-R: John Hope Franklin and Genna Rae McNeil

Photo courtesy of Genna Rae McNeil
John Hope Franklin with orchids in his greenhouse in Durham, NC.

Photo courtesy of Genna Rae McNeil
John Hope Franklin and Genna Rae McNeil in Durham, NC, on the day after Barack Obama was elected to the presidency.

Photo courtesy of Genna Rae McNeil
L-R: Rev. Jesse Jackson, John Hope Franklin, and William Julius Wilson

Photo courtesy of June O. Patton
Bottom: L-R: John Hope and Aurelia Whittington Franklin at home with (Top: R-L) son and daughter-in-law, John Whittington and Karen Franklin, and friends.

Photo courtesy of June O. Patton
L-R: John Henrik Clarke, June O. Patton, John Hope Franklin, Dorothy Yancy, and V.P. Franklin at ASALH convention.

Photo courtesy of June O. Patton
John Hope Franklin and June O. Patton

Photo courtesy of June O. Patton
L-R: John Hope Franklin and Robert L. Harris

Photo courtesy of Robert L. Harris
Dr. Lillian S. Williams with Dr. Franklin at the ASALH conference in Orlando, Florida.

Photo courtesy of Lillian S. Williams, Ph.D.
John Hope Franklin and David Dennard at ASALH 1998 Convention.


Photos courtesy of David Dennard
PHOTOS FROM ASALH CONVENTION IN CHARLOTTE, NC, OCTOBER 2007
PLENARY SESSION DEVOTED TO 60TH ANNIVERSARY OF FROM SLAVERY TO FREEDOM.

John Hope Franklin at ASALH plenary session in October 2007 on the 60th Anniversary of From Slavery to Freedom.

Photo courtesy of David Dennard
Audience at ASALH session on John Hope Franklin’s *From Slavery to Freedom.*

ASALH officer Sheila Fleming-Hunter and John Hope Franklin at the opening of the session on the 60th anniversary of *From Slavery to Freedom.*

Photos courtesy of David Dennard


Photos courtesy of David Dennard

ASALH President John Fleming and Mary Frances Berry at session on John Hope Franklin’s *From Slavery to Freedom*.

Photos courtesy of David Dennard
Mary Frances Berry and Lonnie Bunch at ASALH session on John Hope Franklin

Photo courtesy of David Dennard
ASALH official Bettye Gardner and John Hope Franklin at 2007 session on *From Slavery to Freedom.*

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Photo courtesy of David Dennard
INTERVIEW WITH
DR. JOHN HOPE FRANKLIN

Brian Purnell

INTRODUCTION

In 2007 we celebrated the 60th anniversary of the first edition of *From Slavery to Freedom (FSTF)*, John Hope Franklin’s groundbreaking synthesis that introduced African Americans’ narrative history to millions of people throughout the world. Over the years the book has received countless accolades from historians, other scholars, and the public. In a brilliant discussion of the book’s treatment of women and gender, Darlene Clark Hine, the influential historian of the South and African American women’s history, praised the book as “the Bible of Black History . . . as much a historical document and artifact as it is a history of our civilization.” Columbia University historian Eric Foner acknowledged that *FSTF* “has introduced generations of students, as well as readers outside the academy, to the richness and drama of the African American experience, as well as making plain why no account of American history can be complete that does not accord African Americans a central role.” The impact and significance of this work secures John Hope Franklin’s legacy as a historian who fundamentally altered the way Americans know their nation’s past.1

After reading John Hope Franklin’s autobiography, *Mirror to America*, which contains a chapter on Franklin’s experience writing *FSTF*, I grew curious to learn more about the origins and evolution of his most famous book. In large part, I wanted to study the history of *FSTF* and gain insight into how African American history developed as a distinct and respected scholarly field within American history. I began this project with a foray into Duke University’s Rare Book, Manuscript and Special Collections Library, which holds the John Hope Franklin Papers. I hoped research in that collection would uncover documents that went beyond Dr. Franklin’s chapter in his autobiography in explaining why he wrote *From Slavery to Freedom*, why Alfred Knopf, Inc., published it, and how the book’s content and historians perception of it changed over time.

John Hope Franklin’s papers certainly contained fascinating sources, but besides a vertical file of book reviews and promotional flyers announcing new editions of *FSTF*, there were few materials that covered the book’s origins and

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1 Brian Purnell is Assistant Professor of African and African American Studies at Fordham University, Bronx, NY.
A breakthrough occurred when Karen Jean Hunt, director of the Franklin Research Center, encouraged me to schedule an appointment with Dr. Franklin and to speak with him about my research project. At first, the idea of interviewing John Hope Franklin made me nervous. I didn’t feel that I had read enough of Franklin’s work to conduct a proper interview with him, and I thought there would be no way one of the most prominent historians in the country could make time for me, an extremely junior historian barely one year removed from his dissertation defense. Still, how many times does one get to interview John Hope Franklin? Excitement over the chance to spend time with a legendary historian outweighed my lack of confidence in my meager scholarly record.

I took Karen Jean Hunt’s advice and thanks to her, Dr. Franklin agreed to meet me during the last week I was in Durham. I had enough time to finish research in Franklin’s papers and quickly study some of his other essays and monographs. I devoured The Free Negro in North Carolina, 1790–1860 (1943), Dr. Franklin’s first published book, which contained many themes regarding the social position of minorities in democratic societies that appeared in his second book, From Slavery to Freedom. Duke’s rare books library held a copy of the first edition of FSTF, and I selectively read it during the days leading up to my appointment. I was familiar with the seventh edition of FSTF, which I had read a decade earlier. To my mind, the first edition read like a completely different book. I remembered the seventh edition’s prose as rather wooden and weighed down by specific names and dates. The first edition’s narrative, on the other hand, was lively and exciting, and the book read more like a trade book than a textbook. In this interview I was able to ask how this change came about. That week I also read Race and History, the anthology of Dr. Franklin’s essays published between 1938 and 1988, which exposed to me Dr. Franklin’s incredibly expansive intellectual interests and his trenchant criticisms of racism and hypocrisy in the writing of American history. More important, they also revealed to me how Dr. Franklin’s entire body of work was driven by a deep advocacy for justice and belief in scholarly professionalism. When the day of my appointment arrived, having only skimmed Dr. Franklin’s other major works, I still felt unprepared, but I also felt assured that speaking to Dr. Franklin would be one of the best ways to learn what motivated him to write From Slavery to Freedom, how and why the book changed over time, and his thoughts on how the book’s sixty-year evolution influenced the ways people have come to know African Americans’ history.

The interview with Dr. Franklin took place on 20 June 2007 and lasted ninety minutes. What began as my attempt to learn about the professional and personal influences that shaped his decision to write this book and Dr. Franklin’s thoughts on the state of the field of African American history turned into a fascinating, dynamic conversation on his personal struggles against white racism, his arguments
regarding racism’s continued presence in American life, his ideas on the need for scholars to balance scholarly research with advocacy, and the complex relationship between African American history and Black Studies.

One of the most important aspects of this interview is that it shares with readers some sides of John Hope Franklin’s personality and areas of insight that are sometimes overlooked in posthumous memorials to his magnificent accomplishments. In life, and especially in death, historic figures such as John Hope Franklin are often turned into symbols, a process of memory production that strips significant individuals of their complexity and simplifies some of the most important lessons their lives and leadership can teach us. Dr. Franklin’s professional achievements certainly make him a symbol of 20th-century black advancement. As an African American who not only survived the violence and dehumanization of the Jim Crow era, but thrived in a racially discriminatory society, Dr. Franklin may come to symbolize America’s progress in race relations. His leadership in national initiatives that addressed legacies of racial discrimination also has the potential to turn him into a symbol of national racial reconciliation and healing. These memories of John Hope Franklin illuminate some of what makes him a significant symbol, but the ideas and arguments he articulated in this interview offer lessons that are far more complex, and equally worthy of our attention as we try to make sense of his life and scholarly works.

While John Hope Franklin was an academic statesman, a survivor of Jim Crow, an incredibly productive writer, and a lifelong advocate, in each of those roles he was a consistent critic of continued racist practices in the United States and a firm believer that scholarship and advocacy were not antithetical to one another. The following interview demonstrates how, as a scholar, intellectual, public servant, and advocate, Dr. Franklin had indeed held a “mirror to America” that reflected the country’s inconsistencies and hypocrisies, especially those that stemmed from legacies of slavery. This interview is a significant primary source that presents in Dr. Franklin’s own words the esteemed scholar’s ability to express anger and enmity over personal experiences with racism—some of which, sixty years later, still seemed to burn—without regressing into cynicism or bitterness. One question that the interview will hopefully prompt readers to examine is: How can we take what Dr. Franklin showed us about American life through his historical scholarship and political advocacy and build from it to create a more just society in the future?

The portrait of Dr. Franklin’s life and his work captured in this interview also will remind readers that the mixture of scholarship and advocacy has been vital to the development of the field of African American history. This raises another important question about the future of African American history as a distinct research field. As African Americans’ past becomes more integrated into general narratives of U.S. history, and as advocacy work adapts to meet the new challenges
African Americans face in a supposedly “post racial America,” how should African American history develop in the future? As a specialized subfield of U.S. history, in what research areas can it make the most significant contributions? Will African American history become a standard component of the nation’s mainstream historical narrative and thus attract less attention as a separate teaching area and research field?

As you will see, Dr. Franklin and I started the interview talking about the history of From Slavery to Freedom, but came to discuss his need to blend scholarship and advocacy in his professional life. Perhaps now is the time for historians of the African American past to converse more on the relationship between the two. Over twenty years ago, historians gathered to discuss the state of the field of African American history, which produced an indispensable collection of essays. New scholarship and historiographies on the development of African American history have appeared since then, but as African American history continues to develop into a central component of the ways people research, write, and teach American history, leaders in the field would benefit from increased critical dialogue about how the field has grown, and what its future may be, both as a scholarly discipline and an advocacy tool. Hopefully, this interview with one of African American history’s major scholars can be a catalyst for that type of debate and dialogue. Perhaps, rather than memorializing him as a symbol, such discussion would be a fitting way to remember Dr. Franklin’s contributions as an advocate and a scholar, and to build upon that legacy.

THE INTERVIEW

In the home of Dr. John Hope Franklin in Durham, North Carolina, 20 June 2007.

Dr. Brian Purnell (BP): How would you describe your knowledge of African American history before you wrote From Slavery to Freedom?

Dr. John Hope Franklin (JHF): I knew very little African American history. I never had a course on it. I have yet had a course in it, and I was sort of teaching myself as I was going along, which I thought was something of an asset because I had no preconceived notions of what it ought to be, no preconceived views of what it should be like, and I tended therefore to put it in a framework of American history generally. I had no axe to grind, you see, no cause to advance. I was tabula rasa. Whatever I found was alright with me.

BP: How did the first edition of From Slavery to Freedom compare with already existing histories of the African American past such as Carter G. Woodson’s The Negro in Our History, and George Washington Williams’s A History of the Negro
Race in America from 1619–1880: Negroes as Slaves, as Soldiers, and as Citizens?5

JHF: It’s rather interesting that I regard my book as more dissimilar to Woodson than to Williams. Although Woodson was highly trained—he had a Ph.D. in history from Harvard—his work is largely a work of praise, a sort of unalloyed and subjective praise of black achievement, whereas Williams, although not terribly analytical and not terribly critical, was at least telling a story as he saw it, its narrative history, not a panegyric. As he said in his own preface, he wasn’t writing a book to praise black achievement, he was writing a book to say what their experience had been. From that point of view, I think I would lean toward Williams in my own view of the subject, although I must add that Dr. Woodson was always very generous, kind, helpful to me as I was working on this, as indeed, whenever I was working on anything. He was a marvelous, marvelous friend, and a great mentor for a youngster who was stumbling around and didn’t know what he was doing.

BP: An idea I learned from reading From Slavery to Freedom is that African American history is United States history, and that United States history is African American history. Was your initial intent in writing the book to argue that point?

JHF: I believe very, very seriously that African American history is American history. It’s not separate. If anything it’s the very essence—it’s a part of American history in a very real way; therefore, I think the best African American history is that which is primarily American history and I always take the view that the history of any group that belonged to a larger group is the history of that larger group, an illumination and extension of the history of that larger group. I strongly believe that African American history is the same thing.

BP: Did From Slavery to Freedom fill any particular scholarly or cultural need in the United States when it first appeared?

JHF: By 1947, it filled a desperate need to make sense out of the relationship between African Americans and the rest of American society, a need that had become essential due to the estrangement of these groups during [World War II] itself. My brother and I were a particular part of that estrangement. My brother was principal of a high school in Oklahoma. He was drafted despite the fact that he was a high school principal and that he was over 30 years old and married, any one of which might have gotten him exempted, at least for a while, but he was drafted [snaps fingers] just like that, just scooped up. My father was very disappointed because he thought that he could get us both out. Turned out that he couldn’t get my brother out; and I never intended to [avoid service]. I didn’t register in Oklahoma. I registered in North Carolina, where I was insulted, to be sure; but where I was willing and anxious to fight. And when I volunteered in 1942—I was volunteering
for a commission, you know; after all, I had a Ph.D. and I was pretty advanced—and then they told me I had everything but the color. I was determined then to fight them to the end of the earth. And I did. I stayed out, just fighting with every resource that I had. And it’s had a profound effect on me in terms of my attitude toward history, toward the interpretation of American history. Fighting for the “Four Freedoms” and I’m not eligible, with a Ph.D. from Harvard; I’m not eligible to fight for the Four Freedoms, because I’m the wrong color? They told me that in 1942. No, you’re not going to do that to me. I was willing to say that I would lie, cheat, steal, do anything to stay out of an army that was selecting its candidates on a flimsy basis like race to fight the Nazis; just horrendous, just the thought of it. So, I fought them, and I won.\(^6\) Now that experience put me in a frame of mind, not in an antagonistic frame of mind, but a frame of mind that I could see history with a much broader view than these characters who saw this country as a white man’s country. So that helped me try to understand what a real history of this country ought to be.

BP: Many argue that race in the United States is different today than it was sixty years ago, that much has changed as a result of the Civil Rights Movement.\(^7\) How might the writing and research, indeed the very need for African American history, as an academic discipline, change as a result of this?

JHF: Well, how much has it changed? The more I look at the present, the more I’m impressed with how much remains the same. Or, how little it has changed, to put it another way. The framework has changed. Maybe the concept of it has changed, but I’m not sure it’s really changed.

I have had the experience that students are more likely to think that things have changed a great deal. I was giving a lecture at Brown University about three years ago. It’s when they were starting that movement to study the relationship of Brown [University] to slavery. This bright young black woman in the audience—I think she was a sophomore—she got up and said, “Since segregation has been outlawed, and since we have moved so far in terms of desegregation, not integration, how do we know that there are vestiges, or remnants, of the past? How do we know that things are not all that different?” I said, you don’t have to open both eyes, just open one eye and I think you will see the disparity in employment, the disparity in housing, the disparity in treatment by the police, and you look at any of the results of any of the things I am suggesting and you probably will realize how little things have changed, or how much we need to change yet. I think that the need [for African American history] is more pressing than ever. It was more pressing than ever in 1947, but if fulfilling the need or filling the need was a significant thing to do in 1947, it does not mean that the need is satisfied or that, all right now we’ve written it so, here it is, be happy and be pleased, go ahead about your business. The need
is more pressing, say, a decade or two later. You might meet it head on with *From Slavery to Freedom* in 1947, but that does not mean that the need is not as great a dozen years later.

What’s wrong with society that they would treat my little boy as they did after I bought that house in Brooklyn? And my next door neighbor wouldn’t even move his car so that the van could park by my house that I had bought next door to him. And it couldn’t have been that I was not worthy in terms of my accomplishments. Therefore, it had to be racism, you see, and that after my picture appeared on the front page of the *New York Times*. So, we spin around. We think we’ve done something, we’ve accomplished something—“Oh Jesus, Franklin’s going to be chair of the Department of History at Brooklyn College, yet Franklin can’t live in the neighborhood. He must get up early in the morning and ride his horse to Brooklyn College from the Bronx, or something”; you know [laughter], the South Bronx maybe. The war hadn’t changed things. And what little that had happened after the war had not changed things by 1957, or not enough, so that I was not free to buy a house in Brooklyn, except that my lawyer’s father made the arrangements. It was personal. I could not purchase the home because I had a right to do it. I was able to buy it because I had happened to hire a lawyer whose father was on a Board, and after I became friendly with the lawyer, I was able to buy the house. It’s just like making some kind of [deal] in Mississippi, where a sharecropper becomes friendly with someone who will do him a favor. That’s all that was.

**BP:** *What are your thoughts on the history of American racism outside the South? Many argue that racism is more hidden and insidious in the North. Your experiences looking for the house in Brooklyn, and the experience you and Mrs. Franklin had while driving with your baby to Cornell University, tell a different story.*

**JHF:** Well, not as much as we have made it out to be. It’s amazing: racism is not as crude and in a sense honest in the North as it is in the South, but it is there. Racism is more accepted in the South and more expected in the South. And it is more prevalent in the South. But none of that can be advanced as an argument that it doesn’t exist in the North as well, and it does exist. What is really different is the remarkable talent and imagination in the North to cover it up in some way so that in the South, if I’m looking for a house, they will say, “Well no niggers can live here.” In Brooklyn, I simply could not find a real estate dealer who would show me a house. And when I go out to look for a house myself, there would be all kinds of excuses, “Well this house is under contract and if the contract falls through, I will be in touch with you.” And even after I found a house in Brooklyn and I moved in, one of those houses theoretically under contract was still for sale right around the corner from where I bought my house. They never called me back. In the North, there is a less crude, but not less acceptable, form of discrimination.
BP: I’d like to go back to speaking about From Slavery to Freedom for a bit. I found that in reading the 1947 edition, that the book had more of a narrative feel to it than later editions. Later editions seem more like a textbook. In the first edition, there are more chapters devoted to South America, there’s one chapter on Canada, and I’m just wondering, was there a discernable shift in the way you presented the work or the style of the writing?

JHF: Well, a few things happened. The history of the book is a very interesting history itself. When I wrote From Slavery to Freedom in [19]47, the editor-in-chief at Knopf was a Princeton Ph.D. in history. Alfred Knopf and Roger Shugg were more interested in a history than in a textbook, and nobody would ever tell me at Knopf, “You’ve got to dumb this down some because students have to pass an exam,” maybe a true/false exam or some foolishness like that, “because we wanted to use it in a classroom.” That book was sold by Knopf to McGraw-Hill in about the fifth or sixth edition. What I’ve had to do since that time is to resist the steady effort to make it into a textbook, which means a lot of things, including dumbing it down and organizing it a certain way. They even wanted me to put questions and answers in there, if I was willing to do so, but I’m always resisting, always resisting, and it’s rather painful. It’s been translated into six languages, all of that by Knopf, and that’s the way they did things. Blanche (Knopf) stayed in Europe to drum-up European offers, and she’d go to Asia and places like that. She was in charge of international aspects of it. So when they wanted to have a German edition, she said, sure. But when I spoke to McGraw-Hill about a Spanish edition, they said, “How many classes are we talking about?” It’s just too bad that Knopf didn’t see the wisdom or the opportunity. . . . As we move over from 1947 to 1990 and on into the 21st century, there is more and more pressure to make it into a textbook, and we resisted.

BP: And the resistance is rooted in a desire not to dilute the content?

JHF: In our desire not to do that, yes, and to make it a classical history. That book was not designed [as] a textbook in the first place and we don’t want it to be, and there’s a certain respectability that we want to maintain. And that’s hard when you’ve got the pressure of a big textbook publishing company like McGraw-Hill. They can’t think outside the box, so to speak, they can’t think about it except in terms of classroom sales. The more its brought under the influence of traditional [textbook] pedagogy, the less appealing it is. And you just have to know how much we put into resisting the pressures. There is another aspect of it: there was no competition in 1947, plus the fact that there was this very sophisticated attitude of Alfred Knopf and his crowd toward this whole field. Contrast that with by the time you read the book’s later editions there are several vigorous competitors. Knopf is dead and our book was sold to McGraw-Hill and you see a combination of things.
Just think, Alfred Knopf regarded himself as a historian. He was a remarkable man, physically and in every other way: tall, big, outlandish clothes, you know, purple shirt and red tie (laughter), and having historians to dinner at the national meetings—he came to all the American Historical Association meetings himself, and you could tell how you ranked with him whether you were invited to breakfast or lunch or dinner. You found you were working toward that dinner. When you got to the dinner, you had made it, (laughter) you had made it all the way. I’m trying to [relate] the climate in which *From Slavery to Freedom* was flourishing. And contrast that with the people at McGraw-Hill when they’re out trying to sell the book. That’s what we were up against, and it was very different. And the competition was pressing all the time. As the competition presses, it’s more and more difficult to persuade McGraw-Hill to do what you would like for them to do.

BP: *Do you think* *From Slavery to Freedom* will be around for another sixty years?

JHF: (Laughs). I don’t know. I would rather doubt it. I can hope that it will be. I think it depends on . . . it might not dominate the field, but if it holds firmly to its own past and its own standards, it will have a place in the field and probably as a textbook, but with limited use and influence. I would hope so. Evelyn and I discussed it a great deal.¹¹ That’s what we want. And that’s what some people at McGraw-Hill want, but that’s not the dominant view at McGraw-Hill.

BP: *I’m wondering if we can speak a bit about some of your own individual scholarly and professional development. At Harvard, initially you sought to research and study European history. Some of your professors tried to persuade you to do work on African American topics; for example, there was the experience where Professor Arthur Schlesinger, Sr., encouraged you to write about Booker T. Washington instead of your initial subject. You resisted this out of concern that you didn’t want to fall victim to prejudiced notions that black people were only fit to work on black subjects. . . .

JHF: And that they “knew” the subject already.¹²

BP: *So, you first published your essay on Edward Bellamy, but then you eventually wrote a dissertation and your first book on free blacks in North Carolina.¹³ Why did you not stick to your initial scholarly impulse and pursue a topic unrelated to African Americans? What drew you to this subject?*

JHF: Well, in the first place, I had to abandon European history because I could never think of getting to Europe. It was, from my point of view, not practical. It was a dream that would remain unfulfilled maybe for the rest of my life. . . . I hope you can appreciate that, that in the 1930s, it was inconceivable that I could ever go abroad.
BP: *This sounds similar to the moment in your life when you learned of your acceptance to Harvard, but you couldn’t go.*\(^{14}\) You couldn’t go until your mentor at Fisk. . . .

JHF: Ted Currier gave me money, lent me the money. No, I couldn’t get into European subjects. Then, every way I turned the things that interested me the most in American history were things that either had been done or were in the process of being done. Then I remembered that I had worked on free Negroes when I was an undergraduate at Fisk. And I was fascinated by it. I looked around and [nothing] had been done on free Negroes since the 1910s, the Virginia and the Maryland studies. One was done the year I was born and the other was done a little bit later, but not much later.\(^{15}\) So here these things are that I am fascinated by, interested in, here are these things that are not being addressed and no one could say that it had been done and I was sort of looking over someone’s shoulder. It still gave me the opportunity to be quite original.

BP: *Why do you think that free blacks had been so understudied into the 1930s and 1940s?*

JHF: Oh, I think that first, it was incredible that they were free. And secondly, no one wanted to be responsible for bringing out the story that in the slave period there were large numbers of free blacks. Conspiracy of silences [laughs]. That history would have shown that blacks were capable of being free and of functioning in a society as free people when slavery was a dominant status for them, and as long as we keep that quiet, the better it is.

BP: *I wanted to speak a bit about the development of Black Studies in American universities during the late 1960s and the growth and expansion of African American history in the larger historical profession. How do those two things influence each other? How, in your opinion, has Black Studies impacted the larger historical profession?*

JHF: That’s a very interesting question. I wrestle with it all the time, and I’m not at all persuaded that I have the answer. I think that Black Studies has a political connotation that the study of African American history may not have, African American literature may not have, and Black Studies is a sort of a political movement. It has to do with somehow pushing for a better place in American society for black people. That blacks, as such, have a different approach when it comes to studying African American history is, I think, a reflection on something that is more non-political, more academic, more scholarly than Black Studies. And it has to do in part with the history of this whole post-World War II, civil rights struggle. Black Studies became a part of a political movement to achieve equality, but through academia.\(^{16}\) And the introduction of African American literature, or
history, or politics, into the curriculum is a way of fulfilling the dream that all of us have, that we have a broader, richer intellectual experience in academia. I have been very wary about creating Black Studies departments. I’ve never been a part of one. And when they were starting one at Harvard, they were thinking of me as coming home, or coming back, or whatever, to run the program, and it did not appeal to me at all. I was chairman of the Department of History at the University of Chicago at the time. I was moving toward what I thought was the right direction, that is, to achieve the highest academic status for a historian and for the subject of African American history in the Department of History. When Harvard called me and told me that they were going to have a [Black Studies] department and everyone was thinking of me as heading the department, I wasn’t thinking about that. I had no interest in it. I [was] president of the Organization of American Historians. I had been president of the Southern Historical [Association]. I was the John Matthews Manly Distinguished Service Professor of History at the University of Chicago. And the history department wouldn’t even consider having me in the department at Harvard, from which I had two degrees. Oh, I’m not even thinking about those characters. So I just ignored them. I was scheduled to give a lecture there. You couldn’t get into the lecture hall because people thought that I was up there to be tried out. I was up there to give a lecture which I had agreed to give the year before. Anyway, that helped me to think through what I thought about these subjects and these curricula. I had the view that African American literature should be an advanced area of study in the English department, or in the American literature department, or whatever the literature department was called, and the same thing with African American history. I never pushed for African American history, a section or a division of it at Chicago, even when I was chair, because I was not interested in institutionalizing the subject so much as I was interested in intellectualizing it and creating a climate where it could thrive and that’s what I’ve always been interested in doing.

BP: African American organizations and publications such as the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History, The Journal of Negro History, The Journal of Negro Education, these developed during a specific historical moment: the age of Jim Crow segregation. Black Studies also emerged at a time when very few, if any, academic departments paid attention to African American subjects in their course offerings or hiring decisions. In the 21st century do we need Black Studies, or organizations and publications dedicated to African American subjects? What role do you think they serve today? Do you think that these organizations still fulfill an important intellectual or even political role?

JHF: I am very ambivalent on the subject. You see, I came at this thinking that African American history ought to enrich and supplement and correct American
history. I didn’t think of it in terms of a separate entity of any kind. I have always had problems with rationalizing or making the adjustment over that problem, and I still do. I’ve never been in a Department of Black Studies, so I don’t know what the ethos is in actuality. What does Black Studies do that does not occur somewhere else? I don’t know. What I fear is that it might be pulling us away from the main line, the main course. What I’m afraid of is that these departments will have a life of their own and will therefore move farther and farther away from the central core, which is history, or literature, or whatever.

I can understand the existence of the Association for the Study of African American Life and History and *The Journal of Negro Education*. I don’t have any problem with that. And I don’t have any problem with their continuation, since they arose to fill a need just like the [historically] black college did. And I would challenge anybody to say that Fisk [University] should not exist anymore. I’d run them out of town. And in the same way that I think that these subjects ought to exist, but whether or not they should flourish as separate entities . . . and they tend to institutionalize that whole existence, and they’re behind separate black activities or groups on campus, a separate commencement, a black commencement. I don’t know, that’s pretty far. You’re either in or you’re not in. You’re either part of this institution, or you’re not a part of it. I’ve never gone to the black commencement, or whatever it’s called, at Duke. I don’t go to it. I just can’t worry. . . . I gave the commencement address at Duke University last year, I didn’t give it at the “Black Duke,” or whatever it is, and I would not give it at this other place. I really wouldn’t.

**BP:** I wanted to ask a few questions on the practice of history. You strike a balance between scholarship and advocacy, and at times you have combined the two, as with your work on what became the Brown decision. Going through your papers at Duke’s library, I saw that you were very involved in the Joint Center for Political Studies, which seemed to be, when it came into existence, a pretty marvelous group of scholars asking some very pointed and important questions, and then coming up with significant, clear answers and directions. And then you chaired Clinton’s initiative in the late 1990s. How did you balance these two roles, scholarship and advocacy, these two forms of work?

**JHF:** Well, you have to work at it. It’s very hard work because you don’t want one to get the better of you at the expense of the other. There’s never a moment you shouldn’t be conscious of what you are doing. . . . I don’t know whether your and later generations can be sensitive to this, but as you make the transition to try to use scholarship as an advocacy tool, you have to be very careful not to get carried away, not to let one sweep you away and the other comes dragging after. So, it’s balance, very trying and very difficult balance, but it’s just necessary. You’ve certainly read where I’ve said more than once that I couldn’t be a scholar in our time without also
being an advocate. They go together. And the moment they go together, a very serious problem arises, of not letting one get the better of the other. That’s what you have to be careful about. All right, so I marched in Montgomery. That’s probably almost an extreme for the scholar. And yet, when we got there, we really realized then that we needed to be there because of the concept that these people had of the role that they were playing as historical figures. Where are the historians to write about them, you know, if we’re not in Montgomery? It was good to be there, not merely as historians, but as people, as scholars who could bring back from that some [eyewitness] view of that experience, which could then be brought into the historical writing itself. I think it’s easy for a historian to be an advocate. It’s more difficult for an advocate to be a historian too. And yet, those two fields must be combined with great care and with appreciation for what they can do for each other.

BP: Your personal discipline and your focus are inspiring and motivating. In the middle of your career, in the midst of your work as a writer, as a researcher, as a teacher, as a department chair, etcetera, how would you describe your typical day?

JHF: I think it depends on what part of my life you were talking about. My typical day now is about as hectic as it’s ever been despite the fact that I’m 92 and have been retired for longer than I can remember, yet I find myself terribly, terribly busy. When I was here in Durham sixty years ago, and writing From Slavery to Freedom, I taught five classes. I did not have an office. I did not have a study room in the library. Between classes, I sat in that classroom and worked until the next, and if I had a vacant hour, I sat in there and worked, unless some class was there and I had to go and find a room that I could sit in and work, and I would work. If its fifty minutes, I could work forty of them, you see. And I would come home and I would work. [He points to large wooden dining room table where we are seated.] I could have written an Encyclopedia Britannica had I had a table like this. But at one end of the table, Aurelia may be cooking and putting dinner on the table and I’m writing on my lap because I can’t have it up there now because she’s putting the food on the table. (Laughs and sighs). That’s the way it was. It just depends on what time of my life you were talking about. It’s very different from one stage to the other. When I was at Howard, it was very different. Then I became an administrator at Brooklyn College and that was difficult and different. And then when I moved to University of Chicago that was the first time I ever acted like a professor. I had, first, secretarial help, secondly an office, office hours, library office, and just living the life of a professor. By then, I’m forty-nine years old, you see. There I was, approaching an old man who was just learning how to be a scholar, professor, so forth. By that time I was traveling a great deal abroad, traveling a lot in Europe, Africa, Australia, and Asia, which cut into my life. By the time I got to Chicago, I
could be in residence and teaching for two quarters, and in residence but not teaching for a third quarter, and then out of residence for the fourth quarter. But in residence and not teaching—which meant I could go anywhere I wanted—you really were not in residence unless you wanted to be, so I would go to Brazil. I was also chair of the Fulbright [Fellowships] Board, which took up a lot of time and I went a lot of places. Or after I left the board, I served as a Fulbright scholar in Australia or in Brazil or Argentina, so it’s very varied, you see.

BP: _In the midst of all this busy activity, how did you find time to continue writing?_

JHF: That was central to my life. I always wrote. I could write [when] I was in residence a lot. You write primarily in residence, but then, if I am going somewhere, I can take a chapter and some notes to use in my spare time on the planes, on the trains, or in my hotel room, or wherever. Often, when I traveled abroad for several months, I was not with my family. Although I was terribly busy in Australia, I was there without my family. The first time I went to Cambridge, England, I taught a seminar in American Studies for the summer and I went alone. The next time I went, I had thought that I could take my wife. I wrote for them to find a place for my wife and by that time I had had a boy. And they said, “Well, we thought that you were coming alone. It’s very important that you have contact with the students and we had thought that you would live among them and not with a family, but if you insist we will find a place for your [family].” And when Aurelia saw that, she said, “Well you go ahead, I’ll stay here.” And so I went ahead. I taught one summer in the Salzburg seminar in American Studies without her. I taught two summers at Cambridge [University], but I made it up because when I went to be Pitt Professor at Cambridge, our son was ten and he went with us. But I made it a point of always remembering what Aurelia meant to me in terms of what she did and sacrificed and in helping send me away [to Washington, DC] to finish _From Slavery to Freedom_.

I swore that she would never regret it because I would take her everywhere I went once we put [John Whittington Franklin] in college, and I did. I took her all the places she’d never been. And then some places I hadn’t been, like Russia, we went to together. So it takes a little doing to combine family with scholarship with work and yet that’s what you have to do if you want to get somewhere, I felt anyway.

NOTES


2The papers do contain a wide array of Dr. Franklin’s writings, lectures, research notes, and sources, but only a sprinkling of personal correspondence pertaining to his scholarship.
Interview with Dr. John Hope Franklin


5Carter G. Woodson’s text was first published in 1922 and George Washington Williams’s two-volume study first appeared in 1883.


7For examples of this argument, see John McWhorter, Losing the Race: Self-Sabotage in Black America (New York, 2000); and All About the Beat: Why Hip Hop Can’t Save Black America (New York, 2008).

8Franklin, Mirror to America, 177-179.


10Franklin, Mirror to America, 153-155.

11The 9th edition of From Slavery to Freedom, to be published by McGraw-Hill, will be coauthored by Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham.

12Mirror to America, 62.


14Franklin, Mirror to America, 56-60


17Franklin, Mirror to America, 156–158.