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Pioneering Historian John Hope Franklin Dies

**Associated Press
March 25, 2009**

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John Hope Franklin, who died today at age 94, retained consummate grace and dignity as he grew into a towering scholar and prodigious author.

Born and raised in an all-black community in Oklahoma where he was often subjected to humiliating racism, Franklin was later instrumental in bringing down the legal and historical validations of such a world.

The Rev. Jesse Jackson said the legacy of late African-American studies pioneer "will live forever."

Franklin died Wednesday of congestive heart failure at Duke University's hospital in Durham, N.C.

Jackson said he remembers walking the University of Chicago campus with Franklin when he was a student.

Franklin joined the faculty at the U of C in 1964, serving as chairman of the history department from 1967 to 1970. He was the John Matthews Manly Distinguished Service Professor from 1969 to 1982, when he became professor emeritus.

Jackson says all of Franklin's students felt that they were his "prize possession."

And he called Franklin "the pre-eminent voice and witness for America's sojourn from slavery to freedom."

In his early days as a young academic, researching his pioneering book on the black experience in the U.S. and setting the foundation for a life's work chronicling African-American history, Franklin had to leave Duke University's manuscript collection to eat lunch or use the bathroom.

Those spaces were for whites only.

"One of the great stories of his life is his dignity in the face of the kind of rampant racism that existed," said Bill Chafe, a colleague in the history department at Duke University. "And he never lost his sense of empowerment in the face of that kind of treatment."

"Because of the life John Hope Franklin lived, the public service he rendered, and the scholarship that was the mark of his distinguished career, we all have a richer



understanding of who we are as Americans and our journey as a people," President Barack Obama said in a statement. "Dr. Franklin will be deeply missed, but his legacy is one that will surely endure."

Franklin died a few months after having witnessed Obama's inauguration as the nation's first black president.

After Obama's November election, Franklin called his ascension to the White House "one of the most historic moments, if not the most historic moment, in the history of this country."

A student of history who made it himself, Franklin would know.

As an author, his book "From Slavery to Freedom" was a landmark integration of black history into American history that remains relevant more than 60 years after being published.

As a scholar, his research helped Thurgood Marshall and his team at the NAACP win *Brown v. Board of Education*, the 1954 case that barred the doctrine of "separate but equal" in the nation's public schools.

"It was evident how much the lawyers appreciated what the historians could offer," Franklin later wrote. "For me, and I suspect the same was true for the others, it was exhilarating."

Franklin himself broke numerous color barriers. He was the first black department chair at a predominantly white institution, Brooklyn College; the first black professor to hold an endowed chair at Duke; and the first black president of the American Historical Association.

He often regarded his country like an exasperated relative, frustrated by racism's stubborn power, yet refusing to give up.

"I want to be out there on the firing line, helping, directing or doing something to try to make this a better world, a better place to live," Franklin told The Associated Press in 2005.

Above all, he used history to document how blacks lived and served alongside whites from the nation's birth.

Black patriots fought at Lexington and Concord, Franklin pointed out in "From Slavery to Freedom," published in 1947. They crossed the Delaware with Washington and explored with Lewis and Clark.

The book sold more than 3.5 million copies and remains required reading in college classrooms. It was based on research Franklin conducted in libraries and archives that didn't allow him to eat lunch or use the bathroom because he was black.

"He was working in a profession that more or less banned him at the outset and ended up its leading practitioner," said Tim Tyson, a history professor at Duke. "And yet, he always managed to keep his grace and his sense of humor."

Late in life, Franklin received more than 130 honorary degrees and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People's Spingarn Award. In 1993, President Bill Clinton honored Franklin with the Charles Frankel Prize, recognizing scholarly contributions that give "eloquence and meaning . . . to our ideas, hopes and dreams as American citizens."

Clinton awarded Franklin the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the nation's highest civilian prize, two years later, and gave him the role for which he was perhaps best known outside academia, as chairman of Clinton's Initiative on Race.

It was a job of which Franklin said: "I am not sure this is an honor. It may be a burden."

As he aged, Franklin spent more time in the greenhouse behind his home, where he nursed orchids, than in libraries. He fell in love with the flowers because "they're full of challenges, mystery" -- the same reasons he fell in love with history.

In June, Franklin had a small role in the movie based on the book "Blood Done Signed My Name," about the public slaying of black man in Oxford in 1970.

Tyson, the book's author, said at the time he wanted Franklin in the movie "because of his dignity and his shining intelligence."

Franklin attended historically black Fisk University, where he met Aurelia Whittington, who would be his wife, editor, helpmate and rock for 58 years, until her death in 1999.

He planned to follow his father into law, but the lively lectures of a white professor, Ted Currier, convinced him history was his field. Currier borrowed \$500 to send Franklin to Harvard University for graduate studies.

Franklin's doctoral thesis was on free blacks in antebellum North Carolina. His wife spent part of their honeymoon in Washington, D.C., at the Census Bureau, helping him finish.

The resulting work, "The Free Negro in North Carolina, 1790-1860," earned Franklin his doctorate and, in 1943, became his first published book. Four years later, he took a job at Howard University. It was the same year "From Slavery to Freedom" was published.

Some of his greatest moments of triumph were marred by bigotry.

His joy at being offered the chair of the Brooklyn College history department in 1956 was tempered by his difficulty getting a loan to buy a house in a "white" neighborhood.

When he was to receive the freedom medal, Franklin hosted a party for some friends at Washington's Cosmos Club, of which he had long been a member. A white woman walked up to him, handed him a slip of paper and demanded that he get her coat.

He politely told the woman that any of the uniformed attendants, "and they were all in uniform," would be happy to assist her.

Franklin was born Jan. 2, 1915, in the all-black town of Rentiesville, Okla., where his parents moved in the mistaken belief that separation from whites would mean a better life for their young family. But his father's law office was burned in the race riots in Tulsa, Okla., in 1921, along with the rest of the black section of town.

His mother, Mollie, a teacher, began taking him to school with her when he was 3. He could read and write by 5; by 6, he first became aware of the "racial divide separating me from white America."

Franklin, his mother and sister Anne were ejected from a train when his mother refused the conductor's orders to move to the overcrowded "Negro" coach. As they trudged through the woods back to Rentiesville, young John Hope began to cry.

His mother pulled him aside and told him, "There was not a white person on that train or anywhere else who was any better than I was. She admonished me not to waste my energy by fretting but to save it in order to prove that I was as good as any of them."

Read the New York Times's March 29, 2009, article on the passing of John Hope Franklin (http://www.nytimes.com/2009/03/29/weekinreview/29applebome.html?_r=2&).