

John Hope Franklin, a ‘Mighty Scholar’, brought clarity to Black struggle in America

Written by Hazel Trice Edney, NNPA Editor-in-Chief
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WASHINGTON (NNPA) – When historian, author, and scholar John Hope Franklin mounted the stage at the Newsmaker of the Year Awards Gala three years ago, he told the members of the National Newspaper Publishers Association, “I think that I deserve this reward for reasons you may not know.”

Receiving the organization’s 2006 Lifetime Achievement Award that evening, Franklin received extra applause from the Black publishers when he announced that 80 years earlier he had been a carrier of NNPA newspapers, the *Chicago Defender* and the *Pittsburgh Courier* “keeping Black journalism afloat” during the hard economic times of the 1920s and 30s.

This was just a scintilla of his acclaimed national and international contributions to Black history.

Known as the “dean of Black historians,” Franklin died of congestive heart failure March 25 at the age of 94. Accolades in statements from across America in the wake of his passing underscores the fact that his name has become almost synonymous with Black History.

“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,” read a statement from President Barack Obama. “Dr. Franklin will be deeply missed, but his legacy is one that will surely endure.”

The Duke University Professor Emeritus of History was best known for his now 60-year-old book, *From Slavery to Freedom*, described as a landmark narrative which weaves Black history into the context of American history. His historical research is credited with assisting NAACP lawyers, including Thurgood Marshall, with the win in the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* desegregation case. At that time, Franklin was a professor at Howard University.

Born Jan. 2, 1915, Franklin was raised in the then all Black community of Rentiesville, OK.

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Largely inspired by the humiliations he and other Blacks suffered there – including being put off a train at the age of six with his mother when she refused to sit in a segregated car - he set his sights on telling the story of African American struggle.

“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 is quoted on the homepage of a special memorial website set up by Duke.

“John Hope Franklin lived for nearly a century and helped define that century,” says Duke President Richard H. Brodhead. “A towering historian, he led the recognition that African-American history and American history are one. With his grasp of the past, he spent a lifetime building a future of inclusiveness, fairness and equality. Duke has lost a great citizen and a great friend.”

A celebration of his life and of his late wife Aurelia Franklin has been set for 11 a.m. June 11 in Duke Chapel in honor of their 69th wedding anniversary. This week, sentiments are being expressed across the nation.

“For many African Americans, our first introduction to Black history was through Dr. Franklin’s book *From Slavery to Freedom*. In its pages we found an account of American history that affirmed the dignity of Black people and the nobility of our struggle,” said U. S. Rep. Barbara Lee, Chair of the Congressional Black Caucus. “Today our nation lost a mighty scholar and soldier for justice.”

Having earned an undergraduate degree in history from Fisk in 1935 and a master’s and doctorate from Harvard, Franklin chaired the history departments at Brooklyn College and the University of Chicago before becoming the James B. Duke Professor of History at Duke University. Named in his honor are the John Hope Franklin Center for Interdisciplinary and International Studies and the Franklin Humanities Institute at Duke.

Franklin loved telling stories and had a knack for drawing laughter amidst painfully serious topics. The following 2005 account from his 90th birthday celebration at Duke illustrates his focus on change for America:

“While others at the event talked about the past and reminisced about his accomplishments, Franklin focused squarely on the future,” says the obituary on Duke’s website. “He described the event, held the same day as President George W. Bush’s second inauguration, as a ‘counter-inaugural,’ and gave a talk in the form of a letter to a fictional White man he called “Jonathan Doe.”

“He recounted some of the historical inequalities in the United States and recalled some of his own experiences with racism. He said, for example, that the evening before he received the Presidential Medal of Freedom from President Bill Clinton, a woman at his club in Washington, D.C., asked him to get her coat. Around the same time, a man at a hotel handed Franklin his car keys and told him to get his car.

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"I patiently explained to him that I was a guest in the hotel, as I presumed he was, and I had no idea where his automobile was. And, in any case, I was retired," Franklin said. "Both of these incidents occurred when he was in his 80s."

Franklin was among giants who brought acclaim to academic prowess while African Americans are so often lauded for sports and entertainment.

"If our society gave as much media play and coverage to persons with great intellectual depth and wisdom as has given to great athletes, then we would know as much about Professor Franklin as we know about Michael Jordan and Willie Mays," said Black Press historian Clint Wilson at the Black Press event. "Dr. Franklin's accomplishments rank in that magnitude among academicians."

Franklin is also being celebrated as a giant in the civil rights community.

"Dr. Franklin's legacy and work will continue to guide us along our national road to an equal and just society. Throughout his life, he worked tirelessly to make sure that the story of America includes the stories of us all," said Wade Henderson, executive director of The Leadership Conference on Civil Rights.

Ralph B. Everett, President and CEO, Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies, called Franklin a "scholar's scholar. He not only created the field of African-American history, he embodied it."

Even into his 90s, John Hope Franklin continued to pour into organizations and projects with missions to maintain a focus on Black History. Chief among those organizations is the Association for the Study of African American Life and History, based at Howard University.

"Dr. Franklin never wavered in his support for ASALH," said Sylvia Cyrus, ASALH executive director. "Recently he lent his voice to the ASALH project "Freedom's Song" on the Tulsa Race Riots. Through this video, generations will continue to learn from Dr. Franklin, a tireless educator and dignified American."

Franklin was active in numerous professional organizations and served on a string of national commissions. They included the editorial board of the Journal of Negro History. Over the years, he served as President of The American Studies Association, the Southern Historical Association, the United Chapters of Phi Beta Kappa, the Organization of American Historians, and the American Historical Association.

He also served on the National Council on the Humanities, the Advisory Commission on Public Diplomacy, and the President's Advisory Commission on Ambassadorial Appointments. His weighty contributions also extended abroad. In September and October of 1980, he was a United States delegate to the 21st General Conference of UNESCO. He also served as Pitt Professor of American History and Institutions at Cambridge University, Consultant on American Education in the Soviet Union, Fulbright Professor in Australia, and Lecturer in American History in the People's Republic of China.

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Among his dozens of awards are the NAACP's Spingarn Medal, and the Presidential Medal of Freedom.

He is survived by his son, John Whittington Franklin, daughter-in-law Karen Roberts Franklin, sister-in-law Bertha W. Gibbs, cousin Grant Franklin Sr., a host of nieces, nephews, great-nieces and great-nephews, other family members, many generations of students and friends.