New North Star, 2024; 6: 96-98

"JWB and the FDPP"

Lawrence N. Powell
Tulane University

It was sometime in the spring of 1967 when I met John Blassingame in the halls of the University of Maryland history department. He had driven down from New Haven to discuss joining Louis Harlan on the Booker T. Washington Papers (BTW). I was nearing graduation and about to start Yale graduate school. This was fifty-six years ago and counting.

Moving back to the D.C. area held immense appeal for John. At nearby Howard University were friends and mentors like Dorothy Porter Wesley and Elsie Lewis from his M.A. student days. But so were the rich collections at Howard's Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, the Library of Congress, and the National Archives. When not doing editing work at College Park, during the next few years John spent most of his waking hours in those repositories researching the Yale dissertation that became *Black New Orleans, 1860–1880*.

Then there was the lure of networking with the NEH and the NHPRC, never mind the opportunity to pick Harlan's brain about the art and politics of lofting historical editing projects. The idea of editing the Frederick Douglass Papers had been gestating with John long before he finished his Ph.D. "He already had it in the back of his mind," his wife Teasie remembers. "That was his heart. It was a mission." But so was preparing himself for life as a historian, which for him was less a career than a calling. John was an institution-builder, in the tradition of Carter G. Woodson, W.E.B. DuBois, and Booker T. Washington, and he pursued that calling with tireless energy. As his longtime friend and frequent collaborator, Mary Frances Berry, remembers, "John was a man of many parts."

Everything fell into place when he returned to Yale in 1970, now as a member of the faculty, but with the understanding that he would play an active role in building out the Afro-American Studies Program established the year before. John welcomed the challenge. After all, he was a heavyweight multitasker. His scholarship scarcely missed a beat. Books and articles came out in quick succession because he seldom worked on one book alone. His norm was two at a time. Yet I have been puzzled by their sequencing. *Black New Orleans* (1973) was not the first in print. It was third in line, appearing one year after the release of *The Slave Community* (1972). Thinking back, I am convinced their publication order beams light not only on the milieu in which the Frederick Douglass Papers Project (FDPP) came into existence; it also foreshadows the difficulties the project ran into at Yale further down the road.

That *New Perspectives on Black Studies* (1971) appeared first makes perfect sense. It was a collection of sixteen essays "on the development and concerns of black studies programs in colleges and universities." One of the two essays that John contributed singled out the problem of Black professors on White campuses. They were overworked, obliged to "serve on every committee remotely concerned with black collegians." By now, following Yale's stepped-up recruitment of Black students starting in 1964, there was a substantial nucleus of "Black Collegians" at Yale, and they were fed up with tokenism. You have to remember that this was a time when the anti-war movement was convulsing American campuses, the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. was lighting American cities on fire, and Black consciousness and Black Power movements were demanding more than just a hearing.

What John told the Yale's higher administration when he signed on I have not the slightest idea, but I am sure it was along the lines that it needed to step up its game and add more faculty lines to the Afro-Am Studies program.

In places like Yale, prestige was—and is—the coin of the realm. And John, it will be remembered, had been minting a currency of his own as early as his days at the BTW Papers: namely, the FDP project. There is no question in my mind that he accepted Yale's offer with the idea of offering one of his own, but not right away. John was familiar with the corridors of academic power. He waited until the financing was in place before presenting Yale with an offer they could not refuse: collecting and publishing papers of America's foremost Black freedom fighter.

After John returned to Yale we became good coffee shop friends. So, when he launched the Frederick Douglass Papers Project in 1973, he asked me to become his first full-time research assistant. The offer arrived at an opportune moment. My fellowship had run out, and I was about to become a father. The job offer literally saved my career—or, rather, John did. I was floundering, stalled on my dissertation, even weighing bailing. I owe him a lot, more than I can put into words.

The Douglass project was a special place in those years—an interracial community of complete intellectual equality, and about as free from condescension and guardedness as it was possible to be in a place where the garment of diversity was hardly a snug fit at the time. John was a great judge of talent. To be associate editor, he recruited Pete Ripley from the Sopchoppy River in northern Florida, where he had been working as a carpenter building houses while rebuilding Harley Motorcyles in his spare time.

Their paths had crossed at the National Archives while researching dissertations on New Orleans's African American community during the Civil War. When one of the archivists discovered his research interests, he told Pete: "Well, you had better meet John Blassingame. He's in the Reading Room. You can't miss him. He's the most imposing person there."

"We spent the next two days in the basement canteen chain smoking and drinking vending machine coffee," Pete remembers, "eating cellophane-wrapped cheese sandwiches that you heated in a toaster oven. There was no competitiveness. John was incredibly generous. He helped me refine my topic—the Department of the Gulf." Ripley's Florida State dissertation became the important book *Slaves and Freedmen in Civil War Louisiana*.

In 1975, another impressive Blassingame find arrived from the University of Georgia to serve as assistant editor. Clarence Mohr had just finished the dissertation that became the prize-winning book *On the Threshold of Freedom*. Then there was Julie Saville, still a graduate student, who like me was also working in her spare time on a dissertation (hers became the acclaimed *The Work of Reconstruction*).

Already well published and highly regarded, V. P. Franklin replaced Pete when he left to establish the Black Abolitionist Papers Project at Florida State University. As for the host of Black undergraduate student workers who also filed through our offices on College Street, they are too plentiful to enumerate. But one stands out: the Black New Orleanian Mitchell Crusto, now a professor of law at Loyola University of New Orleans.

The Douglass project was more than a hive of activity; to mix metaphors, it was also a barrel of laughs. The number of hours we spent marveling over the Comstock ore we had plundered the day before from the antislavery newspapers John tasked us with mining in Yale's imposing Sterling Memorial Library seem endless in retrospect. Even the hard labor of writing annotation notes were occasions for inflicting new insights on our neighbors.

Often the fun began first thing in the morning. Just around the corner from the Douglass Papers' office was Naples Pizzeria on Wall Street. Calling it a pizzeria hardly does justice to its ambience. The tavern had the tobacco-soured, smoky ambience of a *Gasthaus in der Schwarzwald*: oaken booths etched with the grooves of venerable Yalie initials, and the air thick with the musk of bygone privilege. This was where several of us began our day before heading to Sterling Library to research annotation notes or synopsize Douglass's imposing editorial output.

Moreover, one of the regulars was Henry Louis "Skip" Gates. Skip was among the remarkable crop of Black undergraduates that had been recruited to Yale in 1964 or thereabouts. After graduating, he headed to Cambridge University for his D.Litt. but returned to Yale to write his thesis while serving as the administrative assistant to Charles Davis, the first director of Yale's Afro-American Studies Program. The Douglass Papers was housed in the same building. No surprise there. Nor should anyone be startled to learn that even this early in Skip's stellar career he was already building his Rolodex. Who might show up with Skip in the morning was always a revelation. It might be the late Ed Bradley from *60 Minutes* or the future Nobelist Toni Morrison or the edgy playwright Amira Baraka (formerly Leroi Jones).

But still with me from those days is John's huge, booming laugh. Yet in saying that, I am also reminded of the profound seriousness that lay beneath his cheerful geniality. For when John locked in, he was as focused as a laser beam. It was commonplace spotting his measured strolls across campus: a tall, lanky figure, gripping file folders and notepads, gazing off in the middle distance, lost in rumination. Or to find him at almost any hour of the day or night occupying a table in Naples, scribbling on yellow legal pads while processing urns of coffee and barns of tobacco, for his idea of smoking was to take a few puffs, snuff out the cigarette, and immediately light another one.