New North Star, 2024; 6: 102-105

Remembering John Blassingame

Peter P. Hinks

I first met John Blassingame in January 1983, the beginning of my second semester as a graduate student at Yale University. I had enrolled in his Reading & Discussion Seminar on the Civil War & Reconstruction. Frankly, I knew little about John then as either historian or editor. I was about to start learning much more. But first I learned about John the man, the person, the friend. It was by way of an ice-breaker at our first seminar meeting. John recalled his first days and weeks at Yale and New Haven in the 1970s:

> I remember, he recollected, walking down York Street early in the morning to the Hall of Graduate Studies, or down High Street to go to Sterling Memorial Library. All along the way I would pass people scurrying to classes or research or meetings of one sort or another. And I did not fail to say "Good Morning!" to almost every single one of them. And, equally without fail, almost every single one of them failed to respond to me. I was dumbfounded and, yes, a little hurt. I was delighted to be in New Haven and just wanted to start making friendly acquaintance with my neighbors just like I had always done back in Covington, GA. I would no more walk past my chums or Mr. and Mrs. Pettigrew [fictional names!] or even a stranger there without offering a friendly greeting and nod than I would have hit them! But it all did not matter much in New Haven; I don't remember very many ever returning my morning greetings.

As I recall now, I think he pretty much stopped the story there, left hanging in the air one of the first lessons this southerner learned about Yankee charm. But, truth be told, John never let it bother him very much. John never stopped saying "Hello!"

The seminar was quite demanding, especially for the novice Hinks who had majored in English as an undergraduate. Only three had enrolled for the seminar—myself, the late Marcellus Blount who went on to teach at Columbia, and Xin Yei, a recently admitted student from The English Language Institute in Beijing. But John had no problem filling up the time in the seminar: each one of us was assigned a particular text treating the topic of the week—secession in the South, forging the Confederate nation, defeat and early Reconstruction, radical Reconstruction, Reconstruction in individual states, the early knitting of a New South, whatever. John then requested that each one of us summarize the argument of the author and assess its merits, deficits, and historiographical significance. It was a big bill given that we all had enormous reading and writing requirements for at least two other graduate seminars. Being far from adept with historiography, I stumbled at first with the near thirty-minute presentations and made a mash of the first few, especially Ransom & Sutch's *One Kind of Freedom*!!But John—who knew all the texts well—would make a few adroit comments, but not much more. He was unfailingly complimentary and gently prodding, never irascible or contrary. He always made you feel that you were on the right path, you might just have to clear it out a little more. By mid-way through the semester, I was getting the knack; John had taken our small numbers and created a space where the inept might move a little closer every week to becoming proficient in a skill absolutely

fundamental to the proper historian. I chose to write an essay on the historiography of the Freedmen's Bureau and surprised myself with what depth I probed that controversial institution and how I came to discern and gauge the diversity of historical interpretations on it. John walked the path with me throughout. What I wrote for him that semester bore no resemblance to my earlier unwitting meanders through works on the Reformation, a result related to the fact the professor had offered little guidance in how to grope one's way through the nuances and differences of historical writing. John quite wittingly welcomed me into the adventure of what might seem anything but an exciting enterprise—historiographical interpretation.

That same semester, I enrolled in David Brion Davis's antebellum research seminar. Rambling about Sterling Memorial Library early in the semester reviewing possible sources for my essay, I stumbled upon John by the elevator into the "Stacks," and blurted out a "Hello." While I had already learned that he appreciated that word, I was nevertheless daunted by this unexpected encounter with an eminent professor with whom I had never yet really spoken. But John being John, he of course stopped and asked me how everything was going. I mentioned my pursuit of a research topic and John only became more engaged. Bear in mind that this man had a full plate of responsibilities—Chair of African American studies, lead editor of the Frederick Douglass Papers (FDP), professor of seminars, author of ongoing scholarship, to say nothing of a very busy nest at home. Yet at that moment, John stopped in front of the elevator as though nothing else was more important to him then than to talk with Hinks about his very pressing antebellum research. I still remember so appreciatively—he gave me his undivided attention. So, I set off—I told him I was considering working with antebellum travel narratives, perhaps those focused on the South. Right away, he mentioned a bibliography on travel writings in America from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. That would have been more than enough, but John went quiet and pondered. "Are you familiar with Frederic Law Olmsted?" he asked. I did actually know that he had something to do with the "Emerald Necklace" in Boston, and I may have known vaguely about some trip he took to the South in the 1850s. Well, John said, "Go read *A Journey in the Seaboard Slave States* and *A Journey in the Back Country*. That might help you get oriented." I am sure he made further suggestions and chatted easily with me for a while more but, truth be told, he had done more than enough with the Olmsted ding. I went immediately into the Stacks and retrieved both Olmsted volumes and soon discovered that John had so simply, so comfortably, opened for me a window that was also so dramatically revealing of the tense tenor of the U.S. in the 1850s. I had had no idea that such rich works existed; John brought me there. I went on to write an essay for David about Olmsted's free labor ethos and how it and Olmsted's deep New England animus undergirded his scathing analysis of southern culture and its huge industrial-scale cotton plantations. As Prof. Davis would always do if appropriate, he praised my work handsomely and helped guide my research and writing like few others. But without John, the door never would have opened in the first place.

In May 1983, John welcomed me again: he asked me if I would accept a full-time summer position at the FDP. I was completely surprised: I actually knew next to nothing about the project. Of course, I was delighted to have the opportunity to participate in such important research and I was also desperate for the money. But frankly, I had no real idea of what I was entering. The FDP housed the richest repository then—and probably now as well—of archival and biographical material available anywhere on Frederick Douglass and his world. And the labor there of accumulating further such material—be it obituaries, censuses, newspapers, letters, account books,

whatever—continued aggressively and resourcefully. I was entering a workshop that taught and valued the highest skills of the historian—dogged research, thoughtful processing and contextualizing of diverse documents, and the careful integration of them into annotations, [name for summary introductions to each document], and other editorial apparatus. Moreover, I and other enthusiastic apprentices including Dominic Parisi, Tamara Plaikins, and Brenda Stephenson applied ourselves under the good shepherding of Jack McKivigan, Richard Carlson, and other already seasoned historians with much to teach us. I was privileged to be asked into this foundry where so many labored to stamp the oratory and writings of one of the nineteenth century's most important actors prominently and permanently on the grail of American history. Yet the skills and acumen I learned there to apply to my craft as historian made me much more the beneficiary of my time at John's editorial hive than any bit I may have contributed to uplifting the life and labor of Frederick Douglass. And, once again, I have John to thank for welcoming me into this learning and knowledge.

Among his many other accomplishments, John sought to help and advance young historians and scholars as much as possible. Early in April 1996, he opened a crucial door for me: at a time when I was out of the conventional academic world altogether and was prepping New Haven youths snagged in the criminal justice system to pass the GED, John alerted me that an opening existed in the History Department for a temporary lecturer in African American history. Over the coming weeks, I was fortunate enough to secure it. Yet, what began as a one-year part-time position blossomed by that summer with additional assistance from David Davis into a full-time three-year position that transformed my academic trajectory. Had John not contacted me, it never would have happened. In spring 1999, when I was in fact no longer young and had known John and worked with him for many years, I had, however, come to the end of those three wonderful years at Yale as I painfully lost a contest for a tenure track position at the university. That disappointment is a whole other story. But what did not disappoint at Yale, as usual, was John Blassingame. As soon as John learned I had lost the position, he went to work to cobble together an archival project he had had in mind for the past few years, jousted with administrators for campus space, and pursued funding he was certain he could secure. Despite his disturbing decline in health, John persisted in doing all that he could to settle the position and funding for me. The last time I spoke with John, he assured me the prospects were looking up. The next day or so, Lou Pflueger at the History office called me to request that I come see the then Chair, Robin Winks, as soon as possible. When I arrived later that day and sat down with Robin, he gave me the terrible news: John had collapsed last night and was admitted to Yale New Haven Hospital where he was now in a coma. The outlook was grim. In terms of simple immediate arrangements, Robin asked me to handle the last few classes John had remaining in his Civil War & Reconstruction seminar and to grade the papers. Of course, I accepted the responsibility. I did not realize then that I would never talk with John or see him again. Yet John's spirit and legacy remained with me: he left me fully prepared to walk into that seminar room a few days later and teach the books to which he had introduced me sixteen long years ago. I could not step into his shoes; they were way too big for me. But I can say he welcomed me and got me ready to do the best I could.

I would just like to close with some words from another one of those many historians and scholars John helped to become powerful voices in the recording of America's complicated history. Stephanie Smallwood, the author of the extraordinary book, *Saltwater Slavery: A Middle Passage from Africa to American Diaspora*, benefitted from John's welcome as well. Remarkably,

she had studied with Marcellus Blount at Columbia, and he had encouraged her to do advanced work in African American history. Probably on his recommendation, she chose to come to Yale. Prof. Smallwood fittingly summarizes her time at Yale:

> It was [John] Blassingame who introduced me to early America as an important and as yet insufficiently developed arena of inquiry in African American history. Seemingly endless summer days spent in the frigid air of the Sterling Library microfilm room, scrolling through the shipping lists of colonial newspapers as Blassingame's research assistant sparked my fascination with the slave ship and its social history. His generosity of mind and heart, shared almost daily in long meetings and over more than a few cups of coffee in his favorite booth at Naples Pizza, did more than words can say to help me believe in the intellectual journey that has shaped my work.
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> The book's dedication to John W. Blassingame reflects both my intellectual debt to the African and African American Studies Program he helped build at Yale University and my deep gratitude for his mentoring and friendship.

Or, as the opening words of her book inscribed:

For John W. Blassingame
1940–2000
with gratitude for his great generosity of mind and heart

I second that emotion.