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John Hope Franklin: The Fisk Years

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# John Hope Franklin: The Fisk Years

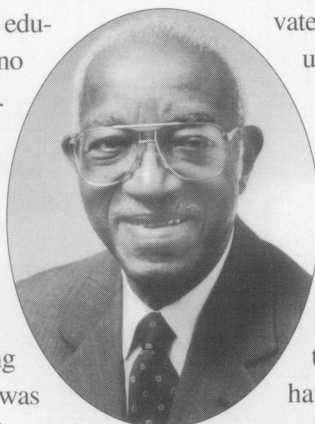
by John Hope Franklin

*Editor's Note: Premier historian of slavery in America, John Hope Franklin recalls his years as an undergraduate student at Fisk University, the prestigious historically black educational institution in Nashville, Tennessee.*

WHEN MY SIBLINGS and I were growing up, our parents had regaled us with stories about Nashville, the rivalry between Fisk and Roger Williams universities, and the subsequent decline of Roger Williams and steady rise of Fisk in importance and influence. Named for a Civil War general, Clinton B. Fisk, the university was founded in 1866 by the American Missionary Association and other advocates of education and uplift for the freedmen. It achieved no real stability until students, led by George L. White, went north and then to Europe in 1874, giving concerts under the name of the Fisk Jubilee Singers. They raised sufficient funds to assure the future of the fledgling institution. It weathered the Reconstruction years, perhaps by not challenging the restoration of white rule. And while it cannot be said that Fisk was thriving in the first quarter of the twentieth century, it was surviving, thanks to support by the American Missionary Association and Northern philanthropists.

The price of stability was the university's autocratic control of the student body and its administration's careful adherence to local white demands that the institution conform to the social and political mores that had always governed the races in the South. Tellingly, its best-known alumnus, W.E.B. Du Bois of the class of 1888, had in 1925 exhorted the students to revolt against the president, Fayette Avery McKenzie, whom Du Bois described as "unfit and a detriment to the cause of higher education for our race."

When my sister Anne and I arrived in Nashville in September 1931, Fisk was enjoying a steady advance in virtually every way since McKenzie's unheralded departure in the spring of 1925. Thomas Elsa Jones, an energetic and spirit-



John Hope Franklin

ed white educator who was considered "safe" in the eyes of the white citizens of Nashville, had attracted some of the leading African-American scholars to join the Fisk faculty. He had also recruited a corps of white professors, including, most important for me, Theodore S. Carrier in history. Financial support for Fisk was increasing despite the Depression, and a newly constructed library and a renovated memorial chapel gave every indication that the university was fiscally sound and educationally strong.

Viewing my undergraduate degree as merely a staging platform from which to launch a career in law, I was restless to get through it as quickly as possible. I informed my temporary adviser, Professor Dora Scribner, that I would major in English. Being in that department, she thought it a good idea but concluded that I should have a male adviser. She recommended that Professor Lorenzo D. Turner, chairman of the department, become my postregistration adviser.

My first core requirement was Contemporary Civilization, presided over by Professor Charles S. Johnson but taught by an array of professors from the history, sociology, psychology, and education departments. This would be followed by a survey course in literature during the winter term, and a general science survey in the spring quarter. I selected German to satisfy my modern foreign language requirement, regretting all the time that no modern foreign languages had been taught at Tulsa's Booker T. Washington High School, this despite the fact that several were taught at Tulsa's all-white Central High School. Finally, physical education completed the list of required courses for credit. Chapel, held twice a week and offering no credit, was also required.

I had received only a tuition scholarship. My parents were able to provide limited assistance, there being my sister's expenses, too. Consequently, I had to work. I secured on-campus employment to pay for most of my room, board, and

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laundry, working as secretary to the librarian, Louis S. Shores, a quiet, scholarly man who seemed to have the utmost confidence in me from the very beginning. The fact that I could type and take dictation in shorthand, learned in high school, thus relieving him of having to write his letters by hand, pleased him tremendously. I worked for him from the fall of my freshman year until the beginning of the final term of my senior year, when preparation for graduation claimed all of my time. My other job was in the publicity office, as clerk-typist for Ethel Bedient Gilbert, who became a close and admired friend.

Occasionally I also worked a few hours a week as a typist in the office of the student newspaper, the *Fisk Herald*, whose editor, the glamorous senior Lucybelle Wheatley, admonished me never to enter her office before knocking. In subsequent years I would work in the dining room, pulling up to the dining-room-floor level the dumb waiter once it had been laden with food prepared in the basement. Many of the cooks and other locals became good friends over the years.

My first week in college was hectic, settling into my room in Livingstone Hall, registering for classes, lining up jobs, and seeing to it, as well as I could, that my sister was making the transaction satisfactorily. I was also becoming involved in activities outside of class. My roommate, whom I met on the train en route to Nashville, was Bob Glasco from Muskogee, Oklahoma. Concluding that since we had similar backgrounds and did not want to risk whom we would get by blind chance, we decided on the ride up to announce to the dean of students that we wished to room together. We ended up roommates for all four years, without so much as one argument or, indeed, any differences whatsoever. My sister Anne seemed happy enough living in Jubilee Hall, and with her jovial personality was making friends easily. My older brother, Buck Jr., had graduated from Fisk a year earlier, and since there were three current classes who knew him as a fraternity president, member of the glee club, and a popular campus leader, we both benefited from his recent presence. Indeed, many students referred to me as "Little Buck," while Anne was known as Buck's "Little Sister."

Before going to Fisk I could not have imagined that, assembled in one place on one occasion, there could be so many class valedictorians and bright, articulate leaders as

were in my freshman class. I discovered this during the week of orientation when the dean of the college announced that there would be an early election of the freshman class president. Of the dozen or more who responded to the dean's invitation, at least six or seven were high school valedictorians, including myself, while most of the remainder were salutatorians or very high ranking members of their graduating classes. Some were women, but most of them were men. Asked to give their first impressions of Fisk, we were all well-spoken and thoughtful, but one person stood out. He was L. Howard Bennett, a graduate of Avery Institute in Charleston, South Carolina. Articulate and charismatic in a way that won over the dean as well as all of his classmates, he remained class president for four years and became my best friend. During our freshman year we vowed, prematurely it turned out, that someday we would practice law together.

During that first week I was delighted to read an announcement that the director of the Fisk Choir would hold auditions for several vacancies in that premier singing group. Successful candidates would be announced during the second week of the term. Having sung in high school and able to read music scores quite handily, I decided to try out on the very first evening of the auditions. Ray Francis Brown, professor of music and director of the choir, and Alice Grass, university organist and professor of piano, were the admissions committee. The audition was businesslike and straightforward. Professor Brown selected a hymn from the University Hymnal and asked me to sing the bass/baritone part as he played the piano. I sang it with ease.

Brown eyed me suspiciously and asked if I had ever heard the hymn before. When I replied that I had not, he took care, it seemed to me, to search for a hymn that he felt certain I did not know. When I sang that hymn as well as I had the first hymn, he closed the book, looked directly at me, and said that he had already decided that I should be in the choir. I was to report for regular rehearsal that evening. Thus, on the very first Sunday of the new academic year, I sang in the choir with the regular members, to my great delight and to the surprise of my classmates, who seemed to wonder how and why I was the only freshman up there with the veterans.

On a Saturday afternoon early in that first term, I went by streetcar, with some male classmates, to downtown Nashville. Before leaving the campus, I went by Jubilee Hall to



ask Anne if she wanted anything. After she told me, she asked the classmate with whom she was talking if there was something her brother might get her. And so I was finally introduced to Aurelia Whittington, whom I had seen a few days earlier but had not met. Aurelia requested chocolate-covered peanuts. Since my cash reserves were limited and were to last me for a very long time, I was in no position to be gallant. I readily took the 15 cents that she pressed into my hand.

When we had completed our shopping, including a great deal of mere window-shopping, we went into the transfer station to purchase tickets for the return trip to campus. When I asked for a ticket for the Jefferson Street car, I presented the ticket agent with a \$20 bill and apologized profusely, saying that it was all the money I had and that if he chose to do so he could give me my change in one-dollar bills. He almost leaped through the ticket window and shouted to me that no "nigger" would tell him how to make change. He then proceeded to count out my \$19.85 in nickels and dimes. I was stunned. In all my six years in Tulsa I had never encountered so rawly racist an outburst, and I spent many subsequent months with no thought of going again to downtown Nashville.

Shaken, I returned to campus and gave my sister and Aurelia the items I had purchased for them, telling them of my ordeal with the ticket agent. Aurelia, from Goldsboro, North Carolina, said that she had never heard of such outrageous conduct. She ventured the opinion that the agent was teaching me a "lesson," since I was obviously a Fisk student from another part of the country and he wished me to know I could not expect to be treated in Nashville as I had been at home.

A tragedy that befell the dean of women and some Fisk students in Georgia taught all of us what we could expect in the American South. Juliette Derricotte was a popular young officer in the national office of the YWCA, with a solid reputation for leadership, when in 1928 she accepted the position of dean of women at Fisk. She quickly became a very popular administrator. One weekend, in the fall of 1931, she and three students took a motor trip to Athens, Georgia, to visit parents and relatives. En route, while she was driving on a rainy afternoon, they had a head-on collision with a white couple near Dalton, Georgia. Though Derricotte and

one of the students were seriously injured, they were denied admission to the local tax-supported hospital. Instead, the two were treated in the office of a white physician and sent to the home of an African-American woman who provided beds for sick or injured black patients. The student died there during the night. Miss Derricotte was eventually transported to Walden Hospital in Chattanooga, Tennessee, where she died the following night, November 7, 1931.

When the news of their deaths reached Nashville, the entire campus was plunged into a period of mourning and outrage that the university had lost a student and its young administrator to segregationist practices. There was, indeed, national outrage, with Dr. Du Bois writing of the incident in the *Crisis* and the nationally prominent Howard Thurman delivering the eulogy in Athens. Ms.

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*"I presented the ticket agent with a \$20 bill and told him he could give me my change in \$1 bills. He shouted to me that no nigger would tell him how to make change. He then proceeded to count out my \$19.85 in nickels and dimes."*

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Derricotte's death was magnified by the racial violence then routine throughout the South. At least 20 blacks had been lynched in 1930, and in March of 1931, just months before

Ms. Derricotte's death, nine black teenagers, who would become known as the Scottsboro Boys, were accused by two white women and found guilty of rape in Alabama. Despite inconsistencies in the women's testimony and the fact that one recanted, eight of the youths were sentenced to death, the ninth avoiding that sentence only by virtue of being a minor. In 1931 the decades-long successful fight to overturn those convictions was barely visible.

I did not turn to scholarship in search of tools to confront America's racial injustice. In a way, there was no turn to take. Since following my mother's chalk marks on the blackboard when I was three, I had enjoyed the determined effort to excel at my studies. A part of that pleasure no doubt traced to my parents' injunction to all of their children that, so long as they tried their hardest, no white person could do any better than that. But that very injunction underscored the fact that Jim Crow America was set on confronting any black determined to excel. I hardly needed to seek a way to confront American racial injustice. Ambition was sufficient to guarantee that confrontation. My choice of a career as a scholar, as opposed to a lawyer or some other career, can be much more directly attributed.

Professor Theodore S. Currier's lectures on history for the course on Contemporary Civilization immediately im-

pressed me. First, he was quite young, a mere 28, to be the senior person in Fisk's history department. Second, he was so animated that he was in constant motion before the class, pacing from one side of the room to the other. Finally, without any notes that I could see, he gave riveting lectures on European and American history. Embellished with anecdotes concerning real, live characters, ranging from kings and queens to prime ministers and presidents to industrial giants to common laborers, his lectures raised and answered questions of how and why events occurred. Only as he wound down did his listeners gradually return to the real world from which he had transported them for an hour or two. I quickly concluded that I should take a course exclusively taught by him.

Thus, in my second year I elected to take Currier's United States history class. As it happened, he was then teaching all the university's history courses. The department's other historian, Alruthus A. Taylor, already well-known for his studies of Negroes in the Reconstruction of Virginia and South Carolina, had become dean of the college and would not teach at all during my four years at Fisk. I considered this my good fortune, for I found Currier's courses in history so exciting and satisfying that I took every one that he offered. I switched my major from English to history and gradually reached the decision not to study law. Currier promptly advised me to prepare to go to graduate school for a Ph.D. in history, and he began to offer a variety of courses that would well prepare me, including seminars colloquia, and reading courses as well as lecture courses. He never questioned where I should go for that Ph.D.: Harvard, of course, where he had studied but never completed his doctoral work. It was an exciting prospect that I thoroughly embraced.

**M**y life beyond the classroom continued to flourish. From the time that Aurelia accompanied me to the homecoming game and evening prom on October 31, 1931, she was my regular date for the next four years.

In the spring of my freshman year I joined the debating team, coached by Professor Currier, which soon gave me an opportunity to travel to the North and East for the first time. Traveling by automobile allowed me to see the countryside, and stopping at points of historical interest and spending nights in towns and cities added much to the journey. Debating also gave me my first opportunity to be in intellectual competition with white college students. This added

immeasurably to my mounting confidence that I was more than capable of competing with people who were not African Americans, an asset that would prove essential in graduate school and during the years that followed. Each time I debated students from predominantly white Notre Dame or New York University or predominantly black Howard University I did so with increased self-confidence. Here was tangible evidence of the truth of my mother's early admonishment that were I to apply myself on a level playing field I could prove that I was as good as, if not a bit better than, anyone else. Whether my debating counterparts were white or black, I quickly felt equal to the task.

Although my brother had been extremely popular at Fisk and was polemarch (president) of his fraternity, Kappa Alpha Psi, and although I admired him greatly, I did not follow him into his fraternity. In the spring of my freshman year, along with the closest friends I had made, I pledged Alpha Phi Alpha, to the dismay of the Kappas. In the autumn of my sophomore year, December 1932, I was initiated into membership. In my junior year I was elected president of the Fisk chapter and, with the assistance of the interfraternity council, immediately launched a drive to eliminate hazing and reduce the intense rivalry among the fraternities and sororities. The drive was not altogether successful, but the harshest and bitterest feelings were considerably reduced.

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*"Throughout my four years at Fisk, I remained committed to the highest scholarship that I could possibly achieve."*

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Certainly one of the most exciting events during my second year was the student and staff choir's extensive concert tour to the Northeast. We performed in Cincinnati, Cleveland, Hartford, Boston, and New York. In Cleveland, Jane Hunter, the legendary head of the Phyllis Wheatley YWCA, not only opened up a floor for male members of the choir so that we could be housed at the same place as the women, but she also invited Fisk alumni in the Cleveland area to a reception at the Phyllis Wheatley House. She immediately became one of the choir's most beloved persons of the entire tour. Comparatively in Boston, where President Jones had charge of the arrangements, the male students were to stay at a hotel that was little more than a flophouse. Balancing costs with the restricted housing choices available to African Americans, he insisted that it was the best the president

could do. A former Fisk student, Eddie Matthews, already on his way to stardom in such stage productions as *Four Saints in Three Acts* and *Porgy and Bess*, fortunately volunteered to find us a more suitable place.

Perhaps the high point of the tour came in New York City, where we performed at Carnegie Hall. It was exciting to be on the stage of one of the world's greatest performance centers in the greatest city in the nation. Several of us decided that rather than waste our time sleeping, we should see as much as we could, including Harlem. It was memorable, right up to when the wealthy philanthropist John D. Rockefeller Jr. greeted all of us backstage with a warm smile and vigorous handshake during intermission.

Along with debating, singing, and traveling with the choir, there were dances staged by fraternities and sororities and by social groups such as the Tanner Art Club and the Decagynians. Nor did I socialize solely with my fellow students. The Wranglers, a group of students whose principal reason for existence was to argue the merits of an announced subject, offered participants an opportunity to become better acquainted with members of the faculty. A few of those, such as Professor Currier and his friend Frances Yocom on the library staff, frequently invited Aurelia and me to lunch or dinner. John Knox and his wife had students in for tea and refreshments, and those of us who were unable to go home for the Christmas holidays found the Knox home to be literally a home away from home.

None of these activities, delightful as they were, obscured the new focus Ted Currier had given to my reasons for being in college, and I worked as diligently as I could to make the most of my opportunity. As my courses continued to go well and as my grades held up I gained confidence in myself. Despite flattering overtures from Professor Elmer Imes, the chair of the department of physics, and the distinguished composer Randall Thompson, I assured them that history was my chosen vocation. Meanwhile, I enrolled in beginning French in my senior year in order to satisfy the Harvard prerequisite that all entering graduate students command two modern foreign languages. I was also writing my first research paper for Professor Currier's seminar. Taking a cue from him, I began to work on free Negroes in the antebellum South. One of the benefits of the subject was the opportunity it provided me to do research in the newspaper files and the manuscript collections at the Tennessee Historical

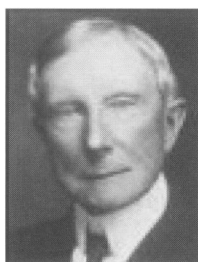
Society, an experience that I deeply appreciated when I finally enrolled in graduate school.

Throughout my four years at Fisk I remained committed to the highest scholarship that I could possibly achieve. Everyone seemed aware of my commitment, and they respected it. Indeed, I became known as the person who had disciplined himself to the point of letting *nothing* interfere with his studies. I once heard someone in the dormitory remark that there was no need to knock on John Hope's door after ten o'clock, for if the light was on and he had not yet gone to bed he would undoubtedly be studying. And in that case, there was no way that he would answer the door. At

one point it was rumored, quite inaccurately, that if I were escorting Aurelia to her dormitory in the evening and the time arrived in my schedule to be studying, I would bid her good night and proceed to my room, leaving her to return home unaccompanied.

Almost as important as formal classes was what my father called our "larger education," or the lectures, concerts, and campus visits of persons who shared their experiences with the Fisk students. A central event in this "larger education" was the annual Festival of Fine Arts. Participants were the Jubilee Singers, if they were available. The visiting dignitary in 1933 was Maggie Porter Cole, one of the original Jubilee Singers, who was then living in Detroit. Another visitor was the celebrated tenor Roland Hayes, a former Fisk student. He thrilled his listeners with his rendition of spirituals as well as classical works. In other areas of the fine arts, there was Langston Hughes and, of course, faculty member James Weldon Johnson, both of whom recited from their works to the delight and enlightenment of their audiences. The festival was an occasion for many people, including local white residents, to visit the Fisk campus and experience, the only racial integration in the entire city of Nashville.

There were times, despite my immersion in my studies, when I wondered if my career would take a turn toward activism and a deep involvement with people. Regardless of what I did, I was pressed by one group or another to assume still another leadership role. I enjoyed being president of my fraternity and serving as the nominal leader of the varsity debating team. For some, however, this was not enough. Consequently, without any prompting on my part, there was



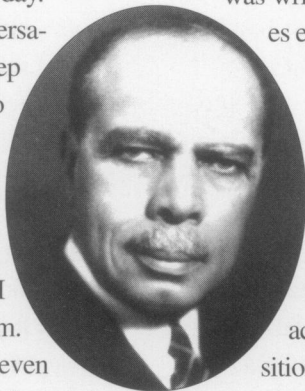
John D. Rockefeller

in the spring of my junior year a successful drive to elect me president of the student council.

When Dean Taylor learned of the election results he summoned me to his office and explained that they had someone else in mind to preside over student government. By "they," I assume that he meant the administration, consisting, perhaps, of the president and his advisers. He informed me that he thought that L. Howard Bennett would be an ideal president, with his charisma, his strong leadership qualities, and his experience as president of his class for three years. I actually had no interest in the position but I was not prepared for a blunt request that I step aside. I told him that I would think it over and give him my response the following day.

That evening I informed Aurelia of my conversation with the dean and of my inclination to step aside and make room for my best friend to become president of the student council. She asked me if I was prepared to tell the students who had elected me that I was abdicating and give them the reasons why I was rejecting their selection of me as their leader. I admitted that I had not thought about what I should say to them. She suggested that I owed them an explanation, even an apology, for rejecting their decision that I should be their president. I had no answer for her or for the students. And in this fashion she helped me decide that I should accept the results of the election. The following day I informed the dean. Although he was obviously disappointed, he accepted my decision.

Even before my senior year, our family economic situation was so bleak that I was determined to earn more in the summer of 1934 than I had earned during previous summers, when I had returned to Tulsa and worked in my father's office and for various African-American professionals. Following the stock market crash in 1929 the national economic picture had steadily worsened. We lost our home in 1930, by which time the urban unemployment rate among African Americans ran as high as 30 percent. The worsening economic picture contributed to the election of Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1932, who gave most Americans some hope for a better future; the present, however, remained grim, particularly so for African Americans. Given my options, I decided that, perhaps, I could find better employment at Fisk or in Nashville than I could in Tulsa.



James Weldon Johnson

Soon I learned that Professor Charles S. Johnson was conducting an ambitious study of the economic and social conditions among Negro cotton farmers in the South. I also learned that he was in need of student assistants. I went to see Dr. Johnson and bluntly asked him for a job on the study. Despite being the source of my only grade of C, given me in my first quarter in college, Dr. Johnson and I had subsequently become better acquainted. He said that he could find a place for me as an assistant to the agricultural economist Giles Hubert. Johnson was going to need someone who could assist Hubert interviewing farmers and preparing the report that would become a part of the book that Johnson was writing, *Shadow of the Plantation*. As soon as classes ended in the spring of 1934, the study commenced.

Our first stop was in the Mississippi Delta, where I saw a population density of African Americans that I had never witnessed before. As we visited Negro cotton farmers, many of whom were sharecroppers, the rumor spread that we were employees of the federal government, part of a New Deal program launched by Roosevelt's activist administration and intended to incite opposition to white planters who were allegedly exploiting black farmers. While there was not a shred of truth to the rumor, we realized that we needed to be careful lest we incite white farmers against us. After getting a picture of conditions in the delta, we were ready to move on. A brief visit to Jackson, where Giles Hubert lived and worked at Jackson State College, prepared us for the hill country in eastern Mississippi.

We made our headquarters in Macon, the seat of Noxubee County, and found lodgings with a very hospitable woman in the Negro part of the town called "Sweet Potato Hill." On our first morning there, we visited the town square, where "Chief Hubert," as I called my supervisor, approached a prosperous-looking white man, telling him of our project and his wish to interview some of his Negro tenants. As the man cast his steely blue eyes on "Chief," he replied brusquely that Hubert should not go on his plantation. Shortly thereafter, "Chief" went out to interview other farmers and I returned to the room to work on the reports of counties we had already visited.

That evening, following a delicious dinner served by our hostess-landlady, I volunteered to go to the variety store on the town square and get some ice cream for dessert. With an

air of confidence, I drove to the square, entered the store, and ordered two half-pints of ice cream. There was no ready-packed ice cream in those days, so I had to wait until the clerk prepared the order. I knew that I should not take a seat, so I stood until the two half-pints were ready. Then I paid the clerk and headed for the exit.

As I walked out onto the store's porch, a crowd of white men formed a U shape in front of the building. They blocked every avenue of escape, unless I was willing to breach the line, which I was not inclined to do. There was nothing for me to do but wait until someone said, or did, something to me. The evening was warm, the ice cream heavy in my hand, and I stood in silence for what seemed to be an eternity. Finally, their spokesman asked, in what was presumably his best hill country drawl, what we were doing in Noxubee County. I said something about examining the economic condition of Negro cotton farmers. There was another long silence. Then, he pointedly asked if I feared that I would be lynched. There was no safe answer to that query. Any reply would have been a challenge. Mute, still, I waited. One of them finally said something that I did not hear but it must have been an order or a suggestion that they should not bother with the likes of me. In any case, the line broke, I walked slowly to the car, got in it, and raced back to Sweet Potato Hill.

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*"In mid-December of the preceding year, Cordie Cheek, a teenage African-American boy, was taken from his uncle's home at the edge of the Fisk campus and lynched."*

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Breathless, with no taste for ice cream, I told "Chief" that I could not possibly stay in Macon another night. He quietly told me that he was already packed and was waiting for me to return to tell me that he had indeed visited the plantation he had been warned not to visit that morning. By the time the man learned of his transgression, he had hoped to be safely in Jackson. In less than a half-hour we were on our way.

The remainder of the summer went peacefully enough. We spent several weeks in Texas, and although there was much activity among the Negro cotton farmers, the entire atmosphere was quite different from what it was in Mississippi. In the area around Rosenberg, many of the planters were of German descent, and their relationship with their tenants seemed to be quite different from the relations of planters and tenants in Mississippi. While the Brazos and Trinity

rivers provided rich lowlands for the cultivation of cotton, the climate and general topography were so different from Mississippi's as to render Texas an unlikely place with which to compare it. Nevertheless, the study continued more or less to Johnson's expectations, and by the end of the summer, broadly more experienced and with money in my pocket, I was ready to begin my most arduous year in college.

When the term opened in the fall of 1934, several matters claimed my immediate attention. High on the list were my efforts to enter graduate school. Mr. Currier gave no thought of my going anywhere except Harvard. Consequently, we sent for the catalog, application forms, and other materials relevant to my matriculation, and in due course I submitted my application. The other principal matter was the student council and plans for my administration. I projected a series of meetings of the entire student body to consider such items as faculty-student relations, the improvement of scholarship, and the place of intercollegiate athletics in a liberal arts college.

By far the most important business facing the student body and, for that matter, the entire university was the murder of Cordie Cheek. In mid-December of the preceding year, Cordie Cheek, a teenage African-American boy, had been taken from his uncle's home at the edge of the Fisk campus and lynched. It was alleged that while chopping wood for a white family in Maury County, Tennessee, Cheek had taken a load of wood into the house and accidentally tore the dress of the white girl, whose brother then gave her a dollar to claim that Cheek had raped her. After his arrest, the grand jury refused to indict him on the basis of flimsy evidence, and he was set free. He left Maury County and went to live with relatives in Nashville. The mob, determined to bestow retributive justice on Cheek, followed him, seized him, and returned him to Maury County. He was castrated and lynched, his body riddled with bullets as the participants passed a pistol from one barbarian to another.

Those of us who had remained in Nashville over the Christmas holidays were virtually obsessed with discussing the Cordie Cheek lynching. Indeed, the entire remainder of our junior year was shadowed by this tragic event. There were investigations, interviews, and other actions. The conclusion that many of us reached was that if it could happen to Cordie Cheek, who had been seized within three blocks of the Fisk Chapel, it could happen to any of us.



That was the sentiment expressed over and over from December 1933, to June 1934. It was the same when we returned in the autumn, as students searched for some means to express to the general public as well as official Nashville how they felt. I met with groups of students and presided over meetings of the entire student body. Members of the faculty and other interested persons met with us, and some made suggestions. For example, Grace Nail Johnson suggested a silent protest parade down Church Street in downtown Nashville, similar to the famous 1917 parade down Fifth Avenue in New York led by her husband, James Weldon Johnson, and W.E.B. Du Bois. A good idea, perhaps, but someone observed that Nashville was not New York.

Then, without warning or preparation of any sort, the White House announced that President Franklin D. Roosevelt's annual visit to Warm Springs, Georgia, would include a stop in Nashville to visit two places he had always wanted to see, the Hermitage, home of Andrew Jackson, and Fisk University. Many white citizens could not believe that the sitting president of the United States would come to Nashville and ignore such landmarks as George Peabody College, Vanderbilt University, and Centennial Park. Obviously, FDR had his own priorities, and as the Fisk students learned of the impending visit, they began to plan and organize. They would lay a petition before the president, asking him to speak out against the barbaric practice of lynching and specifically against the horrible murder of Cordie Cheek. We had only to make certain that the petition, that I would present, in its thrust and in its language was worthy of the Fisk student body.

Meanwhile, as the day of the president's visit approached, the excitement on campus and in the city rose to fever pitch. The Secret Service personnel arrived several days ahead of the president. They conferred with me at length, pointing out my responsibility in helping to inform the students about the routine security measures to be taken wherever the president went. Since he would arrive at the oval where Jubilee Hall was located and where the University Choir would sing, all windows were to be closed and the building was to be entirely vacated. They also wanted me to assist in instructing ushers who would be selected to seat the visitors in the bleachers that had been installed on the grounds near Jubilee Hall.

In the midst of the preparations for the presidential visit, Dr. Jones called me in to discuss the conduct of the students during the historic visit. Upon learning that we planned to

present the president with a petition calling for action in the Cordie Cheek lynching, he expressed sympathy with our plan but observed that the president of the United States was honoring Fisk with a visit and we should take care not to press our case when he was our guest. Declaring such a gesture unbecoming and impolite, he offered an alternative. Since many Fisk students would be accompanying the football team to Atlanta for the homecoming game with Morehouse College the following week, he hoped that I would go. If I could arrange the trip, he would arrange an appointment for me to see the president at nearby Warm Springs. Reluctantly, I agreed.

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*"The white man told me that he had voted the Democratic ticket all his life but if a Democratic president could come to a school that did not separate the races, he could not ever vote the Democratic ticket again."*

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The day of the presidential visit, November 18, 1934, finally arrived. Despite the fact that the local radio station, in describing the visit, had failed to mention FDR's stop at Fisk, the visitors, black and white, began to come to the campus early for the noontime event. Memorably, I was walking near the bleachers when a white man approached me and asked where white people were to be seated. I told him that at Fisk we never practiced racial segregation, and he was free to sit in any of the bleachers. He accepted the information calmly and then quietly informed me that he had voted the Democratic ticket all his life as had, indeed, all of his kinsmen. But if the Democratic president could come to a school that did not separate the races, he could not ever vote the Democratic ticket again. He even shook my hand and found a seat in the desegregated bleachers to await the arrival of the president of the United States.

The visit went off very well. In the open sedan with the president were Mrs. Roosevelt and Secretary of the Interior Harold Ickes. Fisk President Jones delivered some remarks of welcome, the choir sang several spirituals, the members of the presidential party expressed delight and gratitude, and they were off.

I spent much of the week studying and preparing for the trip to Atlanta. Two other members of the student council went with me, and our faculty escort was the Reverend W.J. Faulkner, the new dean of men and future dean of the chapel, who had recently moved from Atlanta to Nashville. Along

with passing on to President Roosevelt our statement, I wished while in Atlanta to meet the person for whom I was named: Professor John Hope, then president of Atlanta University. Tall and erect and having the physical appearance of a white man, he briefly adjourned a meeting to ask about Fisk, when I would graduate, and what I would do then. He was pleased that I intended to begin graduate studies at 20 years of age. He inquired of my mother and father and expressed his admiration for them, and asked me to send his warm and affectionate best wishes. With that he wished me well and returned to his meeting.

Other than that brief sojourn, I stayed put, awaiting the call from Warm Springs. As time passed, I told my colleagues that they should go on to the Morehouse-Fisk game without me. The afternoon dragged by slowly. Suddenly, it dawned on me that I would not receive a call, that very likely President Jones had never contacted President Roosevelt, that it was all a charade. In the days and weeks that followed, Dr. Jones never mentioned the matter, and in the absence of an explanation, an excuse, or even an alibi, I could only conclude that from the time he first suggested the arrangement back in early November, Dr. Jones never intended to attempt to make an appointment with President Roosevelt for a committee of Fisk students. I learned one lesson: it was far easier to ensure Jim Crow America's confrontation with me than to seek a confrontation with Jim Crow America. The former required only my ambition, determination, and willingness to excel.

Life went on, even with no campus resolution of the Cordie Cheek case. Classes continued, and even the first-year French class during my senior year was not as much of a bore as I feared. I was spending more time with Professor Currie, soon to be "Ted" to me, as we plotted and planned for my admission to Harvard Graduate School. It was something of a boon to learn that Fisk had been placed on the list of colleges approved by the Association of American Universities, the first historically black institution to receive that distinction. With my application, transcript, and other materials already at Harvard, I needed only to take the Scholastic Aptitude Test, which was to be administered at Vanderbilt University.

Having never been on its campus, I went to Vanderbilt rather early on that spring Saturday morning in order to find the cor-

rect building and room well before the examination was to begin. When a professor entered with a bundle of papers, I concluded that this was the right place and that he was in charge of the examination. As I reached that conclusion, the professor saw me and asked me what I was doing there. I told him that I was a senior at Fisk and was required to take the Scholastic Aptitude Test for my admission to the Harvard Graduate School. He hurled the examination at me, and, unable to catch it, I had to pick it up from the floor. The experience was so unnerving that I doubted I would perform well on the examination. When I had written what I could, I turned in the paper and departed. As I left, a black janitor asked me what I had been doing in that room. When I told him that I had been taking an examination, he remarked that he was asking out of curiosity. He had never seen a person of our color seated in a room at that all-white university.

To my elation, I shortly received a letter from Harvard informing me that I had been admitted to the graduate school in good standing. The letter pointed out that this was the first time that a student from a historically black institution had been admitted without condition, a consequence of Fisk having been placed on the approved list of American universities. That, I suppose, should have been a great consolation; I felt more immediately the fact that I had been denied financial aid. Clearly, I would have to prove that I was deserving of it. That would depend, of course, on whether I would have sufficient funds to get to Harvard to prove it. In the spring of 1935, that looked exceedingly unlikely.



John Hope

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*"I took the Scholastic Aptitude Test at Vanderbilt University. After completing the examination, a black janitor told me he had never seen a person of our color seated in a room at that all-white university."*

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As I completed my undergraduate course work and prepared to take the comprehensive examinations and finals, the future did not look promising. My father's law practice was no better and was, perhaps, worse than it had been. Anne had been out of school for a year because of poor health and was now a junior at Talladega, majoring in physical education. Aurelia's fortunes were no better. She had ceased taking piano lessons because of the expense, and she had instead begun a job cleaning glassware in the university

dining room. Since limited funds kept us on campus even during long holiday periods, we saw much of each other and began to discuss our plans for the years ahead. We knew quite well that the end of the academic year would mean our separating for an indefinite period of time. I hoped to be going to Massachusetts for graduate school, and in all likelihood she would teach in North Carolina for a while in order to assure her continued education and that of her younger sister, Bertha, who was already completing her freshman year at Fisk.

The examinations were at hand and graduation was approaching. I had given up my job in the library, and I was reducing the time I spent with the debate team, the choir, and the fraternity. With a grade point average of 3.79 I would graduate magna cum laude, along with Marian Minus of Dayton, Ohio, and Louis Roberts of Jamestown, New York.

Unfortunately, my parents could not afford the trip for both of them to attend commencement, so my mother came alone. The same was true of Aurelia's parents, so her mother likewise came alone. Seventy-five of us were graduating and there were many sad farewells, for it was inevitable that some of us would never meet again. From the beginning, however, we had insisted that the class of 1935 was exceptional, and many of us were convinced that some classmates would achieve so much and enjoy such high visibility that it would not be difficult to follow their careers. Even our first year was one of achievement, as L. Howard Bennett led us on insisting that our 12-point program for the improvement of Fisk was all that was needed for the institution to become *the* leader in higher education.

In our final year it was not too much to insist that the world would hear from many members of that small class of 75, and it did.

JBHE

The Fisk University Jubilee Singers



Fisk University was founded in 1866 on the site of a Union Army hospital. From the beginning, the university struggled to find enough money to stay in business. With the university on the verge of bankruptcy in the late 1860s, a group of talented black vocalists at the school organized a group called the Jubilee Singers to raise money to keep the university afloat. In this illustration, the Fisk University Jubilee Singers appear at a command performance for Queen Victoria in 1873.