

JOHN WESLEY BLASSINGAME

John Blassingame, the distinguished historian of nineteenth-century African-American culture and politics, passed away Sunday, February 13, 2000, after a long illness.

Professor Blassingame was born in Covington, Georgia, in 1940. He received his B.A. at Fort Valley State College in 1960 and an M.A. at Howard University in 1961. He taught at Howard from 1961 until 1965 when he became an associate at the Carnegie-Mellon Foundation, after which he began graduate study at Yale. He became a lecturer at Yale in 1970, received his Ph.D. in 1971, became a tenured associate professor in 1973, and was promoted to professor in 1974.

John Blassingame's extraordinary recognition in the profession and at Yale stemmed from a publication record that knew few parallels, since he published three books almost simultaneously after receiving his Ph.D. In 1971 he published an intriguing collection of essays, *New Perspectives on Black Studies* (University of Illinois Press) in which Professor Blassingame and his fellow authors, which included Kenneth B. Clark, Eugene Genovese, and scholars and administrators from a variety of colleges and universities, some historically black, some not, probed opportunities and difficulties in black studies, both as an intellectual field and as an academic discipline.

In 1972 Professor Blassingame published the book for which he became and remained best known: *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South* (Oxford University Press). A revision of his Yale Ph.D. dissertation, he challenged interpretive rigidities that distinguished historical studies of plantation life from the work of Ulrich Bonnell Philips to that of Stanley Elkins. *The Slave Community* offered a nuanced view of plantation life that pointed up both the cruel vicissitudes experienced by enslaved Africans in the antebellum south and their achievement of independent and even assertive cultural life among Africans under extraordinarily difficult circumstances. *The Slave Community*

also forecast his subsequent interest in African-American source materials in its defense of antebellum African-American literary sources that other historians often had ignored or viewed suspiciously. Through these sources, he challenged historians who saw both slavery and the African response as monolithic and predictable. Willie Lee Rose applaudingly summarized the argument in the *Journal of American History*: 'The Slave Community shatters the notion that slaves were molded by a common experience into a common mold of shuffling subserviency.'

Then, in 1973 Dr. Blassingame published *Black New Orleans, 1860-1880* (University of Chicago Press). Perhaps because *The Slave Community* received such wide notice, was published only a year earlier, and discussed antebellum plantation life in general rather than one city in the difficult aftermath of emancipation, it seems to have overshadowed *Black New Orleans*. Yet *Black New Orleans* not only was the logical and necessary successor of *The Slave Community*, but also represented Professor Blassingame at the height of his analytical and narrative powers. He offered a sweeping assessment of post-emancipation politics and culture in one of the south's most unique and important cities. He worked innovatively not only with literary and political materials but also with census records, which revealed the nearly identical patriarchal character of white and black families in New Orleans in 1880. Even as he described the challenge of unbalanced sex ratios among newly arrived rural migrants to New Orleans, social disorganization stemming from urbanization, and pressures created by continuing segregation in housing and social life, he documented the remarkable African-American achievements in business, education, religious life, and politics. Readers could appreciate black New Orleans for what it was—a sophisticated and complex African-American community in the new urban, post-emancipation setting that would be the site of the African-American future in the United States.

In 1982 Professor Blassingame and Professor Mary Frances Berry, then at Howard University and now at the University of

Pennsylvania, published *Long Memory: The Black Experience in America* (Oxford University Press), which became a standard textbook in African-American history. Interdisciplinary in character and organized topically rather than chronologically, *Long Memory* emphasized how oral tradition, cultural wholeness, and political activism created the 'long memory' at the heart of nineteenth- and twentieth-century African-American culture. As the authors wrote, *Long Memory* rejected 'the view of Afro-Americans as an atomized, rootless people who begin each generation without any sense of what preceded them.'

While writing these histories, Dr. Blassingame also turned his attention to the African-American documentary heritage. In 1977 he published his widely acclaimed *Slave Testimony: Two Centuries of Letters, Speeches, Interviews, and Autobiographies* (Louisiana State University Press). *Slave Testimony* offered an unprecedented array of autobiographical material about enslaved Africans and at the same time painstakingly tackled the issue of authenticity that had so frequently bedeviled historians' use of it in the past. Merton Dillon described the result in *Reviews in American History* as nothing less than 'bring[ing] us as close to the mind and experience of slaves as we are likely ever to get.'

In the mid-1970s Professor Blassingame assumed editorship of the *Papers of Frederick Douglass*, and between 1979 and 1999 he led the publication of six volumes of Douglass's papers and manuscripts. The series was widely praised for its extraordinary success in tracking down elusive Douglass manuscripts and for locating obscure yet vitally informative newspaper accounts of Douglass's appearances and speeches that otherwise would have been lost to historians. *The Papers of Frederick Douglass* won major grants from the National Historical Publications and Records Commission, the National Endowment for the Humanities, and the Ford and Rockefeller Foundations and established the principal continuing record of Douglass's extraordinary career and its impact in nineteenth-century American life.

Professor Blassingame was elected to membership in the American Antiquarian Society in April 1982.

Professor Blassingame energized scores of undergraduate and graduate students in his years at Yale and elsewhere, many now teaching in colleges and universities across the nation. He was an early member of Yale's then fledgling African American Studies Program, where he served as acting chair in 1971-72 and in 1976-77 and then as chair between 1981 and 1989, and he was equally active in Yale's Department of History and American Studies Program.

Those who knew John Blassingame remember with affection his almost daily appearance at Naples Pizza on the Yale campus, where he so eagerly discussed American and African-American history with students and faculty. His achievements will live on in the vigor of his original scholarship, in the legacy of his pioneering documentary publishing, and in the intellectual excitement and rigor he brought to American and African-American history and to the students and colleagues he encouraged to pursue both.

Professor Blassingame is survived by his wife, Teasie; a daughter, Tia; a son, John; and his father, Grady Blassingame.

Jon Butler

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