

**Life as a Black Scholar:
Dr. Franklin W. Knight**

by
Fern Elise Foster
Spring 2004

Faculty Mentor: Melanie Shell-Weiss, Department of History

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Early Life and Education

Franklin Knight was born on the island of Jamaica in 1942. One of eight children, he enjoyed an idyllic middle-class childhood, the early part of which was spent in rural Jamaica. As an employee of Jamaica's forestry department, his father would be posted in various locales around the island, moving his large family with him. The extended family was sizeable and Knight spent many a summer's holiday visiting with his cousins around the island.

Education formed a significant part of Knight's younger years. The pursuit of knowledge was highly regarded by the family and an expected step in the journey to being a fully-fledged adult. As Knight recalls, "Education in my family was a big thing. It was just natural if you went to school and did the best you could." Doing the "best you could" encapsulated the motto of the high school that Knight would attend at age 11. The faculty of Calabar High School encouraged their young charges to strive for "The Utmost for the Highest." Founded in 1912, with the purpose of providing education for the youth of rising middle-class, Calabar was in 1953, one of the premier high schools for boys in the island.¹ The school proved a fertile ground for many of the future leaders in Jamaican society, including present Jamaican Prime minister, P.J. Patterson. As a boarder in "splendid incarceration", Knight relished the opportunity to learn and play with his peers at Calabar. He enjoyed many extra-curricular activities at the school, a faithful member of both the photography and drama clubs. He had a great love for sports, participating in many Jamaican favorites including cricket, track and field, field hockey and soccer. One of Knight's greatest influences at Calabar was his teacher, Jamaican novelist John Hearne. As editor of the

Green and Black Review, the school magazine, Knight interacted with Hearne on a regular basis both in and out of the classroom. Hearne encouraged the boys in their writing skills, teaching by example. He introduced many West Indian novels to Knight and his classmate, a significant reflection of the interest in West Indian literature and culture that was growing in the region.

The combination of his middle-class background and the cloistered atmosphere of boarding school kept Knight apart from many of the changing attitudes that preceded Jamaica's independence in 1962, including the growing emergence of Afrocentricity reflected in the Rastafari culture in the ghettos of Kingston. For young Knight and his friends, these issues were only curious news headlines that did not hold much relevance to their daily lives. Similarly, Knight was not asked to confront the issue of race during his childhood. Though he identified as black, race was not the polarizing issue in Jamaica as it was in the United States during the same period.

In my family, we never discussed race at all. It was irrelevant. We had friends who were Chinese; we had cousins who I guess could pass as Jamaican whites. They came to our house, we went to their's. We thought some people were snooty but race was never really discussed.

If anything, the diverse plethora of ethnicities that Knight came into contact with during these years, led to a very cosmopolitan outlook on life. In perhaps the first step towards his later studies, Knight was quite taken with his foreign language classes. Throughout his eight years at Calabar, Knight took both Spanish and Latin. Though Latin was a requirement necessary Knight asserts to "buy university entrance"², Spanish was the recipient of his true affections. Knight would use his newfound knowledge of the language to listen to Cuban radio stations and converse with the many Spanish-speaking boarders that attended the school.

Later Education

In 1960, Knight graduated from Calabar High School, serving his last couple year in distinction as a prefect, then deputy head boy. After having a brief stab at teaching at Monroe's Teacher's College in Kingston, Knight entered undergraduate life at the University College of the West Indies, London in September of 1961. It was an exciting time to be at the U.W.I. Located in the parish of St. Andrew, Jamaica, the university played host to students from all across the Caribbean. Though Knight was confident that the U.W.I. was the place he wanted to be, he was not quite as definite about what course of study he would actually undertake. After flirting with the possibility of being an English or Spanish major, Knight decided to give the history program a try. "It was a very hot day in the classroom," Knight recalls and that morning he sat with his classmates for what seemed like forever, waiting for the professor to arrive. When she finally did, she gave the class of 60 a terse once-over before announcing that only twelve people would be selected for honors. Never one to back down from a challenge, Knight decided he was going to be among the chosen" I looked at the face and listened to the voice and [said] I'm going to be among the 12. It had this nice disciple sound to it" The next day Knight returned to the class to take the entry test for the history honors program. By the following morning, Franklin Knight was officially a history major at the university.

Knight was determined to make his college years a continuation of the joyous times he had enjoyed at Calabar. He joined the photography and drama clubs. He participated in sports his first year but gave them up after finding that they "were incompatible with my other habits of eating and drinking." He served as both editor of *The Pelican*, the student undergraduate magazine and director of the student guild press during his three years. Knight's independent spirit got him favorable notice by many of his professors. Despite his penchant for a good time,

Knight was apparently still able to find time to be an excellent student. Knight had a good relationship with many of his professors, a few of which that would turn out to have great influence on him. One such person was Sir Fitzroy Augier. Born in St. Lucia, Sir Roy was one of the historians most responsible for the adoption of Caribbean history in schools in the West Indies and the recognition of the importance of Caribbean history worldwide. Augier was actively involved the founding of the Association of Caribbean Historians and subsequently became its president. As Knight recalls, Sir Roy “ had a lot of ideas and could communicate with students and really get you excited about the experience.” Knight would continue his relationship with Sir Roy throughout his career and they remain great friends. Another prominent historian who influenced knight was the great Elsa Goveia, another bastion of Caribbean history.

Knight’s years at the UWI were not all smooth sailing. In 1963, an incident would occur that resulted in near expulsion for the 21 year-old.

Somebody came up with the bright idea of closing the University’s main gates which meant [stopping] the buses and everything... it was supposed to be for an hour [but] it turns out that whoever did it [lost] the key. I know that we all agreed that it should be done. Nobody could find the key when the vice chancellor came to get to his office. So there he was in his air-conditioned car with chauffeur and nobody can find the keys that had locked the gates. He was royally teed off and that started it.

Vice Chancellor Phillip Sherlock sent out an angry demand for the perpetrators of the gate locking who had disturbed the decorum of his university. Being “an obedient sort of guy”, Knight and six of the other organizers involved, made their way to Sherlock’s office the next day. After a thorough trouncing by Sherlock, Knight was convinced of his impending expulsion. He even started to make serious plans for going to Guatemala where a friend of his from Calabar was in business. Fortunately, because no one person was ever fingered doing the actual deed, Knight and his friends were given a reprieve, the University deciding instead to punish the entire student body by canceling sporting and guild activities. Though the Vice Chancellor was part of

one of his lowest periods in his youth, Knight holds no grudges against Sherlock and it's no surprise why "He's a Calabar old boy. I mean if you're a Calabar old boy, you can't be all together bad!"

By 1964, Knight was finishing up his undergraduate career and began to think about his next step. He cites that his decision to go to the University of the Wisconsin, Madison was like "all the serious decisions I made in my life, it was actually made lightheartedly." Passing by a university notice board one day, Knight and one of his fellow classmates in the history honors program potted a brochure that detailed the program in comparative tropical history at Wisconsin. Excited by the potential of exploring his chosen major in its greater context, Knight asked the opinion of one of his history professors, Elsa Goveia.

She looked at it and she read it and she said, "You know this could be very interesting... I know Philip Curtain, he's written about Jamaica, [and] Wisconsin has a good press, they've published good stuff" She knew a few of the other faculty there...she said "If it doesn't work out, you can always come and go back to England" So she encouraged us to apply.

Knight did apply and ended up receiving a scholarship from Wisconsin. In the summer of 1964, he would make his first journey to the United States and being the next important milestone of his career.

Career

Afro-Caribbean immigrants to the United States are quite often not prepared for the realities of racism that exist. Though news stories that filter through international media detail the injustices that many blacks suffer in America, hearing about injustice is not as palpable as experiencing it firsthand. Though Afro-Caribbeans identify with the "black" racial category, they

do not always identify with the host of negative meanings that have come to be associated with that designation in the America.³

Rather than traveling directly to Wisconsin, Knight stopped in New York in the summer of 1964 to visit with relatives. Knight was enthralled by the hustle and bustle of the big city “New York was again so different from today,” he recalled. “It was just a jungle, subways were 10 cents and you could ride them forever it seemed.”⁴ Knight’s time spent in New York was also his first introduction to the levels of interpersonal racism suffered by blacks in America.

I didn’t get any real treatment until I tried to get a part-time job when I was on summer breaks in New York. That’s when I realized that the world was sort of different from what we thought when people were telling me I had a Master’s but I couldn’t wash dishes... I didn’t come to United States not knowing about racism in the United States. I mean Jamaican people are cosmopolitan, very well informed [but] they’re not [black people with] the history of experience in the United States and it is entirely different here.⁵

When Knight arrived at Wisconsin for his first day of classes, he was able to focus again on the reason why he had come to the United States. Like many other American universities in the mid-sixties, the University of Wisconsin at Madison was a turbulent but exciting place to be. The country had just seen the beginnings of the civil rights movement and was about to wage war in Vietnam. Knight describes his experience there as the “most challenging intellectual experience” he had had up to that point. As part of the program in comparative tropical history, Knight was required to choose two geographical areas for study, and chose to focus on Latin American and Africa. His interest in Caribbean slave societies would be the seeds of his dissertation. The campus had a very diverse student population and Knight befriended graduate students from Africa, the West Indies, and Latin American. He had a special affinity for the

³ See Waters, Mary C. (1999) *Black Identities: West Indian Immigrant Dreams and American Realities* New York: Harvard University Press

⁴ Franklin W. Knight, Personal Interview, 11 March 2004

⁵ I didn’t come to United States not knowing about racism in the United States. I mean Jamaican people are cosmopolitan, very well informed [but] they’re not [black people with] the history of experience in the United States and it is entirely different here.

Brazilians he met, finding them to be the “most like Caribbean people, extroverted and fun to be with.”⁶ His interaction with them added new sparks to his interest in Latin America. Brazil would turn out to be one of his most favorite destinations in the following years. Knight would also gain personal fulfillment at Wisconsin, as evidenced by one of his most fateful meetings with a fellow student.

In the attempt to minimize expenses, graduate students in the same program would often share the cost of reading materials. One of Knight’s friends recommended that he inquire about such an arrangement with a female graduate student also in the history program:

[He said to me] “That girl down the line is reading the same thing you were doing. Exact courses, same program, Comparative Tropical History.” So I looked down the line and sure enough it was a girl dressed in, I hope I get it right, a red skirt and a black top. So I broke in the line ... I said to her “Oh Peter tells me we’re doing the same courses.” Without looking at me she said “So what?” So that was the auspicious start to the woman who later became my wife.⁷

In 1965, Franklin Knight became a married man. The newlywed couple encountered some trouble finding housing, an experience that Knight had become accustomed to but which was made more confounded by the fact that his wife was white. Often, she would call in response to a rental notice and be told that apartments were available. Once the owners discovered that her husband was black however, the vacancy was suddenly filled. Some landlords minced no words and stated the obvious, that they did not want to rent to a black person.

These frustrations of living in America did not keep Knight from pursuing his doctorate, however. In 1966, Knight fulfilled some of his childhood dreams of travel when he journeyed to Spain to do research for his dissertation on Cuban slave society. In 1968, he matriculated with his Ph.D. in History and began his first teaching job at the State University of New York, Stonybrook. He remained there until 1973, when he accepted a job at Johns Hopkins University.

⁶ Franklin W. Knight, Personal Interview, 11 March 2004

⁷ Franklin W. Knight, Personal Interview, 11 March 2004

Life at Johns Hopkins University

Although Johns Hopkins University would ultimately become the institution where Dr. Knight has spent the majority of his career, the road he traveled there was not necessarily straight or easy. Dr. Knight was familiar with the university both by reputation and by personal experience even before he was formally offered a job. In 1969, he was invited to give a Seminar in the Department of History in which he talked about slavery in the New World outside of the United States. A job offer followed shortly thereafter, but Dr. Knight turned them down. As he laughingly recalled, “I looked on a map and it was south of the Mason Dixon line,” he recalled. “And I thought, ‘Hell, I’m not living south of the Mason Dixon line!’”⁸ Ultimately, however, it was Dr. Jack Greene – who directed JHU’s Program in Atlantic History, Culture and Society that persuaded him to rethink his views. After meeting and talking with Dr. Knight at the annual meeting of the American Historical Association, Dr. Greene convinced him to make another visit. And after numerous more visits, more time in the city and getting to know the faculty and students, Dr. Knight finally accepted. He began teaching at JHU in the Fall of 1973.

Hopkins appealed to Dr. Knight for a number of reasons. First, it allowed him the dedicated time for research and teaching that he wanted. But the opportunity to work in a community of scholars interested in similar issues appealed as well. In his words, “Hopkins offered the opportunity to get into a serious appointment [that was] serious about professional history.”⁹

The Hopkins Dr. Knight found in 1973, however, was very different from today. There were only a few dozen female, undergraduate students. Undergraduates were in short supply

⁸ Franklin W. Knight, Personal Interview, 11 March 2004.

⁹ Franklin W. Knight, Personal Interview, 11 March 2004.

overall. But the university did enjoy at least some degree of ethnic diversity, including a number of Chinese, Latino and East Indian students. Although Dr. Knight was not the only black faculty member, he was one of just a few on the Homewood campus.

Dr. Knight was also a pioneer in other respects. Prior to his arrival on campus, fields of study in the History Department were focused largely on “the old conventional fields” like European and North American history. During his first years, the program in Latin American history expanded rapidly, however. Studies in African history expanded as well. In 1977, Dr. Knight helped to bring the first group of Cuban scholars to the United States through a collaborative initiative between Yale University and Johns Hopkins. It remains the oldest academic exchange with Cuba in the United States.

For Dr. Knight, the city of Baltimore also proved in many ways to be as important a draw as the university itself. “I thought Baltimore was absolutely charming when I got here,” Dr. Knight recalled.¹⁰ Although the city was quite dilapidated, he loved going down and walking through the Jessup fruit and vegetable market, and along the waterfront on the weekends. Often other faculty members accompanied him as well. A great lover of the theatre, Baltimore and Washington, D.C. provided many opportunities for Dr. Knight and his family to enjoy the theatre as well.

Race and racism, however, framed many of his experiences in the city even if he did not recall it being much of an issue on campus. When Dr. Knight and his wife began looking for a home to buy, for example, their first realtor told them explicitly where he believed they could and could not live. The Knights promptly fired him and found a new realtor. “I had barbers who told me when I came here that they wouldn’t cut my hair. So this was still a racist city,” Dr.

¹⁰ Franklin Knight, Personal Interview, 17 March 2004.

Knight recalled.¹¹ Still, rather than become discouraged, Dr. Knight sought out community among the city's African-American and West Indian residents. "It didn't really matter to us," he said. "I mean...the city was overwhelmingly black. I just had to find the areas where there were West Indians living or the black population living and, in any case, I traveled so much that I could cut my hair in Mexico or Jamaica or Spain or Germany. Cutting my hair in Baltimore was not a major preoccupation at all."¹²

Achievements

Dr. Knight's professional achievements are many and varied. Since 1970, he has published numerous books, articles and edited volumes. Some of the most well-known include *Slave Society in Cuba During the Nineteenth Century* (University of Wisconsin Press, 1970) which was based on his dissertation, *The Caribbean: The Genesis of a Fragmented Nationalism* (Oxford University Press, 1978; 2nd Edition, revised 1990), *The Modern Caribbean*, which he co-edited with Colin A. Palmer (University of North Carolina Press, 1989), *UNESCO General History of the Caribbean, Volume III: The Slave Societies of the Caribbean* (UNESCO Publishing/Macmillan Educational Publishing, 1997). His most recent works include *Las Casas: An Introduction, Much Abbreviated, of the Destruction of the Indies* (Hackett Press, 2003) and *Contemporary Caribbean Cultures and Societies in a Global Context*, co-edited with Teresita Martinez-Vergne (forthcoming).

In addition, Dr. Knight has also served as President of the Latin American Studies Association and is currently President of the Historical Society. He has held fellowships from the Social Science Research Council, the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Center for

¹¹ Franklin Knight, Personal Interview, 17 March 2004.

¹² Franklin Knight, Personal Interview, 17 March 2004.

Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences, the Ford Foundation, and the National Humanities Center, among others. He has presented scholarly papers in universities across Latin America and the Caribbean, as well as in Europe, Japan and Australia. His analyses of Latin American and Caribbean history and politics have aired on National Public Radio, the Voice of America, the British Broadcasting Corporation, McNeil/Lehrer Report, C-SPAN, and a range of local radio and television programs.

His contributions to the Johns Hopkins community are also numerous. For more than thirty years, Dr. Knight has actively mentored a wide range of graduate and undergraduate students – many of whom are now leading scholars in their own right. He has always kept an open door for students who want to come and talk or ask questions. And it is these interactions with Dr. Knight that many students, graduate and undergraduate alike, recall most fondly. Between 1974 and 1982, Dr. Knight also has co-edited the Johns Hopkins University Press Series, *Studies in Atlantic History, Culture and Society*. He has served on numerous university and departmental committees and boards.

Today, Dr. Knight continues to be an active scholar and citizen within the Hopkins community. He continues to keep an open door and to actively mentor graduate and undergraduate students. And he directs the History of African Americans at the Johns Hopkins Institutions project.

When asked about what he feels his most important contribution to the Hopkins community has been, Dr. Knight's response is very humble. "I never even thought about that," he said. "I have taught a few students. I have helped to diversify their faculty. I have at least in my first year made sure they didn't label black students...I personally changed that." In reality, however, Dr. Knight's contributions have been even more sweeping. By not tolerating racism,

and by remaining a consistent and active participant on campus board, admission, hiring and tenure committees, Dr. Knight has been a very important force for change and remains just as lasting and path-breaking as his scholarship. In his words:

There should be something that when you leave here, should make you a Johns Hopkins graduate first and foremost, rather than a black graduate of Johns Hopkins.....It should because you come in as that. I mean you're black.....You don't need Johns Hopkins to reinforce that -- and it can do that very well --but what Hopkins can do is orient you to the true meaning of diversity and then get you to meet people who are not like you and to relate to them.¹³

This, indeed, may be Dr. Knight's most important contribution after all. As an outspoken advocate for racial equality, as an active mentor and a path-breaking scholar, Dr. Knight has undoubtedly transformed the university in a lasting way.

¹³ Franklin Knight, Personal Interview, 25 March 2004.