

THE MAGAZINE OF HIGHER LEARNING

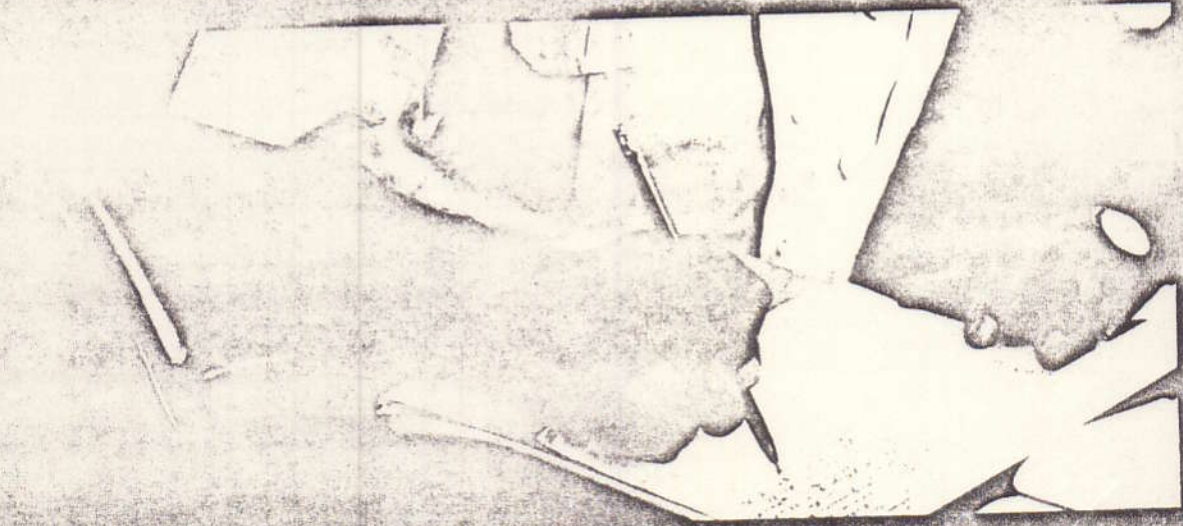
# Change

**Jack Star**  
**John Hope Franklin**

**Horace Porter**  
**Reflections**  
**of a Black Son**



# **THE** **VISIBLE MAN**



The Leading Schools of Education, Law, and Business — A New Study  
Journalism Schools Boom, But Can Their Students Write?



# Above All, A Scholar

by Jack Star

Ask John Hope Franklin, the distinguished historian, if he wants to be known as a "black historian" and he will quickly set you straight: "Why should I paint myself into a corner? I don't think you have to be white to write about white people. I don't teach black history at the University of Chicago. I teach the history of the South—black and white." Nevertheless, the actuality is somewhat more complicated. Even today black scholars are rare, but when the 62-year-old Franklin was emerging as one in a white academic world they were curiosities, sometimes to be patronized, sneered at, and subjected to discrimination. That is why the personal history of Franklin, the man, has had a pronounced effect on Franklin, the writer of history.

In a 1963 article on the dilemma of the black scholar, he wrote: "I speak of his dual role—that he has to be like any other scholar in his field. He must adhere to the highest standards in his field, but he must also be an advocate for justice and equality so he can be heard as a scholar and survive as a human being." And in a 1976 book (*Racial Equality in America*, University of Chicago Press), Franklin follows his own advice. He depicts in devastating detail how the black man was cruelly relegated to unequal status "on the basis of doctrines of racial inferiority that were as widely accepted as they

were bizarre. The characterization of blacks by serious scholars and scientists as stupid and irresponsible and incapable of maturity dogged them even after emancipation." As a historian of black and white America, Franklin says he must automatically be a revisionist because of the racist bias of many previous white historians. "There's a lot to correct," he says, "but, I'm happy to say, not as much as there was a generation ago."

Franklin's feelings date back to his boyhood in Rentiesville, Oklahoma (population 2,200), an all-black town where he was born in the living quarters back of the post office. His father, Buck Colbert Franklin, was the town's postmaster as well as its notary public and only lawyer. His mother taught school. Both were graduates of Roger Williams University in Nashville, where they had met. Buck Franklin had grown up on an Oklahoma ranch. His father, David Burney, was a slave who was taken along to Oklahoma from Alabama by his Chickasaw Indian masters, who had been forced by the federal government to take the "trail of tears" and resettle in Indian territory. An independent man, David Burney promptly ran away from his masters and changed his name to Franklin. He fought in the Union Army during the Civil War, later married a woman who was half Indian, and finally settled on ranch land that was deeded him by the government.

Living in Rentiesville, surrounded only by

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blacks, John Hope didn't feel the sting of racism. But when his father shifted his law office to Tulsa, built a house, and prepared to move his family there in 1921, the move had to be postponed for four years because of a terrible race riot. Buck Franklin's law office was burned down along with his new house and nearly every other Negro residence in Tulsa. One of historian Franklin's cherished mementos is a faded photograph that shows his father's temporary law office: a canvas tent. "The Tulsa city council then passed an ordinance forbidding the rebuilding of any structure except in stone or brick," Franklin says. "It was obviously designed to keep Negroes from rebuilding. My father fought the ordinance all the way to the state supreme court and eventually got it thrown out."

From his father Franklin learned to be an integrationist. "I never saw him go into a toilet marked 'colored,'" says Franklin. "He'd go into the first toilet he came to and so would I. He paid no attention to segregation in the courtroom. When I would visit him in court he'd ignore the huddle of Negroes off in one corner and sit me down at the lawyers' table or in the jury box." The municipality provided free tennis courts for its citizens, paved for the whites and dirt for the blacks. "When it rained the dirt courts became a sea of mud and we couldn't play," Franklin recalls. "I'd telephone the park department and serve notice that we were going to play on the paved courts. We did and there was never any trouble."

Like his father, Franklin rarely subjected himself voluntarily to segregation. The one exception oc-



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curred because he is a music lover and an opera buff (he plays the trumpet and listens to nineteenth-century romantic music). When a touring company of the old Chicago Civic Opera came to Tulsa, he sat with the other blacks in a segregated section. "I reapproach myself for it today," says Franklin. "My father disapproved but never forbade it."

In his all-black Tulsa high school Franklin was a good student, spurred on by the high expectations of his mother, the teacher. (His four older sisters and brothers also did well and all went on to graduate or professional schools.) "Our home was a reading home, with lots of books," says Franklin. "My father would read for pleasure all day at the office when he wasn't busy and at night he'd come home and pick up a book. I found myself going on reading binges—like discovering Thomas Wolfe and in a few weeks reading everything he had ever written." Franklin was valedictorian of his high school class at 16.

Continuing his education at Fisk University in Nashville, he seemed destined to follow his father into law. "I was told that I had to take some history," he says, "and in my sophomore year I signed up for American history as an elective. I had never, never had such an intellectual experience. I took some more history courses and then I knew that a historian was what I wanted to be. I was utterly fascinated with the puzzle of putting things together from small clues, from trying to understand the present by looking at the past."

In college Franklin was an outstanding student. He would most certainly have been elected to Phi Beta Kappa if black colleges at that time had been permitted to have Phi Beta Kappa chapters. Nearly 20 years later, Fisk finally got a Phi Beta Kappa chapter and Franklin was elected a member along with one other distinguished alumnus. (From 1973 to 1976, Franklin served as national president of the United Chapters of Phi Beta Kappa.)

Despite his ability as a scholar, however, it seemed doubtful that Franklin would be able to make his way through graduate school. His father's law business was crushed by the Depression, and Franklin could count on little help from him. However, a white professor named Theodore S. Currier came to his rescue. "He was a New England Yankee who had gone to Harvard, and he wanted me to go there too," says Franklin. "So he went down to the bank and borrowed enough money to pay for my first year of school." Not that Franklin didn't have to help pay his way. He worked at a variety of jobs while earning his MA and PhD. A fast typist who also knew Gregg shorthand, he worked as a secretary for several librarians and also washed dishes in a Harvard eating club for his dinner. (At the club he got to know Joseph P. Kennedy, Jr., John F. Kennedy's older brother.) In a class on British history, he mystified his fellow students because the professor would not commence lecturing until Franklin was comfortably seated and had replied affirmatively when the professor asked: "Are you ready, Mr. Franklin?" Franklin chuckles. "The professor had hired me to transcribe all his lectures in short-