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Keynote Address

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Let me say first that I regard this commemoration of the seventy-fifth anniversary of the Southern Historical Collection (SHC) as a model symposium. It is model in the sense that it has been thoughtfully and carefully constructed. You have invited some of the best people to participate: people of experience and wisdom, knowledge and understanding. It has been a stimulating experience not only for those who came to listen, but also for those who came to participate. The staff of the SHC—Tim West and his colleagues—is to be congratulated for the thoughtful planning and care with which they have conceived and executed this program. I am grateful, and indeed I am honored, to be here with you, and I extend my congratulations to you.

I want to speak just a bit about some experiences that I have had in the world of archives. My son, who is now fifty-two, frequently asks me: “Tell me about the olden days.” So today I want to talk about the “olden days” of doing research and what I call the memories of an itinerant scholar. When you get to be my age, one becomes memory and not much more, and consequently I find myself speaking autobiographically most of the time. I beg your indulgence to tell you about some of the experiences that I have had in the archives: experiences that you will not have, and cannot have, because of the changing times.

In the early years of my career, I made a conscious effort to reassess and reinterpret the history of the United States. This was not easy for me because I had intended originally to be an historian of Europe, or of England at least. As a first-year graduate student I dreamed of going to far-away and exotic places to do research and to meet with other historians. I would drop by London, I imagined, to visit the British Museum on my way to Paris; from there I would head to Delhi and then all the way around to Southeast Asia and some other places. This dream was sparked in part by the man for whom I was working in my first year of graduate studies. Harvard had admitted me to the graduate program, but because they did not want to take the risk of investing any money in my training, I had to work in addition to borrowing money for school. The man who employed me asked me to type his doctoral dissertation, and in a time before cell phones and other kinds of speedy communication, I observed while working for him that he would receive a cable every day or two from his fiancée in London. I thought that this was really something, and I was impressed by how they were communicating as best they could, solely with messages over telegraph wires. Though I failed to take note of this fact at first, I later learned that he could afford this type and degree of communication because his father was not only a member of the University’s Board of Overseers but Vice-President of the First National Bank of Boston. As I began to absorb what this information meant, the farther away England seemed to be; as more time passed, England came to seem about as far away as Mars. I gave up then on the idea of

studying in the British Museum and the Public Records Office, and I settled instead on studying the United States with a specialty in the history of the South.

In pursuing my doctoral dissertation I decided to work on free Negroes in North Carolina before the Civil War. There were about 30,000 such persons prior to the war, and I thought I would be kept fairly busy for awhile just trying to understand and write about them. Having decided to do that, I came down to Raleigh, North Carolina, in the spring of 1939 to do research. I went to the North Carolina Department of Archives and History on the first Monday morning after I arrived, and spoke to the director, Christopher Crittenden, indicating my intention to work in the archives. I had not anticipated that there would be any problem, but when I looked up at him I saw that there was a problem. And I was the problem. He spoke to me very frankly, and told me that when the building was constructed no one had anticipated that there would be anyone like me who would do research there. When I had come into the building and went by the director's office, I saw a large search room; and though there were people in it, it became quite clear that it was not the place for me. Dr. Crittenden told me that he had no objection to my working in the archives, but that he merely wanted to have the opportunity to prepare a place for me to work, and asked me if I could come back the following week. Well, I just looked at him. I had an adding machine in my head, and I knew that the rent for my room and board would accumulate each day while I sat and waited. So I said nothing. And he said, "Well, how 'bout three days?" I told him, "I'll be back Thursday."

When I returned on Thursday I found that a place had been prepared for me. A small room had been cleared of exhibits, and in it were a table, a chair, and a wastebasket. The director also presented me with a key, because presumably the white pages would not choose to deliver manuscripts from the stacks to me. I returned to my study across the hall from the search room, looked at the wastebasket and the table and the chair, and thought that perhaps this arrangement might work, despite the fact that it carried with it some message of humiliation and, of course, discrimination. There was, however, some compensation for this arrangement. I had the keys to the stacks, and I was given a library dolly. I would then go through the main reading room, put my key in the door, and go in past the five or six white people who were in the search room. I had free access to the stacks, which they did not, and after finding what I needed, I would emerge thirty or forty minutes later with a wagon loaded with manuscripts, completely full of material.

This went on for about two weeks, until there was a crisis. Dr. Crittenden called me to his office and told me that he would have to take my key. (I wondered what I had done; I had tried not to offend anyone.) I asked what the problem was, and he said, "Well, I've had a delegation from the white researchers who complained that they are being discriminated against, and they are demanding a key to the stacks." And, he said, he simply could not let them have a key without the whole system of rules breaking down. From that point on I would have to give up my direct access to the stacks, and instead bring my request to the search room desk, retreat to my room, and wait there for each individual box of materials to be brought to me. So with this the way it would have to be, I gave up my privileges. All was peaceful for the remainder of the time I worked there, not only that year and the following, by which time I had received my Ph.D., but for several years after that. Each time I returned to Raleigh, this was the arrangement, and it taught me a great deal about the problems of doing research in a southern state.

It turned out that I had not learned everything yet, however, for as the days and weeks and months went by, and I needed to go to other repositories in Raleigh, I found out a great deal more about how the contradictions and inconsistencies in race policies existed and functioned in the South. I soon became persuaded that there was nothing consistent in the South regarding racial distinctions, except that they were practiced in a manner that made little sense except to those who wanted to make some

distinction between me and other people. As I looked around, I saw one example of this at the Department of Archives and History, where segregation was complete. At the same time, I went over to the North Carolina State Library, where there had been arrangements made previously for students from Shaw University and St. Augustine's College. Though black researchers could not go into the main reading room, there were full accommodations prepared for them in the stacks. In those two facilities alone there were two different types of racially-determined arrangements. Then I went to the North Carolina Supreme Court Library. When I made a request for materials there, the lady brought the items to me and placed them on a table in the main reading room. I used them right there; there was no segregation at all in the Supreme Court Library. Thus, within three blocks, the State of North Carolina had three different arrangements for black researchers, and this told me something about the vagaries and inconsistencies of southern race policies as one sought to do research in the South.

I did not know, though, how great the contradictions could be until I went to Louisiana in the summer of 1945. I had finished and published my book on free Negroes in North Carolina, and had begun work on a book that came to be known as *The Militant South*. I had traveled to New Orleans largely to see the city, but also to lay some groundwork for doing later research in the Cabildo (part of the Louisiana State Museum). I moved on to Baton Rouge in August, and arrived there a day or two after the end of the war. I went first to the Louisiana State Archives then located at Louisiana State University, and arrived early before they opened, hoping to get a head start. As I stood standing outside waiting, the director Edwin A. Davis came to me and said, "You do know the archives are closed for a week to celebrate the war? But perhaps you did not know that blacks are not allowed here anyway?" When I told him that I did not know this, he said that he would be coming in to work everyday, and if I could finish in a week—by the time they got through "celebrating the victory of good over evil," as he put it—I could work there. Ed Davis was very cordial, very helpful, and very accommodating, and I worked very hard to beat the deadline and to finish by the end of the week. I did finish, and in doing so I learned something important from this experience: that there was a real advantage to be had if we could only fight enough wars to keep the archives closed, as long as there was an accommodating director like Ed Davis.

I left Baton Rouge and went to Montgomery, Ala., a place to which I really shuddered at the thought of going. My experiences were varied in North Carolina and Louisiana, but I just did not have the courage to go to Alabama. I thought that perhaps if I went to Louisiana first—largely to visit New Orleans, but then on to Baton Rouge to work in the archives there—I would be seasoned enough to be able to stand whatever it was that Alabama had to offer. So I went to the Alabama Department of Archives and History in Montgomery with the greatest of misgivings in late August, 1945. The structure was magnificent, one of the most impressive that I had seen; I was aware of the Archives' impressive program of collecting and preserving the records of the state's history. I knew also that the director of the Department was the widow of the founder of the archives and a grand dame worthy of the Confederate South: that woman was Marie Bankhead Owen, who presided over the archives as though they were her very own.

After arriving, I gathered enough courage to go inside, with what I wanted to look at clearly in mind. I had a list of those things ready when I went in to the main reading room, where I made my request to an elderly white woman, who promptly sent my request to a page. The page returned with the materials and gave them not to me, but to her, whereupon she transferred them to me. At that point she just stood there and looked at me, and I looked back at her; she did not tell me whether I could or could not sit there in the search room, though having been conditioned by North Carolina, I was sure that I could not. I waited for her to give me some guidance, and when she did not offer any and it was clear that she was not going to do so, I began to move to what I thought was a neutral corner of the main reading room. The corner was where I would have gone anyway, if I had been really free to choose a place to work, because it was a space where I thought I would not be disturbed and where it would be

quiet. When I started over there, though, the woman said, “You can’t sit there.” I thought to myself: Why, if you’d told me that, I would have sat where you told me! I suppose she saw the plaintive look on my face because she said, “You sit over here where these other people are; that is the coolest place in the room. We don’t have no air conditioning, and we only have one fan. Where they are sitting at that table is the only cool place in the room, and you should sit there.” “Yes ma’am,” I replied. She told me that the other researchers would need to meet me anyway, and interrupted everyone at that table in order to introduce me around the room.

I was very much relieved at this development, and that elderly white woman turned out to be very helpful and a very good friend. She would talk to me about the problems of the South—she would ridicule segregation and race relations as they existed in Alabama—and she gave me every indication that she was, shall we say, on my side. One day I went to her and asked to see the papers of Governor Winston, who was the state's chief executive at the time of secession. She told me that I could not see them because they were being processed, and the only person who could give me permission to see them was Mrs. Owen. “Well,” I said, “is Mrs. Owen in?” When she told me that she was not but that she would be in Thursday, I asked, “How will I know when she’s here?” “Oh, you’ll know,” she said. “Everybody will know. Just wait until Thursday afternoon.” And I did know. There was something that happened in the archives that made me and everyone else know that Mrs. Owen had arrived.

That afternoon I went up to her office, which was magnificent; it looked like a Hollywood set, and it was beautifully appointed in every way. I learned several lessons when I arrived there and made my request. When I reached the office I told the secretary that I would like to see Mrs. Owen, and I was told to go right in. But when I entered, the secretary left the door wide open and did not close it behind me. It was then that I learned, very promptly, lesson number one in southern history: that the outer door between a private office and a public office was never to be closed when a black person was in the private office with a white woman. I was as courteous as I could be when I went in, and said “Mrs. Owen, my name is John Hope Franklin. I would like to see Governor Winston’s papers.” She did not say anything at first, but then looked up at me, greeted me cordially, and replied, “Why, yes, you can see the Winston papers.” At that point I was still standing, and though there was a beautiful chair right next to me, I obviously was not welcome to sit in it. This was lesson number two: I could not sit down in the presence of a southern white woman.

Despite this, I thanked her profusely, and told her that I very much appreciated the opportunity to look at that material. She then asked me how I had been treated so far. I told her I had been treated very well, and now that I would be able to see the Winston papers, I would be home free. “Now I want you to know,” she said, “if you’re not treated well, just let me know, because you have as much a right to be here as anyone.” “Thank you,” I said, and as I remembered my experience in Louisiana and my problems in North Carolina, it seemed to me that I was doing quite well now. I was still standing there when she said: “They tell me there is a Harvard nigger here. Have you seen him?” Her secretary, who had been listening, of course, to the whole conversation, ran in the office and exclaimed, “That’s him, Mrs. Owen—that’s him!” To which Mrs. Owen replied, “You don’t act like a Harvard nigger.” Well, I did not know how a Harvard nigger acted, and I could not tell her whether I did or did not act like one. “Sit down,” she said. I was thinking about how I might leave, but when she repeated it, I sat. She asked me where I was born and raised; I told her I was born in Oklahoma. “Oh no; no, no,” she said. “You didn’t get those nice manners in Oklahoma. Where did you go to school?” “I went to Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee,” I replied. “That’s right—that’s a good ole Confederate state. That’s where you learned your manners.” I did not contradict her, though I thought to myself: If I have manners and you have some misunderstanding of where I got them, that is your problem, not mine.

I learned from this experience that one needed to be patient and understanding in order to receive a good course in southern history. I had not had such an education prior to my travels in the South, though I had been put on my way to learning. And after spending some time in the archives in Montgomery, I could have taken an exam in the subject. But I learned also a great deal more. I learned that the South was utterly and hopelessly confused about what it should do about race. You could find as many different social and racial arrangements as there were places, or states, or archives, and the vagaries and inconsistencies and contradictions among these locations were endless. I learned also that one had to be careful in making conclusions or generalizations about the South. I did not go to the South to do research in order to change the region; I went to the South to do research in order to explain what life was like there even if the South did not understand it itself. I went to prove that, as my mother told me when I was six years old, regardless of what people tell you, not any of them are any better than you are. I wanted to show the South how perfectly ridiculous the arrangements it created—segregation and discrimination—were.

The hardships that one had to endure in the 1940s and 1950s were not enough to deter me from becoming a scholar or to stop me from trying to be a spokesman for truth and a model of perseverance and determination. They were not enough to prevent me from trying to prove that, despite the hardships in doing research, the experiences would make me a better historian and, I hope, a better human being. As I once told Ed Bridges, who was my own Ph.D. student and is now the director of the Alabama Department of Archives and History—and who now sits in the seat in which Mrs. Owen used to sit—“these experiences that I had long before you got to Montgomery have made me a better historian, and a better human being. I hope that I would be wise enough not ever to exchange them for all the world.”