New North Star, 2024; 6: 99-101

John W. Blassingame, the Fredrick Douglass Papers, and Academic Politics at Yale University in the 1980s

John R. McKivigan
Indiana University Indianapolis

My first day at work as an assistant editor for the Frederick Douglass Papers office at 1 Hillhouse Avenue on the Yale Campus in New Haven, Connecticut, September 1, 1979, started inauspiciously. There was no one in the office. Another brand-new employee, named David Roediger (whatever happened to him), and I waited in the hallway outside a locked office door almost an hour until another recently hired editor showed up with a key. I quickly learned that the project editor, John W. Blassingame, and all the editing staff who had worked on the project's first volume of Frederick Douglass's earliest speeches, were all in Washington, D.C. for a reception to celebrate the official publication of that work with the project's sponsors, the National Historical Publications and Records Commission and the National Endowment for the Humanities. When Blassingame returned to Yale later that week, I discovered that almost all his original staff (Peter Ripley, Larry Powell, and Calrence Mohr) had now departed the project to launch their own academic careers and the one last veteran, Jule Jones, was making plan to do the same shortly.

With an essentially new staff, Blassingame began work on editing the Douglass Papers in what proved to be a rapidly changing and frequently adverse political climate at Yale. It is important to recognize that Blassingame always had to balance his leadership of the Douglass Papers with a multitude of other roles. Like many of today's Africana Studies scholars, he was called upon to perform a myriad of service obligations at Yale and in professional organizations that drained away a lot of his prodigious energy. He was devoted to Yale Afro-American Studies Department (as it was then named), which had been founded in 1969. John became its chair in 1981 after the death of literary scholar Charles T. Davis and strove to improve "Afro-Am" by the recruitment and retention of topflight scholars. At one point, the Yale African Studies program included such leading African American scholars in a wide range of disciplines, in addition to Blassingame, as Henry Louis Gates, Anthony Appiah, Sylvia A. Boone, Cornell West, bell hooks, Robert Stepto, Gerald Jaynes, and numerous others. Despite his efforts, Blassingame failed to retain many of these younger, rising academic stars, which he blamed on poor tenure and financial decisions by the white-dominated departments and higher administration officials at Yale. Tenured in the prestigious Yale History department, Blassingame conspicuously never had his scholarship recognized by that body with the award of a chair or named professorship.

There were other events at Yale that probably caused Blassingame to become disenchanted with the Douglass Papers' home institution. In the mid-1980s there was the famous clerical and technical workers strike at Yale that highlighted longstanding patterns of pay inequity toward female and non-white employees. Blassingame shut down both the Douglass Papers and the Afro-American Studies offices during the more than four-month strike while the Yale administration tried unsuccessfully to convince students, parents, and the public that it was business as usual on the campus. In the late 1980s, Yale was also the scene of numerous faculty/student protests against the campus's large investment portfolio with connections to corporations doing business in Apartheid-ruled South Africa. Such events caused serious cracks to appear in Yale's image as a liberal bastion in the Ivy League.

Nationally, the political climate changed considerably during the 1980s under the administration of Republican president Ronald Reagan. For the first time, serious attacks were

launched against the funding of the National Endowment for the Humanities, one of the Douglass's Papers' primary sponsors. NEH chair Lynne Cheney waged some of the earliest assaults of the "culture war" against the perceived hegemony of liberal ideology in higher education that she branded "liberal McCarthyism." While peer reviewers for the Douglass Papers grants during the 1980s seemed largely inured to those attacks, that agency seems to move away from support for all programs in African American studies and Blassingame had to deal with reduced federal funding for the first time.

With all these factors serving as background, Blassingame continued to work to complete the contemplated fifteen-volume edition of the Douglass Papers. Shifting from the exhilarating earlier work of discovery of new Douglass documents to the more tedious steps of document selection, transcription, and annotation. The work on the remaining four volumes of the project's Speeches, Debates, and Interviews series proceeded slowly but steadily. To pay part of the salaries of his staff of three to four assistant editors during the 1980s, Blassingame persuaded the History Department to shift some of his undergraduate teaching to those individuals, including myself. (John was never fond of teaching the undergraduate courses that he had inherited from the eminent C. Van Woodward and the department might have preferred more dedicated instructors for those courses.) After the departure of several more assistant editors, Blassingame struck on a new strategy, that I supervised, of hiring and training Yale graduate students to research and prepare preliminary drafts of annotation for the later volumes of that series. With this crucial assistance, the project would complete its five-volume Speeches series in 1992.

During the 1980s, the Douglass Papers, like many established documentary editing projects, attempted to enhance its productivity by adopting the new electronic process of word processing. Prior to the mid-1980s, the project relied on a small squad of secretaries to transcribe not only Douglass documents, but the annotation prepared by editors in handwritten form that would accompany them. Volume manuscripts would be painstakingly assembled from those typed pages, literally with glue and scotch tape, and then be retyped. Blassingame, later with my assistance, then would review those pages, make corrections, and they would be retyped. And retyped. And often retyped. As you can guess, Blassingame, who had never learned to type himself, recognized that the employment of word processing would be both a major labor savings for the Douglass Papers in budgetary terms and a boon to turning around editing tasks. The available "office" computer word-processing systems of the early 1980s proved large and expensive and the project held off purchasing any until 1984 when the project obtained its first IBM "personal computers." While the Douglass Papers then had to go through numerous changes of word processing and data inventory "software" as well as constantly upgrading its "hardware" over subsequent decades, Blassingame's decision proved enormously beneficial to project productivity.

Another fateful decision in the mid-1980s was Blassingame's decision to adopt the critical scholarly edition standards of the Modern Language Association for its second series of documents: Autobiographical Writings. That decision, as were many other important ones for the Douglass Papers, was made in a booth at a New Haven neighborhood restaurant, Naples Pizza, and it was made in consultation with "Skip" Gates before his departure to Cornell University in 1984. Gates explained to Blassingame the immense labor required for a critical scholarly edition and advised against the undertaking. Gates himself would go on to edit his own single volume containing the text of all three of Douglass autobiographies in 1994. Blassingame rejected Gates' advice and began work on these three volumes, even while annotation work was still underway on the final volumes of the Speeches series. He reasoned that the *Narrative* was a work still growing in the appreciation in the American canon of autobiographical writings and deserved the highest

quality of apparatus to attract literary scholars. It was also short and had only a few authoritative texts. Douglass's second autobiography, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, was longer but had even fewer authoritative texts to be compared to determine the definitive text. Publication of the final autobiography, the *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*, would be a decade or more off and received little attention in the decision to produce the three volume Autobiographical Writings series as the next installment of the Douglass Papers. As I and other editors who worked with me on that last volume during much of the 1990s often remarked, this was our "Vietnam," an undertaking launched with little appreciation of the commitment that would be required to achieve anything like "victory." In the late 1980s, Blassingame worked with a number of consulting textual editors to prepare a text according to MLA standards while he devoted himself to learning about the evolving genre of autobiographical writing in the nineteenth century. He also directed students in finding contemporary reviews of all of Douglass's autobiographies to provide modern-day readers with valuable insights regarding how those three books were received. Ultimately John produced rough drafts of the series introduction and two of the three autobiographies before his untimely death in 2000.

As Douglass Papers editors waded through the muddy swamps of multiple authoritative texts and pretexts of *Life and Times*, Blassingame's relations with Yale University soured further in his last years. He came to believe that the Douglass Papers, arguably the nation's premier documentary editing project in African American history, was unappreciated on its home campus. Blassingame complained that the Douglass Papers was not housed in the campus's major library like many other documentary projects such as the Benjamin Franklin Papers. In protest, he explored removing the Douglass Papers to an off-campus office space which he believed he could rent at a lower cost than Yale charged the project. This was part of an escalating quarrel with campus administrators over the "in-direct" charges the university insisted be factored into every federal grant to defray Yale's expenses in hosting the Douglass Papers. John believed this dispute had turned personal when those same administrators refused to grant him release time to work as the principal consultant with PBS on what would have been a path-breaking TV documentary series on African American history. Ironically, those Yale officials argued vindictively that federal grants required that Blassingame devote the bulk of his non-teaching time to directing the Douglass Papers.

Increasingly frustrated with the declining support shown the Douglass Papers by both the National Endowment for the Humanities and Yale University, John Blassingame would ultimately tire of the "grantsmanship" required to keep the project funded and stepped away from the role of primary investigator in which he had invested nearly two decades of his career. In those first twenty years at the Douglass Papers, however, Blassingame had successfully demonstrated that the documentary record of a runaway Maryland slave was as rich and as historically valuable as that of the nation's white "founding fathers." The momentum Blassingame had generated and the direction he had laid out for this project allowed the Douglass Papers to persist in producing the well-regarded volumes of Douglass's Correspondence series and Journalistic Writings series that Blassingame did not live to see in print. As work on the Yale University Press scholarly edition of Douglass's Papers draws near to its completion, Blassingame's reputation as a visionary documentary editor of the African American experience will be furthered enhanced.