

IN MEMORIAM

James Oliver Horton, 1943–2017

Melani McAlister

In October 2017, hundreds of faculty, friends, and former students gathered at the National Museum of African American History and Culture (NMAAHC) to remember James Oliver “Jim” Horton. It was a fitting gathering place. As the museum’s director, Lonnie Bunch, commented, Jim’s legacy is everywhere at the museum, from the fact that several of his former doctoral students are now curators to the foundational commitment of the museum itself: that African American history is not a local branch of US history but integral to its core. Jim always insisted in his lectures and classes and on his many TV appearances and public engagements that “American history *is* African American history.”

Jim’s former student and NMAAHC curator Paul Gardullo said that Jim’s legacy was telling the stories of African Americans and other marginalized groups—and telling them to everyone: “I’m talking about the deep and long tradition of African Americans speaking outside of the centers of power to create spaces for truth telling, to build new archives, to find new voices and communicate with and to people ignored and disregarded with histories that have been suppressed, oppressed and neglected.”¹

This insistence on the centrality of race to US history was not always well received. Jim believed in *public* history, and he spoke to public audiences of many types, from Civil War buffs to local church groups. He displayed extraordinary levels of tolerance for hearing the same discredited arguments over and over. “The Civil War was not about slavery,” an elderly man might sternly announce, and Jim would firmly—but kindly and respectfully—explain that actually, slavery is exactly what the Civil War was about. Jim thought that helping people, all sorts of people, know history in its fullness was the reason for our profession.

Jim died in February 2017 after a long illness. He was the Emeritus Benjamin Banneker Professor of American Studies and History at George Washington University (GW) and Historian Emeritus of the Smithsonian Institution’s

Melani McAlister teaches American studies and international affairs at George Washington University in Washington, DC. She is the author of *Epic Encounters: Culture, Media, and US Interests in the Middle East since 1945* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001; rev. ed. 2005) and *The Kingdom of God Has No Borders: A Global History of American Evangelicals* (forthcoming 2018).

National Museum of American History. A native of New Jersey, he received his bachelor's degree from the State University of New York (SUNY) at Buffalo. At SUNY, Jim also received training through ROTC, and after graduation he spent six years as an Air Force officer, first in Maine and then in Hawaii. While serving as a military police officer in Hawaii, Jim earned a master's in American studies at the University of Hawaii at Mānoa. He went on to receive his doctoral degree from Brandeis University, where he wrote his dissertation on free people of color in Boston.

Jim Horton edited, authored, or coauthored ten books, many with his wife, Dr. Lois Horton, who is now Emeritus Professor of History at George Mason University.² These include *Black Bostonians: Family Life and Community Struggle in the Antebellum North*, a revision of his dissertation that established the Hortons as leading scholars of African American social history, as well as the Pulitzer Prize-nominated *In Hope of Liberty: Culture, Community and Protest among Northern Free Blacks*. Jim also wrote *Landmarks of African American History* and, with Lois, *Slavery and the Making of America*, the companion book for the WNET PBS series of the same name.³

One of Jim's most important contributions to public history is a book he edited with Lois, *Slavery and Public History: The Tough Stuff of American Memory*. In that book, the Hortons brought together an extraordinary group of scholars to talk about the problems of slavery and memory in US museums and public sites. Ten years before the nation debated the presence or removal of Confederate statues during the Trump era, these scholars analyzed the uncomfortable conversations about slavery, race, and politics that accompany the work of making history for the public. Jim and Lois's friend and colleague, Yale historian David Blight, summarized the book's point in the title of his contributed chapter: "If You Don't Tell It Like It Was, It Can Never Be as It Ought to Be."⁴ This straightforward belief in the power of truth telling animated Jim's scholarly life. He never stopped believing that a more accurate understanding of the past could and would improve the possibilities for social justice in the future.

When his friends remember Jim, they almost always mention what a beautiful singer he was. Jim had a remarkable voice: at age fifteen, he appeared with Count Basie's Orchestra. For a while he thought about making singing his life's work. Fortunately for the history profession, he chose otherwise, but he did often sing—Motown and soul, mostly—at meetings of the Organization of American Historians, on road trips, at the end of a dinner with friends. For a short time, he was lead singer for an ad hoc band made up of graduate students in American Studies at George Washington University. They called themselves "The Jim Horton Experience" and entertained at department parties. In his singing, Jim told stories—of love, and joy, and loss. In that, they were not so different from the stories he told as a historian.

Jim was an inspiring teacher at many levels, and he was an award-winning

teacher at GW, where he spent most of his career. His “Introduction to Social History” survey was for decades a signature course for GW undergraduates, who learned how to search Civil War pension records at the National Archives in order to see for themselves that ordinary people have stories worth telling. He had the knack for finding stories or examples that were accessible and yet powerful. I remember when, my first year teaching at George Washington University, Jim guest-lectured in my US history survey. He was trying to get students to understand the ordinary ways that Jim Crow operated, and he asked my students to imagine what it would be like to be a parent, to be walking down the street with your five-year-old, and to be stopped by a white man who called you “boy.” Or to have your child need a drink of water, and to explain to him that he couldn’t drink there, at that fountain, because of who he was—because of who you both were. Jim told this story to a room that went silent, because he drew the image so simply and vividly. I had given facts and figures about race in the United States for weeks, but that day, my students were asked to understand how racism feels.

Jim taught scores of master’s and doctoral students as well, training two generations of historians, many of whom went on to work in public history. During the 1980s, he established the Afro-American Communities Project at the National Museum of American History. Jim wanted to teach his graduate students about the possibilities of teaching history to a broad public. In the public history graduate classes he designed to take advantage of his Smithsonian Institution affiliation, Horton enabled students to bring new interpretations to exhibits and historical sites. Many of his graduate students became lifelong friends, and watching them mature in the profession gave him great satisfaction and filled him with pride. His work on the “tough stuff” of American history—particularly the stories about race that a white majority found unpalatable—grew out of years of graduate teaching that produced a generation of museum staff and curators attuned to making African American history central to the history of the country.

But Jim did more than teach. As Raymond Arsenault of the University of Florida put it, “From the 1980s on, Jim probably did more than any other American historian to foster links between the academy and public history institutions.”⁵⁵ Serving as chair of the National Park System Advisory Board in the early 1990s, Jim toured national parks to learn the issues from the ground up, conversing with staff from rangers to superintendents. He worked with GW graduate students to survey visitors at Thomas Jefferson’s home at Monticello in order to advise historians there on how to rethink their presentation of slavery at the site. But Jim was never simply an outside advisor. Susan Ferentinos, the public history liaison for the Organization of American Historians, said that Jim soon became “a great defender of the interests of public historians.”⁵⁶ Horton was influential in establishing a cooperative agreement between the National

Park Service and the Organization of American Historians, for example. He also worked with other institutions, such as the Gilder Lehrman Institute and the Newberry Library, to open up different kinds of historical training to Park Service employees. This was particularly important for those working on the history of slavery. One of Jim's colleagues at the National Park Service, Martin Blatt, said that Jim's work helped to provide "intellectual cover" when Park Service staff developed new and potentially controversial interpretations at historical sites.⁷

Jim was a leader in the historical profession. He worked as an advisor to the White House Millennium Council (1998–2000), working closely with First Lady Hillary Clinton and traveling with her "Save American Treasures" bus tour in 1998. Professor Horton was appointed by President William Clinton in 2000 to serve on the Abraham Lincoln Bicentennial Commission (2000–2009). He also served as historical advisor to a number of museums in the United States and abroad throughout his career.

Jim served as president of the Organization of American Historians from 2004 to 2005. He was also active in supporting public history through media. In the 1990s, he appeared frequently on *The History Center*, a weekly program on the History Channel. He was also a historical consultant to numerous film and video productions, including the Emmy-winning 2006 History Channel series *Ten Days That Unexpectedly Changed America*. The History Channel's 2002 special, *A Fragile Freedom: African American Historic Sites*, was based on his scholarship, and the DVD of the 1989 movie *Glory* included his historical commentary.⁸ In 2006, Professor Horton was elected to the National Academy of Arts and Sciences. He also received the George Washington University President's Medal, which recognizes scholarly achievement and teaching excellence.

Those of us at George Washington University feel Jim's loss acutely. Although he had been retired for a number of years before his passing, we still work in an environment deeply shaped by his legacy. American studies at GW has a long history of former and current students and faculty who have ties with public culture institutions in the DC area, and, long before "Alt-Ac" became a shorthand, Jim taught us to consider public history as something profoundly worthy of respect—a mode of doing history that requires an unusual ability to produce new knowledge in ways that are accessible and meaningful to a broad audience of people. Anyone who has visited the National Museum of African American History and Culture since its opening in September 2016 knows how valuable that kind of scholarship and teaching is. Watching thousands of people every day squeeze into the exhibits, and listening quietly to the conversations of people from all over the world as they enter the replica of a slave ship, or celebrate the achievements of Black art and music, is a profound testament to the longing for better understandings of history among ordinary people—and

to their hope, our hope, that a willingness to learn the truth about the past, in and beyond the classroom, will indeed help things become more like they ought to be.

NOTES

1. Quoted in Denise Meringolo, “James Oliver Horton: An Appreciation,” National Council of Public History blog, <http://ncph.org/history-at-work/james-oliver-horton-an-appreciation/>.

2. Some of the material in this essay is drawn from the GW memorial page for James O. Horton, compiled by Melani McAlister and Gayle Wald from Jim Horton’s official faculty biography and the memories of his colleagues. See George Washington University Department of American Studies, “In Memoriam: Prof. James O. Horton, Emeritus Prof. of American Studies,” <https://americanstudies.columbian.gwu.edu/james-oliver-horton>.

3. James Oliver Horton and Lois E. Horton, *Black Bostonians: Family Life and Community Struggle in the Antebellum North* (Teaneck, NJ: Holmes and Meier, 1979); James Oliver Horton and Lois E. Horton, *In Hope of Liberty: Culture, Community and Protest among Northern Free Blacks* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); James Oliver Horton, *Landmarks of African American History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005); James Oliver Horton and Lois E. Horton, *Slavery and the Making of America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004); Thirteen/WNET New York, *Slavery and the Making of America*, four-part miniseries, Educational Broadcasting Corporation, 2004.

4. James Oliver Horton and Lois E. Horton, eds., *Slavery and Public History: The Tough Stuff of American Memory* (New York: New Press, 2006); David W. Blight, “If You Don’t Tell It Like It Was, It Can Never Be as It Ought to Be,” in *ibid.*, 19–34.

5. Ray Arsenault, “In Memoriam: James Oliver Horton (1943–2017),” American Historical Association, November 2017, [https://www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/november-2017/james-oliver-horton-\(1943%E2%80%932017\)](https://www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/november-2017/james-oliver-horton-(1943%E2%80%932017)).

6. Susan Ferentinos quoted in Meringolo, “James Oliver Horton.”

7. Martin Blatt quoted in Meringolo, “James Oliver Horton.”

8. History Channel, *Ten Days That Unexpectedly Changed America*, ten-part miniseries, April 9–14, 2006; History Channel, *A Fragile Freedom: African American Historic Sites*, 2002; Edward Zwick, *Glory* (Culver City, CA: Sony Pictures Home Entertainment, 2007), DVD.

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