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Ellis: A Memory of Frances



Frances Cabaniss Roberts
1916-2000

By
Jack Ellis

Although the views and methods that Frances Roberts brought to the study of the past were those of her own generation, her life exhibited certain timeless qualities that future historians should strive to emulate.

There was her curiosity about people, her intellectual rigor, her insistence on academic standards, and her love of students. These, along with a deep-rooted tenacity, marked her career from her first years of teaching in Depression-stricken Sumter County to her later leadership in creating a university in Huntsville. They were especially evident in her quest for the doctorate during the 1950s, at a time when history faculties routinely discriminated against women.

Most fascinating to me personally were the ways in which Frances's own private connection to the land and people of her state revealed itself in all that she was and did.

Years ago I spent a day with her in tiny Gainesville, place of her birth, located along the Tombigbee in the heart of the Black Belt. "Once capital of a cotton principality," as the *WPA Guide* described in 1941, the town and its four hundred or so inhabitants, more than three-fourths of them black, had been a thriving community in Frances's youth.

Today, both the town and the land seem impoverished and exhausted, haunted by the ghosts of the past—of French and Spanish traders, of despoiled Choctaws and enslaved Africans, of Confederate dead. At its center is an oddly abstract design—"the only place in Alabama where the town square is a triangle," Frances explained—and one is greeted there by a stone marker commemorating the spot where Nathan Bedford Forrest surrendered to General Canby of the Union Army in 1865. Only the last lines of tribute to Forrest's men can easily be made out: "Nor Shall Their Glory Be Forgot While Fame Her Record Keeps."

Later we drove along unmarked streets whose names Frances still remembered, past overgrown lots and rusting trailers where once stood the houses of the druggist and the lawyer and the preacher. Stopping at the Presbyterian Church, largely abandoned now but magnificent in its old age, we entered a vestibule still proudly displaying a framed map from 1858 showing the location of missions worldwide. Inside, one gazes over the benches and up to the slave gallery on the right.

Back in the car, Frances pointed across a meadow to a vacant house with a solitary oak out front. She told me that during Reconstruction a black man had been lynched there while on his way to seek protection from a federal judge in a nearby town. She paused, then added: "Some of the locals think it's fun to dress

up in gray and Confederate re-enactments on weekends in the meadow. All they're really trying to do is intimidate the black people."

At her ancestral home, a two-story frame house with gallery built in the years before the Civil War, "Miss Frances" was warmly greeted by neighbors. Inside, the rooms were filled with four-poster beds and Victorian chests, and the walls held photographs of Frances and her sister as young women, dressed in 1930s attire. In its day, the house was a comfortable dwelling, fitting testimony to her father's standing as the local grocer and her mother's position as postmistress, though time and the elements have warped the floors.

From such small and obscure places, enveloped in layers of memory, come powerful voices in art, literature, and the historical imagination. In the case of Frances's hometown, one could cite the names of black blues musicians and gospel singers, like Jaybird Coleman and Olice Thomas, not to mention the great missionary Maria Fearing, founder of the Pantops Home for Girls in the Congo, who was born in slavery on a Gainesville plantation and was recently inducted into the Alabama Women's Hall of Fame, sixty-three years after her death.

In her own way, Frances was one of these voices, a voice of passion and authenticity, rare virtues in an age of rootlessness. Her origins, I think, help account for her all-consuming drive to understand the world from which she came. I cannot say whether, deep down, she ever felt that she had succeeded. I do know that with her passing, and that of Harvie Jones, master architect and apostle of preservationism, Huntsville has lost two of its best friends. But their legacy is still around us for all to see.

November 13, 2000