

# History Happenings

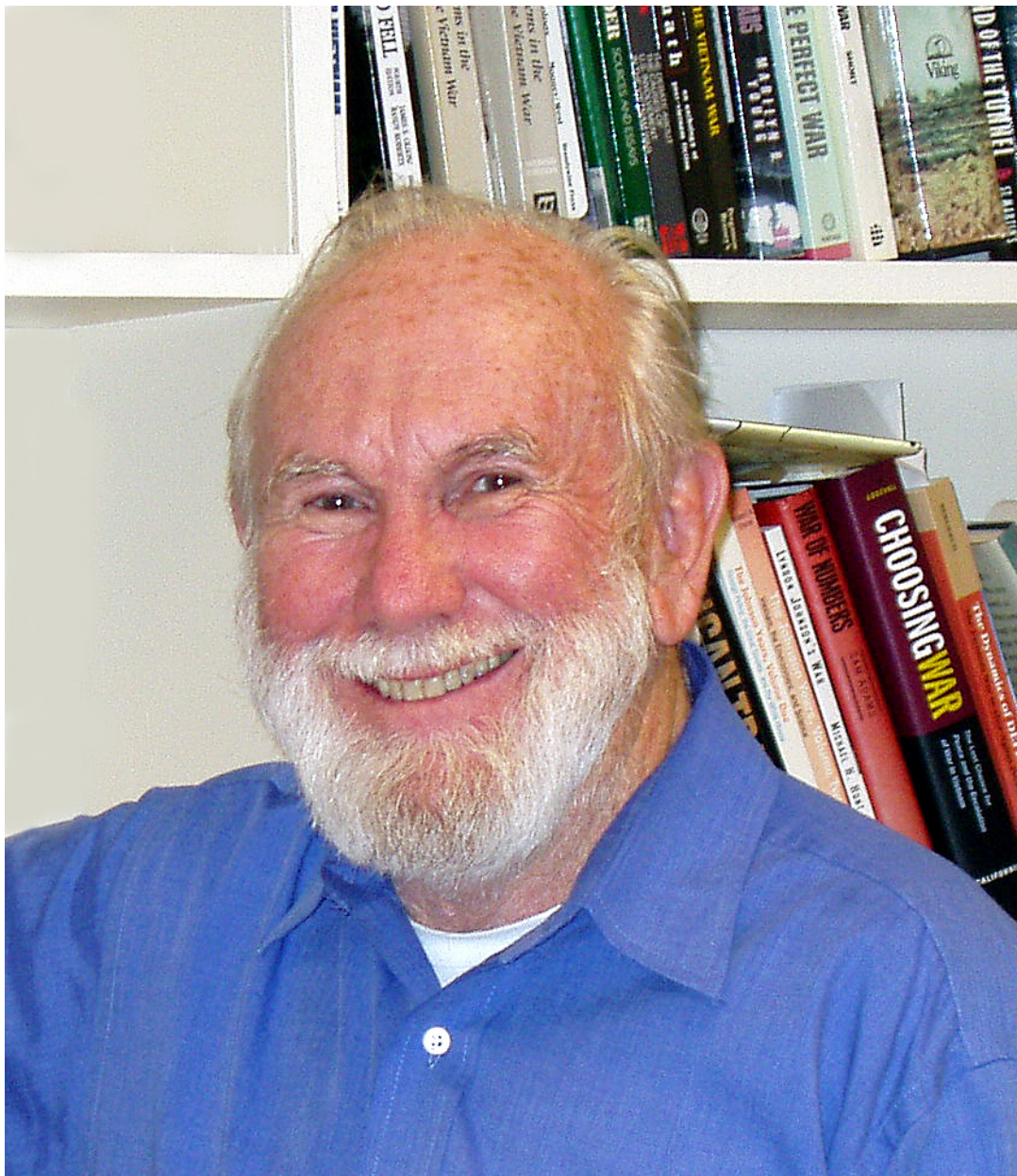
*A newsletter published by the Department of History  
The University of Memphis*

---

Vol. 7, no. 1

September 2010

---



THE UNIVERSITY OF  
**MEMPHIS**  
Dreamers. Thinkers. Doers.

# *From the Chair*

Greetings.

Please remember that this is your newsletter. We would love to hear from you. Please send us your triumphs, your announcements, your personal stories. Feel free to e-mail me, [sherman@memphis.edu](mailto:sherman@memphis.edu)!



We always begin the fall semester with much anticipation. Enrollment at the University of Memphis, and in our department, is at an historic high. Students are filling our classrooms to overflowing and finding a parking place has become like a treasure hunt.

For those students who cannot visit our campus to take our courses here, we are now offering an increasing range of courses online. Our Online BA degree program has grown four-fold since we launched it in 2008, and this spring we will begin offering a Masters' Degree in History fully online.

After spending her first year as a member of our faculty in Chicago fulfilling a prestigious research fellowship at the Newberry Library, Dr. Susan O'Donovan has now joined the department. She is a welcome addition to our African and African-American History focus; her area of expertise is reflected in the title of her award-winning book, *Becoming Free in the Cotton South*. Coming here from Harvard, O'Donovan says, was perfect for her and her scholarship, and she reports finding our students among the smartest and most enthusiastic she has ever taught.

This year, November 10-12, marks the twelfth year for our annual Graduate Conference in African American History. This conference features papers, workshops, and roundtables on topics related to the scholarship and teaching of the history of African Americans, and attracts scholars and students from across the nation and in many countries of the world to our campus and our city. This year's keynote address will be delivered by Dr. Leon Litwack of the University of California-Berkeley, one of the leading scholars of African American History and a wonderfully entertaining speaker. Please consider joining us for this marvelous conference!

Unfortunately, this semester's beginning was bittersweet. In July, we lost an extraordinary member of our faculty, Dr. Kell Mitchell. Dr. Mitchell was a highly respected faculty member and served as a devoted academic advisor for the department for over forty-five years. A small ceremony in his honor elicited humorous memories and fond recollections of this kind and generous man. A description of that ceremony follows in this brief newsletter, which is dedicated to Dr. Mitchell's memory.

*Janann Sherman*



## *In Memoriam*

# Kell F. Mitchell

## 1936-2010

Bob Brown first noted the irony. Over 100 people had gathered to pay tribute to Kell Mitchell, who had passed away on July 25, 2010, after a long illness. The participants included Mitchell's family, his friends, his departmental colleagues, university administrators, and students whom he advised and taught. But he "was the most modest and unpretentious of people," said Brown. Kell never would have approved of such a fuss.



Kell's family and friends gathering as the reception begins.



Janann Sherman welcoming the guests.

Kell Freeman Mitchell was born on April 5, 1936, and spent his early life on a North Georgia farm. A specialist in American Diplomatic History with a Ph.D. degree from the University of Georgia, he taught at the University of Memphis for almost half a century, endearing himself to people with his easygoing, compassionate nature. He lived on a houseboat, had friends from all walks of life, and cared about education.



Bob Brown speaking about Kell. He and Kell had shared office space and advising duties for many years.



Group listening to Bob's remarks. In the rear, wearing a blue shirt, is Vice Provost Tom Nenon.





Standing at the right, Kell's wife Debora Dowda, a friend, his brother David, and President Shirley Raines.



Seated, Kell's daughter Karen. Standing behind the table, Kell's sister Kay.

Brown paid tribute to Mitchell with eloquence. He lauded Mitchell's character: "He was one of the most principled people I ever met." He recalled Mitchell's love of art, music, and literature, and he celebrated his commitment to teaching. He admired Mitchell's belief in fighting for academic freedom, a battle that dated back to his arrival at Memphis State University in 1963, when he encouraged the right to free speech about such political issues as civil rights and the Vietnam War. Brown leavened these accolades with humor, recalling how he teased his friend about his economizing – Mitchell continued to use a sluggish dot-matrix printer because the department still had a big supply of the old-fashioned printer paper.

Mitchell and Brown had worked alongside each other for years as advisers to the majors in the Department of History, forging a deep friendship. Brown revealed how, down to the last week of his life, his understated friend lived according to his values of social justice and education: he cast an absentee ballot for an upcoming election, and he was in his office advising students about picking their courses for the upcoming semester.



Trinity Sage Dowda reading her poem.



Barbara Dale speaking about Kell.

The ceremony in the lobby of Mitchell Hall included Kell's wife Debora, his brother David, his sister Kay, and his daughters Katherine and Karen. His step-granddaughter, Trinity Sage Dowda, read a short and sweet poem about him. University President Shirley Raines, Provost Ralph Faudree, Vice Provost Tom Nenon, and Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences Henry Kurtz were among those in attendance.



Mitchell's friends offered memories and tributes. "This man was grounded," said his friend Barbara Dale, remembering his inability to get ruffled or embarrassed. "He knew who he was." John Haddock, a professor in the Department of Mathematics, reminisced about his low-key humor and wonderful smile. Steve Shaver, now an educational specialist in Student Disabilities Services, appreciated his former teacher's rigorous standards.

Other colleagues in the Department of History added their tributes. Robert Frankle spoke about how Kell Mitchell, more than anyone else, urged the department to become more diverse; he pioneered the teaching of women's history and the Vietnam War. Peggy Caffrey, the first woman hired into the department, painted a humorous image of Mitchell picking her up at the airport for her job interview in a quirky, unfussy car that seemed to typify Kell himself. Dennis Laumann announced the creation of the "Kell Mitchell Memorial Award," to be given the department's junior with the highest grade point average.



**Peggy Caffrey speaking about Kell. Standing behind the food table, Provost Ralph Faudree.**



**Abe Kriegel speaking about Kell. Seated, Kell's daughter Katherine. Standing to her right, Robert Frankle, who also spoke.**

Abe Kriegel, another historian and good friend, talked about his friend's "extraordinary sense of empathy," which drew many students to him. Other academics are prone to cynicism, but never Mitchell. "Kell Mitchell was the most authentic and honest person I've ever known."

As a testament to Mitchell's reserved character, many of his colleagues did not even know he was ill. He did not even tell Kriegel until asked about his changing appearance, about a year ago. "I used to look like a hippie," Mitchell had joked. "Now I look like a redneck."

Kriegel recalled how during his [formal retirement ceremony](#), Mitchell had concluded his quiet speech with the words: "It's been an honor." Speaking for everyone who had gathered to honor this man of extraordinary principle and character, Kriegel ended his remarks with a message for his departed friend.

"Kell," he said, "the honor was ours."