

Jack Temple Kirby

Colleagues and Jack's family, his dear companion and partner, Dr. Constance Pierce and children, Matthew Kirby and Valerie Kirby, I am honored to have the opportunity to speak at this tribute to Jack. We were friends and colleagues. I have long been a fan of Jack's work and over the past few years, we developed a friendship that has been one of the most important in my life. One of the real pleasures of attending the annual meeting of the Southern Historical Association was seeing Jack, catching up on family and kids, and sitting around telling tall tales about the South—some of them remarkably quite true but perhaps best remembered, for sanity's sake, as tales. We discovered our South Carolina connections—I was born and grew up there and some of Jack's ancestors, on one of the many sides he reflects on in his presidential address, hailed from there. There was also our mutual love of okra soup, a substance, as Jack inimitably put it, "essential both to sustain bodies and clarify memory." We shared a fondness for James Baldwin's *Notes of a Native Son* and a passion for the study of the people and places of the South. To me he was in many ways a kindred spirit.

Jack Kirby was a descendant of small and large farmers, a sawmill worker and mill boss, merchants, Revolutionary War militia captains, and, too, Confederate soldiers and Reconstruction-era Georgetown Rifle Guard members (a group Jack once described generously as "particularly mischievous"), and the son of a machinist from the docks in Norfolk, Virginia. He became a historian of all these worlds of which he was so much a part by virtue of genealogy and spirit and brought to the study of the South a generosity of spirit, passion, and an incomparable capacity to understand and "see."

During the period he was researching his South Carolina roots and possible connections to the Georgetown Rifle Guards, I sent him a link to a photo of the Guards. Now, most historians I know would have focused on the men in the photo. Not Jack. He wrote back: "Wonderful old hound dog in the foreground, climbing up onto the wooden storefront walk, where the uniformed guardsmen sat—Must have been one hot day, considering the dog's body language." And without skipping a beat, he added, "Hope your okra crop is doing better than ours, which the bugs have half devoured," and included his beloved Constance's recipe for okra soup.

Our conversations and correspondence were as much about southern history and literature as about living in the South in the present. This summer, he wrote in disbelief at the unveiling of 500-pound, 7-foot statue of President Ronald Reagan in the Rotunda of the Capitol in Washington. (The Reagan statute displaced the statue of Thomas Starr King, a prominent nineteenth century anti-slavery activist in California). I remember also an occasion in 2007. We had both given papers at a conference on the Civil War and I had talked about a slave woman who led a revolt in the area of Pineville, South Carolina and the white reaction celebrating her capture and death. Among the celebrants were women of the Palmer family, a wealth slave-holding clan in the state. By this point Jack was deep into research on the Palmers in his family and feared that the Palmers involved in my narrative could be ancestors, even if only of the "collateral" kind. Happily, he later reported to me, these Palmers were not his ancestral Palmers.

Jack was one of our greatest historians. He wrote southern history as no one else, every page crackling with wit, learned discernment, and eloquence. I'll also remember him fondly as a man who delighted in his garden. In midst of the winter of 2009, he wrote: "We're shivering tho I persist in wearing shorts and sandals. Just covered the arugula, lettuce, parsley, tomatoes, and peppers, in the big box in the front yard." He kept friends in touch and cared about the things they cared about. When a mutual friend's dog died, he wrote to make sure I had heard. He and Constance knew how much Okami meant to her and how much she would need her friends at this moment.

I came to look forward to notes from Anastasia Island. They were always interesting, lively, and provocative; made one remember all the things that are good about the life of the mind and friendship. For example, there was this note which he signed, "Brother Professor Jack'o": "Did you see Henry Louis Gates, Jr.'s PBS Lincoln show last night....Pretty middle brow, as we snobs say. But there was a moment late in the first hour that was precious—this was when Gates went to talk w/Lerone Bennett. (I assigned Before the Mayflower to students back-in-the-day)....Bennett was lively and unrepentant of his Anti-AL opinion. Finally gave his summary, prefaced by 'Brother Doctor Skip....' I asked Constance if I heard right, Yes. 'Ha!,' said I, "...that is the best thing I've heard on TV in a year!" So Old-School Mississippian (he's a native)—respectful, familiar, soulful, steadfast in voicing dissent...." Jack could have been writing about himself—"respectful, familiar, soulful, steadfast in voicing dissent."

Jack Temple Kirby has been a member of the SHA for nearly fifty years, first joining in 1961 at the suggestion of Otto Olsen, one his undergraduate professors. We have been privileged to know him, enjoy his fellowship, and learn from the wonderful body of scholarship he has left us. He was a man of superb wit and inordinate talent who modeled the life of the mind and human spirit. As he once said to me, I say in his memory: "well done."

Dr. Thavolia Glymph
Duke University