
FRANCIS SHELDON HACKNEY



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SOON AFTER SHELDON HACKNEY enlisted in the U.S. Navy in 1956, he began teaching sharpshooters how to assemble, fire, and maintain their rifles. Every morning, he would stand behind a cadre of new recruits, instructing them on the intricacies of marksmanship. Tall with broad shoulders, a ready smile, and engaging eyes, Sheldon effortlessly commanded the attention of the young men.

Decades later, as president of the University of Pennsylvania, Sheldon, an Alabama-boy-turned-Southern-history-giant, would reflect on those early days in the service. It was through his lessons to the young sharpshooters, he would say, that he came to realize his singular calling in life: teaching.

Francis Sheldon Hackney, a teacher, scholar, academic leader, social justice advocate, public intellectual, champion for the humanities, and devoted husband and father, died on 12 September 2013, after a courageous battle with amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS), or Lou Gehrig's disease. He was 79. Surrounded by family, Sheldon died at his home on Martha's Vineyard, an island he once called his "favorite place on earth."

In the introduction to his 2005 book, *Magnolias without Moonlight: The American South from Regional Confederacy to National Integration*, Sheldon reflected on his 70-plus-year journey through life. "I realize now that my original interest in the history of the South stemmed from my desire to understand myself better," he wrote. "Life, in part, is a voyage of self-discovery."

Sheldon's own voyage began in Birmingham, Alabama, on 5 December 1933. Born as the third son to a newspaper reporter father and a homemaker mother, Sheldon grew up at the epicenter of Jim Crow. He believed deeply in justice, the need for reconciliation, and the power of forgiveness. As a teenager, he came under the influence of a liberal Methodist preacher. Years later, Sheldon would reflect, it was this relationship that instilled within him an intellectual openness and the courage of his convictions.

As the South of sharecropping and strict segregation began to give way, Sheldon entered Vanderbilt University as a brilliant, but sheltered, 18-year-old boy. Supported by a Naval Reserve Officer Training Course (NROTC) scholarship, he came under the tutelage of Dewey Grantham, a prominent scholar of post-Reconstruction Southern politics. Cross-town visits to the historically black Fisk University introduced Sheldon to the nascent civil rights movement that would come to capture the attention of a nation. Soon after, Sheldon met and fell in love with Lucy Judkins Durr, a Radcliffe-educated student from Montgomery. Sheldon's courtship began immediately. By the time of Sheldon's death, their love affair—as strong and powerful a bond on the first day as it was on the last—would endure for 56 years. A liberal fireball in her

own right, Lucy was raised in a household closely connected to the civil rights movement. Supreme Court Justice Hugo Black, who was on the bench when the unanimous decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* was handed down, was her uncle. Rosa Parks was a close family friend. One afternoon, Sheldon joined Lucy and her mother for lunch on the porch with Mrs. Parks. It was the first time he had ever dined with a black person. Staunch and tireless advocates of equality who were unafraid to speak out forcefully against intolerance and injustice, the Durr family influenced Sheldon's formative years immeasurably.

Fortunately for Sheldon, the Durrs' social circle included C. Vann Woodward, widely recognized at the time as the leading historian of the American South. Sheldon quickly became Woodward's protégé, and in the fall of 1961, when Woodward left Johns Hopkins for Yale, Sheldon and Lucy followed. Sheldon's time at Yale was divided between long hours of academic engagement with historians among the likes of Woodward, John Morton Blum, and Edmund Morgan, and even longer hours raising three young children—Fain, Elizabeth, and Virginia—with Lucy. Sheldon's past illuminated his scholarship. His dissertation, examining the ideological continuities and separations between populism and progressivism in post-reconstructionist Alabama, laid the groundwork for his pioneering brand of scholarship (i.e., making use of sophisticated quantitative analysis to supplement traditional narrative), and this dissertation in book form (*Populism to Progressivism in Alabama*, 1969) received the prestigious Albert J. Beveridge Award of the American Historical Association.

Already a rising star in academe, Sheldon accepted a faculty position at Princeton in 1965. He was an engaging and dynamic presence in the classroom, and his Southern charm and oft-dry wit was as entertaining as it was disarming in department meetings. It was at Princeton that Sheldon began to view the college experience as a laboratory for learning and engaged citizenship. In an era marked by political unrest and upheaval, he engaged his students in lively and sustained dialogue on the most pressing social issues of the time.

Sheldon was a visible and popular figure across campus. Keenly sympathetic to the experience of minority students at universities, he helped found Princeton's Afro-American Studies Program in 1969. He also organized a campus chapter of the American Civil Liberties Union and taught in a special Upward Bound program—all the while managing to keep up with a full teaching schedule. In 1972, at the age of 39 and not yet unburdened of student loans, he was named Princeton's provost. Serving alongside then-President William Bowen, who became a close friend and tennis partner, Sheldon rapidly established himself as a "boy wonder" of American higher education.

After 3 years as provost, Sheldon was named president of Tulane University. Sheldon's 6-year tenure in New Orleans was highlighted by his effective work in setting the institution on a more stable financial course. The Tulane that Sheldon left was a far more self-sustaining institution than the one at which he had arrived in 1975.

In 1981, Sheldon was chosen to succeed Martin Meyerson as the sixth president of the University of Pennsylvania. Penn, an institution that Sheldon would later call "the greatest place on earth," became home for him and Lucy. However, his early days at the helm of the university were full of challenges. Sheldon was selected for the presidency over then-Provost Vartan Gregorian, a more popular choice among faculty and students. (In 1988, Sheldon bestowed an honorary degree on Vartan, and the two embraced, as Vartan was welcomed home.) At the same time, Penn, like other urban institutions in the United States, faced challenges with its neighborhood. The university was also coming out of a period of financial strain, and its social dynamics were in need of repair.

Sheldon went to work immediately. He used his formative experiences in Alabama and his own knowledge as a Southern history scholar to mend fences with Penn's West Philadelphia community. What is now known as the Netter Center for Community Partnerships grew out of a seminar Sheldon taught. Today, the Netter Center stands as a national model for university-community engagement. Sheldon believed deeply that the relationship between an urban institution and its surrounding community was symbiotic: Neither could flourish without the other. To that end, Sheldon became the first Penn president to live on campus, in the university's Eisenlohr Hall. He significantly raised undergraduate minority enrollment and appointed a task force to diversify the historically fraternity-dominated Locust Walk. Sheldon also shepherded the university through its first billion-dollar fundraising campaign, the largest in American higher education at the time. The campaign concluded with \$1.47 billion, helping to grow Penn's endowment from \$160 million to \$1 billion. A national champion for the humanities, Sheldon fortified Penn's place as a bastion for the arts and sciences. When U.S. News and World Report released its inaugural undergraduate rankings in 1983, Penn was nowhere to be found on the list. By the end of Sheldon's presidency, the university was eleventh.

Penn students and faculty alike grew to admire and enjoy Sheldon's calm and committed leadership of Penn. Jovial shouts of "Hey, Sheldon!" from admiring students could be heard during his daily walks from Eisenlohr to the President's Office in College Hall. "Hey back!" he would respond. Six-foot-three with a winning smile and

youthful appearance, Sheldon could recite all the names of the food truck operators who lined Spruce Street. At a football game, he once approached the university's assistant director of athletics to suggest that the team run a draw play. They did, and it worked.

Later in his presidency, Sheldon walked into Philadelphia Mayor Ed Rendell's office and declared that Penn's future lay to its east. At the time, Rendell thought he was crazy. Today, more than two decades later, Sheldon's vision has been fulfilled by the Pennovation Works on the south bank of the Schuylkill River and Penn Park, more than 70 acres of once-fallow industrial properties and parking lots that directly connect Penn's campus to Philadelphia's Center City and its bustling business, residential, and historical districts. "I maintained the long view," Sheldon once commented, "and that's the only way to lead."

Sheldon refused to see things as black and white. He spoke often of nuance and ambiguity. "In the course of our education, as in maturation in general, we come to realize that things are not as simple as they ought to be—or as they once seemed," he said during his Commencement address at Penn in May 1983. "The world is filled with ambiguity and ambivalence. It makes life far more difficult—and so much more interesting." That appreciation and ability to communicate complexity made Sheldon a great mentor and friend to future university presidents, including Drew Gilpin Faust (Harvard) and Anthony Marx (Amherst).

If Penn was Sheldon's home, then Martha's Vineyard was his escape. Summers for the Hackneys meant family time at their Vineyard Haven house. The Vineyard was Sheldon and Lucy's anchor—a place of peace and repose. From his study window, he could look across the water for what seemed like miles. Few played the role of gracious host better than Sheldon and Lucy. Their Vineyard home was a friendly haven for many of the "who's who" of academe, politics, and culture. Sheldon enjoyed golfing with his good friend Vernon Jordan, and Lucy and Sheldon were among those who welcomed Bill and Hillary Clinton to vacation on the Vineyard.

During his 12 years leading Penn, Sheldon remained a teacher at heart. As president, he taught a weekly seminar on the American South, hosting a small group of students in his living room at Eisenlohr for lively debate and discussion. Sheldon tried to turn some of Penn's darkest days into its most teachable moments. He presided over the university when it dealt with the fallout from what became known as the "water buffalo" affair. Under a "hate speech" code, Penn's student conduct office pursued racial harassment charges against a student who had yelled "water buffalo" at a group of African-American women. Although Sheldon came under national criticism for his refusal

to intervene in campus judicial proceedings, he worked hard to turn the affair into a learning opportunity. Sheldon saw a teachable moment where his critics saw only a scandal. The water buffalo affair also proved to be a teachable moment for Sheldon himself. "I think the question of hate speech on campus is enormously more complex than the vigilante campaign against political correctness will admit," he wrote in his 2002 book, *The Politics of Presidential Appointment: A Memoir of the Culture War*. "I am also aware that, in the public square, complexity is a fatal flaw."

Sheldon left the Penn presidency in 1993 after Bill Clinton appointed him to the chairmanship of the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH). He wore the title of NEH chairman just as easily as he had worn the title of Penn president. During his time in Washington, Sheldon engaged the nation in a collective conversation about its identity and values.

While Sheldon enjoyed his time leading NEH, it was not long before he returned to Penn—this time, as a faculty member. He grew active in departmental life, soon becoming history department chair. He advised undergraduates and graduates alike. One of Sheldon's proudest professional moments came in 2001 when he received the Lindback Award, a university-wide honor for distinguished teaching.

Sheldon is survived by his wife of 56 years, Lucy; a son and daughter, Fain Hackney and Elizabeth McBride; three brothers, Morris, Rob, and John; and eight grandchildren. His daughter Virginia died in 2007.

Across campus today, we still see Sheldon's legacy all around us. We see his legacy in College Hall, where he joyfully worked and taught. We see his legacy on Locust Walk, the main walkway through the heart of campus, which Sheldon spent years as president revitalizing and diversifying. We see Sheldon's legacy in a vibrant and thriving West Philadelphia community.

Like so many others, I was fortunate to call Sheldon an esteemed colleague and dear friend. When I arrived at Penn in 2004, he was just a floor above me in College Hall, teaching American history full time to the avid appreciation of Penn students. Along with Lucy, Sheldon was always there for me and many other Penn colleagues to offer advice and encouragement. Even when he faced the diagnosis of ALS, Sheldon managed to maintain a rare equanimity that would help lift our spirits when we were hoping to lift his.

It was Sheldon's custom to sign off on his notes to me or to others with a concise "Onward." That one word marked more than the close of a letter. It embodied Sheldon's optimistic spirit, his philosophy of

progress, and the rich legacy of an insightful scholar, admired leader, and beloved friend.

Onward, Sheldon.

Elected 1988

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