

Frank Joseph Mitchell

February 12, 1927 - July 25, 2017

By Anne Virginia Mitchell Whisnant



The Rev. Dr. Frank Joseph (“Joe”) Mitchell, 90, of Durham, NC, died peacefully in the company of his family on July 25, 2017 at Duke University Hospital after a short battle with pneumonia complicated by congestive heart failure. Joe remained basically “himself,” though frail, through the weekend before he died, visiting with family and friends at his home at Croasdaile Village United Methodist Retirement Home. He faced death with acceptance, and the end came as he wanted it to -- swiftly yet gently. The family is grateful for his courageous and inquisitive spirit, his commitment to truth and justice, and the intellectual acuity he retained till the end. A vivid person with strong views on many subjects, he was also unfailingly devoted to his family. Those who knew and loved him will never forget him.

Joe was born on February 12, 1927, in Fairfield, Alabama to Seth Hamilton Mitchell and Effie Schmitz Mitchell. The youngest of three sons, he grew up in a blue collar family, as his father and several of his uncles were employed by the United States Steel Corporation in the Birmingham area.

Joe graduated at the top of his class from Fairfield High School in 1944. Too young at 17 to follow older brothers Jesse LaFayette Mitchell and Seth Hamilton Mitchell, Jr. into military service (mother Effie would not sign the papers for an early enlistment), he bided his time working in one of U.S. Steel’s Birmingham blast furnaces until he turned 18 in February of 1945.

Two days before his birthday, Joe enlisted as a hospital corpsman in the United States Navy. Joining the service near the end of World War II, he never left the mainland U.S., leading his family later to joke that he was a hero of the “inland navy.” After discharge in 1946, he followed his

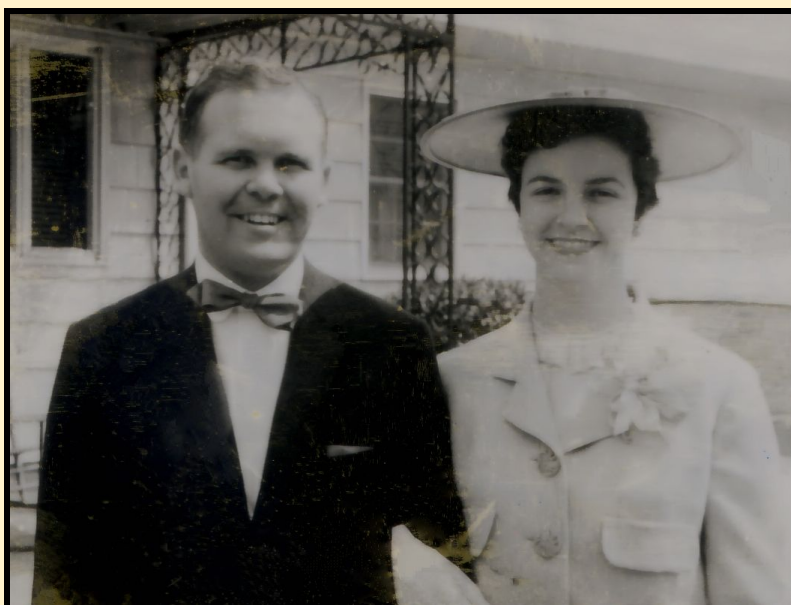


brothers to the Alabama Polytechnic Institute (API; now Auburn University), where he graduated with a degree in history education in 1950.



Having been president of the Wesley Foundation at API/Auburn, Joe followed a call to the Methodist ministry and enrolled in 1950 at Duke Divinity School, where he earned his M.Div. in 1953. With liberalizing views on race and uneasy about returning to Alabama, he chose to be ordained in the Virginia Methodist Conference. Between 1953-1958, he served as pastor at Chamberlayne Heights Methodist Church in Richmond (where he took several public stands in favor of racial equality in the wake of the 1954 Brown v. Board decision) and Tabernacle Methodist Church in Pungo. Rural Princess Anne County being a lonely place for a single young minister, in 1958, Joe left the pastorate to enroll in the doctoral program in Religion at Duke.

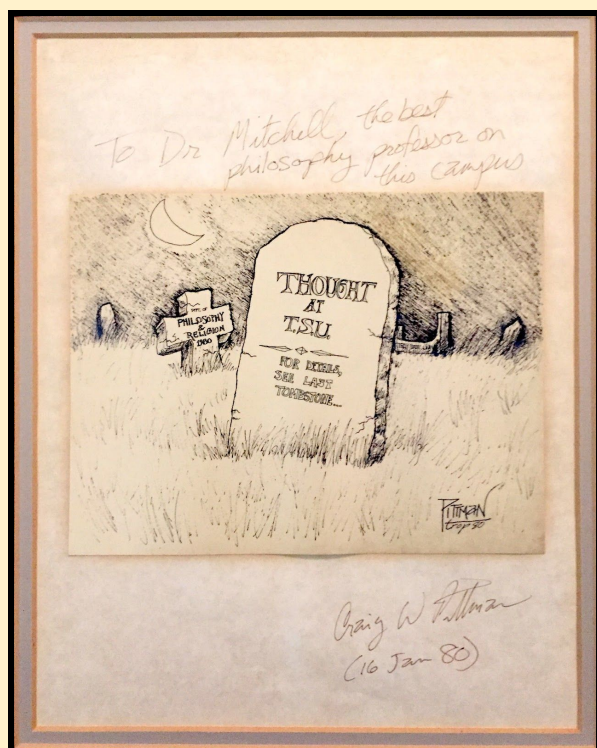
Early in his first semester back at Duke, Joe met History doctoral student Norma Anne Taylor, just arrived from Norfolk, Virginia as a graduate of the College of William and Mary. A speedy courtship ensued, featuring many trips to Durham's "Blue Light" restaurant, where Joe bought Norma a hamburger and milkshake and drank coffee himself to save money. They were engaged in the spring of 1959 at the Carolina Inn in Chapel Hill and married on September 5, 1959 at Park Place Methodist Church in Norfolk, VA. They spent their early years of marriage in Durham, living during 1959-60 in the Methodist Student Center building while Joe worked as an assistant to the Rev. Art Brandenburg. Joe became active in the civil rights movement, picketing the segregated Center Theater with others from Duke in 1961.



Joe earned his Ph.D. in Religion at Duke in 1962. In 1961-62, he taught religion at Carleton College in Northfield, Minnesota. From there, he and Norma moved to Union College (Methodist) in Barbourville, Kentucky, where he served as Campus Minister and Assistant Professor of Religion from 1962-65. In 1965, he

took a position as Professor and Chair of the Religion Department at Central Methodist College in Fayette, Missouri. Their daughter Anne Virginia was born there in 1967.

In 1970, lured by the offer of a dramatic salary increase and faculty positions for both him and Norma at Troy State University in Troy Alabama, Joe returned to his native state. Censured by the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) for abrogations of academic freedom, Troy was eager to prove it could recruit AAUP members to its faculty. Having served as an AAUP chapter president, and coming highly recommended by a former Duke friend then on the Troy State faculty, Joe was an attractive candidate. His and Norma's membership in Phi Beta Kappa added to their appeal.



At Troy State, Joe chaired the Department of Religion and Philosophy from 1970-1976 but ran afoul of the university's president, Ralph Adams, and found himself moved to the Classics Department. In 1979 he helped lead a campaign secure faculty raises. Although the president's resulting efforts to have him fired in the spring of 1980 failed (partly thanks to support he received from the Alabama Education Association, the AAUP, and student journalists at the campus newspaper), Joe was moved to the History and Social Sciences Department, where he finished out his teaching career. Undaunted, Joe remained a constant thorn in the Adams administration's side. In the 1980s, he and Norma joined a movement to organize a faculty senate, of which she became the first full-term president.

Meanwhile, Joe was revered as a provocative teacher who challenged students to take critical approaches to religious topics. It was said that he once threw a Bible on the classroom floor to prove a point about it being a product of human hands. Whether or not this was true, students -- even in a conservative south Alabama environment -- found much to respect in Joe's sharp intellect and deep commitment to their learning.

In Troy, Joe and Norma were members of First United Methodist Church, where every Sunday found them on the third pew in the center section immediately in front of the pulpit. For many years, Joe taught the Covenant and New Covenant Sunday School classes, bringing his intellectual and critical approach to faith into the Sunday School curriculum.

Troy was also where he and Norma reared daughter Anne Virginia from age 3 to her graduation in 1985 from Charles Henderson High School. As a feminist who read Betty Friedan and passionately supported and encouraged his wife's professional academic career, he carried his full share (and sometimes more than that) of parenting duties and was an energetic and engaged father. Many afternoons would find him throwing baseballs; kite-flying; bike riding; playing tennis, Rook, or Monopoly; or building an electric train layout with Anne. He taught her to



use tools, crawl under the house to troubleshoot the plumbing, and insert a stick in the butterfly valve to start the balky engine of his beloved, but somewhat dilapidated, '65 Mustang. He and Norma served as PTA co-presidents and followed their daughter to south Alabama high school

football stadiums to hear her play trombone in the Charles Henderson High School Blue Machine marching band. When Joe fulfilled a lifelong dream to earn his private pilot's license in the late 1970s, Anne enjoyed learning the pilot's alphabet and flying with him to nearby Brundidge, AL as the only passenger he ever took up.



Ever the math whiz, Joe embraced the computer revolution as a way to conduct quantitative analysis of historical topics. First with punch cards and reams of green and white tractor-fed paper, and later with a database he designed and programmed himself, Joe collected and standardized information on Methodist bishops (a topic on which he also wrote and self-published several books and became a recognized expert) and slaveholding Methodist clergymen. In the early 1980s, he became a fixture in the Troy State computer lab, practicing programming skills he learned in several computer science classes. Always frugal, he was thrilled in

about 1983 to find a cheap computer (the famous Texas Instruments TI-994a) to buy for home, and he and Anne enjoyed using it to practice writing simple programs in BASIC. Over the years, Joe continued to be fascinated by computers and electronics, and the advent of the Internet was a boon to this dogged researcher -- putting at his fingertips information he had long been accustomed to digging out of archives. His computer screen was filled with open documents on the day of his death, and one of his favorite possessions at the end of his life was his iPad.

In 1989, Joe retired from teaching at Troy and re-entered the United Methodist pastoral ministry, accepting an appointment at the Covenant United Methodist Church in Chesapeake, Virginia. Thus he and Norma began a year of "commuter marriage," as he moved into the huge Covenant parsonage on the Elizabeth River, and she remained in her faculty position at Troy. In his year at Covenant, Joe urged the church to develop an after-school program to serve the elementary school next door to the church, supported his daughter who was navigating her first year in graduate school at Chapel Hill, and cultivated many connections with Norma's extended family in the Tidewater area.

In 1990, Joe returned to Alabama, taking a cross-conference appointment in the North Alabama Conference as pastor of the Ensley First United Methodist Church in Birmingham. With an aging, dwindling white congregation in a giant church plant located in what had become a largely African American part of the city, Ensley First was a challenging appointment for any minister. With his own roots in west Birmingham, Joe connected easily with the small congregation in his two years as pastor, helping to prepare them for the eventual closure and sale of the church to an African American congregation a few years later.

After three years of commuting, Joe and Norma decided that Joe would retire completely and return to Troy. Always seeking a project, Joe next took up supervising construction of a new custom home for the two of them in Troy's Heritage Ridge subdivision. His daily visits to the work site in 1993 caught construction errors (like the lack of a drain in the slab under the laundry room) before they became significant problems.



In the fall of '93, Joe and Norma moved from the home they had bought in 1970 near the Troy State football stadium to the larger new house on Monticello Drive. From 1993 until Norma's retirement from Troy State in 1999,

Joe worked daily in his study and played the role of “house husband,” handling cleaning and cooking duties and caring for Norma’s dogs and cats he claimed not to like.

In 2001, with two grandchildren, Evan David Whisnant and Derek Taylor Whisnant, having been born to Anne Virginia and her husband David Whisnant in Chapel Hill, Joe and Norma decided to return to North Carolina. On Evan’s fourth birthday, they moved back to Durham, to a large home able to accommodate, among other things, Joe and Norma’s 400 boxes of books and historical and family records.

Joe and Norma settled quickly into the Durham community, joining Epworth United Methodist Church, where Joe was soon teaching the Fellowship Sunday School class -- which he shepherded until 2016. For many years, Joe also regularly attended the “Grumps,” a group of older men who met each morning at the McDonald’s on Tower Drive. Since most of them were Republicans, Joe enjoyed goading them with his liberal Democratic politics. He actively participated in the Westwood Westerners, a local men’s group that organized lectures on significant topics. He and Norma enjoyed traveling to the western National Parks and Canada with their longtime friends the Rev. Max and Ann Wicker, who lived in nearby Southern Pines, NC.

Having been an insatiable reader of everything from serious history to junk novels his whole life, he regularly visited the Durham County Public Library to bring home stacks of books. From 2014 until his death, he was the single best outside reader for son-in-law David’s new Asheville history blog and eagerly awaited new installments to discuss over family dinners.

Coming to Durham provided him the welcome opportunity to become more involved in the lives of his grandsons. Joe regularly took them to get ice cream at Maple View Farm in Chapel Hill and set up an electric train for them under his and Norma’s Christmas tree. A fierce ping-pong player, he bought them a table and taught them to



play. He and Norma took several trips with Anne, David, and the boys -- to Lake Junaluska, the Blue Ridge Parkway, Florida, the North Carolina coast. They attended the boys’ every

performance and event and made possible many enrichments, including camps, concerts, music lessons, and season tickets to the Playmakers theater on the UNC-Chapel Hill campus.



In 2016, the boys and Joe worked through the summer to prepare for Joe and Norma's move to the Croasdaile Village retirement community, spending hours together sorting through files, books, and Joe's collection of old radios, telephones, clocks, computers, and other devices. Joe was proud to live long enough to watch both grandsons graduate from high school in Chapel Hill -- most recently Derek, the occasion of whose

graduation at the Dean Smith Center on June 10, 2017 may have been his last social outing before his death.



After he and Norma moved to Croasdaile in September of 2016, Joe continued his research and writing projects. In his last weeks, he completed the final installment in his long series of short books about aspects of his family's history -- a narrative of the short life and sacrificial death of his first cousin Butch Nabers, an Army airman who drowned trying to save a fellow soldier after their damaged B-17 had to ditch in the Tyrrhenian Sea off the west coast of Italy in 1944. Joe was eager to share the work with his extended family and enjoyed a long conversation about it two weeks before his death with his daughter and son-in-law. His many writings on his own and family history provide a lasting legacy that the family will treasure.

Joe was preceded in death by his parents, Seth and Effie Mitchell of Birmingham, AL; his brothers, Jesse L. Mitchell, Asheville, NC, and Seth H. Mitchell, Jr. and wife Kathleen Mitchell, Corpus Christi, TX; and his brother-in-law Orville C. Taylor and wife Marie Taylor, Virginia Beach, VA.

He is survived by his wife of almost fifty-eight years, Dr. Norma Anne Taylor Mitchell, of Durham, NC; his daughter, Dr. Anne Virginia Mitchell Whisnant, her husband Dr. David Whisnant, and grandsons Evan David Whisnant and Derek Taylor Whisnant of Chapel Hill, NC;



sister-in-law Faye Mitchell and nieces Jessica (Jesi) Mitchell Trentham and husband Paul Trentham, and Martha (Marty) Mitchell Roe and husband Howard Roe, all of Asheville, NC; his nephew Joseph Hamilton Mitchell and wife Cindy Mitchell of Stony Brook, NY; sister-in-law Wanda Mitchell of Portland, TX; niece Sharon Mitchell Sellars and husband Walt Sellars of Fayetteville, GA; niece Sandra Mitchell

Hollander and husband Ira Hollander of Fort Worth TX; nephew Seth H. Mitchell III and wife Laurie Mitchell of Fair Oaks Ranch, TX; nephew John David Mitchell and wife Kay Davis Mitchell of Fort Worth, TX; and niece Kathy Halasy and husband Chris Halasy. His is also survived by his cousin Carolyn Lantz and husband Donald Lantz of Mechanicsville, VA; and cousin-in-law Dillie Culberson of Hueytown, AL.

On his wife Norma's side, he is survived by brother-in-law Randall Heal Taylor, Sr. and wife Joyce Taylor of Bluffton, SC; cousin-in-law Jo Rhea Colonna Ford and husband David Ford of Oxford, Alabama; nieces Emma Taylor Wade and husband Rick Wade of Garland, Texas, Elizabeth Taylor McDaniel and husband Tim McDaniel, and Anne Leigh Taylor Stamper and husband Dallas Stamper, all of Virginia Beach, VA; and nephews Robert Harrison Taylor of Virginia Beach and Randall Heal Taylor, Jr. of Ponte Vedra, FL.

Many beloved great nieces, great nephews, and cousins on both sides also survive.

A memorial service will be held on Saturday, October 7, 2017 at 2:00 pm at Epworth United Methodist Church in Durham, NC, with a reception to follow. All who knew and loved Joe are invited to attend.

In lieu of flowers, the family suggests that memorial gifts be sent to the following organizations that reflect Joe's values:

Epworth United Methodist Church, 3002 Hope Valley Road, Durham, NC 27707.

<http://www.epworth-umc.org>.

- Where Joe and Norma have been active members since November 2001 and where Joe taught the Fellowship Adult Sunday School Class for fifteen years.

Birmingham-Southern College, 900 Arkadelphia Road, Box 549003, Birmingham, AL 35254. <http://www.bsc.edu>.

- Where Joe and Norma's daughter Anne Virginia graduated in 1989, and where their grandson, Evan David Whisnant, is enrolled as the 2015 Rushton Scholar.

People In Need "PIN" Ministry, 503 15th Street, Virginia Beach, VA 3451.

<https://www.pinministry.org/home>.

- Nonprofit serving the homeless in Virginia Beach, VA since 2002; started and led by Joe and Norma's niece, Anne Leigh Taylor Stamper and her husband Dallas Stamper.

Bread for the World, 425 3rd Street SW, Suite 1200 Washington, DC 20024.

<http://www.bread.org>.

- Advocacy organization lobbying the U.S. Congress on behalf of hungry people in the U.S. and worldwide since 1974; one of Joe and Norma's most important philanthropies since the 1970s.

