



In
Loving
Memory of

Roland L. Freeman

July 27, 1936 - August 7, 2023



Celebration of Life

Saturday, November 11, 2023 @ 2:00 pm

Friends Meeting House

2111 Decatur Place, NW - Washington, DC 20008

The Celebration of the Life of Roland L. Freeman

Welcome to the Friends Meeting of Washington

2 PM: Order of the Celebration

Welcome by the Friends Oversight Committee

Moment of Silence

Welcome and Overview of Celebration, David Levine

Speakers:

Marcia F. Freeman

Burk Uzzle

Worth Long

Diana N'Diaye

Dave Crosby

Beverly Guy-Sheftall

Kia Melchor Q. Hall

Other Speakers if Time Permits

Handshakes and Closing

3:30 PM – 5 PM:

Reception and Viewing of Artifacts of the Life of
Roland L. Freeman

Acknowledgements and Thank You's

Without the assistance of the following the Celebration would not have been possible. Our gratitude to them all:

- ◆ The Friends Meeting of Washington, DC in opening their facilities to us, guiding us through the structure of the Celebration, and assisting with the audio and streaming support.
- ◆ Oliver Friendly, owner/chef of Eat and Smile Catering (www.eatandsmilecatering.com/).
- ◆ Joi Bannister, Paul Williams and Kevin Dyels: Sign Language Interpreters.
- ◆ Emilye Crosby for Roland's obituary.
- ◆ Daniel Levine for coordinating the audio and live streaming and developing our database.
- ◆ Jo Ann P. Henry for designing the Celebration Program and being an extraordinary assistant/support to Marcia throughout this process.
- ◆ Judith Katz and David Levine for partnering with Marcia throughout.

Donations

If you wish to make a donation in Roland's memory, please donate to either the Friends Meeting of Washington, DC or to Mississippi Cultural Crossroads:

1. For The Friends Meeting of Washington DC: Go to their website <https://quakersdc.org/>, click on "Donate to FMW" on the top banner; on the new screen, again click on "Donate to FMW"; from the first dropdown select "Social Justice Fund"; and in the Comments Box, enter "In Memory of Roland L. Freeman."
2. For Mississippi Cultural Crossroads, either send your donation to Mississippi Cultural Crossroads, PO Box 816, 507 Main Street, Port Gibson, MS 39150; or for an on-line donation, go to www.ms culturalcrossroads.org, click on the "Donate" button; click the "Donate" button on the new screen, from the pop-up box of "Use this donation for," select "In Memory of Roland Freeman", and complete the transaction.

Celebration of the Life of Roland L. Freeman

by Emilye Crosby

Roland L. Freeman was born July 27, 1936, in Baltimore, Maryland, to Dorothy Mae Vaughan and Albert Phillip Freeman. He was a curious and energetic child, the second oldest of 12. For a few years, his mother and siblings lived with their maternal grandmother, Goldie Addison, a loving and important early influence, a midwife and root doctor who encouraged Roland's interest in the healing power of quilts. As a child, Freeman, fascinated by the arabbers who sold produce off horse-drawn carts and by the songs and hollers they used to attract customers, began spending considerable time at his uncle's stable and on the wagons. He was especially drawn to a college-educated junkman named Mr. Elmo, Swayback, who loved books and stimulated Freeman's curiosity about a wider world, telling him stories about Africa and Black history, and how he had chosen the freedom of arabbing over the racism he had confronted. One of Freeman's early projects involved documenting the Baltimore arabbers.

Despite his sharp intellect and insatiable curiosity, Freeman's undiagnosed dyslexia led to struggles in school, truancy, fighting, and three months in a reformatory, after which his mother made the difficult decision to send him to live in rural Maryland, where he lived on a tobacco farm from the ages of 12 to 18, and was embraced as family by Thomas and Elizabeth Briscoe Miles. He came to love life on the farm where his new cousin Jeannetta Chase answered his endless questions and encouraged his interest in Black history and culture, predicting that he would one day "make a fine history professor." Jeannetta devised a way to teach him to read and inspired him to struggle through his dyslexia.

Freeman's combined urban/rural upbringing served him well, ensuring his easy comfort throughout Black America, and later was the central theme of a three-year national touring exhibition *Southern Roads, City Pavements*, which was accompanied by a book of the same title.

Freeman enlisted in the Air Force, and while stationed in Paris, was inspired by the Negritude movement and African anti-

colonial struggles, and perhaps as influentially, he won his first camera there in a craps game.

He returned home in the late 1950s, eager to be part of the Movement. Inspired by Dr. King and deeply moved by a photographic exhibition portraying the March on Washington, Freeman began his career as a photographer and folklorist documenting African American expressive culture and living up to his grandmother's command that he "tell our story and do us proud." Largely self-taught as a photographer, Freeman was inspired by Gordon Parks and Roy DeCarava and sought out mentors and guides, including Burk Uzzle and Sam Smith, the publisher of the *Capitol East Gazette*. Over the years, Freeman spent time as a stringer for *Time* and *Magnum*, worked as a White House photographer and carried out assignments for a wide range of publications in the U.S. and abroad.

An important early assignment came in the immediate aftermath of Dr. King's assassination, when Freeman was asked to accompany and photograph the Mule Train from Marks, Mississippi to Washington, DC as part of the 1968 Poor People's Campaign. Decades later, as part of Marks' celebration of the 30th anniversary of that event, Freeman reached out to other Mule Train photographers, tracked down the people he had photographed for follow-up interviews, and created an exhibition and book titled *The Mule Train: A Journey of Hope Remembered*.

In 1970, the National Endowment for the Humanities awarded him the first ever Young Humanist Fellowship given to a photographer, and in 1972, Freeman began a fruitful long-term partnership with the Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage, which in turn introduced him to SNCC veteran and folklorist Worth Long, who became a lifelong work partner, friend and ally. Together they directed the Mississippi Folklife Project, and the related exhibition, *Folkroots*, which started its national tour at Mississippi's Old Capitol Museum, helping to open up that previously white-only space to African Americans. Worth and Freeman collaborated on a range of projects and exhibitions over the years, sharing a vision of their fieldwork as a collaborative effort with the people they photographed, as participants, not subjects, relationships that built bridges across race and class, and between past and present.

While working on these projects, Freeman's childhood connection with quilts as sources of warmth, healing and art, and as links to the ancestors, became a crucial focus of his ongoing work. He developed strong relationships with quilters in Mississippi and beyond, photographing and documenting their lives and works in almost all 50 states, while also collecting and eventually designing quilts himself. This passion became the basis for numerous exhibitions and books, including *Something to Keep You Warm*, *More than Just Something to Keep You Warm*, *A Communion of the Spirits*, and *Quilts for Obama*.

Roland L. Freeman was brilliant and persistent, warm and generous, passionate and excitable. He and Worth nurtured artists and cultural workers across the country, helping, for example, to found and sustain Mississippi Cultural Crossroads and the Crossroads Quilters in Port Gibson. The Crosby family, Patty, Dave and their children, provided his home away from home in Mississippi.

Though he never settled into academic life as his cousin Jeannetta predicted, Freeman taught at and worked with several universities including Howard and Millsaps where he was awarded an honorary doctorate. He regularly worked with other scholars, notably Carolyn Mazloomi and Beverly Guy-Sheftall, and always supplemented his photography with oral histories. He exhibited around the world, developed an exhibit for South Africa, *Testimony Through Art*, and published seven books that combined photography, research, and memoir.

While Freeman was close to many people, a few were central to his life. Worth is one. Another dear friend and important ally is Bernice Johnson Reagon, whom he trusted for advice and guidance. The late Eleanor Foster Ott remained a close, steady friend and source of support throughout her life.

In 1991, David Levine and Judith Katz helped Freeman establish The Group for Cultural Documentation, a 501(c)3 non-profit for supporting and archiving his life work. Though the website is no longer active, <https://www.tgcd.org/> preserves much of Freeman's work for public access. Through TGCD, the *Young Person's Cultural Exchange Program*, involving young people from Mississippi, Arizona and Vermont, was also developed and documented.

From their marriage in 1968, Roland shared his life with Marcia Felton Freeman. Whether on the road or home in DC, her constant presence and enduring support was central. As he testified: "She has put up with my peculiar madness and work habits, remaining a true partner through thick and thin. She has been supportive throughout my long absences for the fieldwork and, despite the demands of her own career, has always found the time and strength necessary to be there for me when I needed her."

Freeman remained committed to family and community, and was a driving force in huge annual reunions and developing the family's genealogy.

Roland's considerable skills and accomplishments were recognized by many awards, including the National Endowment for the Arts National Heritage Fellow and Bess Lomax Hawes Award (the NEA's highest); a Living Legacy Award from the National Black Arts Festival; and two Masters of Photography Visual Arts Fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts.

The Kohler Foundation recognized the value of Freeman's extraordinary work by purchasing his extensive collection. They donated the negatives, prints, and slides to the Southern Folklife Collection at the University of North Carolina to preserve for the public, while sending his quilt collection home to Mississippi. When Freeman passed, he was engaged in a new project, *Freeing the Spirit*, based on the lives of women leaders of slave rebellions throughout the Americas, which his research assistant Jo Ann P Henry and his beloved goddaughter Kia Melchor Q Hall are working to complete.

Roland L. Freeman is survived by his wife Marcia Freeman, seven of his 12 sisters and brothers, hundreds of other relatives, and countless close friends. Freeman thought of his life work as an ongoing project *While There is Still Time*. While this work is caught short by his passing, Freeman has left us so much to celebrate. Freeman, we feel you urging us to continue the work. We love and cherish you, Freeman.