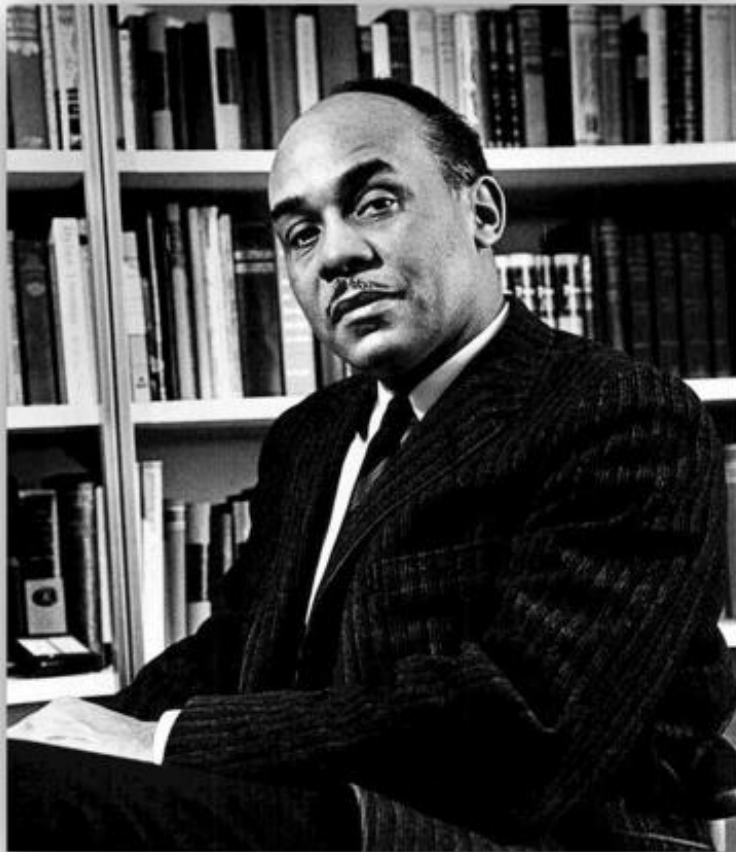
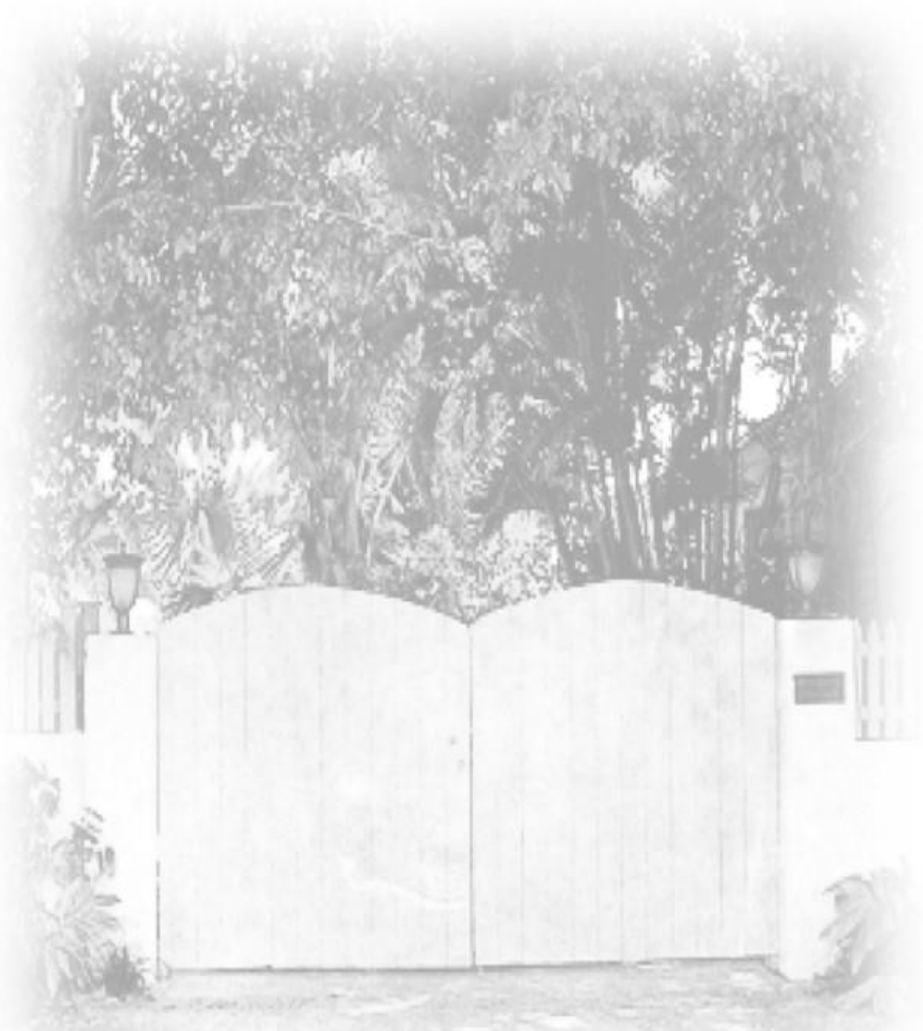


## CHAPTER 2

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### **RALPH ELLISON** **Renaissance Man**





*"He saw the predicament of blacks in America as a metaphor for the universal human challenge of finding a viable identity in a chaotic and sometimes indifferent world."*

-- Anne Seidlitz, American Masters, NPR

## Chapter 2

### RALPH ELLISON

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**I**t was March 1985. Seventy-two-year-old Ralph Ellison emerged from the back door of his winter home on Windsor Lane in Key West early in the morning. Slightly overweight, unlike the slim, fit physique of his youth, Ellison was impeccably dressed in light tan linen slacks, a linen shirt, and two-toned saddle oxfords—his customary “casual” attire for this winter resort.

In a town that was traditionally laid back and oh-so casual, Ellison’s morning outfit spoke volumes about how he perceived himself or at least how he wanted to be perceived—sophisticated, civilized, cultured, even regal. It was an image that Ellison had dreamed about as a boy growing up poor in Oklahoma City in the 1920s.

In those days, his mother would bring home old copies of *Vanity Fair* magazine from her cleaning jobs in the wealthy homes of the city. Ellison devoured each issue, as much for the advertisements as for the articles, all of which exposed him to a sophisticated world—an avant-garde world beyond Oklahoma City. Years later, he would explain to an interviewer, “I wanted the world in which you wore your Sunday clothes every day. I wanted it because it represented something better, a more exciting and civilized and human way of living.” To that end, Ellison saw himself and several of his friends as “young Renaissance Men, people who looked to culture and intellectualism as a source of identity.”

Ellison’s attire that morning in the compound was in stark contrast to his literary neighbor, the poet John Ciardi, who novelist Alison Lurie said was “more or less a slob. He always had on baggy pants and a

Hawaiian shirt” —something Ellison would never own and certainly not wear.

Ellison walked the few yards to the pool, where the compound manager and resident, Tom Taylor, was speaking with the pool boy, one of many who would come and go over the years, a handsome young blond Taylor had hired to service the pool and, one can easily imagine, a few other things. Taylor was reportedly notorious for taking the pool boys under his wing and into his bed.

“Why do you always hire these young white boys to clean our pool,” Ellison asked Taylor that morning. “Are you discriminating? Why don’t you hire some of the black men in town?”

Taylor’s smug retort was immediate. “Because,” he said, “the black men in town are all doctors and lawyers and they don’t want to clean our pool.”

That wasn’t true, of course. Not all black men in town were doctors and lawyers. But the snippy comment was, at least, somewhat reflective of how things had changed in Key West over the past century when a hundred years earlier “Key West city directories listed Black male occupations as: cigar maker, seaman, sponger, carpenter and laborer.” (Black females were usually listed as seamstress or laundress.)

When this pool-boy exchange occurred in 1985, it had been several years since Ellison and his second wife Fanny McConnell Ellison, had bought their home on Windsor Lane, a place that Ellison described as a “dilapidated compound in the Old Town section of the island.”

Charlee Wilbur had told Fanny about the compound and Fanny thought it would be a good investment. Ralph agreed. So, on December 17, 1975, Fanny put down \$1,000 on a little 960-square-foot, four-room house facing Windsor Lane and next door to the house the Herseys were buying at the same time. In March 1976, she closed on the property in her name only for \$19,610.

From the beginning, Ralph and Fanny really didn't spend a great deal of time at their winter home. Ciardi, Wilbur, and Hersey were the three people who ran the compound, recalled Tom Wilson, a longtime resident. "The Ellisons were almost nonexistent. The only time I remember seeing Fanny," he said, "was at our annual association meeting in March."

Yet, on those rare visits, Ralph seemed to enjoy his environment. "The grounds which we share with our friends and neighbors are landscaped with lovely tropical plants, trees, and flowers," he once said, "though I must add that the thump of oranges and avocados on one's roof can be quite shocking."

So that morning in March of '85, after Ellison was finished admonishing the compound manager about his choice for pool maintenance, he set about trying to prune an orchid tree. Back East, Ellison found himself having to explain that orchid trees don't actually bear orchids, but they do bear lovely flowers that look like the blooms of certain orchids.

There was one problem with the orchid tree, however. As Ellison explained, he was tired of cleaning up after the bean pods that "explode button-shaped seeds with the velocity of shotgun pellets," nearly ruining the wooden deck on the front of their little house. Ellison was also frustrated with the fact that the tree "cast so much shade" it was depriving the property's beautiful flowering hibiscus plants and passion flowers from needed sunlight.

What made things worse, apparently, was the fact that the roots were encroaching into the stone wall in front of their house which provided the privacy that they cultivated as much as the orchid tree with its lovely cattleya-like blossoms.

When the Ellisons bought into the compound in 1976, it had been almost twenty-five years since the publication of Ralph's masterpiece *Invisible Man* in 1952. His apotheosis, which had taken seven years to write, had earned him dozens of awards, including the National Book Award in 1953—beating out two worthy contenders: Steinbeck's *East of Eden* and Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*.

Since then, the literary world awaited his next magnum opus. But it hadn't come. Sure, there was a collection of political, social, and critical essays—*Shadow and Act*—in 1964, but the long-awaited novel was just that—awaited.



A 15-foot high Invisible Man monument stands on Riverside Drive at 150<sup>th</sup> Street in Manhattan, honoring Ralph Ellison.

In 1967, the Ellisons purchased (for \$35,000) a 246-year-old, two-story farmhouse on Lincoln Hill Road in Plainfield, which was supposed to serve as a quiet retreat, away from their Riverside Drive apartment in Manhattan, where Ellison could write. And by October, Ralph was “writing intensely.”

Their farmhouse was a quick ten-minute drive from the Ellisons' good friends, Dick and Charlee Wilbur, who owned a large, rambling home on eighty acres on Dodwells Road in Cummington. Ralph and Fanny first met Dick and Charlee Wilbur in August 1959, at the Bread Loaf writers' conference in Middlebury,

Vermont, where he was scheduled to lecture as well as read manuscripts from the upcoming young writers.

The conference was founded in 1926 by a young editor named John Farrar (later the founder of a major book publishing company, Farrar and Rinehart) who believed that “new writers could be or should be helped on the road to fame by older and more established ones.”

“A sense of easy intimacy quickly developed between Ralph and Dick Wilbur,” said Ellison's biographer Arnold Rampersad, whose book *Ralph Ellison: A Biography* was a nonfiction finalist for the

National Book Award in 2007, in part, Rampersad suggested, because they shared the same birthday, March 1.

One can imagine Ellison and Wilbur sitting in wicker chairs on the wrap-around porch of the three-story Bread Loaf Inn, its faded yellow clapboard siding accented by dark-green shutters. While smoking a cigar and sipping a snifter of brandy, they likely discussed a variety of topics, ranging from the odd juxtaposition of poet as lyricist (Wilbur had provided the lyrics for the 1956 Broadway musical *Candide*) to the function of literature or how writing is written, two topics Ellison returned to frequently.

Soon after they bought their summer property in Plainfield, Fanny wrote to her friend Rose Styron, wife of novelist and essayist William Styron, author of *Sophie's Choice*, after reading an article in *Newsweek* magazine about the Styrons and the birth of their daughter Alexandra. According to Fanny, the article mentioned “many beautiful things” about Rose, which Fanny found very gratifying. “Every now and then,” Fanny wrote, “a woman is duly credited.”

Fanny also told Rose that Ralph had bought himself a tractor and had mowed acres and acres of ground “with the enthusiasm of a boy on his first bike.” At the same time, they both discovered that gardening was a very peaceful hobby, which brought them a great deal of satisfaction. Twenty years later, it would be the one disappointment Ralph had about their winter home in Key West. There was no room on their property for gardening.

From all reports, it was a delightful summer that summer of '67, the year the Ellisons first bought their farmhouse. The Wilburs immediately welcomed their friends to the area and introduced them to other residents, both year-round and summer.

In a letter to a friend at the time, Ellison told about the parties at the Wilburs' home, describing his hosts as “interesting enough and humorous enough to make things swing.” He continued his enthusiasm, noting, “Usually, it's black tie with a live and not too square orchestra, and a lot of amusing academic and literary types and dam[n] good food. You have to work pretty hard at it to be bored.”

The good times, however, came to a tragic and abrupt end on November 29, 1967. While Fanny and Ralph were running some errands in town that day, a fire broke out, destroying their farmhouse. The cause, according to the local fire marshal, was faulty electrical wiring.

Fanny, however, never did totally buy that explanation. Years later, after Ralph's death in 1994, Fanny expressed her long-held belief that it had been arson, motivated by racism.

While they managed to rescue their seven-year-old black Labrador retriever named Tuckatarby of Tivoli—a dog who had come into their home as a puppy with a pedigree that Ellison insisted on—they were not able to rescue Ralph's long-anticipated new novel—a novel that he had begun in Rome in 1955. How much was destroyed was never really clear. At first, Ellison suggested that he had lost most of the novel in the fire. Later, Ellison claimed he had "...a full copy of all that he had done prior to that summer." Still, later, he claimed he lost more than 360 pages.

Regardless of how much of the manuscript was destroyed, it was a devastating loss, a literary catastrophe the likes of which had not been experienced since Hemingway's first wife Hadley had packed up all his unpublished short stories to take to him in Switzerland, only to have her luggage with its precious cargo stolen at the Gare de Lyon in Paris, never to be found. Ellison later wrote about the "sheer devastation of what had been quite a lovely old house and grounds now reduced to a scene of desolation."

In March of 1968, less than four months after the blaze, Fanny promised that Ralph would deliver the manuscript "early next year." Yet, ten years later, there was still no manuscript. Fanny justified the inordinate delay by telling everyone the fire had devastated them both, making it difficult for Ralph to write. It was as if the fire had given him a legitimate excuse, however specious, for not finishing his next great work.

At age eighty, a few months before his death in 1994, Ellison still maintained "there will be something very soon." But, in the end, after Ellison had died from pancreatic cancer, it was left to his close friend



and literary executor to compile the novel from more than two thousand pages that Ellison had written over nearly forty years. The novel—*Juneteenth*—was finally published posthumously five years after Ellison's death.

Some might suggest that Ellison was destined to become a writer and that his father intentionally set him on that path when he named his young son after the eminent essayist, philosopher, and poet Ralph Waldo Emerson. Ellison would not disagree. "I came to suspect that he was aware of the suggestive powers of names and of the magic involved in naming," he would often say later in life.

In any event, when Ellison arrived in New York in 1936 on a break from his music composition studies at Tuskegee University in Alabama, his plan was to become a composer and performer of classical music. A fortuitous meeting with novelist, poet, and social activist Langston Hughes changed all that, resulting in what he called "a metamorphosis from a would-be composer to some sort of writer."

Hughes, who was thirteen years older than Ellison, was already well-known for *Not Without Laughter*, his first novel, published in 1930, and *The Ways of White Folks*, a collection of short stories published in 1934. He introduced the young, twenty-two-year-old Ellison to Richard Wright, who was just beginning to become recognized as an African-American author. (His novel *Native Son* would be published in 1940 which would become an immediate best seller).

Ellison had planned to go back to Tuskegee, but he and Wright hit it off and Wright encouraged Ellison to write for a new magazine called *New Challenge*. In a way, the idea seemed preposterous to Ellison; however, he soon wrote a book review and soon after that a short story. "Richard Wright took me under his wing, so to speak, and encouraged me, offering suggestions on how to tighten my writing and to structure it," Ellison said in an interview with his compound neighbor John Hersey.

In that same interview, Ellison told Hersey, how he had developed his skill as a writer. "I approached writing as I approached music," he

said. "I'd been playing since I was eight years old and I knew you didn't just reach a capable performance in whatever craft without work. I'd play one set of scales over and over again. In Tuskegee I'd get up early in the morning and I'd blow sustained tones on my trumpet for an hour. I knew the other students used to hate it, but this developed embouchure, breath control. And I approached writing in the same way."

Then, in the late 1940s, Ellison met Frank Taylor, a senior editor at Reynal and Hitchcock (later absorbed by Harcourt Brace), who encouraged Ellison to work on a novel and who ultimately gave Ellison his first book contract.

It was also Taylor who was influential in getting "Battle Royal" —a story that would later become the first chapter of *Invisible Man*—published in the influential literary British magazine *Horizon: A Review of Literature and Art*.

The publication of "Battle Royal" brought Ellison his first real attention from the publishing world.

In many ways, it was an odd friendship of contrasts between Ellison and Taylor. Where Taylor was flamboyant, Ellison was reserved; where Taylor was extravagant, Ellison was cautious; where Taylor was charming, Ellison was often curt. (Friends from high school remember him with a "sharp tongue" even back then.)

"Taylor had a reputation as a clever, smart publisher," said former longtime book publisher Ross Claiborne. "He was also a charmer. Everybody thought he was terrific despite his failings."

Alison Lurie agreed. "Everyone loved Frank," she said. "He was so smart and so charming. Everybody was very keen on him. We still miss him."

Taylor was also a homosexual, despite being married with four sons. His flamboyance apparently left no doubt about his true sexual proclivities. As Claiborne said bluntly, "No one would have mistaken him for straight." Well, almost no one.

Ellison would later maintain that he had no idea about Taylor's

preferred sexuality until 1958 when a friend told Ellison that he had been approached by Taylor “homosexually” —a fact that Ellison maintained “did nothing to lower our regard for him. Instead,” Ellison said, “I resented my friend’s having passed along information which I had no desire to know.” In other words, Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell.

Throughout his life, Ellison’s attitude toward homosexuality seemed to be one of “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell,” the official United States policy on military service by gays, bisexuals, and lesbians instituted by the Bill Clinton administration in 1994.

(The policy, which took effect on February 28, 1994, prohibited military personnel from discriminating against or harassing homosexual or bisexual service members or applicants as long as they, essentially, remained in the closet during their time of service. Openly LGBTQ people need not apply, under the policy, which didn’t end until September 20, 2011.)

The Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell policy fit Ellison’s sensibilities to a T. He once commented that he didn’t mind gays “as long as they didn’t make it obvious.” As Ellison’s biographer Rampersad noted, “He was liberal, but exuberant gay culture offended him.”

In the early 1960s, Taylor moved his family to Hollywood where he produced the 1961 film “The Misfits,” starring Marilyn Monroe and Clark Gable. It was reportedly a fun time. In his 1969 biography, *Norma Jean: The Life and Death of Marilyn Monroe*, Fred Lawrence Guiles remarked that “to Marilyn, the Taylors were by far the liveliest and most convivial of Miller’s married friends. She came, in time, to confide in both Frank and Nan Taylor.”

They reportedly returned to New York after he was “threatened with blacklisting as a Hollywood liberal.”

At least twice during his marriage, Taylor left his wife Nan for a young guy, Claiborne recalled. “But then both times, after his affair was over, Nan took him back.” Finally, in 1975, when Taylor was fifty-nine years old, he and Nan divorced and four years later, in 1979.

Thinking back on those days, Lurie said, “It’s a wonderful experience of being able to change your life, move to Key West, drop

one life and take up another one,” she said. “He was married, had a job in New York and four children. Then, he fell in love with the son of one of his friends, a children’s book writer.

“That was probably shocking in New York, but it wasn’t shocking down here. Nobody said, ‘Oh, he’s taken up with somebody that’s 25 years younger than he is.’ It didn’t seem remarkable. It’s very freeing not to have that kind of criticism swirling around you,” Lurie added.

That acceptance was reflected in the fact that since at least the 1960s, if not earlier, Key West was recognized as one of the country’s best-known gay and Lesbian enclaves in the country—the Fire Island Pines of the South, said compound resident Tom Wilson

The Island House on Whitehead, which may be the longest-running men only guesthouse in the country, opened in 1976. A few years later, in 1983, the island elected the first openly gay mayor in the state of Florida (and one of the first openly LGBT mayors in the United States).

That acceptance, some say, was also why Key West didn’t have a gay pride parade until 1993, two decades after the first gay pride parades in 1970. The traditional rationale or explanation was that a parade wasn’t needed in a city where sexual orientation wasn’t an issue. (Yet, others countered that a gay pride parade was to show gay pride. “It’s not that it’s needed,” said Stephen Morris, one of the organizers of the first parade in Key West in 1993. “It’s a celebration of being gay.”

As liberal and accepting as the island was, the issue of homosexuality played a major role in the breakup of the longtime friendship between the Wilburs and the Ellisons in the 1980s. The exact series of events leading up to the breakup between friends was complex, but began in 1983 when the Ellisons rented their home in the compound to an elderly gentleman.

Not long afterwards, the Ellisons received a letter from their tenant, saying that Frank Taylor and his companion Steve Roos (the son of the tenant and, as it was soon discovered, Taylor’s paramour) wanted to replace the bed in the study.

The fact that Frank Taylor and Steve were occupying the home came as a disturbing surprise to the Ellisons, since they had not been told that their friend Frank Taylor and his “lover” would also be staying at their home for the winter season and since Taylor and his companion were part owners of another Key West property on Catherine Street which “presumably they could have occupied.”

Ellison felt strongly that they should have been told in advance about the occupancy of additional tenants. The fact that they weren’t told about it was “a violation of friendship and our rights as property owners,” Ellison said.

As Ellison wrote in a letter to the Wilburs, “...being square, and holding on to certain old-fashioned notions of friendship, we would have expected our old friend Taylor to’ve been frank about his intentions and told us in advance, much as I, as a Negro, would have done had I intended to bring a white girl companion into a friend’s house in a community wherein our interracial presence might have raised questions.”

Matters grew decidedly worse, however, after the end of the season. The Ellisons began receiving telephone calls that were transferred to their New York number by the phone company from people who assumed that they were phoning Frank’s residence. “This I took as an invasion of privacy,” Ellison wrote. “At that point “we were not simply at odds with an unthinking erstwhile friend, but a half-assed trickster who seems to assume that his emergence from the closet endowed him with special privileges.”

While the Ellisons’ clearly felt betrayed, Taylor must have also felt equally betrayed over the rejection by his longtime friend—someone he had clearly done so much for over the years.

At some point during this period of time, Charlee received a letter from Fanny saying that their home had been “dirtied by Frank Taylor and his lover.” To the Wilburs, the comment was unambiguous, and word soon got around, as Ellison later wrote sardonically, that according to Dick and Charlee “the cruel Ellisons broke with Frank because they [the Ellisons] were prejudiced against homosexuals.”

The notion that Ralph and Fanny were homophobic would have been offensive to many in Key West in general, let alone to the other residents of the compound, many of whom were gay. When asked if there was any homophobia in the compound, resident Tom Wilson denied it emphatically. "In fact, it was just the opposite," he said. "Everyone was beyond accepting. There was just a sense that that's the way it should be."

In protest to the allegation, Ellison wrote a six-page letter to the Wilburs insisting that neither he nor Fanny was in any way prejudiced against homosexuals, and that the charge was a baseless, if not malicious, canard. He also asserted that their longtime friendship should have provided ample evidence of the total fallacy of the assertion.

"To ascribe the break in friendship to an assumed objection on our part to Taylor's choice in lovers," Ellison wrote, "...is like assuming that I abhor all physicians because I lost my mother to the incompetence of a single practitioner who failed to order an X-ray after she broke her hip in a fall."

Apparently, the Wilburs had gotten wind of just how upset the Ellisons were even before receiving Ellison's letter because two weeks before Ralph had penned his discourse, Charlee had written her own letter to the Ellisons talking about "the fun we had together, the closeness, many shared experiences, both happy and painful."

She added cryptically—was it intentional? — "And everyone seems to be aware of the need for acceptance in old friends—open-mindedness and forgiveness."

It was not to be, since the Ellisons still had other resentments and animosities toward the Wilburs that apparently had been festering for quite a while. Ellison expressed those resentments at the end of his lengthy letter, noting how both he and Fanny felt that the Wilburs had been pulling away from their friendship for quite a while.

"When you spent a year abroad and didn't write (neither of you), I assumed that we'd reached the end of our friendship," he wrote. He acknowledged that Charlee had said they had written and called, but

in fact they [the Ellisons] had received no communication.” At the same, he added, “The fact that other friends did hear from you seemed to affirm a break.”

That seemed to put an end to it. Friendship over. Yet, Ellison’s innate sense of noblesse oblige—justified or not—no doubt kept him from severing the relationship completely. He concluded his six-page letter to the Wilburs, as any proper gentleman would, with a hint of reconciliation.

“I hope this gives you a clearer idea of our view of the matter,” he wrote, “and that reading it will provide a measure of the catharsis and sense of reconciliation that I’ve achieved in the writing. At any rate you may take the length of it as an indication of my concern that an ultimately trivial incident could do so much damage to our friendship.”

It was however, a sad conclusion to a thirty-year friendship. For the next decade, the shattered remains of the soured relationship would hang over these former friends as palpable as the Key West humidity in July. While there were pleasantries exchanged, there was never the “conscious closing-in with old friends” that Charlee had hoped for.

In 1993, a year before Ralph died of pancreatic cancer and more than a decade before Fanny passed away in 2005 at the age of ninety-three, Fanny sold the Windsor Lane home to Charles Lee for what reportedly was a nice profit.

Meanwhile, it was, perhaps, Frank Taylor who had the last word in the matter. When Taylor died in 1999 at the age of eighty-three, the *New York Times* published an obituary, including a lengthy list of authors Taylor had dealt with throughout his career—Arthur Miller, Grace Metalious, Eldridge Cleaver, Richard Wilbur, and others. The obituary, however, failed to mention Ellison. Was it simply an oversight? It’s not too farfetched to suppose that Taylor had a direct hand in the instructions he left regarding his obituar



*Fanny Ellison visits the Library of Congress in 1997.*

### **Ellison on Writing**

“I am terribly stubborn, and once I get engaged in [a writing project], I must keep going until I finally make something out of it. I don’t know what the something is going to be, but the process is one through which I make a good part of my own experience meaningful. I don’t mean in any easy autobiographical sense, but the matter of drawing actual experience, thoughts, and emotion together in a way that creates an artifact through which I can reach other people.”

~ **Ralph Ellison**