Gordon D. Logan
My adventures with Stroop

Gordon Logan is famously known as the ‘inventor’ of the Stop-Signal task, which is said to measure inhibitory control by occasionally requiring participants to stop executing their actions. As a leading expert on executive control, he would acknowledge that J. R. Stroop has done much for the field by designing a task in which effects of automaticity (in reading, or, if you will, semantic processing) and executive control (in stopping yourself from verbalizing the distracter). Shortly after his dissertation which produced perhaps the most often cited paper in psychonomy however, Stroop took a step back from doing research. It has come to our attention that Gordon Logan found more clues about the man behind the Effect.

“Stroop’s house is white.” This tongue-in-cheek comment in an interview with a Vanderbilt alumni magazine triggered a remarkable chain of events that ended up giving me a deeper understanding of the man behind the Stroop task and the legacy he left behind. I had been talking about the Stroop effect to an interviewer from the magazine, noting that the house that Stoop built as a young student and lived in throughout his life was here in Nashville at 1110 Morrow Avenue. I said it had become a tourist attraction for visiting psychologists, along with the Ryman Auditorium, the Grande Ole Opry, Gruhn Guitars, and the honky tonks on lower Broadway.

Shortly after the magazine was published, I was away at a conference and got an excited call from my wife, Jane Zbrodoff. “You’ll never guess who called me!” she exclaimed. “It was Fred Stroop, Stoop’s youngest son! He still lives in the house on Morrow Avenue,” she said. “He read the magazine and said you were wrong. The house is red—brick red.” He invited us over to see for ourselves and to talk about his father. We went to his house as soon as we could, and spent a lovely afternoon with Fred and his wife, Faye, looking over the documents from Stoop’s life. Fred and Faye couldn’t believe our excitement as we held the original version of Stoop’s dissertation in our hands. They showed us an original reprint of the 1935 Journal of Experimental Psychology paper, which was almost word-for-word identical to the dissertation. Apparently, the APA copyeditors were gentler in those days. As for the house itself, they told us how John Ridley Stroop had moved to Nashville from nearby Murfreesboro to finish high school and go to college, how he designed the house, dug the basement with a team of mules, built the house himself with the help of a friend, and lived there all his life. They told us of Stoop’s devotion to religion and showed us the six books he wrote on Bible study, some of which are still in print. We learned that Stoop spent his life preaching every Sunday and teaching at David Lipscomb University at the end of Morrow Avenue, serving as the chair of the psychology department and the registrar of the university. As we left, Fred showed us the front of the house, which was mostly red brick. I pointed out some white siding near the roof, and Fred said that was a recent addition. The house was red when Stoop lived there.

Stoop got his Ph.D. at Peabody College, which is now part of Vanderbilt University. Jesup Hall, in which he conducted his famous experiments, is still standing and houses the Department of Psychology and Human Development,
which is a sister department to the Department of Psychology in the College of Arts and Sciences, where I am employed. My friend and colleague at Peabody, John Rieser, and I decided to put up a display commemorating Stroop and the Stroop task in Jesup Hall. We quickly got the support of our respective department chairs and deans. We located the original Stroop cards and got a picture of Stroop and an original reprint of the paper from his family. We made a nice display containing those items along with a brief biography, a list of his publications, and instructions for performing the Stroop task. The display has become another tourist attraction for visiting colleagues, and every year, Vanderbilt students learn about the Stroop task by testing themselves on the original stimuli. The effect still replicates after all these years.

To inaugurate the display, Vanderbilt hosted a “Stroopfest” in September of 2002. We had a mini conference followed by a champagne-and-strawberries reception in the lobby of Jesup Hall, next to the display. Stroop’s three sons and their families attended: John Ridley, the eldest, Albert, the middle son, and Fred, the youngest. The mini conference included talks by me, Jonathan Cohen, Colin MacLeod, and Tom Carr and a delightful biography of Stroop by his son, Fred. We learned from Fred that Stroop saw himself as a man of God rather than a man of science. He devoted his life to Bible study and preaching, publishing his last paper in psychology in 1938. He ended his career at David Lipscomb University teaching Bible study classes instead of psychology. He was a stern disciplinarian with strong principles. Fred said his students called him “J. Rigidly.” One Sunday, his only transportation to church for his sermon was Albert’s motorcycle. He thought it was inappropriate for a preacher to arrive on such a flamboyant vehicle, so he left an hour early and stayed an hour late so no one would see him, and parked two blocks from the church. He kept a record of each sermon he preached and the payment he received, which was often a meal or a chicken. He remained active throughout his life. A few years before he died, he fell off the roof of his house while he was repairing it. Concerned neighbors rushed over to see if he had been hurt. He stood up, brushed himself off, and made them promise not to tell his wife until after he died. He didn’t want her worrying about him.

A few years ago, Fred and Faye moved out of the house on Morrow Avenue to a condominium that was more suited to their needs. The house is still standing, although the new owners built a huge extension on the back of it. The front still looks the same as it did when Stroop lived there, red or white, depending on your selective attention.