



The Davis School in Winston School by Virginia Pou Doughton

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Moved there after tragedy struck in LaGrange; the school progressed for seven more years

When it became clear that the Davis School of LaGrange would not reopen for the fall session of 1890, the loss was felt throughout North Carolina. In the brief ten years since Col. A. C. Davis established his "military and boarding school," its excellent reputation had attracted cadets from many parts of this and seven other states.

It was most sorely missed, of course, in the LaGrange area. Most families had some connection with it, either directly or indirectly, and the community had become accustomed to the lively crowds attracted by the school's athletic events, its notable band, and the elaborate commencement exercises.

Tragedy had struck in the winter of 1890 when several students became sick, and the doctor-in-residence recognized their symptoms as meningitis. He immediately summoned all the medical men in the area, and still there were deaths. (Meningitis is hard to diagnose even today, and does not always respond to modern medicine, as was the case on at least two campuses in this state in the winter of 1981.)

Winston's Invitation

Fear of the disease was a blow from which the school never recovered in LaGrange. But very soon several communities in other parts of the state expressed an interest in moving Col. Davis and his school to their localities. The first definite proposal came when a letter arrived in LaGrange with a Winston postmark.

On April 18, there had been a special meeting called by the Chamber of Commerce of Winston, NC (now Winston-Salem) to consider the idea of moving the Davis School to that city. Since the famous Bingham School was moving to Asheville there was a definite opening for a military school in that vicinity. Town leaders were enthusiastic over the prospect of attracting Davis and immediately subscribed \$6,500. G. W. Hinshaw proposed that they donate \$20,000 "to aid and encourage Davis to relocate his school in the Forsyth County town."

In 1749, the same words had been used when the NC General Assembly appropriated money "to aid and encourage" James Davis (great-great grandfather of Col. Davis) of Williamsburg to come to North Carolina to be our first State Printer. (He took the offer and opened his print shop in June of that year in New Bern.) Col. Davis accepted the offer and began making plans to move.

The New Campus

The News and Observer of July 20, 1890 announced that the Davis School of La Grange would be open in the fall in the town of Winston. There were to be two large buildings flanked by eleven smaller ones. Bath houses with hot and cold water were to be provided for the cadets at no extra cost, and classroom equipment was to be first class. Adjacent to the school grounds there was a twelve-acre tract of land that was to be converted into a park with shade trees, a clear bubbling stream and an unobstructed view of Old Pilot Mountain.

In mid-September of 1890, the Davis School opened on the new campus in Winston with 200 cadets. Bishop Rondthaler was most extravagant in his praise of this fine institution, which he said formed quite a village of its own. Col. Davis still emphasized the classics, mathematics and military science but he added courses in telegraphy and bookkeeping, which very few schools offered in 1890. The Davis School seemed to win the support of the leading citizens of Winston as they attended all of its functions.

The athletic games held in April attracted so many spectators that extra transportation had to be provided to accommodate the crowd. There was many a teen-age girl who cancelled other social engagements to be present at the awarding of the medals.

Prominent Speakers

The commencement exercises for the first school year in the new location were held on May 28, 1891 and the Hon. F. M. Simmons made the address. Mr. Simmons was practicing law in Winston at this time. He had already served two terms in Congress when he was living in New Bern. Later he became a US Senator and remained in office for thirty years.

A drill and dress parade followed Mr. Simmons speech and the audience was greatly impressed with the conduct and demeanor of the well-disciplined cadets. The literary societies gave a joint celebration and then there was a band concert. The parents congratulated Col. Davis for the successful year. His reputation as a first rate educator was becoming known throughout the country and cadets from Minnesota, Arkansas, Virginia, New York, Maryland and Texas began applying for admission.

More than 200 cadets enrolled for the year 1891-92. The commencement address was given by the Hon. Rufus A. Doughton, speaker of the North Carolina House of Representatives and nominee for Lt. Governor. He spoke on "Our Civilization" and concluded that it is a product of religion, philosophy, trade, arts, commerce and especially government. The debating society argued the pros and cons of Woman's Suffrage and many of the ideas expressed were the same as they are today. Lt. Dull of North Carolina spoke on the affirmative and Lt. J. E. Fulghum of Virginia discussed the negative side. Lt. Fulghum wanted to know what was to happen to the home if the mothers were running off to attend ward meetings and political gatherings. He said that he thought his mother and sisters were too pure to be mixed up with the contaminating influences of the ballot box. Lt. Dull voiced his opinion and said that the female was just as interested in government as the male and was equally as intelligent and competent. The audience for their sound arguments applauded both boys. Declamations were made by Sgt. A. B. Bynum of North Carolina and Cadet T. W. Ridgeway of Texas. Another successful year came to a close and Col. Davis was pleased with the progress of his school.

The Zinzendorf Fire

When the Zinzendorf Hotel burned on Thanksgiving Day in 1892, the Davis cadets were given credit for saving much of the furniture and the lives of a number of guests. Major W. L. Allison -- father of Mrs. William Rand of Raleigh and others -- had many tales to tell about the fire and the part played by the cadets. He was not a student there then but the event was still talked about a few years later.

In 1892, Col. Davis' brother Major J. Davis joined the faculty. He had recently married Mamie Gannaway. She fitted in well in an academic environment as her father W. T. Gannaway had been a professor of Latin and Greek at Trinity for many years and had at one time served as president. She was always ready to comfort a homesick cadet.

Lt. William Ewen Shipp of Lincolnton joined the staff the same year and taught military science. This addition enhanced the prestige of the school greatly, as he was the first Southerner to graduate from West Point after the Civil War. He arrived in Winston with his new bride, the former Margaret Busbee of Raleigh. This young couple stayed a number of years and both of their sons were born while they were at Davis School.

Dr. Ben F. Dixon, grandfather of Wright T. Dixon of Raleigh, Ben F. Dixon of Washington, DC and Mrs. Cyrus D. Hogue of Wilmington, NC, made the commencement address at Davis School on May 30, 1893. There was no newspaper write-up about it possibly because the Jefferson Davis funeral train dominated the newspapers for the last two weeks in May of that year.

The Whipping

The school year 1893-94 was a very successful one, except for an incident in April, 1894 at which time the Southern Associated Press ran a sensational article in the *News and Observer* about the "unmerciful" whipping of a Davis cadet. The victim was Cadet Rider of Richmond. The boy's father began receiving letters and telegrams from irate citizens of Winston and also from lawyers who advised him to prosecute Lt. Shipp.

For a time there was a great deal of hostility toward the school but, upon investigation, the cadet's father, M. T. Rider, came to the conclusion that his son had not been "unmercifully whipped" but had deserved his punishment for his insubordinate behavior and vile language. Lt. Shipp and Col. Davis were fully exonerated and the student remained to complete the year.

Success

The Hon. F. A. Gudger gave the commencement address in 1894 and he must have been proud when his son Sgt. F. A. Gudger won the medal for the declaimers. The Rt. Rev. Edward Rondthaler of Salem presented the diplomas. He was very impressed with the accomplishments of the Davis School and considered it to be superior to any other institution in the area for literary, scientific and moral training. The student body included pupils from Brazil, Cuba and from thirty-five different states. It was estimated that 1,000 people attended the commencement and Mr. A. Dughi -- the well-known caterer from Raleigh, furnished the refreshments.

There were two more successful years at Davis School with the student body increasing every term. Col. A.C. Davis had gone back to Goldsboro to live, and his brother J. Davis was superintendent. Lt. Shipp was still commandant. Each commencement speaker was a well-known man and the usual sham battles, debating, public speaking, and musical concerts were held at the school closing. The future looked bright.

The year 1896-97 began with an increased enrollment and with a multitude of satisfied parents. The reputation of Davis School was becoming known throughout most of the United States as students came from Mississippi, Pennsylvania, Illinois, West Virginia, Arkansas, Louisiana, Virginia, New Your, Texas, Minnesota and some foreign countries.

Character building and deportment were emphasized as well as training in literary and scientific subjects. Many fathers saw rebellious sons turn into well disciplined polite young men under the tutelage of Lt. Shipp. He was fair but did not tolerate insubordinate behavior, vile language or sloppy habits. Cadet Rider of Richmond found this to be true. Lt. Shipp was also a first rate scholar who prepared several boys for West Point. General Henry Wolff Butner, namesake of Camp Butner, was one of them.

Depression Years

Little did anyone realize at the beginning of the year that Davis School would not survive for the second term. The panic of 1893 was to blame, as a severe and prolonged depression followed. Tobacco brought three cents a pound in 1897; a two-horse wagon went for \$15.00; peas were thirty-five cents a bushel; and, good mules sold for \$35.00 each. Industry suffered too and there was widespread unemployment in factory communities. North Carolina saw many bankruptcies that year including the famous Tuckers Store in Raleigh. It had opened in 1818 and survived the Civil War and Reconstruction but closed its doors in 1897.

The Davis School folded in February because parents were unable to pay the tuition. The buildings stood vacant for a number of years but in 1909 the Methodists of Winston-Salem acquired the property and established the Children's Home where it stands today.

Outstanding Alumni

Although many people have never heard of the Davis School, there is a number of outstanding North Carolina men who got their early training there. Former Attorney General A. A. F. Seawell and Frank Page of the highway commission often mentioned their days at the Davis School and spoke of the thorough teaching they received.

Statesville had a number of alumni, among them: William and Edgar Allison; Derr Bradwell; Willie Carlton; N D. Tomlin; James Gray; R. R. Cowles and Herman and Sigmon Wallace. The last two named were the sons of the Wallace Brothers who developed the largest root and herb business in the United States.

John Spencer Bassett entered the junior class at Trinity College after graduating from Davis. He later earned a Ph.D. from Johns Hopkins and was regarded as one of the ablest historians of the day. From Winston-Salem Charles M. Norfleet, W. H. Maslin, P. H. Hanes, Jr., J. L. Hanes and N.M. Schaum were Davis cadets.

I received a letter from Mrs. Josephine L. Hambrick of Hickory, saying that her father Euston Lyerly was a Davis cadet in 1895 and that he had many fond memories of the school. She sent me the picture of the Jefferson Literary Society.

Earlier I mentioned that General Henry Wolff Butner was an alumnus; his brother M. F. Butner was one also.

A graduate of Davis School did not need remedial reading nor did he have to be taught the social graces. He was prepared to meet the world. Isn't it a pity that we don't have places like this today?