

The Dr. George E. Davis House



This report was written on March 7, 1984

1. Name and location of the property: The property known as the Dr. George E. Davis House is located at 301 Campus Street in Charlotte, North Carolina.

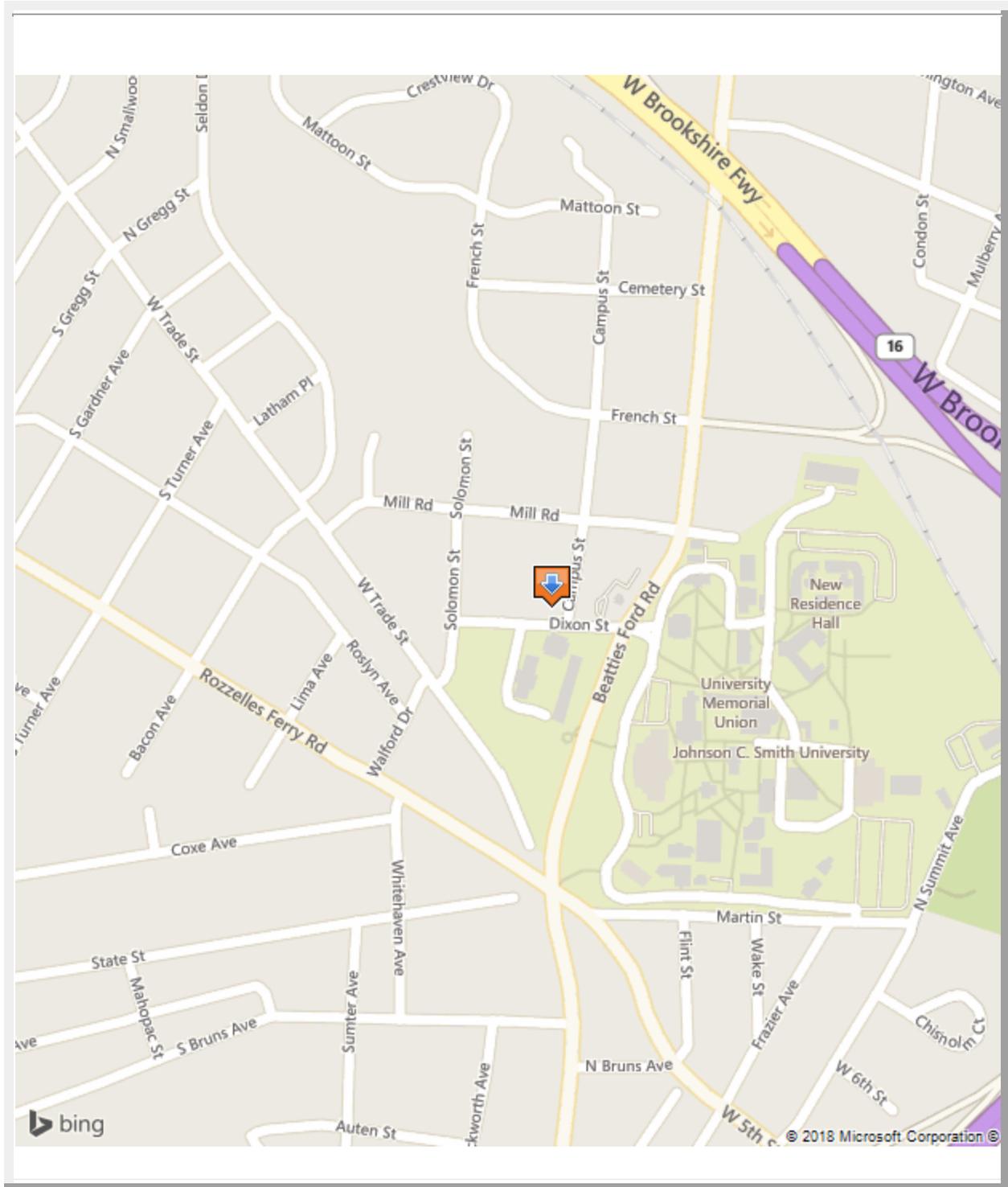
2. Name, address and telephone number of the present owner of the property: The present owner of the property is:

Johnson C. Smith University
100 Beatties Ford Road
Charlotte, N.C. 28216

Telephone: 704/378-1007

3. Representative photographs of the property: This report contains representative photographs of the property.

4. A map depicting the location of the property: This report contains a map which depicts the location of the property.



Click on the map to browse

5. Current Deed Book Reference to the property: The most recent deed to this property is listed in Mecklenburg County Deed Book 1807 at page 152. The Tax Parcel Number of the property is: 069-012-20.

6. A brief historical sketch of the property: This report contains a brief historical sketch of the property prepared by Dr. William H. Huffman.

7. A brief architectural description of the property: This report contains an architectural description of the property prepared by Mr. Thomas W. Hanchett.

8. Documentation of why and in what ways the property meets the criteria set forth in N.C.G.S. 160A-399.4:

a. Special significance in terms of its history, architecture, and/or cultural importance: The Commission judges that the property known as the Dr. George E. Davis House does possess special significance in terms of Charlotte-Mecklenburg. The Commission bases its judgment on the following considerations: 1) Dr. George E. Davis (1862-1959), a graduate of Biddle Institute (now Johnson C. Smith University) and Howard University, was a figure of seminal importance in the history of black education in Charlotte-Mecklenburg and North Carolina, as the first black professor at Biddle Institute, as Dean of the Faculty, and as North Carolina state agent for the Rosenwald Fund; 2) Dr. George E. Davis was a successful and adroit black businessman in Charlotte at the turn of the century, especially in real estate activities; and 3) the Dr. George E. Davis House, erected in the 1890's, is in the opinion of Mr. Thomas W. Hanchett the most imposing example of pre-World War II black residential architecture in the city of Charlotte.

b. Integrity of design, setting, workmanship, materials, feeling and/or association: The Commission contends that the attached architectural description by Mr. Thomas W. Hanchett demonstrates that the Dr. George E. Davis House meets this criterion.

9. Ad Valorem Tax Appraisal: The Commission is aware that designation would allow the owner to apply for an automatic deferral of 50% of the Ad Valorem taxes on all or any portion of the property which becomes "historic property." The current appraised value of the .979 acres of land is \$12,795. The current appraised value of the improvements is \$45,550. The total current appraised value is \$58,345. The property is zoned R6MF.

Date of Preparation of this Report: March 7, 1984

Prepared by: Dr. Dan L. Morrill, Director
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Historical Overview

Dr. William H. Huffman
January, 1984

The imposing house of Dr. George Edward Davis (1862-1959) at the corner of Campus and Dixon Streets in the Biddleville section of Charlotte only one block from the Johnson C. Smith University campus, which was nicknamed "The Ponderosa" by students in recent years, was originally constructed in the 1890s, perhaps added onto in the early 1900s, and given a brick veneer probably in the 1920s.

Dr. Davis himself was an important figure in three respects: he was the first black professor at Johnson C. Smith University, and, as Dean of the Faculty, a major shaper of education at that institution; he built a number of houses near his own as rental housing, thus molding the character of that part of the neighborhood near the university; and he was a North Carolina state agent for the Rosenwald Fund, and in that capacity had a direct hand in raising more than a half-million dollars for many of the black schools built in the state which were partially financed through the fund. The influence of George E. Davis on Johnson C. Smith, Biddleville and education for blacks in the state is unmistakable.

He was born in Wilmington, N.C. on March 24, 1862, to Edward Alexander Davis who was a member of the Wilmington police force for thirty years, and the former Hester Ann Price. The Gregory Institute in Wilmington provided his early education, and at the age of fifteen he began teaching at a school in Laurinburg. From there he entered Biddle (now Johnson C. Smith) University, and graduated with an A. B. in 1883. During his studies at Biddle, he had so impressed the staff that he was offered a

teaching post there, which to that time had only employed white professors. But the twenty-one-year-old graduate had decided on medicine as a career, and in that pursuit he enrolled in Howard University in Washington. By 1885, however, he finally accepted the repeated requests to return to become a professor of natural science and sociology for the next thirty-five years, during the early part of which he earned his doctorate from Biddle. In addition to his long teaching service, Dr. Davis became Dean of the Faculty in 1905, a post he held for fifteen years. ¹

In 1889, Dr. Stephen Matoon, the president of Biddle, who did much to build up the institution and provide housing for faculty by selling them land at a bargain price near the school, sold Davis about one acre of land at the corner of Campus (then Matoon) and Dixon Streets for \$100. ²The records suggest that, perhaps as early as 1891, Dr. Davis built a house on the corner of his lot nearest the intersection of the two streets, and eventually subdivided the property to build three additional rental houses on it as well. ³ For in that year he married Maria Gaston, and the five of their seven children who lived to adulthood were raised in the house: Fannie C. Dennis (1891-1944), of Charlotte; Hattie G. Williams (1893-1943), also of Charlotte; Dr. Alexander G. Davis, of Detroit; Celeste C. Sampson) of Greensboro; and Gladys E. Wood, also of Greensboro.

It appears that over the years George Davis added to both his house and his real estate holdings in Biddleville. In 1903, a mortgage deed describes his house as having eight rooms, but one of the following year says it is a fourteen-room frame dwelling. ⁵ The present brick veneer appears to date from about the 1920s, and obviously is not the same as the chimney work. The county deed books also reveal the fact that the Davises took out many mortgages, often three or four a year, for thirty years (1891-1921). ⁶ Much, if not all, of this money seems to have gone to build houses on properties they owned near their house and elsewhere. As early as 1919, they owned a five-room house next to their own on Campus Street, and two four-room houses behind it on Dixon Street. ⁷ In addition, they at one time owned other lots on Dixon, Yorkville Road, Hill Street, College Street, S. Graham, N. Myers and Beatties Ford Road. ⁸ According to his will, besides the home place with the houses just described, Dr. Davis owned four houses on Carmel Street and one on Mill Road at the time it was written (1954). ⁹

In 1920, George Davis began yet another career when he became a state agent for the Rosenwald Fund. ¹⁰ This fund was set up by Julius Rosenwald (1862-1932), who amassed a great fortune as an early investor in (1897), and as president of (1909-1924), Sears, Roebuck and Company. After a meeting with Booker T. Washington in 1911, Rosenwald became very interested in education for blacks in the South, and built a pilot school near Tuskegee Institute two years later. In 1917 the fund was incorporated to provide money for education, health, fellowships and race relations,

and Rosenwald's total contributions to it eventually came to twenty million dollars in Sears stock. By 1948, the fund had contributed \$4,071,463 toward the building of schoolhouses alone, and nearly three times that much for all its educational programs. ¹¹ Between 1917 and 1937, the Rosenwald Fund had given the money to help build 5,357 schools in 883 counties in fifteen Southern states, and in twelve of those states, they were one-fifth of all the schools. ¹²

For Southern black education in particular, the fund focused on four areas: building rural schools; providing library services; education of teachers, and the development of strategic centers of higher education. Since Rosenwald envisioned the work as a "community enterprise in cooperation between citizens and officials, white and colored," there were several conditions attached to receiving a grant for a rural black school, including: it had to be a common effort by the state or county authorities and the local black and white citizens; the state and county had to contribute to the building and maintain it as a regular part of the public school system; and the black citizens themselves had to show their interest by making gifts of money or labor, usually both. ¹³ It was Dr. George E. Davis' job to travel the state as an agent of the fund to get local groups to meet these conditions.

In 1921, the State of North Carolina set up a Division of Negro Education in the reorganized Department of Public Instruction, which then administered state Rosenwald projects. It was headed by N. C. Newbold, the director; under him was an assistant director, G. H. Ferguson, who was in charge of teacher training, and four supervisors: W. F. Credle, supervisor of the Rosenwald Fund; and three black supervisors, Dr. George E. Davis, supervisor of Rosenwald buildings; Mrs. Annie W. Holland, supervisor of elementary schools; and W. A. Robinson, supervisor of high schools. As building supervisor, paid half by the fund and half by the state, Davis' main duty was to travel throughout the state to speak to local black groups for the purpose of persuading them to contribute money for the building of Rosenwald schools, and to improve existing ones, as well as to meet with local officials (see Figures 1 and 2). ¹⁴ As he explained in his own words, in a letter of 1921 when the new division was set up,

In my work as supervisor of Rosenwald Buildings, I have worked in fifty counties of the state, have traveled 15,277 miles, have been immediately concerned in helping collect on school buildings and equipment \$19,555, have presented our work in addresses at all of our schools of higher grade and in all the denominational colleges. Have addressed large audiences composed of white and colored people throughout the state and have in the main been most cordially received in all sections.

I have inspected and supervised 103 school buildings and have as far as possible helped the people in section where our Rosenwald schools have already been completed, to beautify and improved prove the school grounds, by grading and planting trees and shrubbery. ¹⁵

By 1930, George Davis had been responsible for raising \$655,124 from the black communities from around the state for Rosenwald schools, and by 1932, this figure had risen to \$666,736. At that time, there were 787 schools, 18 homes and 8 shops partially built by the fund in the state, which had the capacity for 2538 teachers and 114,210 pupils, and were constructed for a total cost of \$5,167,042. ¹⁶ In Mecklenburg County, there were twenty-six Rosenwald schools, including Billingsville in Grier Heights. ¹⁷

By the time he retired in 1935 at the age of seventy-three, Dr. George E. Davis had left a legacy of unparalleled achievement in raising money for black education in the state. When one considers that this was accomplished after a long and distinguished career as the first black professor at Biddle/Johnson C. Smith University and Dean of the Faculty, it is without doubt that he must be considered in the front rank in the history of Charlotte's leading black citizens. In 1946, he moved to Greensboro to live with his daughter, Mrs. Gladys Wood, and in 1955, he sold the home place to Johnson C. Smith University, which has been used for student housing, but it has been vacant for the last two academic years. ¹⁸ No doubt Dr. Davis was happy for it to be used as part of the educational institution with which he was allied for so many years. On education itself, his words of over fifty years ago still seem appropriate amid the present-day debates on the subject:

There is no investment of the state's funds today yielding better returns than the money spent in building good schools, paying for competent teachers and building good roads to get to them. ¹⁹

NOTES

¹ A. B. Caldwell, ed, *History of the American Negro* (Atlanta: A. B. Caldwell Publishing, 1921), IV, pp. 52-3; *Greensboro Daily News*, Jan. 13, 1959, p. (?); *Crisis.*, 23 (Feb. 1922), p. 178. Grateful acknowledgment is given to Tom Hanchett, Principal Investigator for the Charlotte Mecklenburg Historic Properties Commission,

whose research turned up the above valuable material, as well as that on the Rosenwald schools, notes 14 through 19, and Figures 1 and 2.

² Deed Book 66, p. 112, 10 May 1889.

³ Index to Deeds, Grantees, 1848-1918; Deed Book 73, p. 263, 18 June 1891; *Ibid.*, Book 103, p. 60, 6 Dec. 1894.

⁴ Caldwell, cited above; *Greensboro News*, cited above; monuments in Pinewood Cemetery; Will Book 17, p. 99.

⁵ It is not clear what is meant by this, since the present structure has nine rooms.

⁶ Index cited in note 3.

⁷ Deed Book 403, p. 416, 4 April 1919.

⁸ Index cited in note 3.

⁹ Will Book 17, p. 99.

¹⁰ Crisis, cited in note 1.

¹¹ Edwin R. Embree and Julia Waxman, *Investment in People: The Story of the Julius Rosenwald Fund* (New York: Harper Brothers, 1949), p. 5 et seq.

¹² George Tindall, *The Emergence of the New South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1967), p. 271.

¹³ Embree and Waxman, cited above.

¹⁴ Outline, c. 1930, State Department of Public Instruction, Division of Negro Education, in North Carolina State Archives, Raleigh, N.C.

¹⁵ Letter from Davis to Newbold, 1921, N.C. State Archives, Raleigh.

¹⁶ Outline, cited in note 14; "Report on Schoolhouse Construction, Transportation and School Libraries to July 1, 1932" (Nashville: Julius Rosenwald Fund, 1932), N.C. State Archives, Raleigh.

¹⁷ "Rosenwald School Building in North Carolina," July 1, 1930, NC. State archives, Raleigh; pp. 10-11.

¹⁸ *Greensboro News*, cited above; Deed Book 1807, p. 152, 19 Sept. 1955.

¹⁹ Letter from Davis to Newbold, cited above.

The Dr. George E. Davis House

Architectural Description,

by Dr. Thomas W. Hanchett

DR. GEORGE E. DAVIS HOUSE
301 Campus Street
Charlotte, North Carolina

An Architectural Description
by Thomas W. Hanchett

The turn of the century was a time of great prosperity for Charlotte's black leaders, remembered as "Charlotte's Negro business renaissance,... [when] successful men opened up business to Charlotte Negroes in the last of the 19th Century and the first of the 20th Century."¹ The prominent families in commerce, religion, and education built large residences, including foreign diplomat J.T. Williams in Second Ward, and publisher George Clement, A.M.E. Zion Bishop George Clinton, and businessman Thad Tate, all in First Ward. In the decades since World War II, extensive inner city demolition has removed almost all architectural traces of that pioneering elite. Today, the Dr. George E. Davis house in the Biddleville neighborhood is the finest dwelling left to remind us of that era of Afro-American achievement, and the most imposing example of pre-Second World War black residential architecture in the city of Charlotte.

Dr. Davis' two story residence is prominently sited at the corner of Campus and Dixon street, facing the campus a block away of Johnson C. Smith University, which he helped to shape. The dwelling has seen changes over the years, mostly during Dr. Davis' lifetime and reflecting his family's rising status. Recently it has been used by the University as a student dormitory, but it now stands vacant.

Records indicate that Dr. Davis purchased this property in 1889 and built a house here about 1891. The present structure may well date from that time. It is a two story Victorian design that shows influence of the Queen Anne style in its complicated massing. The main cube of the house has a projecting front wing and a shallow projecting south side wing. Hip roofs cover the assemblage. Their wide eaves are decorated with small modillion-like brackets. Another Victorian feature of the design is the wide one-story front porch that extends across the entire front of the structure and wraps partly around the south side, accentuating the dwelling's corner location. It has doric porch columns and a wooden balustrade.

One enters the house through a double-doored entry, into a small vestibule. A second door opens into the large Victorian stair hall. The stair, which rises to a low landing, then turns and proceeds upward against the outside wall, shows NeoClassical influences in its simple railing and newell post.

To the left of the stair hall on the first floor is a large sliding panel-door that opens to reveal the parlor. This room features an ornate columned Victorian mantel with a mirrored over-mantel, in one corner. A second panel-door leads back to the dining room, which also has a very decorative mantel.

Returning to the stairhall at the front of the house, we see a door leading to a central hallway that runs straight to the back of the structure. Venturing down it, we pass a door to the dining room on the left, and a door to a downstairs bedroom or study on the right. This large room has an elaborate mantel composed of rectilinear forms. Near the end of the hall on the left is the kitchen, with its separate butler's pantry. A door from the butler's pantry leads into the dining room.

Upstairs, the four bedrooms and bath are arranged in a somewhat unusual manner. The stairwell at the north side of the house terminates in a long hall across the front of the dwelling, with one bedroom opening off it. Near the center of the front, this hall meets a center hall much like the one on the first story. It runs straight back, with two bedrooms and the bathroom on the left, and one bedroom on the right. These three bedrooms have mantelled fireplaces, while the bedroom that opens off the front hall has none.

Davis took out mortgage deeds on the house in 1903 and 1904, possibly in order to finance improvements. The 1903 deed refers to an eight room dwelling, while the 1904 document speaks of fourteen rooms. Today's house has eight or nine rooms, depending on one's definition of a room, but if one counts all spaces, including hallways, it is possible to come up with fourteen. It seems likely that whatever changes occurred in 1903-1904 were relatively minor, with the method of counting being the biggest change.

The major change to the house appears to have happened in the 1920s, at about the time that Davis joined the North Carolina State Education Department. At that time the dwelling's wooden siding was removed and the house was covered with brick. The material undoubtedly contributed much to the structure's economical upkeep, and to its status in an era that deemed a brick house most fashionable.

Dr. Davis sold his residence to Johnson C. Smith in 1955, and for much of the time since then it has been used for student dormitory space. Minor changes have taken place. The kitchen and pantry have been stripped of their cabinets and fixtures. New interior window surrounds have replaced the originals, though much of the other interior trim, including bullseye corner blocks on the door surrounds, remains in place. A conventional door has been inserted in part of the frame of the panel-door between the stairhall and parlor. All of the walls, handsome mantels, and other trim have been covered in a thick crust of blue paint.

Yet, the Davis house has weathered its time as a dormitory surprisingly well. Its room arrangement, major woodwork, and exterior appearance are just as they were when Dr. Davis was North Carolina's Rosenwald Building Agent. The Dr. George E. Davis house deserves preservation and continued use as an important part of Charlotte's architectural heritage.

George Davis page 3.

NOTES:

1. Star of Zion, May 27, 1937. The paper, the official organ of the A.M.E. Zion religion, was published in Charlotte. Citation courtesy of Louise M. Roundtree, Librarian at Livingstone College, Salisbury, North Carolina.

February, 1984