

A History of Davidson Academy

by Virginia Miles Chaney, Ph. D.

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Chapter I

Beginnings, 1784-1786

Nothing is more exciting than a beginning. Lives begin with birth; cities begin with settlement; schools begin with opening. Usually the beginning is small, but often the growth is astonishing.

John Donelson arrived in Nashville on April 24, 1784, and opened up a settlement which was officially named Nashville by the legislature of North Carolina. The tiny, struggling settlement was not a new one. Its intrepid founder, James Robertson, first called it the Bluffs, a most appropriate name for a place perched precariously on the cliffs rising above the Cumberland River. But from 1781 to 1784 the little fort had been called Nashborough. Evidently agreement upon the name for the young settlement was not immediate, for in the opening paragraph of his diary, John Donelson states that his destination was the French Salt Lick.

When Nashville was only five years and eight months old, a significant beginning occurred. On a blustery, snowy December 29 in the year 1785, Davidson Academy was born. The Legislature of North Carolina created this school west of the Alleghenies, a one-room, old-field school destined to touch and enrich hundreds of lives as it came down through the years. With its line unbroken, except for changes of name and scene, it has continued through to Peabody-Vanderbilt University and the Davidson Academy of today. It is worthy of note that no other of the nation's major settlements established an institution of learning at so young an age. This academy, the great-great grandmother of Peabody College, may be said to have been founded by a pioneering group of as fine a quality as ever gathered in one of the country's settlements.

This first Davidson Academy, located six miles northeast of Nashville on the Kentucky Road, was fortunate in its incorporators and trustees. They were the Reverend Thomas B. Craighead (1775 graduate of Princeton University), Hugh Williamson, Daniel Smith, William Polk, Anthony Bledsoe, James Robertson, Lardner Clark, Ephraim M'Claine (or McLean), and Robert Hayes. In the records they were all referred to by the complimentary title of Esquire.

It may be truly said that the earliest history of Davidson Academy is the history of Thomas B. Craighead, president of the academy from 1785 to 1806 (Windrow 17, 23, 24, 26). A Presbyterian minister, he may be called the founder of Presbyterianism in Nashville, Tennessee. Both James Robertson and Andrew Jackson were his close personal friends and served on his Board of Trustees. Not by accident was the Reverend Thomas B. Craighead an innovator and a leader. His father, Alexander Craighead, was illustrious, and he himself was a product of Nassau Hall, Princeton. Davidson Academy was fortunate indeed in its first teacher and mentor, a finished scholar and great theologian. Having succeeded at Davidson Academy, Thomas B. Craighead served as president of Cumberland College from 1806 to 1809.

James Robertson was instrumental in seeing to it that the Legislature of North Carolina provided legally for the establishment of Davidson Academy. Since this act was one of the first pronouncements in favor of education uttered west of the mountains, it is here stated in full:

Whereas the good education of youth has the most direct tendency to promote the virtue, increase the wealth, and extend the fame of any people; and as it is the indispensable duty of

every legislature, to consult the happiness of a rising generation and to endeavor to fit them for an honorable discharge of the social duties of life. And whereas it is represented to this General Assembly, that the citizens of Davidson County are desirous of making an early and liberal provision for the instruction of youth by laying the foundation of a public seminary in that county:

I. Be it therefore enacted, by the General Assembly of the State of North-Carolina and it is hereby enacted by the authority of the same, that the Reverend Thomas Craighead, Hugh Williamson, Daniel Smith, William Polk, Anthony Bledsoe, James Robertson, Lardner Clark, Ephraim McClaine, and Robert Hayes, Esquires shall be and they are hereby declared to be a body politic and corporate, to be known and distinguished by the title of the trustees of Davidson Academy; and by the name of the trustees of the trustees of Davidson Academy, shall have perpetual succession and a common zeal; and that the said trustees and their successors by the name aforesaid, or the majority of them, shall be able and capable in law to take, demand, receive and possess all monies, goods and chattels that shall be given them for the use of the said academy; and the same apply according to the will of the donors and by gift, purchase or device, to take, have, receive, possess, enjoy and retain to them, and their successors forever, any lands, rents, tenements or hereditaments of what kind, nature or quality forever the same may be, in special trust and confidence, that the same or the profits thereof shall be applied to and for the uses and purposes of establishing and endowing the said academy, in the county of Davidson, building or purchasing suitable and convenient houses, purchasing a library and philosophical apparatus, and supporting and paying the salaries of the provost and such number of professors and tutors as to them shall seem necessary.

II. And be it further enacted by the authority aforesaid, that the said trustees and their successors, or a majority of them, by the name aforesaid, shall be able and capable in law, to bargain, sell, grant, demise, alien or dispose of and convey any such lands, rents, tenements, or hereditaments as aforesaid, when the will of the grantee doth not forbid the same; and further, that the said trustees and their successors forever, or a majority of them, shall be able and capable in law, by the name aforesaid, to sue and implead, be sued and impleaded, answer and be answered in all courts of record whatsoever by the style of "the president and trustees of the academy of Davidson."

III. And be it further enacted by the authority aforesaid, that the said trustees or a majority of them shall and they are hereby authorized to choose a president, treasurer and secretary of their own body; they may also choose a rector, professors and tutors for the academy, and the same may remove at pleasure; and they shall have authority to make bye-laws for the government and regulation for the academy, and the same to alter and amend. Provided nevertheless, that such laws not be repugnant to the laws of the state, their morals, studies, and academical exercises, as to them shall seem meet, and to give certificates to such students as shall leave the said academy, certifying their literary merit and progress of useful knowledge; and further, that on death, resignation, refusal to act, or misconduct of either professor or tutors, the secretary, treasurer or steward, others shall be elected in their room and stead a majority of the trustees agreeing thereto.

IV. And be it further enacted by the authority aforesaid, that the treasurer of the said board of trustees, shall enter into bond with sufficient security to the trustees aforesaid, in the sum of fifteen hundred pounds conditioned for the faithful discharge of the trust in him reposed; and that monies and chattels belonged to the said corporation that shall be in his hand at expiration of his office, shall then be immediately paid and delivered into the hands of the succeeding treasurer; and every treasurer shall receive all monies and donations of whatsoever kind, that may belong or accrue to the said academy during his office; and at the expiration thereof shall account with the trustees for the same; and the same pay and deliver over to the succeeding treasurer; and on the neglect or refusal to pay and deliver as aforesaid, the same method of recovering may be had against him as is or may be provided for the recovery of monies from sheriffs or other persons chargeable with public monies.

V. And be it further enacted, that if any trustee shall neglect attending at the stated meetings of the board for the space of two years, or if any of them shall die or otherwise resign his office, the remaining trustees, or a majority of them, shall at their next meeting choose another trustee in the room of the person thus neglecting his duty, dying or resigning his office.

VI. And be it further enacted by the authority aforesaid, that no lands, tenements or hereditaments, which may be vested in the trustees of the academy of Davidson for the sole use and behoof of the academy, shall be subject to any tax for the space of ninety-nine years.

VII. And be it further enacted, that two hundred and forty acres of the land reserved for the use of the state, being that part of said land which is most remote from the salt springs near Nashville, shall be and is hereby vested in the trustees of Davidson Academy for the use of the Seminary (Windrow 27-29).

After carefully perusing this document, could anyone doubt the sincerity and the commonsense of the founders of Davidson Academy?

On a day in the warm third week of August – August 19, 1786 – the trustees of Davidson Academy held their first formal meeting. They could not possibly have gazed down the years to see Cumberland College, the University of Nashville, or George Peabody College for Teachers. But these men of rare character and intelligence must have felt a hint of the importance of the meeting held that day.

The most important decision reached at this first "meeting of the board" was the choosing of Thomas B. Craighead as principal of Davidson Academy. Also at this first meeting, a ferry was established at Broad Street, whose revenue should accrue to the academy. Tuition was fixed at four pounds per annum, "hard money."

Davidson Academy had begun its history. The lineage of Peabody is direct, the inheritance clear. Without Davidson Academy there would have been no Cumberland College, no University of Nashville; without the University of Nashville, no State Normal College, nor Peabody Normal School, nor George Peabody College for Teachers. It is, indeed, a rich inheritance (Windrow 16).

When the reader is caught up in the history of Davidson Academy, he may forget to picture in his mind some of its humble beginnings. The Board of Trustees chose the Spring Hill Meeting House as the home of the Academy, September 25, 1786. This little rough stone church, twenty-four by thirty feet, was on the Gallatin road leading toward Kentucky, six miles east and north of Nashville, itself mainly a group of cabins. The Meeting House was demolished many years ago, and today the highway runs through the site.

"Progress moves with irreverent feet," said Professor A.L. Crabb. Where was the "hard money" to come from? On December 5, 1786, the Board of Trustees met and agreed "that Mr. President make a motion to court for a ferry just above the town lands." The motion was granted. On April 3, 1787, the right to operate the ferry located 220 feet upstream from the present site of the Sparkman Street Bridge was granted to the trustees of Davidson Academy. The ferry was established at Broad Street, with the stipulation that its revenue (estimated to be from \$100 to \$650 per year) accrue to the academy. But the ferry produced more annoyance than income, and, in 1813, it was disposed of. The academy was in constant need of money, and its appropriation of land, 240 acres, was sold off by piecemeal. By 1803, only seven acres remained, this acreage serving as the campus. On these remaining seven acres new Davidson Academy buildings would be erected. The school was following a pattern – more buildings, less land.

In this year of 1803, Sumner County made an effort to have Davidson Academy moved to Montpelier, in that county. The effort was not successful. There is a further reference to the

buildings of the academy. On April 5, 1796, the territorial legislature passed an act which said that:

the buildings of the said academy shall be erected on the most convenient situation on the hill immediately above Nashville and near the road leading to Buchanan's Mill, and that the trustees of aforesaid shall proceed to erect buildings and employ tutors to proceed to the business of instruction as soon as the funds will permit.

The site chosen was approximately the present area bounded by Third Avenue and Peabody Street.

Schools often grow by merging. In 1799, Federal Seminary merged with Davidson Academy. A further note on the endowment of Davidson Academy is of interest. In 1789, two licks at which salt could be manufactured, with the adjoining land, were to be retained for the use of Davidson Academy. Thus early was provision made for the endowment of a Literary Institution upon the remote frontier. In 1804, Nashville had about four hundred people.

The progress of Davidson Academy is a matter of special interest to Nashville. As a beginning venture, it grew with the progress of society and gave form, tone, cohesion, luster, and the means of nobler growth to the society around it. The heroic spirit of those who founded and guided it finds expression in the energetic ideal of its descendant, the present Davidson Academy. Davidson Academy objectified the esteem of the intellectual and spiritual which the earliest of the pioneers brought from North Carolina (Windrow 50).

In the autumn of 1786, Davidson Academy opened in the old stone church, the oldest church and school house in Middle Tennessee. This rustic church was the cradle of Nashville University, of Peabody College, and of the present Davidson Academy. The children were taught in it during the week; the parents, children, and servants on the Lord's day.

In 1802, Davidson Academy was "still in its infancy, only seven or eight young men being yet assembled, under one professor" (Michaux 246). In this year Judge John McNairy and David Shelby of Federal Seminary, were elected trustees of Davidson Academy. It is fascinating to see all over the Nashville of today the names of the people connected with the school of 1785-1786. The names recur in streets, buildings, and especially in prominent families. And it is worthy of note that Davidson Academy was chartered about six years after the first settlement in Middle Tennessee and nearly eleven years before Tennessee became a state.

Interesting, too, is the fact that, until 1768, James Robertson had not taken the time to learn how to read and write. Then he married Charlotte Reeves of Wake County, North Carolina, under whose tutelage he learned fast. This man led Davidson Academy with energy and foresight.

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Chapter II

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Personalities

James Robertson (1742-1825)

Schools are born of visions in the minds of men. In the case of Davidson Academy, the first vision is surely that of James Robertson. From the very founding of Nashville (1779) Colonel Robertson was desirous of promoting his city by forwarding its interests through learning and religion. He had conceived the idea of an academy at Nashville, and, while attending the North Carolina legislature, in December 1782, he met the Reverend Thomas Craighead (q.v.), a Presbyterian minister and teacher of excellent qualifications, whom he interested in his scheme. They secured the passage of an act "for the promotion of learning in Davidson County." (See act in full in Chapter I.)

It is said that upon catching sight of the bluffs above Nashville, Robertson exclaimed, "Some day there will be a college there!" (Windrow 283). A man of vision?

According to Alfred Leland Crabb, it was John Donelson who said, "We are going to build schools and churches there." (Journey 126). And again, "... some day, not too long off, we're going to build a school." (174). The founders of Nashville were men who envisioned a town with an educated populace.

From 1785, it was Robertson's dream that an academy would be opened for the young people of his developing community. So he asked the Reverend Thomas B. Craighead, a native of North Carolina and a graduate of Nassau Hall of Princeton University, to come to Nashville and become the teacher of the new school. This was the day school which the sons of James Robertson attended. Jonathan was sixteen; James Randolph was fourteen; Peyton was ten. David Hood, the Robertson family tutor, had taught them basic education in their earlier years. The story of these boys is an interesting one. With the opening of the new academy, the boys were up at daylight to walk the eleven miles to school. They followed the buffalo path which connected Robertson's Lick with Sulphur Dell. The route was direct and along the river's edge. After crossing the foot log at Sulphur Spring branch, they made their way to the academy ferry. When they reached the opposite shore of the winding river, they followed a path through the edge field (present East Nashville) and out to Haysborough. Jonathan was always cautious along the way. He carried his trusty rifle in case of an ambush or other emergency. Delilah, twelve, was taught her Latin at home.

In August of 1786, a Board of Trustees for Davidson Academy was organized. At once, the trustees resolved to put a subscription paper into circulation, to obtain means wherewith to erect a building and to endow the institution. They adopted a form of subscription with a special clause for donations in lands. And thus the Academy, College, and University of Nashville received several tracts, in addition to the 240 acres now included within the corporate limits of the city of Nashville.

Two "licks," with adjoining land, were to be retained for the use of Davidson Academy, for which commissioners were ordered to execute deeds to the trustees (Putnam 380). The Academy had a "two forty" on the south of town, and a "six forty" at "Gasper's Lick" (405).

Colonel Robertson remained an active, vocal trustee of Davidson Academy until May 31, 1805, when he resigned. "It seems safe to say that had there not been a James Robertson, there would not be a Nashville, and perhaps not even a Tennessee" (*Nashville: The Faces of Two Centuries, 1780-1980*, 30). Certainly there could not have been a Davidson Academy! James Robertson died, probably slain by Indians, in 1825. Charlotte Robertson, aged ninety-three, died in 1843. She was living in the home of her daughter and son-in-law, Lavinia and John Craighead.

Thomas Benton Craighead (dates?)

It is impossible to overestimate the value of Thomas B. Craighead, its first leader, to Davidson Academy. He came out of a long line of Scotch-Irish ministers and as the school's president of the board and teacher, he brought to Davidson Academy a love of learning and a reverence for good character which would remain trademarks of the school throughout its long and varied history.

This 1775 graduate with honors of Princeton University accepted eagerly the invitation to preach in the wilderness. As the first Presbyterian minister in middle Tennessee, and as the first minister in Nashville, he enjoyed great freedom in promulgating his ideas. As early as 1786, Mr. Craighead stood out as the patron of learning, the teacher of youth, and the counselor of the aged. And he remained Principal of Davidson Academy for more than twenty years. The academy was never large but its work was impressive.

Dr. Craighead conducted Davidson Academy as a sort of adolescent Princeton in the western wilderness (Crabb, *Personality* 172). The boys of the settlement learned the rudiments at home and then enrolled in the academy (See Chapter III). They had from the beginning great respect for Dr. Craighead, first out of wonder at the learning he had, and then because of the interest he could inject into their monotonous and restricted lives. Not at all did they object to the fact that Dr. Craighead taught long hours and six days a week. The same forefinger that pointed outward accenting the truth of the world pointed upward on the seventh, for on that day he preached to them the Presbyterian Gospel (172). He taught the classics and mathematics to the boys; jostled delightfully with their parents in conversation; ate pioneer food with great relish, discrimination, and capacity; and lived a good life in all of his ways.

It is enlightening to look at the life of Dr. Craighead before he became a part of Davidson Academy. The son of a Presbyterian minister, he was ordained by the Presbytery of Orange County in 1780. He was thirty-five years old and had been married only five years previously to Elizabeth Brown, the daughter of a minister from Frankfort, Kentucky.

At the very first meeting of the trustees on August 19, 1786, the Reverend Craighead was chosen president of the board (*The Craighead Family*, 1876). It is notable that this group of trustees had among its members such honored men as Senator Daniel Smith and Andrew Jackson.

The school was ordered to be taught in the Spring Hill Meeting House, the church in which Mr. Craighead preached. No separation of church and state here! It was located at the edge of the town of Haysborough. For those from Nashville who attended the school, early departure was necessary; it was six miles from the town square to the academy. Davidson Academy had its meager beginnings near the site of the present Spring Hill Cemetery and swelled into the great George Peabody College for Teachers.

In 1795 the Reverend Thomas Craighead built a new home on Gallatin Road, across from the Spring Hill Meeting House. At this time the teacher and preacher was also a large producer of whiskey. In the eighteenth century no one adversely criticized Reverend Craighead for the diversity of his interests.

(A Nashville newspaper article dated August, 1932, shows a picture of Craighead's home and states that the cornerstone gave the date of construction. Mrs. Emily D. Walton owned the home in 1932.)

For over ten years the Reverend Craighead had preached and taught the classes of Davidson Academy there. At the age of seventy-five, he died, honored and fondly remembered. He was a credit to his profession, learned and truly good. "He lived, preached, taught, died and is buried two hundred yards from the one-room stone building which served as academy and Presbyterian church (*Personality* 125). Nashville is still a city of schools and churches.

Andrew Jackson (1767-1845)

It is not always that highly-educated men are the most devoted to the cause of education. An example of this fact was Andrew Jackson. A man of limited formal learning, he threw himself wholeheartedly into the making and maintaining of Davidson Academy.

Although his interest in the school was present at its very beginning, Jackson did not actually become a member of its Board of Trustees until 1791 (Windrow 6). From that date, his influence became a major factor in the success of the small school, numbering a mere handful (eight or ten) of boys. He resigned from the board, but not from his interest in the school, in 1805. His interest never waned.

When Andrew Jackson became a member of the Board of Trustees, the Reverend Craighead was in the third year of his ministry to the Presbyterian Spring Hill Meeting House at nearby Haysborough. He was also heading Davidson Academy and acting as a member of its board of trustees (Crabb 23.) It is clear from existing records of the school that Andrew Jackson worked in close harmony with its principal. He may surely be considered a contributing factor in the ability of the tiny backwoods school to survive.

By 1792, when the "Academy" was giving hopes of becoming a permanent institution, the school leased a ferry across the Cumberland, for \$100. General Smith, another member of the board, said to General Jackson, "That is enough to pay the passages of all the Trustees across the River Styx." The then young Hickory replied, "I want but one stick to make my way."

There were no fewer than three generals in Davidson Academy's original Board of Trustees – Robertson, Smith, and Williamson. There were three Colonels – Polk, Bledsoe, and Hays. To this honored company, upon the resignation of Polk, "Mr. Andrew Jackson" was added (1791). His election was good for the academy and evidently rewarding to him. He remained a proud trustee or helper for thirty-three years.

The academy grew. On April 5, 1796, the territorial legislature passed an act, a section of which read:

Be it enacted: That the buildings of the said academy shall be erected in the most convenient situation on the hill immediately above Nashville and near to the road leading to Buchanan's Mill; and that the trustees of aforesaid shall proceed to erect buildings and employ tutors to proceed to the business of instruction as soon as the funds will permit. (See Chapter I.)

With what pride patrons of the present-day Davidson Academy can look back at its beginning at the part of James Robertson, Andrew Jackson, and others in its growth!

" ... it does not seem likely that any city in the nation has been so much influenced by one man as he [Andrew Jackson] has influenced Nashville" (*Personality* 255).

William K. Polk (dates?)

Davidson Academy had the good fortune to have William Polk as a member of its Board of Trustees. A member for Davidson County, he was a man of wealth, sagacity, and cultivation. It was he who introduced the bill for Davidson Academy's charter and had it successfully carried through (Windrow 6).

He was the grandfather of the William (James?) K. Polk who became a president of the United States.

Daniel Smith (dates?)

The Secretary of the first board of trustees of Davidson Academy was Daniel Smith. He was learned and astute.

Ephraim McLean

The first Treasurer of Davidson Academy was Ephraim McLean.

John Sappington

In the same year of 1785, Nashville experienced two most important firsts. Its first school, Davidson Academy, was born; and its first permanent (but only for three years) physician, John Sappington, appeared.

Dr. Sappington placed his pills on the local market. He called them mystery with a covering of sugar. Each morning the doctor stepped outside the door of his office and rang a bell to tell his patients that it was time for them to take their pills. One of his sons, Roger, practiced in Nashville until his death in 1824.

Boyd McNairy (1785-1856)

Born in 1785, Boyd McNairy entered Davidson Academy in 1797, and remained there under the tutelage of Dr. Thomas B. Craighead until he was ready for study at the University of Pennsylvania. He was graduated from the academy in 1803 and entered the university the same year. Since an institution of learning owes its prestige to the quality and success of its graduates, it is well to look at the history of Boyd McNairy. For twenty-eight years Dr. McNairy served as a trustee of the University of Nashville.

Lardner Clarke

The mercantile life of Nashville began in 1786 when Lardner Clarke arrived from Philadelphia with ten horses laden with calico, linen goods, and coarse. ... It was noted that after Mr. Clarke opened his store there was an added brightness in the dresses the Presbyterian ladies wore to hear Dr. Craighead preach ... (*Personality* 26).

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Chapter III

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Library or Textbooks

Records concerning the books and the curriculum of the student body at Davidson Academy are far from complete. However, it is known that in 1792, forty-eight volumes were used. It is not clear whether these volumes were considered library books or textbooks.

A list follows:

Aesop (Esop), Fables

Ainsworth, Dictionary (language not known)

Algebra

Astronomy (one volume Ferguson's Astronomy)

Cicero, two volumes

Conic Sections (mathematics)

Dilworth, Assistants. Dilworth's arithmetic delivered to Mr. Craighead on July 3, 1792.

Differential and Integral Calculus

Desidarius(or Desiderius)

Evidence of the Christian Religion

Erasmus, two volumes (or three)

Geometry (Descriptions and Analytical)

Homer, one volume

Holy Scriptures

Hutchison, Xenophon, one volume

Harvey, one volume 2 [sic] volume

Horace, one volume, second part

Hutton, Logarithms, one volume

Lexicons, three volumes (Lucious [sic])

Maire [sic], Introduction to Surveying, seven volumes

Mensuration (?); Mechanics (?)

Natural Philosophy (Theology)

Navigation

Napos, Cornelius, three volumes

Ovid, two volumes (or three)

Plane and Spherical Trigonometry

Roman and Greek Antiquities

Samson, Euclid, one volume

Sallust, three volumes

Terence, one volume (Dawson's, two volumes (?)), perhaps three

Virgil, Delphini, two volumes

Willingham, five grammars, Latin or Greek (?), composition

Three works are illegible, but a rough total of forty-eight volumes may be safely counted on. By putting these fragments together, the investigator of the early years of Davidson Academy may certainly say that Latin, Greek, and mathematics made up the major part of the curriculum. Handmade in 1781, John Buchanan's Book of Arithmetic (June 20, 1782) is the oldest surviving symbol of education and book publishing in Nashville. Perhaps this text was used at Davidson Academy. Two facts seem obvious: Almost all the students studied Latin grammar and all received the rudiments of reading and writing. It seems safe to assume also, that the boys were at least exposed to the areas of logic, moral philosophy, and rhetoric and belle-lettres.

While it is not possible from the information now available to make a curriculum for Davidson Academy, one from the Harvard (Meriwether, Our Colonial Curriculum) may serve as an example of content and purpose. Those classes marked with an asterisk would fit the list of books in Davidson Academy.

First Year

Monday and Tuesday: Logic, Physics, Disputes

Wednesday: Greek Etymology, Syntax, Precepts of Grammar in such authors as have variety of words*

Thursday: Hebrew Grammar, Bible Practice*, Eastern Tongues

Friday: Rhetoric*, Declamations once monthly*

Saturday: Divinity*, The Catechetical History, Nature of Plants

Second Year

Monday and Tuesday: Ethics*, Politics*, Disputes

Wednesday: Greek prosodia and Dialects*, Poesy*

Thursday: Chaldee

Friday and Saturday: See above

Third Year

Monday and Tuesday: Arithmetic*, Geometry*, Astronomy*, Disputes

Wednesday: Composition, Imitation, Epitome, both in prose and in verse*. "Perfect their theory of writing and exercise style."

Thursday: Syriac, Trostius, New Testaments*

Friday and Saturday: See above. Add commonplaces.

While there remains no detailed account of the daily routine in the Davidson Academy under the principalship of Thomas B. Craighead, gleanings preserved from the history of the school allow the present-day reader to view its operation. Let the reader imagine an excerpt from the diary of Felix Robertson, son of James Robertson, Founders of Nashville. It seems likely that Dr. Felix Robertson, Nashville's most influential physician of the early nineteenth century, attended Davidson Academy because of his Father's part in the creation of the school (Crabb, Personality 90). Perhaps he remembered its opening. Besides, it was the only school in the community offering training that would prepare him for the medical college of the University of Pennsylvania. He began his medical practice in 1806.

The first white child born in Nashville (1781), as a doctor in 1829-1830, Felix Robertson introduced the use of quinine into the city (Kelly, 25-26). He was mayor of Nashville in 1827.

A Day at Davidson Academy

I, Felix Robertson, son of James Robertson and Charlotte Robertson, attended Davidson Academy. I remember well a rustic, one-room building, a little, rough stone church twenty-four by thirty feet, six miles east of Nashville, Tennessee, at Haysborough. But most visibly do I recall the Reverend Thomas B. Craighead, our principal, a man of learning and of devotion to learning.

At the time I thought it nothing uncommon to get up before daylight, put on my "homespuns," cross on the ferry over the Cumberland River, and walk six miles to the Spring Hill meeting House, our combination school and church. I was a healthy youngster and walked with pleasure through spring rains and winter snows, engaging in races going and coming.

During the week, I pursued my academic studies; on the Lord's Day, along with my parents, children, and servants of the community, I listened to moral strictures of the Reverend Craighead, our Presbyterian minister. A graduate of Princeton University, he was a finished scholar and a great theologian. Much of this profound theology passed over my young head, but I listened to his two-hour sermons with the respect due to "a man of the cloth." My eight schoolmates and I did not think it an imposition that we had to listen to the one professor and minister all week long. We marveled at his learning and following his precepts.

Each morning I spent with the Latin classics, the basis of education in the early nineteenth century. All of us studied Latin grammar and Roman and Greek antiquities. I had learned the rudiments of reading and writing in my own home, where I used a goose-quill pen and pokeberry ink to practice my letters and numbers; so I was ready for education, primarily the Latin classics.

A typical day might be spent as follows:

- A review of the subjunctive mood: 30 minutes
- Sentences written in Latin (these largely from Caesar's Gallic Wars): 30 minutes
- Translation from Cicero's orations (delivered in Latin and loosely rendered into English): two hours

- Vergil's Aeneid: Translation and metrics: two hours
- Lunch
- Afternoon: Greek and Mathematics
- Composition
- Translation from Homer: two hours
- Arithmetic: one hour

For more than twenty years, the Reverend Craighead taught his students as though he meant each boy to do well at Princeton, though most of us would never leave the Western wilderness. And I, bound for medical school, profited enormously. I spent long hours six days a week in the classroom, but my interest remained intense. The Reverend Craighead brought the world of high thinking into that small schoolroom. I learned how to enter into the thinking of Cicero, Abraham – all the great men of old. As I listened to him in the classroom and on Sunday, I came to love the beauty and the power of the spoken word. Watching my mentor eat our simple food with great relish and capacity, I became more aware of the correlation between mental and physical well-being. The good life which he lived in all his ways became the ideal upon which I later based my life as a physician.

I learned from the Reverend Craighead another valuable lesson. I grew up with an attitude of disregard for the value of "things." When I attended Davidson Academy, I went barefoot when the weather allowed, wearing moccasins only when they were necessary because of extreme cold. I wore linsey pants and a hunting shirt, but if the weather demanded, another shirt of tow-linen (a very scratchy material) under that.

I never felt that I was deprived or had cause to regret that I spent my early years in the backwoods of Tennessee. The men of old teach their lessons as well at a scarred wooden desk as at a desk in a marble hall.

Random Tidbits About the Early Davidson Academy

An example of Mr. Craighead's methodology: The boys studied the versification of "Tityre, tu patiebas recubans sub tegmine fugi." Their preceptor remarked, "Boys, your fathers never deserted their country, and you will never say, 'patriam fugimus or linquimus.'" Such a follow up from the quotation of Vergil was natural, simple and effective.

An example of Davidson Academy's earliest discipline:

We were barefooted and moccasined, with linsey pants and hunting shirts, and if we had another shirt under that, it was of tow-linen, with shives enough all through it to justify our exemption from any worse form of hackling; though it did not always avail us. ... I have seen lots of broken limbs and stumps of switches in my day. When we used to go through "scuff" and "on the road to Buchanan's Mill," up to "the Academy," we talked of college, of Professions and politics, and the girls, and wrote poetry on paper, and carved names on trees. One thing we did, we took good care of our books, and drove the cows home after we were dismissed from school.

– Conversations

Hardships of Attending Davidson Academy

The school was ordered to be taught in the Spring Hill meeting House, the church in which Mr. Craighead preached. It was located at the edge of the town of Haysborough. Because of this location, for those who attended the school from Nashville, early departure was important; it was

six miles from the town square to the academy. The pupils of the first Davidson Academy could not be lazy! The daily travels alone called for stamina.

From the Few Remaining Records of Davidson Academy

An invoice dated April 11, 1795:

... sundry books belonging to the Academy of Davidson County left in the care of Bennett Sercy, Esq. by Lardner Clark subject to the order of the Trustees of said Academy.

("Some Old Papers" 212)

A Description from the Early Frontier Schools

The first schools were usually in log cabins. They were called old field schools because they were built in worn fields no longer used for farming. They had one room and one teacher; pupils of all ages being taught in the same room. Different classes sat in their own section of the room, where teachers would instruct each of them in turn. Students were taught to read aloud, just as they were in ancient Rome.

The seats were benches cut from logs. The pupils sat side by side on them. There was no lighting and only a few small windows. The rooms was heated from a fireplace from which the students cut the wood.

School terms were short. The studies were generally in the classics and in the Scriptures. For recreation there were spelling bees, reciting of poems, and foot races.

School was not compulsory. There, as in the rest of life on the frontier, voluntarism held sway.

The oldest surviving symbol of education in Nashville is John Buchanan's Book of Arithmetic (1781-1782).

Significant Dates for Davidson Academy [Return to Top](#)

1772. James Robertson was born.

1767. Andrew Jackson was born.

1775. Thomas Benton Craighead, patron of learning, was graduated from Princeton University.

1779. Nashville, first called "The Bluffs," was founded.

1780. Thomas B. Craighead was ordained as a Presbyterian minister.

1784. The settlement called the Bluffs, then Nashborough, became Nashville.

1785.* Davidson Academy was born, with Thomas B. Craighead as President. Boyd McNairy was born.

1786. The trustees of Davidson Academy held their first formal meeting. School opened in the Spring Hill Meeting House.

1778. Davidson Academy was granted the right to operate a ferry.

1789. Davidson Academy was endowed with two salt licks.

1791. Upon the resignation of William Polk, Andrew Jackson became a trustee of Davidson Academy.

1792. Davidson Academy used or studied forty-eight volumes.

1795. An invoice from Davidson Academy has been found for this year. George Peabody was born.

1796. The territorial legislature placed the building's of Davidson Academy near Buchanan's Mill.

1797. Boyd McNairy entered Davidson Academy.

1799. Federal Seminary merged with Davidson Academy.

1802. Davidson Academy had only seven or eight students. John McNairy and David Shelby were elected as trustees.

1803. Only seven acres of Davidson's 240 remained. Sumner County, tried unsuccessfully, to move Davidson Academy to Montpelier in that county. Boyd McNairy finished his schooling at Davidson Academy.

1805. Colonel Robertson and Andrew Jackson resigned as trustees of Davidson Academy.

1806. Thomas B. Craighead resigned as president of Davidson Academy, becoming president of Cumberland College, now merged with Davidson Academy.

1808. A new building for Davidson Academy was completed.

1809. Thomas B. Craighead left Cumberland College to be replaced by James Priestly.

1826. Davidson Academy and Cumberland College became the University of Nashville. Andrew Jackson was a trustee.

1979-1980. A group of persons in Madison, Tennessee, began to discuss among themselves the need for another private Christian school to serve the area.

1980. Madison Christian School, the forerunner of Davidson Academy, opened with sixty-two students and four teachers, grades one through four.

1981. The Tennessee Department of Education granted approval. Davidson Academy came to being.

1983. Enrollment grows from 62 to more than 300. "Satellite" kindergartens are established at Grace Baptist Church and Inglewood Baptist Church. Construction of the first phase of the new Old Hickory Boulevard campus is completed.

1983. Facilities of the new Old Hickory Boulevard campus are occupied in the fall.

1983-1989. Enrollment grows to more than 1,300. Lower and Upper School buildings are constructed.

1989. First class of 48 students is graduated.

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Chapter IV

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Continuity: Davidson Academy to Davidson Academy

Cumberland College

By 1808, a new building was completed for Davidson Academy, but already, two years before, Davidson Academy had become Cumberland College (September 11, 1806). The new building of brick was three stories high. It was seventy by forty and a half feet wide. Its cost was \$12,240. It was located about a quarter of a mile south of Broadway. Like every school, then and now, the academy was in constant need of money, and its appropriation of land was sold off by piecemeal until by 1803 only seven acres remained. The charter had been changed to read "Davidson College," but the trustees decided not to accept this change, considering it inadvisable to expand a weak and struggling institution at the time. The way to Cumberland College was clearly opening up.

At the request of the trustees of Davidson Academy, the Tennessee Legislature passed an act entitled, "An Act to establish a College in West Tennessee." Section 1 of its Preamble reads:

Be it enacted that a college be established on the square reserved for Davidson Academy by the trustees thereof, which shall be known and distinguished by the name of Cumberland College (Windrow 17).

Obviously, Davidson Academy wished to have the title of "college."

Putting out vigorous shoots from a sturdy tree, the Academy must have grown with the growth of the times, for, on the 11th day of September, 1806, by an act of the General Assembly of Tennessee, Cumberland College was chartered on the foundation of Davidson Academy, and its property and rights became thenceforward those of the College. Professor Craighead moved into town and located about a quarter of a mile south of Broadway (Ewing 6).

In 1809, Thomas Craighead was replaced by James Priestly as president. Cumberland College was hardly a stable institution of higher learning, but its continuance meant that the leaders of Nashville had hopes for its future.

In 1808, Dr. William Hume became instructor in mathematics and foreign languages in Cumberland College. School and church!

In 1816, Cumberland College, "prostrated for lack of funds," closed, but reopened in 1824, with Dr. Philip Lindsley in charge. There were thirty-five students in the first session of the reopened Cumberland College. Also in 1816, Nashville Female Academy opened.

The University of Nashville

In 1826 (November 27) Davidson Academy and Cumberland College became the University of Nashville, a school which would run until 1911; Andrew Jackson was one of its trustees. Like Davidson Academy and Cumberland College, the University of Nashville would have its troubles, but its history would show a constant trend toward "higher education," as the following notes will show:

1851. The University of Nashville opened a Medical Department.

1854. The University attempted to establish a law school.

1855. The Literary Department's entire faculty resigned, and there was (Feb.) reorganization through the union of the Literary Department with the Western Military Institute.

1867. A preparatory school was opened, financed by Montgomery Bell.

1869. The school was expanded to include the first two years of college.

1870. The Literary Department and MBA were leased to Generals Edmund Kirby Smith and Bushrod Rust Johnson for a period of fifteen years. A law school was established.

1872. The law school was discontinued.

1875. The arrangement with MBA was discontinued. The Board of Trustees of the University of Nashville entered into an agreement with the Tennessee State Board of Education and the Trustees of Peabody Education Fund under the terms of which the Peabody State Normal School was established at the University of Nashville. The Medical Faculty contracted with the newly established Vanderbilt University, whereby the Medical Department of the University of Nashville would also serve as the Medical Department of Vanderbilt University.

1895. Vanderbilt University established its own medical school.

1909. The Medical Department of the University of Nashville merged with that of the University of Tennessee.

At the Centennial Exercise of the First Presbyterian Church of Nashville (Ewing 34), Mr. Alexander J. Porter, President of the Board of Trustees of the University of Nashville, alluding to the nature of the occasion, referred to the donation by North Carolina of the Davidson County Academy, which became Cumberland College, and then the University of Nashville. Obviously, Mr. Porter considered Davidson Academy a healthy acorn from which a sturdy oak would grow.

The history of education speaks of an act "of quiet heroism which we have met this day to commemorate – the founding of Davidson Academy, the germ of the University of Nashville" (Tavel 3). To quote further:

... heroic men got from North Carolina a charter for an Academy (12/24/1785) – as an endowment a grant of 240 acres of land, worth then, perhaps, five dollars an acre – built a small school house

and employed such teachers as the times afforded, obscure men who have left no traces, "their bodies dust, their souls are with the saints, we trust" (Tavel 4).

The address of welcome was delivered by Hon. Randal M. Ewing, class of 1849. It is significant in the history of education that Davidson Academy was the second and only other school chartered for this territory by North Carolina. Martin Academy, afterwards Washington College, was the first school established west of the Alleghenies.

It is important to remember that Philip Lindsley turned down the presidency of Princeton University (in 1824) to give life to the seriously depressed University of Nashville. In 1850, when he retired after a quarter of a century, the school was still struggling, but he had firmly established a tradition of higher education in Nashville.

Peabody College for Teachers

In the later nineteenth century, sometimes wealthy men spent part of their surplus accumulations in endowing existing universities or founding new ones. So it happened that George Peabody, who accumulated an immense fortune by marketing American securities in London, not only generously endowed public education in the South, but founded great museums of natural history at the oldest American colleges.

Southern education owes an immense debt to George Peabody, a northern capitalist with a national view. Among his benefactions to education was the Peabody Fund, amounting to three and a half million dollars. This fund was used chiefly to encourage the southern states to provide taxation for the maintenance of the weak school systems frequently existing only on paper.

George Peabody was born on February 18, 1795, at South Danvers (now Peabody), Massachusetts. The school bearing his name is known and loved by students all over the world. What a wonderful use of money he represents!

When George Peabody died on November 4, 1869, in London, England, he did not really die, for he lived on in the minds and hearts of countless students. His beneficiaries are walking on the grounds of Peabody on this very day.

In 1889, the name Peabody Normal College was adopted.

Names change; ideals and aspirations remain the same. In 1905 (or 1906), Peabody Normal School became the George Peabody College for Teachers. And, in 1914, a graduate school was opened after a further grant from the Peabody Fund. There were fifteen trustees, headed by the first chairman, Robert C. Winthrop, of Massachusetts.

Peabody College is now a part of Vanderbilt University.

The "Modern-Day" Davidson Academy

Those first trustees of Davidson Academy in 1785, with all their foresight, could hardly have envisioned such a glorious history. And now there has arisen a new Davidson Academy, a part of the twentieth century, to be sure, but striving to maintain the best of its forbears.

A merger took place on July 1, 1979. George Peabody College for Teachers, with roots reaching back to Davidson Academy in 1785, was taken over by Vanderbilt University.

One hundred and ninety-five years after the founding of the first Davidson Academy, a new school of its name opened, again east and north of the city of Nashville, and again with meager financial resources, but again with unlimited spiritual assets.

Since the modern-day Davidson Academy opened formally in 1980 (as Madison Christian School), its growth has been phenomenal. The school of today has a faculty of certified and competent teachers, a student body of over twelve hundred, and modern buildings which are both attractive and functional.

While the twentieth century is not the eighteenth, one likes to think that the best attributes of the first Davidson Academy have been passed down through Cumberland College, the University of Nashville, and Peabody College to the students and the administration of the new Davidson Academy located on Old Hickory Boulevard. For, while the present Davidson Academy has not had to fight off Indians, it has had some of the problems which belong to every beginning school. All schools in their first years must struggle to obtain students and money. But Davidson Academy enjoyed some singular advantages.

Foremost among them was its choice of leadership. David I. Huggins, Postmaster of Nashville and a founder of the school, was its first chairman of the Board. Charter members of the Board included Leonard E. Arnold, Wade H. Bobbitt, William E. Crook, Kenneth J. Petty, and J. B. Wynn. These trustees elected Bill Chaney, formerly principal of East Robertson High School, as President of the corporation and Headmaster of the school. Every man on the board of trustees was known in the community for his integrity, for his achievement of personal goals and for his habit of planning for the future.

Also important was the choosing of a name. Many names for the new school were considered. Finally, the Board of Trustees chose Davidson Academy, after the first school west of the Cumberland Mountains, established in 1785 at a spot about two miles north of Madison Christian School, forerunner of Davidson Academy. The living up to a respected name can add a spark to any new institution.

The wisdom of opening Davidson Academy is shown by its spectacular growth in student population. In 1983, there were over six hundred students enrolled and over thirty faculty members. In the fall of 1984, 894 students chose the rapidly-growing private school. In 1986, total enrollment through grade 10 was 1,012, making Davidson Academy the fourth largest private school in Middle Tennessee. Further enrollment figures show 1,153 students in 1987-1988 and 1,223 students in 1988-1989. Today Davidson Academy is among the largest independent schools in the state, and there is every reason to believe that its growth will continue.

There are several respects in which Davidson Academy shows its resemblance to the academy of 1785. Each school grew out of a need. Just as the early settlers of Nashville felt the need for a Christian academic institution, so a group of dedicated persons in Madison, Tennessee, began to discuss, in the winter of 1979-1980, the need for another private Christian school to serve the area.

The founders of each school recognized the fact that any budding institution needs a head devoted to promoting its ideals. Thomas B. Craighead served the first Davidson Academy as such a head. William (Bill) Chaney, then principal of East Robertson High School, was chosen as a leader of the new forerunner of Davidson Academy. Like Mr. Craighead, Mr. Chaney believed deeply in a school based on academic excellence in a Christian atmosphere.

A striking parallel between the two Davidson Academies lies in the strong character of its founders. The founders of the first Davidson Academy were men of prestige in their pioneer community. So, too, were the men who served on the board of trustees of the new Davidson

Academy. Without exception, they were men committed to progress in whatever areas they were engaged in – church, school, or community. All over the campus of present day Davidson Academy, their names may be read. For example, the Huggins Gymnasium keeps alive for all time the name of the first chairman of Davidson Academy's Board of Trustees.

But a school, old or young, is more than students, teachers, and buildings. It is a spirit of learning, a joy in the pursuit of the things of the mind. It is a perseverance in the achievement of the goals laid down for its present and its future. It is a working combination of the practical and the spiritual. It is a product of its past, a picture of its present, and a prophecy of its future. It is the firm belief of the patrons of Davidson Academy that it is such a school, carrying the best of qualities of the school of 1785 into the twenty-first century.

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