

# Ezra Captain Davidson, Sr.

## Founder And Principal Of Davidson High School

Growing up in Water Valley, I often heard mention of Professor E. C. Davidson, the principal and founder of Davidson Schools. He seemed bigger than life to me even though I had never seen a picture of him. He was honored and revered as a phenomenal educator. Recently, Brittany M. Brown, a graduate student in the masters program in Southern Studies at the University of Mississippi completed a brief documentary on the last class to graduate from Davidson High School in 1970. It featured Army veteran Emma Faye Gooch and me, referring to us as the last graduates of the segregated Davidson High, which sounded strange to me as I had never heard it referred to being segregated. While true of course, it was the black school or the white school to us. Davidson was indeed all-black and segregated and we loved it.

The documentary is short but powerful, and it is posted on my website and YouTube. This summer Brittany is working on the oral history project launched through this column with the hope of expanding the documentary. She has received a fellowship to continue the interviews of black families and individuals in Yalobusha County. These interviews are being archived at the university to document and preserve our stories, our black history. The Davidson High Class of 1970 was small in comparison to those that preceded us. We graduated 50 years ago, and I appreciate what Brittany has done. She has and will reach out to other classmates and Davidson graduates to get their input.

In honor of the Class of 1970's 50th anniversary, the end of an era for Davidson High and Father's Day, I have chosen to deviate from the standard focus of this column to pay homage to Professor E.C. Davidson. He was born Ezra Captain Davidson on September 24, 1886, one of six children, four brothers and one sister, in Tillatoba, MS. His tombstone in the Oak Ridge Cemetery in Water Valley reads "Rev. Ezra Captain Davidson, Sr." and shows the year of his birth and 1957, the year of his death. His funeral was held on August 31, 1957. We, members of the DHS class of 1970, were just five years old. Professor Davidson started the Davidson school in 1924 located in a red brick building on the corner of Simmons and Cemetery Streets across from Miles Memorial CME Church.

Around 1931-32, Professor Davidson married Theresa Wood Cogburn, then a widow and he a divorcee. She brought two girls to the union, Helen and Gwendolyn. They had three boys together E.C. Jr., Lester and Kerry. According to Gwendolyn Sherrill Morgan, one of Theresa's daughters, 98, and now residing in Chicago, her mother was born April 18, 1900 and grew up in Water Valley. "My grandfather, Louis Wood, who worked for the railroad in Water Valley, sent my mother to a private school, Mary Holmes All-Girls School in West Point for her early educational training," she said. Theresa completed high school at Lane College Preparatory in Jackson, TN in May 1916. Thirteen years later, in 1929, she attended Alcorn Agricultural and Mechanical College, now Alcorn State University in Lorman, and in 1932 she took classes at Jackson College, now Jackson State University in Jackson. In 1937 she enrolled at Rust College in Holly Springs and earned her degree in August 1943. There is not one C on her transcript!

"Mom was just a semester or so away from finishing her masters from New York University when she had to come back home for medical reasons," Gwendolyn recalled. Professor Davidson also completed his college degree at Rust College. He worked in a factory in Ohio before he answered his urge to return to Water Valley to begin his lifelong work in education. "When dad was not running the school, he was preaching," Kerry said. "He often preached at churches in the area. Dad was very religious and totally committed to serving the Lord." Professor Davidson pastored Kind Providence Baptist Church, now known as New Providence Baptist Church on Pope Road in Water Valley.

Kerry describes their house at 501 Calhoun Street as always filled with boys and girls seeking help with academics and extracurricular activities. "My mother played a critical role in the development and success of the Da-



**Professor E.C. Davidson**  
1886 - 1957

Professor E. C. Davidson, principal of the Water Valley colored schools since 1924, died Thursday night at his home on Calhoun Street after an illness of several months. Had he lived until Sept. 24, he would have been 71 years old.

Funeral services were conducted at Everdale Baptist Church, Water Valley, Saturday afternoon, August 31, at 2 o'clock, with Rev. Eugene Burley, pastor, delivering the funeral sermon. Burial was in Oak Ridge Cemetery with Water Valley Funeral Home in charge. His body lay in state in the chapel of Davidson High School from 10:30 Saturday morning until the time of the funeral, and a large number of his friends, both white and colored, visited the school to pay their respect.

During the service resolutions were read as follows: In behalf of the Yalobusha Teachers Association, by Annie Kelley Montgomery; in behalf of Davidson High School, by John Dowsing; and in behalf of Kind Providence Church, by Bertha Mitchell. Prof. Davidson was also a minister, and served as pastor of the Kind Providence Church for a number of years.

He leaves his wife, Theresa Davidson, who has taught with him in the Water Valley colored schools for a number of years; three sons, E. C. Davidson Jr., a senior at Meharry Medical School, Nashville, Tenn.; Kerry Davidson, Water Valley; and Lester Davidson, Chicago; two step-daughters, Hazel May, Benton Harbor, Mich., and Gwendolyn Sherrill, of Chicago; four brothers and one sister.

Prof. Davidson was born at Tillatoba, and had spent the greater part of his life in Yalobusha County. Before coming to Water Valley he had taught school for ten years elsewhere, and previous to his teaching career he had worked in an industry in a Northern city.

To Professor Davidson, more than any other person, goes the credit for the building of the Davidson High School to its present position of honor and respect, and very fittingly the school was named in his honor.

When he came to Water Valley, the colored school of the city ended with grammar school, and those who desired a high school education had to go elsewhere to continue their schooling. Little by little, he was able to enlarge the curriculum of the school, and a source of satisfaction to him was the fact that the school was raised to a full four-year high school.

Professor Davidson emphasized to his people the principles of Christianity, and the need for upright conduct. He had the highest respect of his people and of the white people of the community as well.

He often told his friends how he came to his decision to teach school and to preach. He said that while he was working in a Northern city, he felt a strange call to return to his native state and help his people. "It was a hard decision to make," he said, "as I was making \$5.29 a day (top-rate pay in those days) and also teaching an independent night school."

"I promised God that I would do my best. How well that job is being done, I rest the ultimate case with Him and the people."

vidson school, he recalled. "She taught English, sponsored the Tri-Hi Y clubs, directed the choir and presented many cultural programs. She was an excellent writer and worked with students year-round especially when school was closed to allow time for picking cotton. She never complained."

Ruby Turner, a native of Water Valley, is a very active 91-year old now living in Illinois who remembers much about Yalobusha's earlier black community. In Article 34, December 8, 2019, which profiled her, she described an event in April, 1974, when she and former Davidson students living in the Chicago area honored Theresa Davidson. The surprise attendance of her sons, Drs. E. C. Jr. and Kerry Davidson, was a highlight of the event. According to Ruby the 12th grade was added to Davidson High in 1941, much of the help for the school coming from fundraisers at Everdale Baptist Church. The first graduating class in 1942 included the Davidson's daughter, Gwendolyn, who recalled that of the fourteen students, thirteen finished. "One girl went to Chicago and did not come back," she said. Gwendolyn, herself, went to Chicago after she graduated. Most of her career was in retail until she became the primary caretaker for her mother, who passed away in 1986.

The Davidson school buildings where I attended were

Dottie Quay Chapman Reed, a native of Water Valley, MS, graduated from Davidson High School in 1970 and the University of Mississippi in 1974. The mission of the project is to compile and share information about black women in Yalobusha County who have made an impact on the African American community. Her column appears in The North Mississippi Herald.



**By Dottie Chapman Reed**

The second phase of the project in collaboration with UIM is on going - providing an opportunity for black families in Yalobusha to record their oral histories.

If you are interested in participating, recommending an individual, telling your own story or have comments please contact us at quaye\_reed@bellsouth.net - 6788252356 (O) - 6785255408 (C).

All articles are posted at <http://www.blackwomenofyalobusha.com>.

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on Calhoun Street. Only the elementary building, now privately owned and in dis-repair, still exists. The class of 1970 started first grade in the building in 1958. Very few official records remain. Many trophies and artifacts were destroyed when the high school building on the hill above the elementary school caught fire. We never got our group graduation picture. As an elementary student I was always excited when we were able to go up the steps to the high school auditorium for any reason, but especially for an assembly that we called chapel. Each class was given a turn to present during a chapel program, and I remember reciting the pledge of allegiance and my class singing "I want to be a Sunbeam" when it was our turn. And here are the lyrics to another song we performed that still comes to mind.

*Have faith, hope and charity  
That's the way to live successfully  
How do I know, the Bible tells me so  
Do good to your enemies  
and the Blessed Lord you'll surely please  
How do I know, the Bible tells me so  
Don't worry bout tomorrow  
Just be real good today  
The Lord is right beside you  
He'll guide you all the way  
Have faith, hope and charity  
That's the way to live successfully  
How do I know, the Bible tells me so.*

We were filled with hope and optimism about our future. We often sang "God Bless America," and yes, there was still prayer in school. Moving up to the high school building was always a motivating thought and a goal for sure. By now, John Dowsing was the principal. Dollie Ann Henderson oversaw the elementary school.

Joseph Ford was the principal when a new high school was built on Goode Street with a cafeteria and gymnasium, and we were quite excited. We elementary students were bussed over for lunch each day and for other varied activities. The gymnasium became the home of the Mighty DHS Tigers basketball team where the boys' team won the division title in 1966 and earned a trip to Jackson for the state championship. We were so proud! Today a plaque honoring Professor Davidson hangs in the entry way of the building. It is now called Davidson Elementary and is a part of the Water Valley School System.

Kerry and E.C. Jr. graduated from Morehouse College in Atlanta, GA. E.C. Jr. graduated from Meharry Medical School in Nashville, TN and was an obstetrician-gynecologist in Los Angeles, CA. Kerry taught at Fisk University in Nashville then went on to earn his doctorate in Modern European History from Tulane University in New Orleans, LA. In 2016 he was recognized by the Louisiana Board of Regents for more than forty years of outstanding service. He joined the board in 1975 and held positions of Deputy Commissioner for Academic Affairs and Deputy Commissioner for Sponsored Programs, retiring from the board in 2016. Kerry spoke at the dedication of Davidson Elementary School, formerly Davidson High on Goode Street and the fifth Davidson School Reunion on July 7,

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