

DAVIDSON COLLEGE & YORK COUNTY

By Louise Pettus

Surprising as it may seem, York County citizens played a major role in the establishment of Davidson College, a private Presbyterian liberal arts college in Mecklenburg County, North Carolina. A group of Mecklenburg County Presbyterians got together in August 1835 and decided that it was too far and too expensive to send their sons to Princeton College in New Jersey for their education. They decided to build a college on some land offered to them by William Lee and to give the school a name that honored William Lee Davidson, a Revolutionary War hero who died in the Battle of Cowan's Ford.

The committee on plans for Davidson College then decided that their friends in South Carolina might wish to help them establish the college and expected that the South Carolinians, too, would want their sons to attend. So, the Bethel Presbytery of York District was "affectionately" invited to assist the Concord Presbytery of North Carolina in setting up the school. Rev. Samuel Williamson, Jr. was sent to Bethel Church in York District to solicit aid.

Samuel Williamson, Jr. was born in the Bethel community of York District, June 12, 1795, the son of Samuel Williamson, Sr. and Anne Starr, both born in York District in 1759. The father and four of his brothers are said to have all been soldiers of the Revolution and a Davidson College history states that Samuel Williamson, Sr. received the credit of killing the first British soldier that fell in the battle known as "Sturgis Defeat."

Rev. Samuel Williamson, Jr. was educated by the Rev. Robert B. Walker at the Bethel Academy in York County and Rev. James Wallis at Providence Academy in Mecklenburg County. Then Williamson taught school, probably a local elementary school, for a time in order to earn enough money to attend South Carolina College (now USC). His entrance test scores were so high that he entered the senior class in 1817.

Williamson graduated with honors and a letter of commendation from Pres. Jonathan Maxcy that praised his "unblemished character...industry, talents and learning". He returned to the Bethel community to teach school at the academy associated with Bethel Church and lived in the home of the minister, Rev. James Adams. He probably studied theology with the minister, as he was licensed to preach in 1822. He also married the minister's daughter, Jane.

Rev. Samuel Williamson, Jr. reported to the Concord Presbytery that fall that Bethel had kindly received his request, saying: "...we recommend it to the churches under our care to aid by their prayers and contributions." The Bethel Presbytery requested that an agent be sent to present the Davidson case to the churches.

This response so encouraged the North Carolinians that they decided that the college's board of trustees would come half from the Concord Presbytery and half from the Bethel Presbytery. Among the South Carolina members of the first Davidson board of trustees were James G. Torrence, Charles L. Torrence, John L. Daniel, Pierpont E. Bishop (minister and principal of Ebenezer Academy), George W. Dunlap, and John Springs, all of York District.

Rev. Samuel Williamson was chosen as the Davidson's first professor of mathematics. In 1841 he became the third president of Davidson College. Since there were only two professors besides the president, Williamson continued teaching until his resignation in September 1854.

The same year Davidson hired a York District native, Daniel Harvey Hill, the grandson of Col. William Hill, York's famed Revolutionary War hero and ironmaster, to teach mathematics. Hill was noted for his bravery in the War with Mexico and came to Davidson directly from Washington College in Virginia. Hill became a Civil War general and later founded an academy of his own in Charlotte.

There is another small, but interesting, connection of Davidson and York County: the back section of Winthrop College's Withers-WTS building was once the Presbyterian High School and at one point was owned by Davidson College before the site was acquired by Winthrop College in

1910 for the construction of the Training School which was built directly in front of, and connected to, the older building.