William Richardson Davie and the University of the People:
Ironies and Paradoxes

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The University of North Carolina has officially recognized the Hon. William Richardson Davie as its “Founder and principal supporter” since 1811, when the Trustees awarded him their first honorary degree. But despite that early and well-deserved tribute, it is not easy today to recapture the meaning of Davie’s life and work. Artists have left us his portrait and panegyrist have described his character, but few of our Founder’s personal papers survive today to document his thoughts and actions. How do we find the man beneath the powdered wig, the personality behind glowing description like this one, left us by Judge Archibald DeBow Murphey only seven years after Davie’s death?

Davie was a tall, elegant man in his person, graceful and commanding in his manners. His voice was mellow, and adapted to the expression of every passion; his mind comprehensive yet slow in its operations, when compared with [a rival orator]; his style was magnificent and flowing; he had a greatness of manner in public speaking which suited his style, and gave to his speeches an imposing effect. He was a laborious student, arranged his discourses with care, and where the subject merited his genius, poured forth a torrent of eloquence that astonished and enraptured his audience.¹

The challenge is particularly acute in an era marked by a deep gulf between popular and academic views of Davie and his peers, the Founding Fathers not only of our university but of our republic itself. On the one hand, biographies of men like John Adams and Alexander Hamilton are remarkably attractive to the reading public and figure prominently on best-seller lists. The popularity of these works testifies to a deep-seated hunger for the wisdom and disinterested statesmanship that the Founders represent for many. On the other, many professional students of early America would like to shift our attention from prominent leaders to more ordinary Americans – “the people out of doors” contemporaries called them – whose contributions to America’s founding took place far from constitutional conventions and university classrooms, commonly in streets, taverns, parades, or boisterous

¹ Quoted in Kemp P. Battle, History of the University of North Carolina (2 vols.; Raleigh:
demonstrations around a liberty pole. Only two years ago, UNC Press published a book entitled *Beyond the Founders* that served as a kind of manifesto for this more democratized view of early republican politics, and won widespread academic praise when it appeared.\(^2\) From that perspective, another look at Davie must seem very out of place.

Here on our own campus, moreover, we cherish the democratic values symbolized by label “University of the People.” Even so, some of us struggle with the knowledge that these values were not always shared by our leaders from the distant past, some of whom we honor on the modern campus landscape. In this intellectual environment, what are we to say about the paradoxical William Richardson Davie: soldier, statesman, Federalist, slaveholder, convinced elitist, and founder of the University of the People?

**From northern England to Carolina**

Let me start with the highlights of Davie’s life. William Richardson Davie was born in northern England on June 22, 1756, so we are observing the 250th anniversary of this birth this season. The Davie family had Scottish origins and boasted a coat of arms, but unlike the most privileged families in Britain, did not live on a landed estate but engaged in trade and the manufacture of linen.\(^3\)

Davie’s maternal uncle, William Richardson (for whom he was evidently named) was a central figure in his nephew’s life. Richardson was a Presbyterian minister who left Britain for America in the early 1750s and settled in the Old Waxhaws district on the border of North and South Carolina, not far from the frontier village of Charlotte. This was a Scots-Irish community, settled by migrants whose ancestors had originated in southern Scotland, migrated to the north of Ireland in the seventeenth century, thence Pennsylvania in the eighteenth, and finally south to the Carolina backcountry.

The Rev. Mr. Richardson took charge of the Presbyterian church in the Waxhaws and persuaded his sister and her family to join him. Archibald and Mary Richardson Davie thus came to America in 1764, when our future founder was eight years old. The elder Davie took up lands adjoining his brother-in-law’s farm in what is now Lancaster County, South Carolina and gave up the linen business for life as a frontier farmer. Here we see our first paradox: though Davie became a leader of North Carolina’s fledgling aristocracy, his roots were elsewhere, in a family of middling

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Dissenters who had come to America for economic opportunity.

The childless Rev. Richardson took quite an interest in his namesake, seeing to his education at a nearby Charlotte academy and expressing the hope that Davie might succeed him in the pulpit. Though Richardson died when Davie was only sixteen, and the youth eventually abandoned any thought of the ministry, something of that ambition may have governed the decision – highly unusual for that day and time – to enroll the young man in the College of New Jersey (now Princeton University) when he turned eighteen in the fall of 1774. There Davie received the training in Greek, Latin, and sound theology that would have equipped him for life as a Presbyterian divine.

It was not to be. The young man’s preparation must have been excellent, for he received his degree in 1776 after two short years of study. As we shall see, however, Davie’s mature religious views tended to rationalism, and events that summer did not encourage a contemplative career. As the War for Independence intensified, the young man alternated between periods of legal study and military service until 1779, when he received a law license and a cavalry commission almost simultaneously. Soon afterwards, Lord Charles Cornwallis invaded the South and the center of fighting shifted to the Carolina backcountry. Davie rose steadily through the Continental officer corps, finishing the war as a colonel and commissary general for the army of General Nathanael Greene.

The Revolutionary War in North Carolina was a desperate guerilla conflict with intense partisan fighting and widespread charges of atrocities between rival bands of Whig and Loyalist militias. Struggling to keep his army fed and supplied without resorting to strong-arm tactics that would surely have backfired, Davie mastered business techniques and clearly learned the importance of a centralized authority that could impose order and stable conditions for trade.

Military service also brought Davie personal rewards. In 1780 he married Sarah Jones, daughter of his commanding officer, General Allen Jones of Northampton County, North Carolina. Military distinction, college education, personal talents, and alliance with one of the leading planter families of eastern North Carolina were clearly crucial personal developments that vaulted William Davie out of the ranks of middling frontiersmen and into the forefront of early republican leadership. And here we have a second paradox: though reared on the South Carolina frontier, Davie joined the gentry of eastern North Carolina and became one of its foremost representatives.

Post-Revolution life

As fighting gradually tapered off after Yorktown, William and Sarah Davie settled near the bride’s home, in the village of Halifax, county seat of Halifax County, and Davie began to practice law in a community that was dramatically different from his
childhood home in South Carolina’s remote Piedmont. Halifax County is in northeastern North Carolina near the Virginia border, and enjoyed fertile soil, moderately good transportation via the Roanoke River, and a flourishing plantation economy. Supported by a large population of African American slaves, the gentry of town and county built handsome homes, and fostered commodious taverns, a Masonic lodge, frequent horse races and cockfights, and eventually a school and a newspaper. Before the establishment of Raleigh, North Carolina’s peripatetic General Assembly occasionally held its annual meetings there. With connections established by his fortunate marriage, Davie quickly built up a flourishing legal practice and began to accumulate the lands and slaves to create his own plantation.

Political and economic conditions would not allow the young lawyer to concentrate exclusively on his private business, however. In North Carolina, the American Revolution had been launched and led by a colonial elite who had recruited reluctant citizens with a series of democratizing reforms. To their chagrin, the reforms had succeeded too well, leaving the post-Revolutionary General Assembly in the hands of self-made leaders who did not share the financial interests, educated culture, or conservative values of Davie and his father-in-law.

Under their leadership, stay laws impeded the collection of debts, an inflated currency left creditors fuming, and the confiscation of Loyalist property in defiance of the peace treaty destabilized titles to property. In modern language, some might say that too much democracy had become bad for business. In the words of men like contemporary Hillsborough merchant James Hogg, “a set of unprincipled men, who sacrifice everything to their popularity and private views, seem to have acquired too much influence in all our Assemblies.”

William R. Davie began to combat these conditions in 1784, when he won his first term in the lower house of the General Assembly. He continued to do so as a leader of the legislature’s Conservative minority for the remainder of the 1780s. To use the terms introduced by historian Jackson Turner Main, Davie and his colleagues were North Carolina’s “Cosmopolitans,” influenced by college education, Continental army service, and family connections to see the value of a centralized government, an independent judiciary, and stable, long-distance trade. Their opponents were the “Localists,” who usually came from more circumscribed backgrounds and whose policies favored local government and the interests of small farmers and artisans over planters, merchants, and lawyers.

In North Carolina as elsewhere in the new nation, Cosmopolitans were outnumbered in post-Revolutionary state governments, and sought relief through the creation of a stronger federal government that could overrule the power of supposedly irresponsible, Localist-dominated state legislatures. Their opportunity came in 1787, when the Confederation Congress summoned a convention to Philadelphia, ostensibly to consider changes in the Articles of Confederation, but actually to draft an entirely new frame of governance. Davie won a place as one of North Carolina’s five delegates.

The Constitutional Convention

Perhaps overawed by even more distinguished delegations from Virginia and South Carolina, North Carolina’s delegates took a very minor role in the Constitutional Convention of 1787. Davie’s most significant contribution was deeply revealing, however, and concerned the place of slavery in the new government. As we all remember, the delegates argued bitterly over how to treat slaves when they apportioned power and obligations among the nation’s free inhabitants. States with large numbers of slaves wanted to count them for purposes of representation in Congress and the Electoral College but not for purposes of taxation. States with few slaves naturally wanted the exact opposite policy.

On July 12, when the exhausted delegates had apparently reached an impasse, William R. Davie rose briefly and denounced those who would, as he put it, “deprive the Southern States of any share of Representation for their blacks.” According to James Madison’s careful notes, Davie “was sure North Carolina would never confederate on any terms that did not rate them at least as 3/5. If the Eastern States meant therefore to exclude them altogether the business was at an end.” In other words, Davie spoke resolutely for slaveholding interests, but unlike more obdurate delegates from South Carolina, he signaled his flexibility and willingness to compromise.

Soon afterwards, the delegates resolved their impasse by applying the three-fifths ratio to both taxation and representation. We will never know if Davie was bluffing when he threatened a southern walkout from the convention, but his intervention left an ambiguous legacy. The famous three-fifths compromise may have preserved the Union for its first seven decades, but it did so by giving slaveholders the political tools to keep federal policy steadfastly proslavery until 1860.

Davie’s participation in the remainder of the Convention remained minor, so much so that he decided to leave Philadelphia early, without signing the final draft, in order to get back home for more pressing (and better paid) work in North Carolina’s Superior Courts. But if Davie cut short his work as a Framer, he undoubtedly

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rejoiced that the new instrument of government settled all major public controversies in postwar North Carolina in favor of his Conservative or Cosmopolitan faction.

The Constitution’s fine print prevents state legislatures from issuing paper money or interfering with private contracts. It makes federal treaties the supreme law of the land, putting a stop to North Carolina’s confiscations of Tory property. Withal it created an enormously powerful and distant central government, which isolated farmers reasonably feared they could never control. As one North Carolina Antifederalist would later complain, “It appears to me to be a scheme to reduce this government to an aristocracy.” More pointedly, one Federalist reported, “the common people have unhappily taken up the notion that the system is formed for commerce and not for them.”

The battle over slavery and taxation continues

Though he mostly stayed on the sidelines at Philadelphia, Davie threw himself into the ratification struggle in North Carolina. He represented Halifax at the state ratifying convention, which met at Hillsborough in 1788 and argued strenuously for the Constitution before a hostile and mostly shut-mouthed Antifederalist majority. There the subject of slavery came up again. This time, Davie not only defended the three-fifths compromise, but tellingly betrayed his impatience with those he viewed as his intellectual and political inferiors.

In Philadelphia, slaveholders like Davie had demanded at least three-fifths representation for slaves in order to increase their own power in congress, and were willing to increase their taxes to do so. Speaking for heavily Quaker Guilford County, however, delegate William Goudy would have none of this, mixing racial resentment with a sharp accusation that slaveholders would gain all the benefits of increased representation while shifting the extra tax burden to the plain folk. “I wish not to be represented with negroes,” he objected, “especially if it increases my [tax] burthens.”

Davie’s reply was scathing. “I wonder to see gentlemen so precipitate and hasty on a subject of such awful importance,” he began, in words dripping with sarcasm. “It ought to be considered, that some of us are slow of apprehension, or not having those quick conceptions, and luminous understandings, of which other gentlemen may be possessed.”

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Laboriously, Davie then explained that he and the rest of North Carolina's delegates had been anxious to increase the South's power by any means possible, and that counting and taxing slaves was the only way to do it. In passing, Davie referred to slaves as "rational beings," and expressed a brief sympathy for their condition that was conventional in the Revolutionary era though taboo a generation later. "This, sir, is an unhappy species of population," he admitted, "but we cannot at present alter their situation." The polished debater then returned to the tongue-tied scruples of poor Goudy, and could not resist another sneer. "It may wound the delicacy of the gentleman from Guilford," Davie concluded, "but I hope he will endeavor to accommodate his feelings to the interest and circumstances of his country." Characteristically, Davie had won the argument but certainly not a supporter.

Despite these efforts (or perhaps because of them), Davie and his Federalist supporters could not budge the Antifederalist majority at Hillsborough. The convention refused to ratify the US Constitution by a vote of 184 to 93, and North Carolinians stood by as the new federal government took shape without them.

Eventually, of course, North Carolina softened its opposition. When it became clear that the new Constitution would go into effect, that North Carolina would be treated as a foreign country unless it ratified, and that a Bill of Rights would limit the power of the government over individuals, North Carolina summoned a second convention in 1789 and approved the new document by an overwhelming margin. William R. Davie once more took a leading role. But for our purposes, the most important events of 1789 took place in the General Assembly, which met at the same time and place as the second state ratifying convention, and where Davie once more served. Just as the convention agreed to ratify, Davie introduced his bill in the General Assembly to charter the University of North Carolina.

**Chartering a university**

What were Davie's motives? The state constitution of 1776 authorized both common schools and a university, but no one else seemed to feel much urgency about either one. Indeed, it would be another five decades before a state system of common schools even got off the ground. Davie briefly explained himself in the charter's often-quoted preamble: "In all well regulated governments it is the indispensable duty of every legislature to consult the happiness of a rising generation, and endeavor to fit them for an honorable discharge of the social duties of life by paying the strictest attention to their education, and that, a University, supported by permanent funds and well endowed, would have the most direct tendency to answer the above purpose."  

What did Davie mean by "the happiness of a rising generation?" How did he

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10 Quoted in Battle, History of the University of North Carolina, I, 6.
understand “the social duties of life?” The founder did not explain himself immediately, but I think we can sample contemporary views from the address which the Rev. Samuel E. McCorkle delivered when Davie laid the cornerstone of Old East four years later. McCorkle and Davie would eventually clash, but the preacher’s words on October 12, 1793 were not controversial and surely represented Davie’s sentiments as well as his own. “Happiness is the centre to which all the duties of man and people tend,” McCorkle explained.

To diffuse the greatest possible degree of happiness in a given territory is the aim of good government and religion. Now the happiness of a nation depends on national wealth and national glory and cannot be gained without them. They in like manner depend on liberty and good laws. Liberty and laws call for general knowledge in the people and extensive knowledge in matters of the State, and these in turn demand public places of education. . . .

McCorkle made clear that happiness consisted of more than liberty and virtue, that moderate prosperity was also essential for a good society, and that wealth and virtue were deeply intertwined.

How can any nation be happy without national wealth...? How can glory or wealth be procured without liberty and laws? They must check luxury, encourage industry and protect wealth. They must secure me the glory of my actions and save me from a bow-string or a bastille. And how are these objects to be gained without general knowledge?11

In other words, insofar as McCorkle spoke for Davie and the other founders of the University, national happiness demanded wealth and glory, promoted and protected by liberty and good laws. All four depended on an education that would teach men to obey virtue instead of mobs or despots. These were the conventional sentiments of contemporary republicanism. National happiness was the highest social good and it depended on “liberty and good laws.” Without these things, wealth and glory were impossible. But liberty did not imply an uncontrolled freedom. It required self-control in place of anarchy or despotism. And the instinct for self-control did not come naturally; it had to be instilled by education.

By starting with a university instead of a common school system, moreover, Davie and McCorkle made clear that the first need they saw was for educated leaders rather than voters. Train the former properly and the latter will sure follow. So once again we see a paradox: a truly free and happy society would not depend on pure freedom but on severe and self-imposed restraint, taught from the highest levels of society to the lowest. For Davie and his fellow founders, promoting this kind national happiness was foremost among “the social duties of life.”

11 Quoted in Battle, History, I, 39.
Davie confirmed this interpretation of his objectives in the model curriculum he submitted to the Trustees in 1795. By this time, he and McCorkle had parted ways over the place of religion and classical literature in the new University. For his part, Davie insisted on a secular, scientific approach to republican education. “In every free government,” his preamble began, “the law emanates from the people…. “ As a result, "the people should receive an education to enable them to direct the laws, and the political part of this education should be consonant to the constitutions under which they live.”

A republican people, in other words, must have an education to match. Davie intended his curriculum “to form useful and respectable members of society – citizens capable of comprehending, improving, and defending the principles of government, citizens, who from the highest possible impulse, a just sense of their own and the general happiness, would be induced to practice the duties of social morality.” Fleshing out these ideals, Davie’s curriculum took the radical step of deemphasizing the classical languages in favor of what he called “moral and political Philosophy and History,” especially as embodied by the leading authors of the European Enlightenment: Montesquieu, Vatell, Burlamaqui, and Hume. Second place would go to modern science, especially physics, followed by mathematics, chemistry, English, Latin, and Greek. In another irony, this Enlightenment curriculum did not sit well with other University leaders, and the institution did not begin to seem stable until President Joseph Caldwell reinstated an emphasis on the classics.

As a capsule description of William Davie’s political objectives in the 1780s, wealth, glory, liberty, and good laws aptly sum up his own view of what was at stake in the fight for court reform and against paper money, stay laws, confiscations, and locally-minded legislation. Given his long history of conflict with untaught or self-taught men like William Goudy, whom he obviously regarded as a numbskull unfit to preserve public happiness or liberty in any shape, Davie clearly believed that popular self-government could never succeed unless the people’s representatives learned to think as he did. Teaching them to do so was the intended mission of the University of North Carolina.

Winning a charter was obviously not enough. There would be many long, hard-fought battles ahead: for funding, to select a site, to employ a faculty, to choose a curriculum, to settle an unruly student body. Davie remained in the thick of all these battles and struggled mightily over the next decade and a half to see the University survive and flourish. His reward was unstinting criticism from those he intended to uplift.

Just as the charter was adopted, one irate assemblyman fumed that spending on a university – even from non-tax sources – “must augment the Tax on the Citizens

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12 Quoted in Robinson, Davie, 248, 407-409.
who can by no means be in any measure benefited thereby.” Later on, another critic of the University complained that the “country will be imbued with aristocratic principles because an aristocrat is at the head of it,” and a newspaper described South Building as “the palace-like erection, which is much too large for usefulness and might aptly be termed the ‘Temple of Folly,’ planned by the Demi-God Davie.”

Enduring these complaints as best he could, Davie persevered as leading Trustee and the University slowly found its footing. In the same fifteen-year period that followed the granting of the charter, Davie continued to build up his law practice and his plantations while also finding time to serve as a Major General in the United States Army, Governor of North Carolina, and Minister Plenipotentiary to France. In all these activities, Davie aligned himself with those who styled themselves the “friends of government,” whom we know as the Federalist Party of George Washington and John Adams.

These loyalties pitted him against those who called themselves Democratic Republicans and followed such men as Thomas Jefferson and James Madison. The most fervent Democrats, Jefferson among them, suspected their Federalist adversaries of covert monarchism, but Davie never harbored such sympathies. The fact that he named one of his sons “Hyder Ali” after a contemporary Muslim warrior who fought the British in India is convincing evidence that he cherished no nostalgia for the land of his birth or its institutions. Instead, Davie believed that the people should rule by electing men like himself: wealthy, conservative, well educated, and deserving of popular deference.

**Davie’s departure**

Sadly for Davie, the United States and North Carolina were leaning in other directions. In its best moments, the new nation would be led by men like his adversary Thomas Jefferson – also well-educated, also the founder of a university, also a wealthy slaveholder, but a small-d democrat who honored popular wisdom and led by inspiration rather than command. Davie himself never learned the secret. When he tried to take his principles past Halifax County in an 1803 campaign for Congress, he lost disastrously to those he called “the Demos.” Afterwards, he bitterly accused his Democratic enemies of “raising the spirit of party into a flame, and alarming the ignorant and credulous with frightful stories about Kings and aristocrats... Thousands of these poor wretches sincerely believe they have saved their country from these monsters by preventing my going to Congress.”

Two years later, after a serious student rebellion and a battle over funding in the General Assembly, the Founder of the University had had enough.

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13 Robinson, *Davie*, 228, 257.
The situation at the University is a distressing one, and the more so, as it is not likely to be soon capable of any Remedy, being the necessary consequence of Legislative hostility to the Institution.... The friends of science in other states regard the people of North Carolina as a sort of Semi-Barbarians, among whom neither learning, virtue, nor men of Science possess any Estimation. The conduct of the Legislature for several years past has stamped this character on the State and it will take a long course of Time, and contrary conduct and policy to efface the impression.... Poor North Carolina!\(^\text{15}\)

Surrendering to this bitterness, Davie disengaged himself from University and other public affairs, sold his North Carolina properties and retired to “Tivoli,” a South Carolina plantation near his childhood home in the Waxhaws. Mourning the death of his wife and already feeling elderly at the age of 49, Davie spent his last fifteen years as a cotton planter. His opulent estate included 116 slaves by the time of his death in 1820.\(^\text{16}\)

In a final irony or paradox, the University founded by William Richardson Davie is now vastly larger and more complicated than anything he ever dreamed of. Even in his own day, the University of North Carolina outgrew its founder’s principles and survived by accommodating itself to forces he despised. Today, that process has gone much farther. Carolina now styles itself “the University of the People,” but its founder was not a man of the people and did not desire that status for the University’s graduates. Instead, he wanted Carolina’s graduates to leave the people and lead them, if necessary, in directions they did not want to go.

Today, Carolina is open to students, faculty, and ideas that Davie would certainly have barred, and upholds democratic principles that – it is safe to say – exceed his worst nightmares. But for all its democratic principles, Carolina still seeks to create an enlightened, responsible elite (it is more polite to say “leadership”) for a self-governing society. That much of Davie’s vision remains intact.

What finally shall we say of that vision? In a very different society, two hundred fifty years after his birth, uncritical adulation is impossible. But this eighteenth-century antidemocratic elitist left us an institution that can – if it will – serve a democratic society still needing educated leaders. For that we have to be grateful.

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\(^{16}\) Robinson, Davie, 396.
Harry Watson delivered this talk on April 18, 2006 in UNC’s Wilson Library for the Gladys Hall Coates University History Lecture series.