



DAVIDSON HISTORICAL SOCIETY

We don't just talk about Davidson's past... We are working to preserve it.

Fall 2017

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Solidarity Day, April 1986

Thirty years ago—on Saturday, April 26, 1986—whites and blacks at the college and in the town of Davidson joined together in a “Solidarity Day” celebration on the campus that isolated and rendered insignificant a Ku Klux Klan march down Main Street that same afternoon. “It was a great day, a lasting memory,” longtime Davidson resident Ruby Houston recalled. “Nobody who attended was down or discouraged.”

The Klan long had been active in this region, especially in counties adjoining Mecklenburg to the east and north. Indeed, two notorious Klan cross-burnings had occurred in the town in 1956. The march on Main Street on April 26, for which Klan leaders had obtained a permit six days earlier, was timed to coincide with—and to intimidate the black high school students attending—the college’s Minority Recruitment Weekend scheduled for April 25-27.

To many Davidson College students, roughly 95 percent of whom were white, the Klan’s most important goal was to gain the media coverage—and hence the free publicity—that would result if Davidson students and townspeople jeered and physically confronted the marchers.

Early that week, in response to news of the Klan’s planned march, some Davidson students contemplated protest actions along Main Street during the march. Brenda Tapia, an African-American raised in Davidson and the college’s assistant chaplain at the time, recalled one student discussing with her the idea of “throwing trash” at the marchers. “What would that accomplish?”, Tapia responded.

On Wednesday, student leaders, including Student Government Association president Mark Sandy and Black Student Coalition president Rob Ellison, met with Tapia and agreed that the college should sponsor a Solidarity Day gathering on the back campus away from Main Street on Saturday afternoon that hopefully would attract students and townspeople to the event while turning Main Street into a “ghost town” during the Klan’s march. Sandy, who originated the idea of the gathering, commented at the time on the group’s thinking: “We decided we wanted to respond in a positive way, not to have an anti-Klan rally, but rather to have a Soli-

Our Purpose

The DHS promotes an understanding and appreciation of the history of Davidson, North Carolina and its surrounding area.

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DHS Events

*All programs are free and open to the public unless otherwise noted.
Please note dates, times and locations for each event.*

Tour of the Watts-Ward House *Members Only* Sunday, October 22, 4:00 pm 526 Lorimer Road

This Cape Cod-style house was built in 1928 by Dr. George B. Watts and his wife, Helen Johnson Watts, who lived in the home for over four decades. Dr. Watts was a French Professor at Davidson College from 1926 until his retirement in 1961. Helen Watts was an active community volunteer and member of the Booklovers Club. The home was one of several early homes built by college professors in what was then known as the "Faculty Heights" neighborhood.

Owners Heather and Jason Ward will discuss their extensive renovations and addition to the home.



The George B. Watts house prior to renovation.

Soul Food, Ebony Magazine, and Black Middle-Class Identity, 1945-1975 Sunday November 12, 4:00 pm Location TBA

Please join us as Daniel W. Aldridge III, Professor of History and Africana Studies at Davidson College, discusses African American food writing in *Ebony*, the most widely-circulated African American magazine of the 20th century. In its food columns and other writings, *Ebony* generally avoided highlighting southern foods and identifying them as representing African American culture and identity. It appears that middle-class oriented *Ebony* readers preferred to emphasize their cultural sophistication and familiarity with upscale, middle-class oriented foods rather than be stereotyped as consumers of southern "Soul Food."

The tour of the Watts-Ward house is for current DHS members only. Not yet a 2017 member? Joining is easy!
Join online at <http://davidsonhistoricalsociety.org/JoinUs.asp>

The History of the Catawba River

On Sunday, September 17, Emilee Syrewicze, Executive Director of the Catawba Riverkeeper Foundation, examined the historical significance of the Catawba River and how its development has shaped its current status as one of America's Most Endangered Rivers. Ms. Syrewicze spoke to a group of more than 40 people. Our thanks to the Davidson Friends Meeting for hosting us.



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darity Day as a positive approach.” Sandy also commented that the rally was intended to allow students to express opposition to “any kind of prejudice whatsoever . . . not just racial prejudice.”

The Solidarity Day plan was approved enthusiastically at a meeting of more than one hundred students on Thursday afternoon. On Friday a similar number of students, often one black student and one white student working as a team, went door-to-door throughout the town to pass out invitations to an “ice-cream social” and entertainment on the lawn behind Vail Commons starting at 1 p.m. on Saturday afternoon.

Meanwhile other students were talking to downtown merchants, urging them to close their businesses during the Klan march in order to help create the desired “ghost town.” College officials, thrilled that students were taking the initiative and working well together, were offering their full support.

As the planners had hoped, the Solidarity Day celebration was a big success, while the concurrent Klan march was a notable failure. The *Charlotte Observer* reported that “hundreds” of blacks and whites of all ages “romped, listened to folk songs, filled balloons with helium, flung Frisbees and played volleyball or table tennis on the lawn and brick plaza.” A reporter for the student newspaper reported that “approximately 500 people attended the celebration”—if accurate, an impressive turnout for a town (including the college) with a population of roughly 3,500.

A video that devotes a couple minutes to the rally suggests that African-Americans made up perhaps 20 percent of the attendees—that is, roughly 60 people if attendance was 300 or roughly 100 people if 500 attended. But this calculation may well underestimate participation by blacks, for Brenda Tapia recently recalled the rally as “one of the few half-and-half events” she has experienced in Davidson.



Ku Klux Klan march in downtown Davidson, April 26, 1986.

Photo courtesy of Bill Giduz

The mingling of the races at the rally—symbolized by the fudge ripple ice cream and Oreo cookies that highlighted the refreshments—was a fun-filled and signal achievement for Davidson. The event paralleled on a much smaller, more modest scale the comfortably biracial “March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom” on August 28, 1963, that featured Martin Luther King’s famous “I Have a Dream” speech.

While we will never know exactly how many people - or, also of interest, how many blacks and whites - attended the rally, we do know how many members of the Klan and their families marched on Main Street: “37 of them, counting the women and children,” Davidson Police Chief Hank McKiernan reported. Watching them were an estimated ten-to-fifteen people—a tiny percentage of those who gathered behind Vail Commons to stand for solidarity among all Davidsonians. Having been thoroughly defeated, Klan leaders blamed the “Communists” who had organized Solidarity Day.

The Klan march—a couple blocks north on Main Street, and then back to the starting point at the police station—was over quickly. Its only accomplishment, ironically, was to show, through the success of the Solidarity Day rally that it inspired, how many people at the college and in the town supported equality and opposed prejudice.

A Note from the President

I remember the Ku Klux Klan march through Davidson in 1986. I sat on my front porch and listened to the occasional shout from downtown and wondered what those sad, hooded people felt as they marched, surrounded by emptiness. On that day, this community, this town we love, sent a message to the forces of hate and intolerance--- You have no place here. Last night, over 30 years since that failed march, I joined with other citizens of North Mecklenburg in a vigil of peace, a time when our community again rejected the intolerance and hate so tragically displayed in Charlottesville and came together to affirm our belief that all men and women are created equal with the right to live in dignity and peace. This atmosphere of respect and love is an integral and precious gift from the past to those of us who live in Davidson.

The Davidson Historical Society is beginning a new year of cherishing and studying the history of our community. This autumn we have planned programs designed to enhance our understanding and appreciation of this town and the larger community in which we live. In October, we are sponsoring, for members of the DHS only, a tour of the Watts-Ward house on Lorimer Road, a wonderful example of how an old house can be preserved and updated for living in the 21st century. As we plan programs for the winter and spring, we ask for your suggestions of areas of our history that you would like to explore.

We have here in this community a precious heritage, worthy of understanding and preservation. Your support of and contributions to the work of the Davidson Historical Society are valuable and much appreciated.

Van Lear
Van Lear Logan



DAVIDSON
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The Davidson Historical Society

was founded in 1991 by a group of concerned citizens led by Taylor and Irene Blackwell. Over the years DHS has presented programs by outstanding local and regional personalities on varying topics, toured historically significant sites in the area, and financed projects which promote the history of the area.