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Palmer Memorial Institute: Photographs by Griff Davis

Historic North Carolina African American Preparatory School Featured in CDS Exhibition

Opening Reception and Holiday Tea

Saturday, December 6, 2–4 p.m.

Dorothy Davis, daughter of Griff Davis, will speak at 3 p.m.

Porch Gallery, Center for Documentary Studies

“I sit in a Jim Crow car, but my mind keeps company with the kings and queens I have known. External constraints must not be allowed to segregate mind or soul.” – Charlotte Hawkins Brown

Palmer Memorial Institute (PMI)—by 1947 “the Groton and Exeter of Negro America,” according to Griff Davis—began in 1901 as a missionary school for local students in Sedalia, North Carolina, with Charlotte Hawkins Brown as its only teacher.

Born in Henderson, North Carolina, Brown (1883-1961) was raised and educated in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Throughout her life, she would return to New England to raise money for PMI, named after her mentor and benefactor, Alice Freeman Palmer, the second woman president of Wellesley College in Massachusetts. Before she turned twenty, Brown had garnered enough support to establish the Alice Palmer Memorial Institute in a single building that served as classroom and dormitory for teachers and boarding female students. From its inception, PMI offered a rigorous academic program for students, even as funders urged Brown to focus solely on industrial and manual training.

Brown’s reputation grew nationally as she raised funds to expand campus facilities and worked to strengthen PMI’s artistic and scholarly offerings. Students from across the country were drawn to PMI. In 1937 Guilford County opened a public school for African Americans, and PMI was transformed into an elite college preparatory school, known for its high academic standards and training in social etiquette.

When Brown retired in 1952, she had been president of PMI for fifty years; during that time, more than one thousand students graduated. The school closed in 1971. In 1987, the Charlotte Hawkins Brown Museum opened on the PMI grounds, the first state historic site to honor an African American and a woman.

Photo by Griff Davis

Born on the campus of Morehouse College, Griff Davis (1923-1993) attended Oglethorpe Laboratory Elementary School and Atlanta University Laboratory High School, where he was introduced to photography. The camera quickly became his primary means for support

and expression. After serving in the 92d Infantry Division during World War II, Davis completed his college education at Morehouse, where Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was a fellow student and Langston Hughes was one of Davis's principal professors. While still a student, Davis shot for various publications, including the *Atlanta Daily World*, *Ebony*, and *Time*.

Davis became *Ebony* magazine's first Roving Editor upon his graduation from Morehouse College in 1947. The photo-essay on Palmer Memorial Institute was his first major assignment: "*Ebony* authorized me to do a picture article of the North Carolina boarding school where my sister completed high school. This was my first big break in photojournalism. I felt rather proud because I had originated the idea and developed the entire six-page story."

Davis's photography provided access to many of the political, cultural, and economic players of the time who came to speak, lecture, and teach in Atlanta. In 1948 he left *Ebony* to attend Columbia University's graduate school of journalism. The only African American student in his class, he graduated in 1949. He went on to work as a photojournalist for Black Star, a New York stock photo agency, from 1949 to 1952. As a freelancer for Black Star and a stringer for *The New York Times*, he photographed and wrote extensively in Africa, Europe, and the United States. His work appeared in various publications, including *Der Spiegel*, *Ebony*, *Fortune*, *Modern Photography*, *Negro Digest*, and *Time*.

From 1952 to 1985, Davis worked in many capacities in the U.S. Foreign Service for the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) and its forerunner, Harry Truman's Point 4 program for foreign aid. Davis served in Liberia, Tunisia, and Nigeria before returning to the United States to direct the Information, Education, and Communication branch of the Office of Population at USAID headquarters in Washington, D.C. He retired from the government in 1985.

In 1993, Morehouse College honored Davis with the Bennie Trailblazer Award for personal and professional achievement. The award is named for Dr. Benjamin E. Mays, president emeritus of Morehouse College and a mentor and friend of Davis. "I'm not a philosopher, nor am I a deep thinker," Davis said when he received the award. "I'm just an observer of life. An observer of how people act and how people work. I have tried to live a life that would be a positive influence, but influence occurs in trickles, not in downpours."

The Center for Documentary Studies is located at 1317 West Pettigrew Street, off Swift Avenue, in Durham. Events at CDS are free and open to the public. Gallery hours are Monday–Thursday, 9 a.m.–7 p.m.; Friday, 9 a.m.–5 p.m.; and Saturday, 11 a.m.–4 p.m. For more information, telephone 919-660-3663, send email to docstudies@duke.edu, or check the Web at <http://cds.aas.duke.edu>.