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BIOGRAPHY OF GRIFFITH JEROME DAVIS

Internationally Renowned Pioneer Photographer, Journalist and Senior U.S. Foreign Service Officer

Griffith "Griff" Jerome Davis was an internationally renowned pioneer photographer, journalist and Senior U.S. Foreign Service Officer. Born on the campus of *Morehouse College* on April 18, 1923, he grew up on the campus of *Spelman College* in the *Atlanta University Center*. He first learned photography under the tutelage of his Atlanta Laboratory High School teacher, William H. Brown, before entering Morehouse College. Photography became his primary means of expression and support during his high school and college years.

World War II interrupted his studies. As a Buffalo Soldier*, he served as the official photographer for the G-2 section of the 92d Infantry Division headquarters company which saw combat duty along the Ligurian coast of Italy. Before returning to Morehouse to complete his degree after the war, Griff Davis was asked by the Italian government to take aerial shots of Genoa Harbor in order to begin the restoration process. Once back at Morehouse, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was a collegemate.

Through his photographic and writing skills, he recorded the history of Atlanta (as a reporter for the *Atlanta Daily World*), the United States and Africa. He was able to influence policy wherever he was due to the access his skills gave him to whatever power structure in which he found himself.

In his final semester at Morehouse College, Griff Davis took the creative writing class taught by Atlanta University Visiting Professor Langston Hughes and became Hughes' photographer in Atlanta. Upon graduation from Morehouse with a B.A. degree in June 1947, Davis was hired as *Ebony Magazine's* first Roving Editor at the recommendation of Langston Hughes to Founder and Publisher John H. Johnson from 1947 to 1948.

After consulting with Langston Hughes, Griff Davis left *Ebony* in 1948 to attend Columbia University's Graduate School of Journalism as the only African American student in the Class of 1949. He lived with Langston Hughes on East 127th Street in Harlem while attending classes and accompanied Mr. Hughes as his photographer on some of his assignments. Their friendship lasted throughout Mr. Hughes' life and is recorded in the text and through the photographs included in Langston Hughes' official autobiography "*The Life of Langston Hughes*" by Arnold Rampersad. In fact, Griff Davis' photographs of Langston Hughes are on the covers of "*The Ways of White Folks*" and "*Arna Bontemps, Langston Hughes: Letters 1925 - 1967*".

After graduating from Columbia University with his M.A. degree in 1949, Griff Davis worked as the only

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*(**Note:** The name of “Buffalo Soldier” dates back to 1866 when Native American Plains Indians fighting against the black cavalry troops called them "buffalo soldiers". It was because of the black soldiers’ dark and woolly hair that resembled a buffalo or bison’s coat of hair and because of the black soldiers’ fierce style of fighting. The nickname soon became synonymous with all African American troops formed since 1866.)

African-American photo-journalist for the Black Star Publishing Company, a New York Stock Photo Agency, and a stringer correspondent for the New York Times from 1949 to 1952. He photographed and wrote extensively in Africa, Europe and parts of the United States. His work also appeared in such various publications as *Ebony*, *Time*, *FORTUNE*, *Modern Photography*, *Steelways* and *Der Spiegel*. He won Second Honorable Mention in the Individual Picture Division of the Young Photographers’ Contest announced in *LIFE Magazine’s* Anniversary issue of November 26, 1951.

Griff Davis' first trip to Africa was to Liberia to cover the missionary movement and iron ore industry in 1949. At the time, Liberia and Ethiopia were the only independent countries in Africa. On a subsequent assignment for *Ebony Magazine* in Ethiopia, he shot and wrote the exclusive cover story, *The Private Life of Emperor Selassie*, for *Ebony’s* Fifth Anniversary issue of November 1950.

Upon returning to the U.S., Griff Davis took the U.S. Foreign Service exam and passed it in 1952. He and his wife, Muriel Corrin Davis, returned to Liberia and became one of the pioneers of President Harry Truman's Point 4 program for foreign aid, the forerunner of the present-day United States Agency for International Development (USAID). Their efforts in Liberia helped to establish the Point 4 program worldwide. Towards the end of his tour in Liberia, Davis was assigned as the official photographer for the U.S. Delegation to Liberia and Ghana’s Inaugural Independence Day Celebration led by Vice President Richard Nixon in Accra, Ghana in March 1957. As a result of an unexpected encounter at one of the official Independence Day receptions, he shot the first meeting of Vice President Richard Nixon and Martin Luther King, Jr. with Second Lady Patricia Nixon and Coretta Scott King just months after the end of the Montgomery Bus Boycott in Alabama.

Griff Davis worked in many capacities in the foreign service for the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) from 1952 to 1985. As an advisor to African governments such as Liberia, (1952-1957), Tunisia (1957-1961) and Nigeria (1966- 1970) and for the Bureau for Africa and the Bureau for Population and Humanitarian Assistance, he had the fortuitous opportunity to both document in still photographs and motion pictures the life and activities of the many African governments and influence their development policies in the communications, education, population and economic development arenas during this professional lifespan. He also repeatedly traveled to over 25 of Africa's 51 countries during his career and a number of European countries. In 1981, his nomination by President Ronald Reagan to the U.S. Foreign Service rank of Counselor was ratified by the U.S. Senate. Griff Davis retired from USAID to Atlanta, Georgia in 1985.

Throughout his diplomatic career, Davis documented through still photographs and motion pictures the life and activities of many African countries and historic events in Africa and the United States. His photographs were featured in exhibitions, books, newspapers and magazines, such as: Cover photograph of the ruins at Baalbek in Lebanon, **The Foreign Service Journal**, September 1955; "*Living Legends in Black*", J. Edward Bailey, III, Detroit, Bailey Publishing Company, 1976; "*A Century of Black Photographers: 1840 - 1960*", **Rhode Island School of Design, Museum of Art**, Providence, Rhode

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Island, 1983; *"An Illustrated Bio-Bibliography of Black Photographers: 1940 - 1988"*, Deborah Willis-Thomas, New York Public Library, 1989.

Griff Davis was one of the first two African American members of the *American Society of Magazine Photographers* (now *American Society of Media Photographers-ASMP*).

In February 1993, Morehouse College awarded him its prestigious Bennie Trailblazer Award; named after President Emeritus Dr. Benjamin Mays. In May 1993, his childhood friends from Atlanta produced his last exhibition, *"An Exhibition Honoring The Career of Griffith Jerome Davis: Photographer, Journalist, Diplomat and Native Atlantan"* at The Atrium on Sweet Auburn.

Griff Davis died on July 22, 1993 leaving a cascade of untold stories to be shared with generations to come.

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