

November 7, 2023

Dear Members of the Davidson Community,

We are writing today in our roles as president of the college, chair of the Committee on Acknowledgment & Naming, vice chair of the Board of Trustees/chair of the Commission on Race & Slavery, and chair of the Board of Trustees.

Six years ago, Davidson College formed a [Commission on Race & Slavery](#) charged with building a comprehensive understanding of the college's own history. Davidson continues this solemn work of researching and reckoning with our history, including acknowledging the devastatingly painful reality that the college exploited the labor of enslaved persons to build the campus from its founding in 1837 through the Civil War, and it maintained institutionalized segregation for an additional hundred years.

Today we share with the Davidson community, and the wider public, the report on Maxwell Chambers (b. 1780, d. 1855) that was researched and written by Dr. Hilary Green, Davidson's James B. Duke Professor of Africana Studies, and the college's public historian. Maxwell Chambers was the college's most significant early benefactor, and his estate gift, valued at the time at nearly \$250,000, is inseparable from Davidson's existence.

Some of the basic facts of Maxwell Chambers' life were known previously. The report adds significant new information. Despite an incomplete historical record, the report makes clear that Maxwell Chambers "bought, sold, and owned enslaved individuals. He accumulated his fortune off of the labor of enslaved people on plantations he owned through foreclosure and in a factory he owned in Salisbury. His reliance upon slavery made possible his philanthropy to Davidson College and to the Presbyterian Church." The report also makes clear that, in receiving the Chambers gift, the college became the holder of five enslaved persons. Further, Davidson trustees sold the Salisbury, North Carolina, factory, which had been gifted to the college, to representatives of the Confederacy. This building became a Confederate prison during the Civil War.

These truths are abhorrent to all of us. They run contrary to the fundamental values Davidson has espoused since its founding. They are a testament to the fact that we are capable, then as now, of professing high ideals and falling short of them based on the prevailing attitudes of our time. We recognize that the stories in this report will be distressing to members of this community, especially those who trace their own lineage back to enslaved persons.

As leaders of the college, we continue to grapple with this information, how best to share it with a community of people dedicated to caring for one another and working for racial justice and reconciliation and, most importantly, what actions should follow. Led by Dr. Green, we have verified all the information that we can, and we have deliberated with the [Acknowledgment & Naming Committee](#), the full Board of Trustees, and senior leaders on campus about the next steps that Davidson will take.

Dr. Green's report lays out the complicated realities of the college's involvement and complicity in the institution of slavery. Maxwell Chambers made his fortune foreclosing on plantations and selling them, including the enslaved persons who were considered as property. The report also establishes that the college as a whole was deeply entangled in the institution of slavery—nearly every faculty member, trustee, and president was a slaveholder.

In light of these findings, we have directed certain immediate actions even as additional measures are under consideration:

First, the [full report from Dr. Green](#) is available. In addition to resources posted on the college website, Davidson will add public information on campus about the history of enslavement, Maxwell Chambers, and descendants of enslaved persons. This will begin with digital displays and will expand to a fuller educational experience in the coming months. The college archives team will engage with Dr. Green to prepare these displays. When the [“With These Hands” commemoration](#)—a permanent installation to honor the labor of enslaved and exploited laborers—is completed in 2025, Oak Row and Elm Row will become a permanent location for historical and educational exhibits.

In addition, we have begun a proactive effort to identify and reach out to descendants of those persons who were enslaved by Maxwell Chambers—as well as descendants of those enslaved by college presidents, trustees, and faculty members. This will take careful and respectful work, and we are committing to it for the long term. We are learning from peer institutions who have done this work ethically and with care and empathy. We’ve had initial conversations with some descendants of those enslaved by Maxwell Chambers and will expand efforts to identify and connect with other descendants. We will strive for a collaborative effort to shape and then take meaningful actions to amend the intergenerational harm caused by enslavement.

We are also making available resources to faculty, staff, and students to continue to learn more about Davidson’s institutional history within its wider regional and national contexts. For several years, faculty have hosted symposia and speakers, developed courses, and mentored student projects on these topics. Under the leadership of Dean of Faculty Shelley Rigger, we are establishing a fund, drawing on existing and new resources, of \$100,000 annually. These monies will support research and teaching initiatives focused on the history of Davidson College and the ongoing inequality engendered by our nation’s history of enslavement, racism, and other forms of identity-based discrimination.

Davidson continues to build a curriculum that reflects the diversity of our student body and community, and which fulfills our mission of developing disciplined and creative minds for leadership and service in a complex and changing world. The college has made four hires in Africana Studies in the past two years, and we expect that the current tenure-track search in Anthropology will recruit an archaeologist who will lead excavations and field research at [Beaver Dam](#), the plantation site near campus where the Davidson family and enslaved persons lived and worked and where the college charter was signed. A search to fill a newly created position—site and program manager for Beaver Dam—is also underway. Further, we will connect and expand our resources for students to undertake related research and experiential learning.

We are planning to launch, starting in summer 2024, an educational program for historically underserved high school-aged students from the local area and region. Inspired by the Love of Learning Program, led by the late Rev. Brenda H. Tapia, the program will focus on college readiness. This will be a collaboration between Academic Affairs, Student Life, and Admission.

These commitments and initiatives connect to and build upon the work that the college has done in recent years. We have collected information about Davidson’s continuing efforts in the [Race, Slavery and Reconciliation](#) section of the website, and we’ll keep this site updated in the months and years to come.

The Commission on Race & Slavery made, in its 2020 report, a preliminary recommendation to remove the Chambers Building name, though it also noted that removing names risks being seen as an attempt to erase a racist past. After two years of grappling with the history, analyzing the criteria identified in the college's [naming policy](#), and deliberating with one another, the Acknowledgment & Naming Committee recommended unanimously to the full Board at its most recent meeting that the Chambers Building name not be changed. The committee offered a vision that centered the college's focus at this time on actions for education around the name—and all the ways that the college and its early leaders were engaged in and connected to slavery. The Board accepted this recommendation to leave the Chambers name, driven by the moral conviction that the college's collective energy should fuel actions for remembering the history, doing further research and teaching about it, and for reaching out to descendants of the enslaved in meaningful ways.

We firmly believe that naming the complexities of the Chambers legacy, which is also Davidson College's legacy, is our responsibility as an educational institution. It would be irresponsible to ignore or be silent about the history of slavery that has shaped our college. We must learn from it and allow our fuller engagement with the life of Maxwell Chambers—and those enslaved by him—to deepen our commitment to learning and justice. While not fully dispositive, we are moved by our early engagement with descendants of families enslaved by Maxwell Chambers, who have reminded us that Chambers is their family name, and their history, as well.

We recognize that members of the Davidson College community have different perspectives and judgments about whether this name should remain on this building. The entire history of slavery, as well as Dr. Green's report that we share today, is a source of moral outrage about dehumanization and injustice. At the same time, we hope that community members will see how complicated the issues are and understand that the decision to retain the name Chambers reflects a commitment to remember, educate about, and respond humanely to that history.

Toward these ends, we are establishing a Trustee Committee on Education and Reconciliation, which will provide strategic direction and support to the college's initiatives. The earlier Trustee-established committees on Commemoration and on Acknowledgment & Naming, respectively, were ad hoc committees with focused goals, which they accomplished. The Committee on Education and Reconciliation has been created as an ongoing committee, because we believe that trustee and presidential engagement in this work is imperative over the long term.

Thank you for reading this far. Each of us looks forward to speaking further with you about these actions and our thinking. As a Davidson community and as individuals in it, we continue learning about this history, and each of us will make different connections between the past and the present moment in which race and the legacy of slavery and segregation continue to be a source of division and injustice. There are no simple solutions or ways forward on naming, acknowledgment, commemoration, or reconciliation. We pledge to work with all constituencies and members of the college—and with neighbors and descendants also directly affected by this history—in our continuing work to live, however imperfectly, Davidson's highest ideals and aspirations.

Sincerely,

**Doug Hicks '90**, *President*

**Erwin Carter '79**, *Trustee and Chair, Acknowledgment & Naming Committee*

**Anthony Foxx '93**, *Vice-Chair, Board of Trustees and Chair, Commission on Race & Slavery*

**Alison Hall Mauzé '84**, *Chair, Board of Trustees*

Read the story: [Davidson College's Commitment to Education and Reconciliation](#)