

# Jackson Davis's Imprint on the General Education Board Archive

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A central figure in the General Education Board's effort to improve the lot of southern African Americans was Jackson Davis (1882-1947), a white Virginian who emerged from post-Reconstruction southern society to intervene in the educational disparity that disadvantaged Black school children. Informed by progressive graduate training from Columbia Teachers College, Davis worked in Virginia in the early decades of the twentieth century to secure opportunities for Black teachers and pupils within the emerging separate-but-*unequal* system of education in the South. That is not to say that Davis, who was directly affiliated with the GEB from 1915 until his death, supported the racial integration of schools, only that he recognized the detriment inherent in under-resourced education for African American children, whose facilities were usually poor and teachers often inadequately trained. As we position Davis's significant contribution within the GEB's program of African American outreach and funding, we must acknowledge him as a white man of a specific time and place but with distinct professional, and perhaps personal, experiences that shaped his views on race and most likely influenced the perspectives of his GEB colleagues.

An institutional history of the General Education Board describes Davis, "the son of one of [Virginia's] first families," as "a remarkable character who in his lifetime was destined to make a contribution of high order to the education of Negroes."<sup>1</sup> Still in his 20s when he first came to the GEB's notice, Davis already had served as a school principal and been promoted to superintendent of the Henrico County schools near Richmond. As conveyed by Raymond Fosdick in his history of the GEB, the young Davis distinguished himself through his concern for the quality of education available to African Americans:

Some Southern school administrators rarely visited the Negro schools under their jurisdiction, while others could not so much as tell where they were located. But Davis had a highly developed sense of social justice. He inspected all the schools, white and colored. Many were bad, but the Negro schools were by far the worst, and Davis must have

wondered how they could ever be raised out of their desolate condition.<sup>2</sup>

In those early years, Davis had secured support for African American teacher training from the Jeanes Fund, a program that later would be subsidized by the General Education Board, and in 1910 was appointed Virginia's supervisor of Black schools, a position the GEB would offer to replicate in any other southern state.<sup>3</sup> In 1915, the GEB hired Davis as a field agent, the first of several GEB posts of increasing responsibility. He continued to work in the South until 1937 when, as a GEB associate director, he transferred to New York and was based there until his death ten years later.<sup>4</sup> In more than three decades with the GEB, culminating in a final promotion to vice president and director of southern education, Davis left a significant imprint upon the GEB's mission on behalf of African American education, medicine, and agriculture, and that work is documented in the philanthropy's archive.

Depth of experience with African American education in the South was just one of Davis's prominent assets throughout his career with the General Education Board. In 1938, a GEB colleague pointed to Davis's "rare combination of wisdom, kindness and sympathetic understanding."<sup>5</sup> Those qualities, within the context of both Jim Crow southern culture and the comparatively liberal urban North, also provided Davis an extraordinary transracial skillset for a white Virginian of his day. His social ease on both sides of the color line — and Mason-Dixon Line — made Davis a *de facto* expert on race relations whose judgment was trusted by both white executives and board members at the philanthropy and the African American educators and leaders who sought GEB support. In fact, Davis's high regard within African American higher education led the Hampton Institute to offer Davis its presidency in 1942, an opportunity he turned down in order to remain with the GEB in New York.<sup>6</sup> Typical of the time, historically Black colleges and universities like Hampton often hired white men as their presidents.<sup>7</sup>

Davis's personal and professional history is important because much of the GEB archive pertaining to African American schools and higher education, including internal and external GEB correspondence, is filtered through Davis's experience and ideology. His perspective offers a lens distinct from those of the African

Americans who sought assistance from the General Education Board, as well as from the northern white elites who were the GEB decision makers. I had been aware of Davis before my trip to the Rockefeller Archive Center, but I had not fully appreciated the centrality of his GEB role, the extent of his influence, or his significance as a historical figure in his own right. One purpose of my research stipend had been to triangulate documentation of the twentieth-century Black press, which I had found in other archives, with the records of northern philanthropists who had shown interest in its mission, even if they had not provided direct financial support. In particular, I had seen correspondence from Davis and other GEB representatives in the papers of sociologist Charles S. Johnson at Fisk University and the digitized collections of the Chicago-based Associated Negro Press news service and its founder, Claude Barnett.<sup>8</sup> Between 1902 and 1960, the GEB reported expenditures of more than \$5.2 million to Fisk University and almost \$3.9 million to Tuskegee Institute, whose board of trustees included Barnett, an alumnus.<sup>9</sup> It was clear that Johnson and Barnett's conversations with Davis and other GEB representatives were multidimensional, grounded in their affiliations with educational institutions but also engaging broad topics of mutual interest.

Prior to my visit to the Rockefeller Archive Center, I learned that the General Education Board had declined to provide formal underwriting for a daily newspaper column written by Johnson and distributed by the Associated Negro Press, a proposal Barnett and Johnson developed from an expanded and overly optimistic interpretation of the GEB's education mission.<sup>10</sup> I was able to confirm in the GEB archive that I had seen a complete record of the correspondence between and among GEB officials, Johnson, and Barnett. What I had not seen, however, were the internal GEB memos and records of meetings, called interview reports, that GEB staff prepared to document phone calls and in-person conversations with subjects outside the organization, like Johnson and Barnett. A central curiosity of my research was why a proposal for Johnson, an internationally recognized sociologist, to write a column for the white daily press encountered so much resistance. While the correspondence I had reviewed previously formed an important record, that evidence did not go far enough, and my research had stalled — until I found the internal memos and interview reports

in the GEB archive. There, Davis and his GEB colleagues meticulously documented meetings and appointments with Johnson and Barnett as part of the philanthropy's institutional record and offered details of those conversations — a paraphrased who-said-what — that revealed one version of what transpired, namely how philanthropists with a progressive mission viewed the African Americans who sought their help. Scholars using these records must consider that the African American participants in these meetings did not provide interview reports summarizing the conversations and offering their impressions. Because they may have taken issue with the white rendering of the meetings, I avoid framing the internal memos and interview reports as definitive historical records. Rather, these documents offer one distinct set of impressions and also reflect the power differentials that governed the GEB's relationships with the public.

Even with this qualification, the record of this private communication provides important insight into interracial relationships at mid-century, when American racial history had arrived at a significant historical juncture. The interview reports, not the correspondence I had seen before visiting the Rockefeller Archive Center, persuaded me of Davis's influence in framing the conversation about race within the GEB and between the GEB and the public. Within the General Education Board archive, Davis's work product is an important nexus in research on such aspects of twentieth-century African American history as education and rural life. For African Americans seeking GEB funding for projects and initiatives, Davis was a conduit to the philanthropy and often screened requests before they became formal applications. He got to know the African Americans who came to the GEB and understood their needs and concerns well enough to explain them to GEB colleagues and decisionmakers. As a result, Davis was an interpreter for both the funders, who had no firsthand experience with racial disadvantage, and the applicants, who were trying to solve the social and economic problems it created. Even if the GEB ultimately did not fund a request, Davis built good will with the African American public and an unsuccessful applicant might well return with a subsequent request. We see this play out in Davis's earnest yet warm correspondence with Barnett, which lasted more than a decade.

Reflecting the way in which Barnett and Johnson built relationships with Davis,

his documentation of their meetings constitutes a kind of sidebar conversation in which he and other GEB staff asked questions and made comments that revealed skepticism or affirmation regarding interactions with the two men. For example, in a brief but revealing 1942 memo, which was reviewed and initialed by at least four others at the GEB, Davis asserts that “Claude A. Barnett is one of the ablest and wisest of my Negro friends. He is a successful business man, a Trustee of Tuskegee, and has a very wide influence.” Davis does not mention the nature of Barnett’s funding inquiry but concludes by noting that he referred Barnett to the Julius Rosenwald Fund and Marshall Field Foundation in Chicago and to “the Ford organization in Detroit,” opening the door to further archival triangulation.<sup>11</sup> Davis’s passing assessment of Barnett may seem like a small matter, and it is certainly condescending, but it is important as a candid opinion offered to an exclusively white audience. For purposes of historical methodology, Davis’s correspondence and interview notes provide important context for his interracial relationships — in this case with African American professionals like Johnson and Barnett, but we scholars must resist the temptation to impose a presentist filter on this archive, viewing Davis as either a racial groundbreaker or insufficiently critical of the racial status quo for current tastes. Although Davis and his GEB colleagues most certainly were more empathetic to African Americans and, by definition, more racially liberal than many other white elites of their day, they were neither civil rights crusaders nor racists.

Importantly, internal memos and interview reports in the General Education Board records do not always pertain to a specific funding request. GEB officials appeared to see acquiring knowledge of social, political, and economic issues, both domestic and international, as part of their charge to make informed funding decisions. As such, Davis and his GEB colleagues sometimes used interactions with experts and thought leaders to mine their knowledge of contemporary developments. They then incorporated that background into the institutional record through internal memos and interview reports. As an example, projects involving the press lay outside the GEB’s scope and mission, but Davis and other GEB representatives became deeply curious about the African American press during the 1940s and engaged Barnett, Johnson, and others in conversation about the state of Black-owned newspapers. Of particular interest and concern, was

activism by the Black press during World War II, and whether African Americans' sense of grievance and marginalization could be resolved by GEB intervention and education. During this period, Davis followed developments in the African American press through conversations primarily with Johnson and Barnett. At one point, the GEB considered commissioning a study of the Black press and approached Johnson, whose Institute for Race Relations at Fisk had been partially underwritten by the GEB and who was held in particularly high esteem by GEB officials. The study was abandoned, but the archive reveals an interesting dynamic between Davis and Johnson, whose research infrastructure at Fisk could be called into service by the GEB. In an interview report, Davis summarized a conversation with Johnson, who "said he was not anxious to undertake this and he would have done it only if we had asked him to do so."<sup>12</sup>

For purposes of my scholarship, such internal records put flesh on the bones of historical actors and bring nuance to relationships that seem a bit one-dimensional when reduced to formal correspondence. Ironically, the archive that Davis and his General Education Board colleagues meticulously constructed as a historical record was not intended for public consumption in the short term and, as a result, is notable for its candor. This archive ostensibly has little to do with my research agenda on ethics and race in twentieth-century journalism, yet Davis's interactions with prominent African Americans of his day, so carefully documented in the GEB archive, provide important context for my broader scholarship on racial boundaries in the American press in the years preceding the US Supreme Court's *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling. My acquaintance with Davis through the archival material at the Rockefeller Archive Center has already informed and influenced my research and raised questions for future scholarship on interracial collaboration involving the media at mid-century.

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<sup>1</sup>. Raymond B. Fosdick, *Adventure in Giving: The Story of the General Education Board* (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), 90. In the years prior to writing this book, Fosdick had served as both the president of the General Education Board and the Rockefeller Foundation.

<sup>2</sup>. Fosdick, *Adventure in Giving*, 90.

<sup>3</sup>. Fosdick, *Adventure in Giving*, 92-3.

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4. William A. Link, "Jackson Davis and the Lost World of Jim Crow Education," photographic exhibit catalog (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Library Special Collections, 2000), 11-12. Importantly, as he traveled the South visiting and assisting African American schools, Davis, an amateur photographer, amassed extensive visual documentation of Black public education. In addition to archival material on Davis available through the General Education Board archive, some of Davis's correspondence and journals, as well as his photographs of Black teachers, school children, and school facilities, are housed in the Albert and Shirley Small Special Collections Library at the University of Virginia. Its Jackson Davis Collection (MSS 3072, 3072-a, 3072-b, and 3072-c) includes more than 5,000 photographic prints, negatives, and glass slides.
5. Link, "Jackson Davis and the Lost World of Jim Crow Education," 13.
6. Link, "Jackson Davis and the Lost World of Jim Crow Education," 12.
7. "The Tradition of White Presidents at Black Colleges," *Journal of Blacks in Higher Education* 16 (Summer 1997): 93-9. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2962918>
8. The Johnson Papers at Fisk University, where Johnson was both a faculty member and university president, document the GEB's extensive support of Johnson's work on the sociology of race and of Fisk University, generally. The Barnett/Associated Negro Press Collection is held at the Chicago History Museum (M1973.0017, M1974.0064).
9. Fosdick, *Adventures in Giving*, 331 and 329.
10. One outcome of this research is a published article: Gwyneth Mellinger, "An Idea Before Its Time: Charles S. Johnson, Negro Columnist," *Journal of Civil and Human Rights* 4, no. 2 (Fall/Winter 2018): 62-89. This scholarship received the Ronald T. and Gayla D. Farrar Award in Media & Civil Rights History from the University of South Carolina in 2019. Research in the collections of the Rockefeller Archive Center also will contribute to book under contract with the University of Massachusetts Press.
11. Jackson Davis, untitled memo, Nov. 20, 1942, General Education Board records, Series 1, Subgroup 3, Box 390, Folder 4083.
12. Jackson Davis, "The Negro Press Study," interview report, March 13, 1944, General Education Board records, Series 1, Subgroup 3, Box 390, Folder 4084.