

LEWIS DAVIS, OTTERBEIN, AND THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD

(10-24-2018)

1. Title Slide

Before I begin tonight, I need to warn you that in this talk I will be reading a quote from a southern student, whose racist rant brought about a crisis on campus in 1857. He repeatedly used a word I will not say. I'm sure you know which one I'm talking about. Now I don't want to surprise anyone with this, but we cannot sanitize our history. I will not say the word, but it will be alluded to. So, with that understanding, let us begin.

2. Lewis Davis

"Davis was always a thorough anti-slavery man." So said his biographer, Henry Adams Thompson. To us this is received wisdom, long-ago understood, and, to a certain extent, expected of the progressive beliefs held by the founders of Otterbein University. But within the context of the time this seems much more unusual, and one might even consider it miraculous that Rev. Davis felt this way.

Lewis Davis was born on Valentine's Day, February 14, 1814, in rural Craig County, Virginia. Slavery was a common practice in that state, and it is assumed that young Davis would have been exposed to it from

a young age. His home life was one of hard work and little education, with no significant religious influence present. However, Davis had a keen mind, and was always eager to learn. At age 18 he was sent to apprentice with a local blacksmith, who recognized the potential in Davis to do great things. The blacksmith gave him books to read, and “talked school to him,” as biographer Thompson put it. Davis joined a local debate society, which is credited with preparing him for his work as both a minister and a teacher. In addition, the blacksmith was a very religious man, a Methodist, and local ministers were frequent visitors to his home. In this way Lewis Davis was educated, and drawn to Christianity.

There was no question in anyone’s mind that Davis would become a preacher. However, I suspect that many were disappointed that instead of joining the Methodist Episcopal Church to follow his calling, he instead joined a small, poor, unostentatious, and reformatory group called the United Brethren Church. He did so for two reasons. First, the United Brethren did not allow membership in what was called “secret societies,” meaning groups like the Masons and the Oddfellows. Davis had always believed that any group that demanded secrecy of its participants was unfit for Christians. Secondly, at least in Virginia, the Methodist Episcopal Church had reconciled themselves with slavery, and many members of the church were, if not slave owners, vocal

supporters of the institution. Davis considered this to be an evil practice, and would not join with any church that condoned it.

3. William Hanby

It was William Hanby that gave Davis a copy of the “Discipline,” or rather the “rulebook” of the United Brethren Church. As Davis himself said, it seemed to him “that God has made him for these sentiments and this discipline.”

4. Lewis Davis

In 1838 Lewis Davis was granted his license to preach, and in the spring of 1839 he joined the Scioto Conference as an itinerant minister. Though most of Ohio was abolitionist, Davis encountered a fair amount of resistance to his preaching against slavery. In one town he was turned out of his lodgings and his horse was let loose after service. Another time he was met by a member of the congregation who encouraged him to leave town after one such sermon. Even in Westerville, a town which Harold Hancock described as only having half a dozen residents against abolition, Davis would encounter those who felt he was going too far. I’ll let Henry Thompson tell the story:

While residing in Westerville, one of the old citizens, Mr. Westervelt, saw him on his way to the polls on election day, and said to him,

“President, you going to vote with the abolitionists, of course.”

“Yes.”

“Well, you and the preachers like you have done all they could to bring on the war.”

“Yes, I did all I could,” was the cool reply.

“Well, I don’t want anything more to do with you,” said the astonished citizen.

Davis said, “Let me explain: The Saviour said, ‘I came not to send peace on earth, but a sword.’ I advocated the truth, and if that brought on the war, then I am guilty. This was made the occasion of war. I was willing to take the consequences of telling the truth.”

5. Otterbein University (circa 1860)

In the early days of Otterbein University, Davis, Hanby, and others certainly brought the sword with them. As far as we can determine, we were the first university to be founded as co-educational, and to be open to students regardless of race. Harold Hancock quoted an unknown university representative who wrote at the time, “Character, not color is the standard by which students are measured when they enter the college.” It is amusing to note that in the early 1850s

Otterbein was criticized in the *Religious Telescope* (the United Brethren newspaper) for not having enrolled any African-American students!

6. Davis House

Lewis Davis and William Hanby had homes that sat side-by-side on Grove Street. The Hanby House faced the university, and the Davis House faced College Avenue. ~~As Pam described to you earlier,~~ The Hanbys and the Davises worked hand-in-hand as conductors on the Underground Railroad. Let me emphasize again that this was extremely dangerous work, even in what could reasonably be called an enclave of staunch abolitionist support. It wouldn't take much more that a thoughtless comment from a loose tongue, or a vindictive student who felt himself somehow injured by the presence of runaway slaves to bring down the whole operation, and to land Davis and Hanby in jail. However, Davis was a man who sought to convert the hearts and minds of those who supported slavery. Again, I quote from Henry Thompson, regarding an incident in the 1857-58 school year:

A young man from the south found his way to the college, and also found a home in the family of the president. He was polite and courteous, a moderate student, but indoctrinated with southern ideas, and of course he believed that slavery was the natural condition of the black man. Mr. Davis was anxious to correct his erroneous views, and

took occasion at meal time as the most opportune period, to put his opinions before the student. As the latter could not, of course, meet the objections brought against his pet notions, and he became a little annoyed at times, but bore it all patiently. The end came one day when a fugitive slave, on his way north, stopped at the president's, and [Davis] insisted he should be brought to the table to eat with the family, including the young man. This was the straw that broke the camel's back. Under no circumstances could [the student] submit to such indignity. By permission he left the table and went to the hotel to get his dinner. He was very angry.

It speaks highly of Davis that he took this risk, especially since tensions were high at the school due to the admittance of our first African-American student, William Hannibal Thomas. In later years Thomas described his reception at Otterbein like this:

7. William Hannibal Thomas

That I contemplated entering the university was generally known, but so far as I recall, no objection from any source was expressed. There was, therefore, no reason to believe that my presence in the school would offend in any particular, and, as a matter of fact, I had cordial welcome from my classmates. Nevertheless, in about ten days thereafter a turbulent spirit awoke; a general uprising that swept the sober-minded

off their feet took place, and never before nor since has Westerville passed through such an event as was occasioned by my presence in the college; nor did it end there. Meetings were held at which inflammatory speeches were made; I was assaulted on the street; in the classroom the leaves of my books were torn out, and I was struck with shawl-pins by those who sat around me; when I passed out to the building groups of waiting students pelted me with rocks hidden in wet snowballs.

Here is the Davis story and the Thomas story intertwine. The southern student who left the Davis house in the earlier story loudly railed against both Davis and the university. Here is how Thomas described the event. Let me again warn you again that there is frequent use of a word in this account that I will not say aloud, but will allude to for the sake of the story. Thomas wrote:

The crisis was reached at the ensuing Friday rhetorical exercises, when a student of fervid oratory declared that Otterbein had a surfeit of “[n-word]”; that it was “[n-word] for breakfast, [n-word] for dinner, and [n-word] for supper,” sentiments that were uproariously applauded.

The university administration, which at the time did not include Lewis Davis, asked Thomas to leave. He refused. Then they threatened him with expulsion. Once again he refused. Thomas continues:

That there was substantial ground for uneasiness on the part of the college authorities is fully borne out by the fact that a number of students from Virginia and elsewhere left the school for good the following week. With their departure, however, the excitement subsided as quickly as it had arisen, and I met with no further trouble. Thereafter the students treated me in a manly fashion; each of the literary societies offered membership to me.

I should explain that membership was a highly coveted honor in the 19th century. Not everyone received an invitation to join. Also, allow me to share one final note from William Hannibal Thomas, which will be of interest to the ladies in our audience:

A significant feature of this experience was the attitude of the young women students towards me, who, with the rare exceptions, were uniformly courteous in intercourse; in fact, it was the outspoken words and courageous acts of several of these young ladies, especially one from West Virginia, that effectually held in check the mob spirit of the male students.

8. Thomas at Otterbein

Like so many others in the mid-nineteenth century, William Hannibal Thomas left Otterbein at the end of the school year and sought employment rather than return to his studies. He later served in the

Union Army during the Civil War, and after that went on to great distinction as a lawyer, and then, unfortunately, on to great infamy as the author of the book “The American Negro,” which sought to propagate many of the same libels against African-Americans that were advocated by the pro-slavery movement.

9. Lewis Davis

As for Lewis Davis, he returned to the school administration in 1858, being named president after ill health forced former president Alexander Owen to resign. Davis continued to be a conductor on the Underground Railroad, presumably through the end of the Civil War. He later was promoted out of office by the hierarchy of the United Brethren Church, by making him a bishop (which was not so much a reward for service as it was the addition of more and harder work to his already full ministerial duties), and by assigning him to teaching duties at the newly founded Union Biblical Seminary in Dayton.

Conductors on the Underground Railroad worked in secrecy, so we are still learning new things about how they worked together to ensure safe passage for runaway slaves. For the protection of all involved, nothing was written down until well after the fact, which is why we are fortunate to know as much as we do about Davis and Hanby’s exploits. I want to close tonight with one more account of Lewis Davis’

experiences, just to emphasize the danger and difficulty these escaped slaves endured. This account comes from Henry Garst's *History of Otterbein University*. He wrote:

10. Garst and Davis

The author [Garst], having been an inmate of the Davis home during the four years preceding the War of the Rebellion, had a good opportunity to observe the business transacted in the Underground Railroad. Of the passengers who passed this station he distinctly remembers a bright mulatto, who stated that he was a house-servant and had escaped from his master in Kentucky. He was in a state of great alarm, declaring that he had seen a handbill posted near Westerville giving a description of him and offering a reward of five hundred dollars for his capture and return to his master. He was quite above the average in intelligence and could read well, as was not uncommon in the case of house-servants. He was weary and hungry and yet it was not thought prudent for him to tarry too long on account of the danger of capture. He tarried until dinner was prepared and then he sat down to eat, trembling from head to foot. The tremulous clatter of his knife and fork upon the plate before him, occasioned by the fright, can never be forgotten. After partaking of his hasty meal and receiving other aid, he was directed to a "station" beyond Westerville in the country, thought

to be a safer place to tarry and rest, and he hastened on his way. Whether he succeeded in eluding his pursuers and reached Canada and freedom is not known.

11. Lewis Davis

Lewis Davis did not know what the end result of his actions would be, but he never failed to act on his beliefs. Like him, may we all have the courage of our convictions, regardless of what the outcomes may be. Thank you.