

Davis, Walter Royal ^[1]

Walter Royal Davis

Janury 11, 1920 - May 19, 2008

by Nicholas Graham

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University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Libraries.



Greer, Bethany. 2001. "Trustees honor five with William R. Davie Award." University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

North Carolina philanthropist, education proponent, and businessman Walter Royal Davis was born into a family of [Pasquotank County](#) ^[3] potato farmers Elizabeth City, N.C., on January 11, 1920.

Davis's independent personality was formed early on. He was quick to challenge authority and was kicked out of three high schools before completing his formal education at the [Hargrave Military Academy](#) ^[4] in Virginia. Davis returned to Elizabeth City where he got a job as a clerk in a chain variety store. He was later transferred to stores in Wilson and then Fayetteville, where he met his first wife.

Davis left his job as a clerk to join the McLean trucking company. He worked as a long-haul driver transporting textiles, a job that took him around the country. While talking to other drivers in California, he learned that oil producers in the Permian Basin in Texas were having trouble getting their product to refineries. Davis borrowed \$1,000 and moved to Texas where he started Permian Oil, a trucking business that transported crude oil from wells to refineries. As the Texas oil industry grew, so, too, did Davis's business and personal fortune. In 1966, the business merged with Occidental Petroleum Corporation, at the time one of the largest companies in the country. Davis soon left Occidental to form another company, which provided services to the oil industry.

Davis often joked that he made money in Texas and gave it away in North Carolina. Despite his lack of a college education, Davis was a prominent and prolific supporter of higher education in North Carolina. Toward the end of his life, he estimated that he had paid for more than 1,300 people to attend college. His financial support ranged from small gestures, such as the establishment of an ice cream fund for fifth graders in [Manteo](#) ^[5], to very large ones, including \$100,000 toward [Hurricane Floyd](#) ^[6] relief efforts, and million-dollar contributions toward buildings on college campuses. His support gave him a voice in the leadership of many North Carolina schools. He was the only person to have served on the Board of Trustees for [UNC-Chapel Hill](#) ^[7] and [Duke University](#) ^[8] at the same time.

Davis endowed programs and buildings at [North Carolina State University](#) ^[9] (Eastern 4-H Environmental Center) and [Elizabeth City State University](#) ^[10] (Walter R. Davis School of Business and Economics), but he is best remembered for his support of and association with the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Davis contributed to numerous building funds, donating \$1 million toward the construction of the Dean E. Smith Center, and \$1.4 million toward the building that now bears his name, the Walter Royal Davis Library. Davis served on the UNC-Chapel Hill board of trustees and was an

ardent supporter of Tar Heel basketball.

Davis was active in North Carolina politics beginning in the early 1970s. He supported politicians from both major political parties and appeared to be interested more in having access to whomever was in power than in supporting a particular ideology. With his wealth, influence, and readiness to write a check, Davis was usually successful in gaining the ear of North Carolina's political leaders. Marc Basnight, the Manteo Democrat who served as President of the North Carolina Senate for over a decade, looked to Davis as a mentor and credited him with helping Basnight get started in politics.

Davis also joined the national political debate on occasion, and enjoyed friendships with both Presidents Bush, whom he knew from the Texas oil business. He was a vocal supporter of President George H. W. Bush, taking out a full-page ad in the *Washington Post* in 1991 encouraging Americans to support the President and the first Gulf War effort. In 2007, Davis paid for another full-page ad in the same paper criticizing President George W. Bush and his handling of the Iraq War.

Davis's personal life was marked by spontaneous gestures of generosity and stormy romantic relationships. He would leave thousand-dollar tips for waitresses and take friends and family members on elaborate vacations. He was married six times, though had only four wives, twice remarrying the same woman. Davis died on May 19, 2008, leaving an estate valued at just under a million dollars, falling short of his often-stated goal of giving away all of his money before he died.

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Greer, Bethany. 2001. "Trustees honor five with William R. Davie Award." University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Accessed 07/2011.

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