

From Luxuries to Necessities: Davidson's Laundry Facility Turned Resource Center

Ella Nagy-Benson

HIS 301, "Making History"

Professors Dietz and Guasco

Nestled between Belk dormitory and the Student Union is a building many Davidson students pass every day. The one-story brick facade blends in with the style and structure of most other Davidson College buildings. Students know it as Lula Bell's Resource Center: a place where one can get extra meal swipes, borrow textbooks or clothing for a professional event or stock up on food or hygiene items. The center seeks to provide support for low-income students attending Davidson and hosts events to help students with life skills like financial literacy.¹ Before Lula Bell's became a resource center, the building served as a laundry facility for students. The purpose of this project is to explore why and how this change in the building's purpose occurred and what the change can teach us about Davidson's history.

For most of the 20th century and until 2015, Davidson college students enjoyed the luxury of dropping off their dirty clothes and picking them up a day or two later, washed and folded (all included in the cost of tuition).² In 1911, faculty first raised the discussion of needing a campus laundry facility: agricultural students who worked mornings in the fields had a "malodorous air about them."³ No action was taken until 1925, however, when the college was able to fund this venture and build the facility. As the College grew and changed, so did the laundry building. Longtime member of the laundry staff, J.C. Washam, remembered when the college grew above 300 students in 1931 and "additions were made to the laundry building... but internal equipment and system changes were few."⁴ C.W. Stacks, manager of the facility in 1949, described a concern with an "overly abundant staff and lack of labor-saving mechanization."⁵ When women began attending Davidson College in 1972, the laundry facilities

¹ "Lula Bell's Resource Center," Davidson College, accessed February 8th, 2020, <https://www.davidson.edu/offices-and-services/civic-engagement/lula-bells-resource-center>

² Mark Washburn. "Davidson College Scrubbing Historic Perk for Students," *The Charlotte Observer* (May 2014). <https://www.charlotteobserver.com/news/local/article9119600.html>

³ Washburn, "Scrubbing Historic Perk."

⁴ C.W. Stacks and Michael Stovall, *The Guide*, January/February 1972, 35.

⁵ Stacks and Stovall.

expanded to meet this need though they did not require women to use it.⁶ Davidson's "free laundry" service was something the college took pride in, coveted by college students across the country as Davidson was one of the only schools to offer this service.

Black women almost exclusively comprised the staff of the laundry facility. In the early twentieth century, racism against Black women in the South often restricted them to domestic-style work.⁷ Laundry worker Lula Bell Houston emphasized this when she described how she began working "in a time when racial discrimination was still prevalent in the South and a Black woman had very limited job prospects."⁸ Restricting Black women's economic prospects was one way that white people attempted to limit Black advancement following the demise of slavery. The Davidson laundry facility

Certain racially charged incidents at the laundry facility at Davidson show how members of the college community did not always respect the workers at the Laundry Facility. On September 28th, 2003, a student spray painted the symbol "KKK" in three locations on the walkway by the laundry facility and exterior walls of the building. The placement of the vandalism on the laundry building was likely not an accident but purposeful because most workers in the building were Black. Davidson student Mbye Njie photographed the writing to ensure there would be a record of it, and observed several white classmates walk by the vandalism without any acknowledgement or visible reaction.⁹ Two weeks later, he wrote an article in *The Davidsonian* discussing that experience and critiquing the school's lack of response and inability to adequately deal with this and other racist incidents. He wrote:

⁶ Recommendations of the Special Sub-committee on Coeducation of the Student Life Committee, June 1972.

⁷ Disorienting & Reorienting: Recovering and Analyzing Legacies of Colonialism, Slavery, and White Supremacy at Davidson College, accessed February 10th, 2020. <http://disorientingdavidson.com>.

⁸ Stacks and Stovall, 35.

⁹ Disorienting & Reorienting: Recovering and Analyzing Legacies of Colonialism, Slavery, and White Supremacy at Davidson College.

To be honest, I cannot even fathom telling prospective students to come to this school. I have seen how the school has reacted to actual acts of racism and not just signs and symbols of prejudice and hate. How am I supposed to also support and sell a school that is elated to have a 5.8 % African American population in their freshman class?¹⁰

Discussion of this event populated the opinion pages in *The Davidsonian* for weeks following the incident. Students criticized Davidson's lack of action, writing: "the focus of this school is to remain a reputable institution in the eyes of the alum and future incoming students."¹¹ I was unable to find any evidence of a response from the administration on this incident and when I talked to a current staff member at Lula Bell's Resource center, she had never heard of the act of vandalism.

In May 2004, the Laundry Facility building underwent another change when the college decided to rename the laundry facility "Lula Bell Houston Laundry" in honor of laundry worker Lula Bell Houston. Houston worked at the laundry facility for 57 years and in her obituary was described as a "beloved presence at Davidson College."¹² While there is no doubt that Houston impacted many students' lives in a positive way, these kind words about her might raise some questions as to how much the college community truly supported the laundry workers, especially given the indifferent reaction to the racist incident. At her retirement party in 2004, Davidson College President Robert Vagt spoke, describing her as "a biological mother to four children but a mom to all who needed her."¹³ After making the announcement about naming the laundry facility after Houston,

¹⁰ Mbye Njie. *The Davidsonian*, October 2003.

¹¹ Njie.

¹² Yolanda Gilliam, "Lula Bell Houston," Davidson College: In Memoriam, November 27, 2017, <https://blogs.davidson.edu/memoriam/2017/11/lula-bell-houston/>.

¹³ Hon. John M. Spratt Jr. "Honoring Lula Bell Houston," in the House of Representatives of South Carolina, May 13, 2004.

Vagt remarked that it was “a grand moment in the history of Davidson College.”¹⁴

Houston returned to the laundry facility part-time for three years before eventually retiring.

It is revealing to view this renaming of the laundry center in the context of other the naming of other buildings on Davidson College’s campus. Most of Davidson’s buildings are named after people or families who have donated significant funds to the college such as Belk, Chambers, and Chidsey. The College’s choice to name the laundry facility after Houston revealed both her impact on campus and how this naming event might have been used as an opportunity for the college to publicly celebrate (and even apologize to) their staff members. Although the hate crime outside the laundry facility just months before is not explicitly named as a factor in the choice to name the laundry facility after Houston, I would argue the two are related. This is not to undercut Houston’s contributions to the College, but to acknowledge the renaming allowed the Davidson administration to redirect the negative attention surrounding the racist vandalism of the laundry facility and give the building a positive connotation.

In 2015, the college chose to discontinue the laundry service. Current Davidson President Carol Quillen explained this decision, saying that Davidson made this change in an effort to “align [their] resources to meet [their] educational priorities.” The \$400,000 spent keeping the laundry service in operation could be channeled to “dozens of other academic and residential activities,” she argued.¹⁵ Students pushed back against the

¹⁴ Spratt.

¹⁵ Nick Anderson. “Davidson College to fold a rare student perk: Full-service laundry,” *The Washington Post* (May 2014). https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/education/davidson-college-phases-out-a-rare-student-perk-full-service-laundry/2014/05/08/71ede3f4-d611-11e3-aae8-c2d44bd79778_story.html.

phasing out of the laundry service, and it took a year to complete because the college wanted to help the fourteen people who worked there to find positions elsewhere.

In 2016, a committee of students and professors sent out a survey to better assess food insecurity among students. The results of this survey highlighted areas of need on campus and contributed to the concept for a resource center. A year after the survey was sent out, Davidson created Lula Bell's Resource Center.¹⁶ Decker Anstrom and his spouse Sherry Hiemstra made a generous donation to the college on behalf of their late son, Tom, a member of the class of 2004 who died from a heart condition in 2015. These funds made the new resource center a possibility. The Anstroms decided to name the resource center "Lula Bell's" to honor Lula Bell Houston's legacy in the repurposed building.¹⁷

The building which now houses Lula Bell's Resource Center can be used to teach us about Davidson College's fraught history regarding race. As an institution whose students and faculty once enslaved people, Davidson must confront its difficult past to move forward. In my opinion, a resource center to serve low-income students coupled with the reallocation of money to bring in more underprivileged students shows Davidson's commitment to making campus a place where every student has the resources that they need to be successful. However, as we move forward, we must strive to support all members of our college community, taking real action when action is needed and speaking out against injustice. It is not merely enough to apologize for past mistakes-- we

¹⁶ Lizzie Kane, "For Whom Lula Bell's Tolls: Survey Proves Food Insecurity is Still a Problem on Campus"

The Davidsonian, September 2019. <http://www.davidsonian.com/for-whom-lula-bells-tolls/>.

¹⁷ Bill Giduz. "The New Lula Bell's is Davidson College's Latest Student Resource," *News of Davidson*, October 2017.

<https://newsfordavidson.org/2017/10/17/1834/the-new-lula-bells-is-davidson-colleges-newest-student-resource/>

must strive as a school community to be actively anti-racist, inclusive, and courageous in the face of injustice each day.

Bibliography

- Anderson, Nick. "Davidson College to fold a rare student perk: Full-service laundry," *The Washington Post* (May 2014).
https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/education/davidson-college-phases-out-a-rare-student-perk-full-service-laundry/2014/05/08/71ede3f4-d611-11e3-aae8-c2d44bd79778_story.html.
- Disorienting & Reorienting: Recovering and Analyzing Legacies of Colonialism, Slavery, and White Supremacy at Davidson College, accessed February 10th, 2020.
<http://disorientingdavidson.com>.
- Giduz, Bill. "The New Lula Bell's is Davidson College's Latest Student Resource," *News of Davidson*, October 2017. <https://newsfordavidson.org/2017/10/17/1834/the-new-lula-bells-is-davidson-colleges-newest-student-resource/>.
- Gilliam, Yolanda. "Lula Bell Houston." Davidson College: In Memoriam, November 27, 2017.
<https://blogs.davidson.edu/memorial/2017/11/lula-bell-houston/>.
- Kane, Lizzie. "For Whom Lula Bell's Tolls: Survey Proves Food Insecurity is Still a Problem on Campus" *The Davidsonian*, September 2019 <http://www.davidsonian.com/for-whom-lula-bells-tolls/>.
- "Lula Bell's Resource Center," Davidson College, accessed February 8th, 2020,
<https://www.davidson.edu/offices-and-services/civic-engagement/lula-bells-resource-center>.
- Njie, Mbye. *The Davidsonian*, October 2003.
- Recommendations of the Special Sub-committee on Coeducation of the Student Life Committee, June 1972.
- Spratt, Hon. John M. Jr. "Honoring Lula Bell Houston," in the House of Representatives of South Carolina, May 13, 2004.
- Stacks, C.W. and Michael Stovall, *The Guide*, January/February 1972.
- Washburn, Mark. "Davidson College Scrubbing Historic Perk for Students," *The Charlotte Observer* (May 2014).
<https://www.charlotteobserver.com/news/local/article9119600.html>.