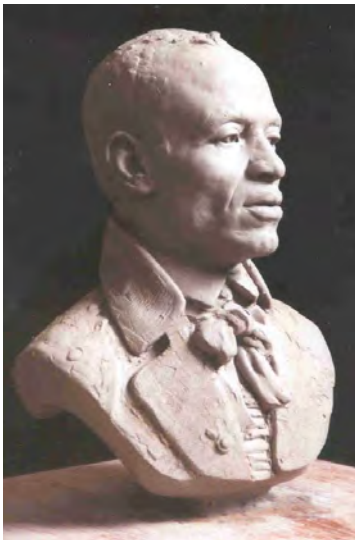
Chavis Hall

> “Prejudice...blinds the mind and forbids free and open investigation after truth.”
>
> –John Chavis

Chavis Hall

JOHN CHAVIS WAS AN ALUMNUS OF WASHINGTON AND LEE AND THE FIRST AFRICAN-AMERICAN KNOWN TO RECEIVE A COLLEGE EDUCATION IN THE UNITED STATES. Born in 1763 in North Carolina, Chavis was a Revolutionary War soldier. In 1792, he began studying for the ministry at the College of New Jersey (now Princeton University). Chavis moved to Virginia in 1795 and completed his studies at Washington Academy (now Washington and Lee University). He was licensed to preach by the Lexington Presbytery in 1800 and became a circuit-riding missionary. By 1809, Chavis had settled in Raleigh, North Carolina, and, in addition to preaching, had opened a school in his home where he taught both black and white students, including several prominent North Carolinians. Chavis died in 1838.



JOHN Chavis

1763–1838

John Chavis was born a free black in 1763 in North Carolina. He enlisted in 1778 as a soldier in the Revolutionary War, serving three years in the 5th Virginia Regiment. Although there are few records that document his early life, Chavis's name appears on the roster of Virginia Soldiers of the American Revolution. His home is listed as Mecklenburg, Virginia.

> To supplement his income as a circuit rider, Chavis opened a school in his home near Raleigh, North Carolina, where he taught both white and black children.

In 1792, he began studying for the ministry under Rev. John Witherspoon at the College of New Jersey (now Princeton University). A deeply religious man who had been evangelized by the Presbyterian Church, Chavis intended to enter the Presbyterian ministry.

When Witherspoon died in 1794, Chavis returned to Virginia, where he began to study at Liberty Hall Academy in Lexington in 1795. He was a student when the school changed its name to Washington Academy in 1798.

Chavis completed his studies in 1799. Records from the Rockbridge County Court, where Chavis applied for freedmen's papers in 1802, refer to his studies at Washington Academy: "On the motion of Reverend John Chavis, a black man. It is ordered that the clerk of this court certify that the said [John] Chavis has been known to the Court for several years. . . and that he has always. . . been considered as a freeman, and they believe him to be such, and that he has always while in the county conducted himself in a decent orderly and respectable manner, and also that he has been a student at Washington Accademy [sic] where they believe he whent [sic] through a regular course of accademical [sic] studies."

The Lexington Presbytery awarded Chavis "a license to preach the Gospel" at its meeting at the Timber Ridge

> “Here was a prominent free man of color who had received an education at my college! And yet, John Chavis was one of Washington and Lee’s best kept secrets.”
>
> –Theodore C. DeLaney Jr. ’85

Meeting House on Nov. 19, 1800, thereby making him the first African-American to become so licensed by the Presbyterian Church in the United States. He preached his first sermon at Lexington Presbyterian Church one year later. He was then recommended to the care of the Hanover Presbytery and was employed by the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church “as a missionary among people of his own colour,” although some records indicate that he also preached to many whites on his missionary tours.

After spending several years in Virginia, Chavis returned to North Carolina and joined the Orange Presbytery where he continued to preach. But he may be best known for his work as an educator in North Carolina.

By 1809 Chavis had settled in Raleigh. To supplement his income as a circuit rider, Chavis opened a school in his home near Raleigh, North Carolina, where he taught both white and black children. Initially, he taught the races together. But after receiving objections from white parents, he began teaching the white children during the day and the black children in the evenings. Several prominent North Carolinians were among his white students, including future North Carolina Senator Willie P. Mangum with whom Chavis developed a close and lasting friendship. Sen.

Mangum was a founder of the Whig Party and a candidate for president in 1836.

At least one account lists Chavis as a slaveholder, and historians have noted that many free blacks of Chavis's time may have been technically considered slaveholders because they elected to "own" a family member, including a wife, to protect that person. Records do not indicate whether or not this was the case with Chavis. Through his letters to Sen. Mangum, Chavis's political views were clear: he advocated education for blacks, accommodation with Southern white people, and gradual emancipation of slaves.

Indeed, through his nearly 30 years of conducting his school, Chavis taught many free blacks. Following Nat Turner's 1831 raid, the North Carolina legislature enacted laws that banned the teaching of black children and made it illegal for slaves or free blacks to preach in public. Chavis was 69 years old at the time and became dependent upon the financial support of the Presbyterian Church for the remainder of his life. He died in 1838.

Many historians and other writers describe Chavis as the most extraordinary black man in the antebellum South. For instance, historian Charles Lee Smith focused on Chavis in a section of his 1888 circular for the U.S. Bureau of Education on "The History of Education in North Carolina." Referring to Chavis, Smith wrote that "[o]ne of the most remarkable characters in the educational history of North Carolina was a negro. His life finds no parallel in the South, nor, so far as the writer is aware, in any part of our country."

In his paper, "John Chavis: 1763-1838: A Social-Psychological Study," Gossie Harold Hudson concludes: "That Chavis participated so vigorously in politics, obtained the licentiate of the Presbyterian Church, and was principal of some of the better schools in North Carolina for both blacks and

whites, despite the presence of slavery and the tremendous handicap of color, is a living testimonial to an exceptional man with an exceptional mind."

Joseph Lacy Seawell, former clerk of the North Carolina Supreme Court, profiled Chavis in the New York Times Magazine in 1924. In the article titled "Black Teacher of Southern Whites," Seawell called Chavis "without any exception the most remarkable black man who ever lived in the United States."

Washington and Lee historian Theodore C. DeLaney Jr., a 1985 graduate of the university, called Chavis one of W&L's "best kept secrets" in a Convocation address in Lee Chapel in January 2001. In his address, DeLaney described how, as an undergraduate, he first encountered Chavis while reading "The Mind of the Old South" by Clement Eaton. Said DeLaney: "Here was a prominent free man of color who had received an education at my college! And yet, John Chavis was one of Washington and Lee's best kept secrets. No one ever talked about him, and there were no plaques or buildings commemorating him. Yet, he is important and deserves a more visible place in the history of the institution."

A Brief History of the Building

Constructed in 1840 as part of a major building effort at Washington College, Chavis Hall was originally designed as a student dormitory. It replaced Graham Hall, which had been a combination dormitory and classroom building. Graham Hall was torn down in 1835. When Chavis Hall was built, the structure provided balance to the set of buildings that were known as the Main Buildings or the Washington College Buildings and comprised the Center Building (now Washington Hall) flanked by the Lyceum (now Payne Hall) to the southwest and then the new dormitory to the northeast.

Chavis Hall was significantly altered in 1877 to house the Lewis Brooks Museum of Biological and Geological Specimens. That museum was dismantled during a major renovation of the Washington College Building in 1936.

As part of that renovation, the trustees voted in June 1936 to give formal names to the three individual buildings. The Center Building was named Washington Hall. “Old George,” the statue of Washington, had been installed on that building’s pinnacle in 1844.

The southwest unit was named Payne Hall in recognition of Virginia-bred John Barton Payne of Chicago who was a major contributor to the 1936 renovation project.

The northeast unit was named Robinson Hall to recognize John Robinson, one of the institution’s earliest benefactors. After helping Washington Academy rebuild after a fire in 1803 burned the building to the ground, Robinson was elected a trustee. He would eventually leave his entire estate, valued at nearly $50,000, to the institution to

---

Chavis Hall was significantly altered in 1877 to house the Lewis Brooks Museum of Biological and Geological Specimens.

establish a professorship of Geology and Architecture and to fund prizes to two graduating seniors each year. He was credited with financing the construction of the Center Building, in whole or in part.

When Robinson died in 1826, his bequest to Washington College included the enslaved men and women he owned. Accounts differ slightly on the total number of enslaved people Robinson owned, but it ranged from 73 to 84. In the will, Robinson stipulated that the College could hire out the enslaved workers to members of the surrounding community, and the proceeds from those arrangements benefited the College over the next decade. Robinson's will also required the College to retain ownership of these women and men for "at least" 50 years. Faced with dire financial circumstances, however, the trustees sold most of the enslaved people in 1836 to a Lynchburg businessman who took them to work in the Mississippi cotton fields; others were sold to local residents over the next two decades. Robinson is buried on the W&L campus underneath the obelisk to the southeast of Chavis Hall.

In 2013, Washington and Lee conducted a major restoration of the building as part of its renovation of the five buildings that comprise the Colonnade, which was designated a National Historic Landmark by the U.S. Secretary of the Interior in 1972. The construction resulted in the discovery of a trove of 19th-century artifacts that were uncovered by W&L archaeologists. The findings included such items as a complete pocketknife, bone toothbrushes, slates, medicine vials, and ammunition of various kinds. Most were from the early 1800s up until about 1840 and likely came from Graham Hall, the combination dormitory and classroom building that occupied the site from 1804 until its demolition.

In August 2013, President Emeritus Kenneth P. Ruscio established the Working Group on the History of African-

During the 2013 Colonnade restoration project, findings included a complete pocketknife, bone toothbrushes, slates, medicine vials, and ammunition of various kinds.

Americans at W&L to examine the role of African-Americans, including the enslaved people. As part of its work, that group initiated the installation of a historical marker on the east side of Chavis Hall to recognize those enslaved men and women that Washington College inherited from John Robinson, owned and then sold. That marker, "A Difficult, Yet Undeniable, History," displays the names of these people as they were recorded in the minutes of the institution's trustees.

In October 2018, the trustees elected to name the building Chavis Hall to honor alumnus John Chavis, the first African-American to receive a college education in the United States when he attended Liberty Hall Academy/ Washington Academy in the late 1790s.

A renaming ceremony was held for Chavis Hall in March 2019.

SOURCES

BOOKS

Ashe, Samuel A. "History of North Carolina." 2 vols. Greensboro, N.C.: Charles L. Van Noppen: 1908.

Ballagh, James Curtis. "History of Slavery in Virginia." Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1902.

Franklin, John Hope. "The Free Negro in North Carolina, 1790-1860." Chapel Hill, N.C.: The University of North Carolina Press, 1943.

Othow, Helen Chavis. "John Chavis: African American Patriot, Preacher, Teacher, and Mentor." Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2001.

Smith, Charles Lee. "The History of Education in North Carolina." Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1988.

Woodson, Carter G. "The History of the Negro Church." Washington, D.C.: The Associated Publishers, 1921. Pg. 67-70.

ARTICLES

Hudson, Gossie Harold (Spring 1979). John Chavis, 1763-1838: A Social-Psychological Study. "The Journal of Negro History," 64 (2), 142-156.

Knight, Edward W. (July 1930). Notes on John Chavis. "The North Carolina Historical Review," 7 (3), 326-345.

Research Department of the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History (January 1924). Free Negro Owners of Slaves in the United States in 1830. "The Journal of Negro History," 9 (1). 41-85.

Seawell, Joseph Lacy (1924, May 18). Black Teacher of Southern Whites. "The New York Times Magazine," p. 8.

Weeks, Stephen B. (February 1914). John Chavis: Antebellum Negro Preacher and Teacher. "Southern Workman," 101-106.

OTHER MATERIALS

DeLaney, Theodore. Founder's Day Lecture, Washington and Lee University, January 19, 2001.

"Rev. John Chavis, 1762/1763 – 1838" Presbyterian Heritage Center. Retrieved from http://www.phcmontreat.org/chavis.html

Johnson, Tekla Ali. John Chavis (1763-1838). BlackPast. Retrieved from https://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/chavis-john-1763-1838/

Paramore, Rebecca. John Chavis. Dictionary of North Carolina Biography. Retrieved from www.ncpedia.org/biography/chavis-john.

WASHINGTON AND LEE
UNIVERSITY

Lexington, Virginia