

Harry Towles Davis

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Harry Towles Davis, a geologist, was second director of the North Carolina State Museum (1937-1966) and a founder of the North Carolina Bird Club, which is now Carolina Bird Club, Inc. He served CBC as president (1962-1964) and editor of the Newsletter.

A native of Buxton, N.C., Mr. Davis was born 7 July 1896, one of 12 children in the family of Dr. and Mrs. J.J. Davis (John 1972). As the first physician to serve the Cape Hatteras community, Dr. Davis was concerned about the early education of all the children, not just his own. He solved the problem by building a one-room school house and hiring a teacher from the mainland to hold classes 8 months of the year. When not in school, the youngsters explored the plant and animal life of the region. Young Harry Davis grew up loving to hunt and fish.

The children's education was greatly enhanced by the many interesting visitors who stayed with the Davis family while conducting scientific studies on the isolated Outer Banks (John 1972). These included Fessenden, Thiessen, and DeForest, the pioneers in radio; T.K. Bruner, secretary of the N.C. Board of Agriculture; H.H. Brimley, curator of the State Museum; and Collier Cobb, a professor of geology at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, who went to Hatteras to study the sand dunes. According to family tradition, Thomas A. Edison was also a guest in the home, but Harry Davis had no personal recollection of the great inventor. It is likely that Edison visited Hatteras because Reginald L. Fessenden, who had served as his chief chemist, conducted experiments with wireless telegraphy on the North Carolina coast, beginning in 1901. One of the two 50-foot towers was at Hatteras (Stick 1958).

When Harry and his siblings reached high-school age, the Davis family moved to the mainland so the children could continue their education (John 1972). Dr. Davis bought a farm near Beaufort, on the Newport River. During the summer, the Davis boys cleared and tilled the farm. They also sailed the family's schooner *Maggie*, a 55-foot boat that helped to supplement the doctor's income. The boys used the boat to carry melons and potatoes to the market at Norfolk, and they had a contract to deliver wood to Coast Guard Stations. Later some of Harry's brothers joined the U.S. Navy, and two of them retired with the rank of rear admiral.

In 1915 Davis was old enough to enter college, but he still lacked a year or so of finishing his studies at the high school in Beaufort (John 1972). Nonetheless, he entered the University at Chapel Hill. During his first year, which was devoted to liberal arts courses, he quickly worked off his conditions in Latin and mathematics. Because he did better in English than in his other courses, he decided to pursue a career in journalism. However, before the beginning of his third year, he knew that he definitely wanted to study geology and therefore renewed his acquaintance with Professor Cobb. He was a laboratory assistant during his senior year and graduated in 1919 with an A.B. in geology. He served as a geology instructor at Carolina for the 1919-1920 school year and received his M.A. degree in 1920.

While Davis was seriously considering the offer of a job as a petroleum geologist in Oklahoma, his friend W.W. Eagle resigned from the staff of the State Museum to study

medicine (John 1972). On 1 July 1920, Harry Davis became assistant curator, working under his father's old friend, H.H. Brimley. Davis later became assistant director and curator of geology. Following Brimley's retirement in 1937, Davis was named director of the museum.

Near the museum in downtown Raleigh there was a hat shop operated by the Phillips sisters. Roberta, whom he called Bert, married Harry Davis, and for many years Bert's widowed sister, Carrie Phillips Hubbard, made her home with the Davises.

In 1922 the building that housed the Agriculture Department (formerly the National Hotel and long in need of replacement) was torn down (John 1972) to make way for the handsome building that now stands across Edenton Street from the State Capitol. When no suitable space could be found elsewhere in Raleigh, Brimley and Davis had to dismantle all the exhibits so the Agriculture Building annexes occupied by the museum could be converted into temporary offices. Some of the exhibit halls reopened in 1925, but all nine were not ready for visitors until 1928. The front lobby of the present museum building was rebuilt during the 1922-1928 period, and its marble floor was laid in 1936. However, the rest of the Agriculture Building annex was not rebuilt until 1952-1953. For a second time Harry Davis, now the director, went through the difficult process of taking down, storing, and reorganizing the museum's exhibits.

During his years at the State Museum, Davis enlarged and improved the geological and archaeological collections. For many years, Davis operated the only laboratory in the state equipped to analyze and identify mineral specimens (John 1972). During World War II, he expedited the search for scarce mineral resources by analyzing specimens sent to the museum. He also helped to publicize the state's numerous rocks and minerals by preparing exhibits and writing educational materials for distribution to the public. He especially enjoyed helping young people identify the specimens in their rock collections.

Perhaps because he and his wife never had children of their own, Davis found great satisfaction in working with young people. He was active in the Boy Scout movement and received the Silver Beaver award in 1934 (Anon. 1978a). As president of the North Carolina Archaeological Society, Davis obtained funding and organized groups of young men to assist with the excavation of Town Creek Indian Mound in Montgomery County, N.C. This work was done by the State Museum in cooperation with federal relief agencies (WPA, NYA), the N. C. Archaeological Society, the Department of Conservation, and the University of North Carolina. Davis encouraged many young naturalists in the pursuit of ornithology and herpetology. He even helped several of his young friends through college and eventually endowed a scholarship fund at his alma mater. He also assisted students by making museum records available for their graduate studies and by offering part-time jobs to those who needed extra income. John B. Funderburg, the present director of the State Museum, is one who benefited from having access to Brimley's old records, but he declined the offer of a job moving specimens during the 1952-1953 reconstruction project.

Davis was involved in the salvage of two of the museum's whale specimens, the Sperm Whale found at Wrightsville Beach in 1928 (Odum 1949, Brittain 1985) and the True's Beaked Whale (MacNeill 1940, Potter 1986). He was also one of the first bird banders to work in North Carolina. He particularly enjoyed leading expeditions to band colonial seabirds, and he helped many people, including this writer, learn the techniques of bird banding. The museum still receives occasional returns from the many Royal Terns

that Davis banded. Thus his work continues to provide useful information for ornithologists.

Davis and his longtime friend David L. Wray, then an entomologist with the Department of Agriculture, updated *Birds of North Carolina* for republication in 1959. Dr. Wray describes Davis as “an all-around naturalist” (Anon. 1978b). Davis’s broad understanding of natural history probably dated back to his boyhood in coastal North Carolina and was no doubt enhanced by his association with H.H. and C.S. Brimley.

Other publications by Davis include *Poisonous Snakes of Eastern North America with First Aid Guide* (Davis and Brimley 1944) and several contributions to *The Chat* (Davis 1948a, 1948b, 1951, 1953, 1958, 1959, 1960, 1961, 1964). During World War II thousands of the snake booklets were sold to the armed forces. Davis rewrote the pamphlet in 1966, and it has since been extensively revised and retitled by William M. Palmer, curator of lower vertebrates at the State Museum.

Palmer remembers Davis as a slightly built man, “undoubtedly wiry in his youth and tough in his later years” (Anon. 1978b). Although he was a quiet person with an even disposition and a dry wit, he was not above indulging in a bit of horseplay. Once, while on a field trip to Carteret County with young Palmer, Davis spotted a big Copperhead beside the road. Hopping out of the car, he put his foot on the snake, which then, to the horror of the 15-year-old boy, struck Davis’s leg. Davis paid no attention to the bite and calmly captured the specimen for the museum collections. Only later did Davis reveal the secret of his remarkable immunity to snakebite—a prosthesis. He had lost one leg as the result of a boyhood hunting accident.

Davis had a strong sense of civic responsibility, which was reflected in his membership in the Raleigh Rotary Club and in services performed for the State Employees Credit Union. As president of Raleigh Bird Club, he was also a leader in the movement to have Raleigh declared a Municipal Bird Sanctuary on 8 May 1946 (Deaton 1946). As president of the N.C. Archaeological Society, he helped further our knowledge of Native American culture.

Many people remember Harry Davis for the kindnesses that he casually bestowed upon friends and acquaintances. When children visited his office, he could almost always find some small treasure hidden among the piles of papers, books, and cigar boxes that always covered his desk—a key ring, a piece of candy, a pretty rock or seashell. Older visitors might be surprised months later by the arrival of a newspaper or magazine clipping, or perhaps a personal letter, pertaining to something the two had discussed.

If Mr. Davis can be criticized for anything during his tenure as director, it is for his fiscal conservatism. Instead of spending every dollar appropriated and campaigning vigorously for budget increases, Davis did everything possible to keep expenditures to a minimum. When the director was unexpectedly hospitalized in the early 1960s, the acting director discovered that the museum needed to renew its membership in certain professional societies, but there was no money in the budget for this purpose. Mr. Davis had been paying the dues out of his own pocket to save money for the State (David Adams, pers. comm.).

One of the best moves Davis made, in terms of financial planning for the museum, involved the North Carolina Bird Club. When T. Gilbert Pearson and the Brimley brothers decided to revise *Birds of North Carolina*, which they had originally published through the N.C. Geological and Economic Survey in 1919, there was no money to cover the

printing. Davis arranged for the Department of Agriculture to sponsor the project, and North Carolina Bird Club members contributed money to pay for extra color plates. Profits from the sale of the 1942 bird book were deposited in a special account to pay printing costs for future educational publications. These include the poisonous snake booklets (Davis and Brimley 1944) and the 1959 edition of *Birds of North Carolina* as well as *A Whale Called Trouble* (Brittain 1985) and museum publications in the process of being printed today. Now known as the N.C. Department of Agriculture Museum Extension Fund, "the bird book account" still provides the financial resources for numerous activities not covered by appropriations from the General Assembly. People who shop at the museum bookstore, sign up for public programs, or subscribe to *Brimleyana* all make their checks payable to the NCDA Museum Extension Fund.

When Davis retired as museum director effective 1 January 1966, Carolina Bird Club named him an Honorary Member for Life (Potter 1986) and presented him with a decorative box to hold his ever-present supply of cigars. As director emeritus and curator of geology, Davis maintained an office at the museum but served without pay until failing health forced him to enter a Carteret County nursing home. He died at Sea Level Hospital on 6 September 1978 at the age of 81. He is buried beside his wife at Oakwood Cemetery in Raleigh.

William L. Hamnett, who succeeded Davis as museum director, recalls that Harry always had plenty of time to talk with people about natural history. "He would just perk up when someone wanted to know something about the birds," Hamnett said.

Bill Palmer, who was only 8 or 9 years old when he first visited the museum and met Davis, said, "He had a museum-like philosophy. He never threw anything away . . . Harry Davis was a prince of a gentleman."

Acknowledgments. Several past and present members of the staff of the North Carolina State Museum shared personal recollections of Harry T. Davis. These include John B. Funderburg, the present director; William L. Hamnett, a former director; Grace John and Julia Nowell, former secretaries; and William M. Palmer, curator of lower vertebrates. Funderburg and Palmer read a preliminary draft of the manuscript and made suggestions for which I am grateful.

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On 8 October 1957, Director Harry T. Davis and Commissioner of Agriculture L.Y. (Stag) Ballentine checked the temporary identification labels on the timber section while they were being prepared for exhibit following renovations made at the N.C. State Museum during the mid-1950s. These large slabs of wood were collected by Gifford Pinchot and W.W. Ashe, who surveyed North Carolina's forest resources during the 1890s. The specimens were a major part of the national forestry display at the Paris Exposition of 1901. Most of the 60 sections now hang in the stairwells of the museum.

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