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## DAVID CALDWELL AND HIS LOG COLLEGE<sup>1</sup>

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I am not sure whether I was invited to prepare a paper on David Caldwell or on his log college which he conducted for forty years, but since things which are equal to each other are equal to the same thing, Dr. Caldwell and his log college form an inseparable and composite picture of one of the South's early educational institutions.

Judge Archibald Murphey in an address before the literary societies of the University of North Carolina in 1827 said: "The most prominent and useful of the early schools was kept by Dr. David Caldwell of Guilford County. . . . The usefulness of Dr. Caldwell to the literature of North Carolina will never be sufficiently appreciated."<sup>2</sup> Dr. Charles Lee Smith, in a sketch of Dr. Caldwell, said: "His history is more identified with the moral and educational history of North Carolina than is that of any other one man of the 18th century."<sup>3</sup> Notwithstanding these encomiums—which all of our contemporary authors confirm—the fact still remains that our memory of Dr. Caldwell seems to have gone into an eclipse.

In order to appreciate what the man did and the circumstances under which it was accomplished, it is important to know something of the history of his life. The early years of David Caldwell constitute a striking prelude to his accomplishments in later life. He was born on a Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, farm in 1725, the eldest of four sons. When he was seventeen years old his father apprenticed him to a house mechanic with whom he worked until he became twenty-one years of age. He then worked four

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<sup>1</sup> A paper read at the meeting of the Historical Society of North Carolina at University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, Nov. 4, 1949.

<sup>2</sup> William Henry Hoyt, editor, *The Papers of Archibald D. Murphey* (Raleigh: The North Carolina Historical Commission, 1914), II, 355-356.

<sup>3</sup> Charles Lee Smith, *The History of Education in North Carolina* (Bureau of Education, Contributions to American History, No. 3. Washington: Government Printing Office, 1888), 30.

more years on his own account as a house carpenter. Upon reaching the age of twenty-five he had but little education and was apparently unambitious. About this time he attended a religious revival and was converted. With his spiritual awakening came a consuming desire to obtain an education and to devote his life to the service of mankind both intellectually and spiritually. With a religious fervor and a supreme determination, he started from scratch, first in a grammar school through all the grades, and thence to the College of New Jersey (now Princeton University) where he entered the freshman class. At the time he became a student at Princeton the requirements for admission to the freshman class were as follows: "Candidates for admission into the lowest or freshman class must be capable of composing grammatical Latin, translating Virgil, Cicero's Orations and the Four Evangelists in Greek—and by a later order must understand the principal rules of vulgar arithmetic." With these entrance requirements, imagine the requirements of the sophomore, junior, and senior classes. It is recorded that he frequently studied all night—sitting up with his clothes on—nothing daunted him, for he had a great vision and an insatiable desire for learning.

When Caldwell finally graduated from Princeton he taught school a year, then returned to Princeton to study for the ministry, and instructed classes in Greek while completing his course in theology. He thus devoted fourteen years of his life to becoming a finished scholar in the classics and in theology. Before actively entering the ministry he was submitted to the most gruelling tests by the Synods of Pennsylvania and New York (which he passed with honors) and finally in 1765 was ordained a minister. He was among the first of the Presbyterian ministers who came to North Carolina to join that ever increasing host of Scotch and Scotch-Irish Presbyterians who had taken up residence in the state and who have contributed so much to the intellectual and religious culture of the state.

While studying for the ministry at Princeton he had promised some of his neighbors who were removing from Pennsylvania to the North Carolina colony that when he had finished his education he would join them. This he did. Two churches—the Alamance and the Buffalo—had been organized in what was later to be Guilford County, and he was installed as pastor of both—

a position which he retained for sixty years—but more of this later on.

In 1766, four years before the county of Guilford was established, David Caldwell married Rachel Craighead, the daughter of Dr. Alexander Craighead, of Charlotte, and they established their home a few miles west of what is now Greensboro. His salary as minister of the two churches was only \$200 a year, to be paid in grain. Since this meagre income would not support him and his family, he purchased a farm, built a two-story log cabin with a chimney in the middle, and opened there a school. With two short intermissions occasioned by the Revolutionary War, he continued to conduct this school for forty years—and what a school: Caruthers says that it attained the greatest reputation of any school south of the Potomac River. Students came there from many parts of North Carolina and from every state in the South. There were usually from fifty to sixty students in attendance and the majority of them found living accommodations in the homes throughout the scattered neighborhood.<sup>4</sup>

This log cabin schoolhouse served North Carolina and the South as an academy, a college, and a theological seminary and many of his pupils became eminent as statesmen, lawyers, judges, physicians, and ministers; some were congressmen and five became governors of states; seven were licensed by the Orange Presbytery in one day and there were not more than three or four members of that presbytery who had not been his pupils, while nearly all of the young men who came into the Presbyterian ministry in North Carolina and in the states to the south and west of it for many years had been trained in his school. It was said of him that Caldwell was instrumental in bringing more men into the learned profession than was any other man of his day in the southern states. There were among his students Judge Archibald D. Murphey, Judge Spruce McCoy, Governor John M. Morehead, Lewis Williams, and many others. His students were qualified for entrance into the junior class at Princeton University and to the University of North Carolina which was established later. Governor Morehead, who attended his school when Dr. Caldwell was eighty years old, matriculated at the University

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<sup>4</sup> E. W. Caruthers, *A Sketch of the Life and Character of the Rev. David Caldwell, D. D.* (Greensboro: Swaim and Sherwood, 1842), 30.

of North Carolina for the half-advanced junior class and was ever ready to pay homage to Dr. Caldwell's instruction and inspiration. But the fame of his school rests not only upon the excellence of his instruction but also upon the fact of its continuity and longevity and the further fact that the school was begun ten years before the Declaration of Independence was signed; all of the other academies in North Carolina came later and existed for a much shorter time.

As there were no doctors within a twenty-mile radius of his home, Caldwell took up the study of medicine and equipped himself, along with his other duties and accomplishments, for the practice of medicine, which he continued throughout his life.

The wisdom and judgment of Caldwell were not only demonstrated in his school and long pastorates of two churches but were conspicuously exemplified in the battle of Alamance, which was a historic event in the struggle for freedom by the North Carolina colonists. It was fought only a few miles from Alamance Church and nearly all of the male members of the congregations of both his churches were active Regulators and engaged in this battle. Governor Tryon came to the battle scene with a force of 1,100 well-trained and well-equipped men, supplied with a plenty of ammunition. The Regulators comprised an unorganized crowd of 2,000 poorly equipped men, with little ammunition and minus any outstanding leader, when they met in battle array. Caldwell was deeply interested in the outcome of the battle because he was sympathetic with the purposes of the Regulators, but he doubted seriously the wisdom of an open conflict at that time. He was present at this battle (but took no part in it) and as an envoy sought in every way possible to avoid bloodshed. He visited Governor Tryon's headquarters and undertook to bring about a settlement, but in spite of his every effort the conflict was inevitable and proved to be the bloodiest contest between the British government and the colonists prior to the Declaration of Independence.

Here again Caldwell displayed his sane leadership by advising the Regulators to surrender and await further developments. Some of the hotheads among the Regulators at first questioned his loyalty, but later he began a series of sermons to

his congregations on liberty and justice and as a result all of his congregation, when the climax came, joined with the other colonists in approving the Declaration of Independence. From then on he threw his influence and energies in support of the Revolution, and his name and fame was known throughout this section. When Cornwallis marched his army in, preparatory to the Battle of Guilford Courthouse, he encamped his soldiers on Caldwell's farm and offered a reward of 200 pounds for Caldwell's arrest. From all accounts the depredation of his soldiers was complete. They took possession of his home, drove his wife and children away, destroyed the furniture, and, worst of all, they destroyed his splendid library. To make a complete job of it, they secured a big pot and carried his books by the armfuls out into the yard and burned them in it. Caldwell had to flee for his safety and for weeks lived in a swamp where he had improvised a hut. While he was in hiding an interesting incident occurred. A company of American soldiers came to Mrs. Caldwell with the story that they were revolutionists and wanted to establish a connection with her husband. After some parleys, she, being ignorant of the fact that they were Tories, told them where he was in hiding. They sought him out the next morning, but he had fled. He recounted afterwards that what had actually occurred was that while asleep that night he had a dream that Tory soldiers had captured him. He awoke in the night, startled from the dream, but went to sleep again; later he had the same dream—that he was being sought after. He got up and left his hiding place and thus avoided capture.<sup>5</sup>

Caruthers tells of another interesting episode which illustrated the character and courage of Mrs. Caldwell and occurred while Cornwallis's troops were stationed in her home. The troops were pillaging the house and came upon a valuable tablecloth which her mother had given her as a bridal present. She grabbed the tablecloth and a scuffle for its possession ensued. Realizing that she was about to lose it, but still holding on, she faced the crowd and with a womanly eloquence asked if they were not born of women; if they had no wives or daughters whom they respected and for whose sake they might treat others with more courtesy? A soldier standing a few feet away stepped up and said, "Yes, I

<sup>5</sup> Caruthers, *Life of David Caldwell*, 216-217.

have a good wife and you shall not be treated so rudely any more."<sup>6</sup> This turned out to be a doctor and after the battle of Guilford Courthouse Dr. Caldwell met him, they became friends, and he gave Dr. Caldwell a walking cane as a memento of friendship for assisting him in attending the sick and in cutting off legs and arms of the injured soldiers by the wagon load.

During these strenuous days his school, of course, was suspended, but when independence was achieved he resumed his teaching and took a prominent part in establishing a new government. He was a member of the Provincial Congress which met in Halifax late in 1776, and was likewise a member of the state constitutional convention that met in Hillsboro in 1788.

Caldwell and five other ministers organized the Orange Presbytery, which was the first presbytery in the South, and he was for many years its recording secretary. He was elected a trustee of Liberty Hall Academy in Charlotte in 1777, and when the University of North Carolina was being organized, he was offered the presidency of that institution. My authority for this statement was, first, Caruthers, then the historians Foot, Weeks, Dr. Charles Lee Smith, and a memorial address by Dr. Alphonso Smith at a celebration at Alamance Church.<sup>7</sup> On account of his advancing years and of his having already established a school which was drawing boys from all of the states south of the Potomac River, he declined the honor. The University later conferred upon him the degree of Doctor of Divinity. Dr. Archibald Henderson says that "During the early years of the University's history, a period when Tom Paine's *Age of Reason* exercised a blighting influence upon the people of the young republic, the Faculty was not immune to or unaffected by its demoralizing philosophy which flowed directly from the French Revolution. Indeed the first 'presiding professor,' David Ker, was a pronounced infidel, Professor Charles W. Harris was strongly influenced in the same direction, Professor Samuel Allen Holmes, according to President Caldwell, 'embraced and taught the wildest principles of licentiousness.' Nicholas Delveaux, Head-

<sup>6</sup> Caruthers, *Life of David Caldwell*, 243.

<sup>7</sup> Caruthers, *Life of David Caldwell*, 265; William Henry Foote, *Sketches of North Carolina, Historical and Biographical* (New York: Robert Carter, 1846), 242; Stephen B. Weeks, "David Caldwell," *Biographical History of North Carolina* (Greensboro, Charles L. Van Noppen, 1905), I, 212; Smith, *History of Education in North Carolina*, 32; C. Alphonso Smith, "Presbyterians in Educational Work in North Carolina since 1813: Address at the Centennial Celebration of the Synod of North Carolina in Alamance Church, Guilford County, October 7, 1913," *The Union Seminary Review* (Richmond), December, 1913-January, 1914, 3 (reprint).

master of the Preparatory School, was a recusant Roman Catholic monk, and even Davie, the founder of the University, was not a church member, had imbibed something of the prevalent scepticism, and entertained a strong antipathy to priests and pulpit influence."<sup>8</sup>

It is possible that the true reason for the saintly Dr. Caldwell's not accepting the presidency was that he decided that the company of these gentlemen would not be agreeable.

Dr. Caldwell's personal habits were most exemplary. He did not use tobacco in any form nor spirituous liquors. He regularly retired at 10:00 o'clock and arose at 4:00. His physical exercise was equally well ordered—consisted of going each day out on the meadows of his farm and digging ditches to drain his lands.

This sketch would not be complete without mentioning his wonderful helpmate. Mrs. Caldwell was a great Christian character, a faithful wife, and a devoted mother. It was said jocularly by some of their students that "Dr. Caldwell educated them but that Mrs. Caldwell made preachers of them." She had nine children—eight boys and one girl—and considering their joint labors and love, she is entitled to rank with him in his high accomplishments. She was blessed with fine health, as was evidenced by the fact that in four years she had five babies. One of the chapters of the Daughters of the American Revolution in Guilford County is named the "Rachel Caldwell Chapter" in honor of her and they have erected a marker near the spot where the Caldwell home was located.

An interesting story is told of an occurrence which took place at the old Guilford Courthouse (now Guilford Battleground Park) before its removal to Greensboro. Judge McCoy was holding court and wished to appoint a permanent clerk of court. There were several candidates, but he finally sent for Dr. Caldwell, who had been his former teacher, and asked if one of his sons would not make a suitable clerk for the office. The doctor thought not, as none of them had had any special training for such a job. The judge insisted that he think it over and report to him the next day. Dr. Caldwell returned the next morning with his son, Thomas, saluted the judge, and said: "Well, Judge, here he is—I

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<sup>8</sup>Archibald Henderson, *The Campus of the First State University*, 64.

have done the best I could." The judge appointed Thomas Caldwell, and he held the office for forty years.

Caldwell served the two churches—Alamance and Buffalo—for sixty years and was succeeded by Dr. Ely Caruthers, his biographer, who remained the pastor of these two churches for thirty-six years—making a total of ninety-six years by these two men. I doubt if there is any similar example to be found in the South. Caruthers quotes the Rev. E. B. Currie, one of Dr. Caldwell's oldest pupils, as saying that "Dr. Caldwell, as a teacher, was probably more useful to the church than any one man in the United States. I could name about forty ministers who received their education in whole or in part from him; and how many more I cannot tell; but his log cabin served for many years to North Carolina as an Academy, a College and a Theological Seminary. His manner of governing his school, family and churches was very much the same, that is, on the mild and paternal plan, generally attended with some wit and pleasant humor."<sup>9</sup> Caruthers records another interesting fact: that during the long period of forty years that Caldwell taught he never expelled a single student. They admired him, they loved him, and they revered him, and Caruthers cites another incident about a boy whom he had to chastize severely while in his school returning afterwards, an old man, riding 300 miles from Georgia to the scene of his childhood. Upon learning that Dr. Caldwell was still living he visited him to see him once more before he died.<sup>10</sup>

Dr. Caldwell lived to the ripe age of ninety-nine, and his wife followed him in death within a year, a fact which often is true of devoted couples.

While the scholarship, the learning, the devotion, and the service of this great man seem to have been forgotten, I cannot conclude this appreciation without recording the fact that David Caldwell, though dead, still lives. His influence as educator, theologian, and preacher has been profound in the subsequent life of Guilford County. It has taken up the torch of education which he held aloof so long, and has stressed education as one of the chief concerns of man; it established the first public school for both races supported by taxation in this state; it gave to the

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<sup>9</sup> Caruthers, *Life of David Caldwell*, 37.

<sup>10</sup> Caruthers, *Life of David Caldwell*, 35.

state its first Superintendent of Common Schools; it has today more institutions of learning for both white and black than any other county in the state. In the religious world, the two churches which he served so long have continued to function with an ever growing influence. His spiritual zeal and example have survived throughout the years, until today there are more churches in Guilford County, including High Point, than in any county in the state, and it has the largest population of any county in the state.<sup>11</sup> His teachings laid the foundation for the county's sense of morals, justice and liberty—aided by the presence of a large Quaker element which likewise has stood for God and education.

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<sup>11</sup> The 1950 census showed that Mecklenburg County ranked first in population in the state, with Guilford second. The Editors.