

PENNSYLVANIA

A HISTORY

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LEWIS HISTORICAL PUBLISHING COMPANY, INC.

NEW YORK

CHICAGO

1926

DR. WILLIAM MEHARD DAVIDSON—Dr. William Mehard Davidson has the faculty of overcoming seemingly insurmountable obstacles, which invaluable quality of character was probably the determining factor in leading the Board of Public Education of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, to offer him the position of Superintendent of Schools of the city of Pittsburgh in November, 1913, at a time when the board was passing through one of the most crucial periods ever faced by an American city in connection with the development of its public school-system. And, meanwhile, his administration has steadily brought order out of chaos, until the school-system of Pittsburgh has come to be reorganized, everywhere throughout the country, not only as one of the best and sanest, but as one of the most progressive school-systems in the United States as well.

Doctor Davidson was born May 8, 1863, in Jamestown, Mercer County, Pennsylvania, of the fine, sturdy, Scotch-Irish parentage of Thomas Houston and Anna (Mehard) Davidson, from whom he inherited the sterling qualities of strict integrity and

unimpeachable honor, and the gentle traits of tactful kindness and courtesy which so characterize his life. In his work, the human qualities and the spiritual values are ever the dominant factors. While naturally considerate of and gracious towards those with whom he works, still, as an administrator, he is always quick, firm and forceful. He is the true exemplar of the just official who administers with the gentle touch and the iron grip, to the end that he commands the respect and the loyal support of every worthy person under his supervision. Possessed of a keen intuition, which he inherited from his mother, no one ever deceives him and no one ever imposes upon him. Although a native of Pennsylvania, his youth and earlier manhood were spent in Kansas, in whose schools he was educated, from the early primary grades of its rural schools to the most advanced courses of its State University, from which institution he was graduated with the degree of Bachelor of Arts in the year 1902. Prior to graduating from the University of Kansas, he had attended the State Normal School in that State, from which he had graduated in 1886, thus giving him that bent toward the calling of the teacher, which was later to become the passion of his life. Doctor Davidson first became a teacher in the rural schools of Lyon County, Kansas, but after two years of service he yielded to a call to take up newspaper work in Emporia, in that State. He served time as a reporter, later becoming an editorial writer on one of the leading newspapers of that city. But the call of the child was too strong for him to resist. We are not surprised, therefore, to find him back again in the profession of teaching,—this time as head of the public schools of Atwood, Kansas. He served here but a year when he was called to the principalship of the Quincy School in the capital city of the "Sunflower State," and later to the principalship of the Lincoln School in that same city. Such was the high character of his work as head of these two schools that at the end of the fourth year of such service, he was unanimously chosen superintendent of the Topeka public schools, where the situation was declared to be such as to "need a clear mind and a steady hand at the helm." The new superintendent met every emergency and remained at the head of the Topeka schools for a period of twelve years,—during which time the school program under his régime took rank as among the first in the country.

During his stay in Topeka he had refused many offers to go elsewhere, until, in 1904, he was induced by the Board of Education of Omaha, Nebraska, to accept the unanimous offer of the superintendency of the public schools of that city. Here his task was a most difficult one, for there was much discord and unhappiness in evidence everywhere. But the schools soon responded to his ideals and his type of school administration, to the end that, at the close of his seventh year of service, discord and unrest had given place to sympathetic understanding and sincere coöperation. The schools of Omaha accordingly took their proper place in the affectionate regard of teachers, pupils and patrons alike, and attracted attention throughout the entire country on account of their superior instruction, the excellence of their administration, and the harmony that prevailed everywhere. The schools had been entirely lifted

out of politics to take their true place beside the homes of the city.

Offers came to him from St. Paul, Cleveland, and Washington, D. C., but he declined them all, until a second offer came to him from the National Capital through Captain James F. Oyster, the president of the Board of Education of Washington, early in the year 1911. Whereupon, after an interview with Captain Oyster, he accepted the call, and began his duties as superintendent of the schools of the District of Columbia that same year.

It has been said that the schools of Washington present the most difficult situation and most harassing problems of any city in America, if not the world. But Doctor Davidson did not find it so. He attacked his work with his usual energy and in his accustomed spirit. He applied the same methods and instituted the same policies that had characterized his work in other fields. He set up new courses of study and made a successful plea for the human touch in teaching. He completely reorganized all methods relating to the business conduct and the financial affairs of the schools, to the end that they now command the respect and receive the approval of the Board of Education, the commissioners of the District, the committees of Congress, and of all those connected with the educational affairs of the District, as well.

While he was superintendent of the schools of Washington, Congress came heartily to the support of the educational program announced by Doctor Davidson, giving the District a generous appropriation of some two million dollars with which to carry out a much needed building program. It was out of this amount that Washington was able to construct the superb new Central High School for the white children of that city, and the Laurence Dunbar High School for its colored youth, thereby vacating the old Central High School and the M Street High School for the organization of junior high schools, a type of school favored by Doctor Davidson in connection with the reorganization of our American city school-systems. This appropriation of Congress also made possible the purchase of a site for a new Eastern High School in Washington, an addition to the Western High School, an increase in the number of elementary school buildings in the District or Columbia, and two magnificent normal school buildings besides,—one for the training of teachers for the white schools, the other for the training of teachers for the colored schools of Washington.

Happy in his work and content in his new field of service, Doctor Davidson, then but in his third year as superintendent of schools of the National Capital, was loath to leave this post of duty, until he had achieved all that he desired to accomplish for the schools of Washington, and which he felt he could surely accomplish in view of the fine support that was now his from the people, the officials of the District, and from its newspapers, and, above all, from the members and the committees of both Houses of Congress as well.

But the turn of events decreed otherwise, for Doctor Davidson, was called back home to his native State, Pennsylvania, in November, 1913, to accept the superintendency of the public schools of Pittsburgh. Here he began his duties on the first day of January,

1914. The committee of the Pittsburgh Board of Education, on selection of a superintendent of schools, had said: "the city needs more than ever before, the wise guidance of an experienced superintendent." To this end Doctor Davidson was chosen. He indeed proved the man of the hour, and there has never been a time, to the present day, that he has not been found worthy of his charge, and that he has not kept faith. His administration has been one of efficiency and sincere devotion to the educational interests of the city and the right instruction of its children and its youth.

He has been uncompromising and firm in his stand for raising the standard and efficiency of those engaged in the calling of teaching, to the end that he has always advocated a salary for teachers sufficiently high, not only to attract, but to hold in the work, the best of our young men and young women coming out of the normal schools and the colleges and universities of the country. He participated with the Pittsburgh Board of Public Education in the campaign for better teacher's salaries in Pittsburgh and Pennsylvania, and under the direction of his board, was an important factor in pressing this question upon the attention of the members of the State Legislature of Pennsylvania, when that body took its big step forward on matters of school legislation in the session of 1921, thereby creating by law those possibilities which are sure to advance Pennsylvania educationally to a foremost rank among the states of the American Union. It was gratifying to him in this great campaign for the educational advancement of Pennsylvania to see the people of the entire city of Pittsburgh, its influential newspapers, its Chamber of Commerce, and its scores of clubs and local boards of trade, endorse, generously and wholeheartedly, the appeal of the Board of Public Education of Pittsburgh to be empowered, through the means of an increased tax-levy, to give a living wage to the teachers engaged in the instruction of the children of the city. Doctor Davidson has always sought the professional advancement and the improvement of the members of every teaching-staff over which he has presided, but above all, their spiritual outlook and improvement.

Believing that the whole future of America depends upon the proper training of its children, Doctor Davidson has consistently stood for an enriched curriculum, and for that type or plan of school organization, which will permit such an enriched curriculum to be utilized and made to function most easily and successfully in effective instruction. Hence it is that he has advocated the platoon-type of school organization similar to that first set up at Gary, Indiana, by William Wirt, the head of the public schools of that city. The local plan is an adaptation of the Gary plan. Doctor Davidson calls it the Pittsburgh Platoon Plan, to differentiate it from the plan in Gary in other cities of the country.

In connection with the vitalized curriculum, he stands for the division of the grades in the public school into what has been designated as the Six-Six, or the Six-Three-Three Plan, of organization, instead of the traditional grouping of the Eight-Four Plan, where the work of the first eight years is devoted to the elementary schools, and the work of the upper four years to the high school grades. By the Six-Three-Three Plan, the first six years are given over

to the work of the elementary school, and the last three years to the Senior high school. Whenever it is not practical to divide the last six years into separate Junior and Senior high school groupings, Doctor Davidson advocates that the upper six grades be grouped together in a single unit to be designated as a Junior-Senior High School. The fact that the Pittsburgh Board of Education has voted unanimously, to place, whenever practical, all elementary schools upon the platoon-plan of organization, and the upper six grades upon the Junior and Senior high school plan of organization, and the further fact that the Board has likewise established as its settled policy that all elementary school-buildings, to be hereafter constructed, shall be planned and built as Platoon schools, and all high school-buildings as separate Junior and Senior high schools or a combination of both, is but to state that Pittsburgh approves "in toto" the recommendation of its superintendent of schools, in relation to Platoon schools and Junior and Senior high schools, as the proper plan of organization for a progressive, up-to-date, modern city school-system.

He believes in the four H's in education, the "head," the "hand," and the "heart," with "health" education as the most essential of all, and at the very foundation of every proper program of education. And thus it was that he early recommended for introduction into the Pittsburgh schools the broad and comprehensive health program now being carried out in Pittsburgh—a program which has been recognized as without a superior in any of the cities of the country.

In pursuance of his idea that the children are entitled to the best a city can afford, he has insisted upon the construction of adequate, up-to-date school buildings in every city over which he has presided, to the end that many millions of dollars have been thus widely expended by boards of education in those cities where he has had charge of their educational affairs as Superintendent of Schools. In the city of Pittsburgh alone, a building program calling for an expenditure of more than ten millions of dollars, is now (in 1922) nearing completion.

Aprpos to his indisputable mastery of the problems of school finance and school accounting, while in Washington, he was elected a member of the National Association of School Accountants in 1912; and while in that city, where his business judgment was recognized by the keenest minds in Congress, he was chosen a trustee of the Public Library of Washington. While in Nebraska, he has served as trustee of the University of Omaha, and was a member for that State of the Cecil Rhodes Scholarship Committee.

He is a member of the National Educational Association, and served as its treasurer and as a member of its executive committee at the Boston meeting in 1903—the largest meeting that Association has ever held. He was president of the Department of Superintendence of the National Educational Association at its meeting in Mobile, Alabama, in 1911. He is a member of the National Council of Education, and has rendered faithful service on many important committees of the National Education Association. He is also a member of the American Historical Association and of the Academy of Political Science and Arts.

He was president of the Kansas State Teachers' Association in 1893, and of the Nebraska State Teachers' Association in 1911. He was also president of the Federal Schoolmen's Club in the District of Columbia in 1913, and in 1921 declined the presidency of the State Education Association of Pennsylvania because of the pressure of work, due to a big new building program in his home city of Pittsburgh that year.

While Superintendent of Schools of Atwood, Kansas, and during the years of his earlier service in the schools of the capital city of Kansas, Doctor Davidson found time to pursue the study of law under some of the ablest of instructors. He was just ready to take his examination for admission to the bar when he was elected Superintendent of Schools of Topeka, whereupon he abandoned all thought of entering the profession of law, though he has insisted that his knowledge of law has been of the greatest value to him throughout his entire educational career.

Through Scott, Foresman & Company, of Chicago, Doctor Davidson published, in 1902, a standard "History of the United States," for use in the public schools, which ranks as one of the best written school histories of the country. He has been the editor of a series of classics for schools and home reading. As a lecturer on educational subjects and on related topics, his services are in constant demand. He is a speaker of force, power and ability, and never fails to carry his audiences with him.

He has had many honors bestowed upon him. In 1909 the University of Nebraska honored him with the degree of Doctor of Laws, in recognition of his services in furthering the educational interests of the State of Nebraska, for wherever Doctor Davidson has worked his influence has not been limited to the city in which he has labored. In Nebraska, in Kansas, in the District of Columbia, and in his native State of Pennsylvania, his influence has been State-wide, and he is known throughout the country as a national figure of force and power in the field of public education. In 1909 the University of Miami at Oxford, Ohio, likewise conferred upon him the degree of Doctor of Laws. Bethany College, West Virginia, bestowed the same degree in 1916, and the University of Pittsburgh honored him in a similar manner in the year 1917, in recognition of his services in promoting the cause of general and of higher education in his home city. He was made a member of the parent chapter of the Phi Beta Kappa Society in America, at the College of William and Mary, Williamsburg, Virginia, in 1920.

He is staunchly Republican, and Calvinistic in faith, being a Ruling Elder in the Point Breeze Presbyterian Church in his home city. At the request of the late H. J. Heinz, he served as president of the Allegheny County Sabbath School Association, from 1918 to 1921, during which period of time he made many addresses emphasizing the work of the Sunday school as of the most vital concern to the future of the American church.

He is a Knight Templar and a thirty-second degree Mason, and a Rotarian. He holds membership in the Cosmos Club of Washington, District of Columbia, and the Athletic Association of Pittsburgh. He is also a member of the Pittsburgh Chamber of Commerce. While in the West, he was twice

president of the Saturday Night Club of Topeka, and the Gridiron Club of Kansas.

Like his Scotch-Irish ancestry, Doctor Davidson is deeply devoted to the cause of human liberty, and is intensely patriotic. During the World War, his services as a speaker were in demand everywhere. He spoke in every Liberty Loan and in every Red Cross campaign, and in every other campaign organized for the purpose of promoting the welfare, the health, and the comfort of the soldiers and sailors enlisted in the war. He was frequently summoned to the National Capital to confer with federal officials upon questions concerning the participating of the United States in the conflict. The total individual membership of the audiences addressed by him during the period of the war, numbered more than 1,750,000 people.

During the war, he was a volunteer worker in the Tidewater Camps, whose centers were located at Newport News and at Norfolk, Virginia. Here he delivered inspiring addresses to a hundred thousand soldiers and sailors, and made an educational survey of these camps in relation to the question of illiteracy and the educational needs of the enlisted soldiers and sailors in the army and in the navy.

His findings to the effect that no educational program could be carried on successfully while an army was at war or in motion, unless the teacher followed the soldier and carried his portable schoolroom and his equipment with him, later received the full and hearty endorsement of General Pershing in France, when the American commander took the Young Men's Christian Association educational staff of workers, whom America had sent overseas, into the army organization itself, placing all of these workers in army uniform, with full authority to do the work of carrying on that type of a real educational program among the enlisted men which the folks back home were expecting of them.

In recognition of his patriotic service during the war, and in appreciation of his work in the Tidewater Camps and on the public platform, and, indeed, in all the great drives for war funds throughout the entire period of the war, Doctor Davidson was made an honorary member of the American Legion in 1920. At the conclusion of the war, he was chosen as one of the national speakers, on the recommendation of Ex-President Taft, to assist in winning the support of the Congress of the United States for the League of Nations.

Undoubtedly, Doctor Davidson's success has been greatly influenced through the inspiration and encouragement of Mrs. Davidson, who was Miss Nettie Adams, of Quincy, Illinois, whom he married in 1888. She, too, was a teacher. She was educated in the public schools of her native State, and at the high school of Pontiac, Illinois, and later at the Teachers' College of Emporia, Kansas, where she and her husband first met while students in that institution. Here is an unusual lineage, reaching far back in history to the days of Charles Martel and Charlemagne. In her list of ancestry in America, she counts Elder Brewster and the Cousins Fuller, of Mayflower fame. President John Adams and President John Quincy Adams were both among her forbears. Through her lineage, she is affiliated with the Massachusetts Chapter of the Mayflower Society,

and the New England Historical and Genealogical Society. She holds membership in the District of Columbia Chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution of Washington, District of Columbia. Though Mrs. Davidson is in her tastes essentially a home-maker, she is active in community and church affairs and takes a keen interest in literary club work. She is a member of the Woman's City Club of Pittsburgh.

Miss Helen Mehard Davidson, an only child, is a graduate of the Omaha High School and of Vassar College, class of 1914. She holds a Master's Degree from Columbia University, 1922, where she did post-graduate work in the Department of History, her chosen field of work, choosing that institution, no doubt, because of the friendship long existent between her father and its president, Dr. Nicholas Murray Butler.

Miss Davidson served with the American Expeditionary Forces in France under the auspices of the Red Triangle. She did Canteen service at the big Service of Supply Post at Gievres. She later worked as a religious secretary at St. Nazaire, and concluded her service overseas in the Bureau of Books, Periodicals and Magazines at the headquarters of her organization in Paris. On her demobilization in Paris in the summer of 1919, she volunteered her services as a teacher to Dr. Mary Mills Patrick, president of the American College for Women in Constantinople, Turkey. She taught in that great Eastern school for women from the fall of 1919 to June, 1920, during which year she continued in her free time, her service as a war worker attached to the Young Men's Christian Association and the Sailors' Club in the city of Constantinople, where America was maintaining a Navy Base under Admiral Bristol on the Bosphorus, with many war ships and nearly 10,000 sailors under his command.

At the conclusion of her year's service at Constantinople College, Miss Davidson spent several months in travel in studying the after-war conditions of the people in the countries of Greece, Asia Minor, Syria, Palestine, Egypt, Italy, Switzerland, and of France, which country she had left just one year before. A delightful outgrowth of her experiences in the Near East is her book entitled: "America to the Rescue—A Study in Some of the Problems of the Near East," now in course of publication. She has already brought out a book of biographical sketches for school use, entitled: "Founders and Builders of the Nation." She has also prepared for publication the manuscript of a third book, to be called: "The Letters of a War Worker with the American Expeditionary Forces in France and in the Countries of the Near East," these being the letters which she had written home to her parents each day of the two full years she had spent in volunteer service overseas.

It will be seen from the above that Doctor Davidson's family group is not a large one, but the heart of each of its members is filled with the "Spirit of Service." In it is the spirit of love, and it typifies in a most perfect and a most beautiful way the best ideals of our American home life.