

UNIVERSITY OF OKLAHOMA
GRADUATE COLLEGE

THE LAST HOPE FOR AFRICAN METHODISM:
FLIPPER-KEY-DAVIS IN THE AGE OF RACE UPLIFT

A THESIS

SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE FACULTY

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the

Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

By

STEVIE NATHANIEL JACKSON III
Norman, Oklahoma
2022

THE LAST HOPE FOR AFRICAN METHODISM:
FLIPPER-KEY-DAVIS IN THE AGE OF RACE UPLIFT

A THESIS APPROVED FOR THE
DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY

BY THE COMMITTEE CONSISTING OF

Dr. Lauren Duval, Chair

Dr. Jennifer Holland

Dr. Kathryn Schumaker

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Abstract

In 1917, leaders of the African Methodist Episcopal Church founded Flipper-Key-Davis University in Tulahassee, Oklahoma. The university served as the only private Black educational institution within the state until 1936 when it officially closed. During its operation, Flipper-Key-Davis university was dedicated to uplifting the African American race through spiritual advancement and educational progression. As such, the university dealt with both external and internal pressures of race uplift that dominated early twentieth century African American discourse. While Langston University is the sole Historically Black College currently operating in the state of Oklahoma, there are several defunct institutions that were once dedicated to African American education in the state. This thesis focuses on Flipper-Key-Davis University, a defunct HBCU that once operated in Oklahoma, in the hopes of offering a more nuanced approach to examining twentieth century Black education and uplift rhetoric.

Acknowledgements

I would first like to thank my family for all the love and support that they have shown me throughout my entire life. To my brother Oshay and my sister Kara, thank you for everything. This thesis is specifically dedicated to my mother, Misty Smith, who sacrificed her entire life to make sure I had all the tools necessary to be a respectable human being.

I would also like to thank the History department at the University of Oklahoma, specifically Dr. Lauren Duval, Dr. Jennifer Holland, and Dr. Kathryn Schumaker for joining my committee and providing valuable feedback. This thesis would not have been possible without them.

A special thanks is due to my friends who encouraged me during my time at the University of Oklahoma and made sure to stress the importance of my mental health. I would also like to thank the students in my Hist-1493 discussion sections from Fall 2021 – Spring 2022 as you all helped me find my footing in this department as a TA.

Lastly, a thank you to the Western History Collections and the digitization staff at the Oklahoma Historical Society for providing me with the necessary collections to complete this historical project. This would not have been possible without all their hard work, and mine.

Introduction:

Located in Northeastern Oklahoma, the city of Tullahassee currently houses a population of 116 people and is undergoing a steady decline in terms of residents.¹ A leisurely drive through Tullahassee would indicate that the town is nearing the status of a ghost town. However, in the early twentieth century Tullahassee was home to a vibrant African American population and the only private Historically Black College in the state, Flipper-Key-Davis University.² During its operation, the university would come to exemplify the meaning, difficulties, and failures of racial uplift theory. Oklahoma's history of all-Black towns continues to be examined by scholars and individuals as the lived experiences of these individuals provides another layer to Oklahoma's rich history. Primarily founded after the Civil War, these all-Black towns were generally established by groups of wealthy African Americans with ties to Indigenous nations within the state. Indeed, most of the population in Oklahoma's Black towns consisted of freedmen and freedwomen from the Five Nations—the Cherokees, Chickasaws, Choctaws, Creeks, and Seminoles—who were forcibly located to Oklahoma alongside their enslavers as part of federal removal policies in the 1830s. Of the dozens of original all-Black cities within Oklahoma, today, a total of thirteen all-Black towns have been incorporated into the state of Oklahoma. These historically all-Black towns carry significance as they served as echo-chambers for uplift discourse. That Flipper-Key-Davis university operated in an all-Black town adds another layer to the university's unique history and offers more insight to uplift discourse in the early twentieth

¹ U.S. Census City/Town Population Estimates, Tullahassee, Oklahoma Population 2022.

² Christina Dickerson, *Black Indians and Freedmen: The African Methodist Episcopal Church and Indigenous Americans, 1816-1916*. (University of Illinois Press, 2021), p.105-106.

century. Indeed, all-Black towns themselves were a symbol of the attainability of race uplift through education, religion, and economic prosperity.³

This thesis examines Black educational institutions within the state of Oklahoma following the Civil War in order to provide a more realistic perspective on the educational experience of African Americans during the age of racial uplift dialogue. Although Langston University is the only remaining Historically Black College operating within the state, the experiences and operations of other Black colleges that were present in Oklahoma during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century shed light on the impact that racial uplift dialogue had on other Black educational institutions in the state of Oklahoma. Indeed, an institution like Flipper-Key-Davis university who subscribed to uplift dialogue and still failed to succeed highlights the true difficulties of achieving race uplift through education. Other higher educational institutions for African Americans included: Claver College in Guthrie, Methodist Episcopal College in Boley, Creek Seminole College in Boley, Sango Baptist College in Muscogee, Oklahoma Baptist College for Girls in Sapulpa, and lastly Flipper-Key-Davis University in Tullahassee. Flipper-Key-Davis University is unique among these schools as the only private institution for African Americans in the state at the time. As a private institution, Flipper-Key-Davis reveals a new, multi-faceted understanding of Black education that challenges the efficacy of uplift rhetoric in the early twentieth century. Expanding beyond the public eye, the university was not as

³ For a map of the all-Black towns located in Oklahoma see *Oklahoma Historical Society*. For economies and societies of all-Black towns see Norman Crockett, *The Black Towns* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1979). For land use and agriculture in all-Black towns see Johnson, Hannibal B., Michael Eric Dyson, and Clay Portis. *Acres of Aspiration: The All-Black Towns in Oklahoma*. Austin, TX: Eakin Press, 2002. For memory studies of all-Black towns see McAuley, W J. "History, Race, and Attachment to Place among Elders in the Rural All-Black Towns of Oklahoma."

accessible as a public institution which made operations and engagements more personal. These personal engagements provide a more nuanced approach to examining the internal operations of an institution dedicated to uplifting the African American race. As such, I aim to provide a new understanding of how Black educational institutions dealt with the pressures of race uplift rhetoric by utilizing the experiences of Flipper-Key-Davis University.

For decades, historians and scholars have examined and challenged the ideology of race uplift. Indeed, scholars such as D'Weston Haywood, Clayton Brooks, Gary S. Parks, Caryn Neumann, and countless others have provided detailed works on twentieth century African American uplift discourse. These intellectuals have all contributed to the multi-faceted historiography of race uplift. From Haywood's analysis of Black media and patriarchal coverage of uplift to Brooks coverage of race uplift in Virginia, the topic of uplift continues to be examined and redefined in contemporary African American historiography.⁴ Parks and Neumann also examine the topic of uplift, drawing parallels with early twentieth century uplift dialogue and the impact that sorority women had in spreading race uplift theory.⁵ Adding to the fruitful historiography on uplift, this thesis examines the problematic impact that race uplift discourse had on Black educational institutions like Flipper-Key-Davis due to its limitations as a theory.

Most notably, Kevin K. Gaines argued that race uplift was limited in its attainability based on the contradictory ideas that the concept drew on. With *Uplifting the Race: Black Leadership, Politics, and Culture in the Twentieth Century* Gaines elaborated on the challenges

⁴ D'Weston Haywood, *Let Us Make Men the Twentieth-Century Black Press and a Manly Vision for Racial Advancement*. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press 2018)

Clayton M. Brooks, *The Uplift Generation: Cooperation across the Color Line in Early Twentieth-Century Virginia*. (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2017)

⁵ Parks, Gregory S, and Caryn Neumann. "Lifting as They Climb: Race, Sorority, and African American Uplift in the 20th Century." *Hastings Women's Law Journal* 27, no. 1 (2016): 109-144.

of the uplift era and his work is often heralded as a thorough examination of the uplift era.⁶ As such, I echo some of Gaines' arguments on race uplift throughout this thesis. Mainly, I position myself in the historiography of race uplift by arguing that early twentieth century uplift theorists ignored many significant factors including financial discrepancies and internal conflicts among institutional officials. As a result, I challenge that race uplift ideology had a significant impact on the failure of educational institutions during its era.

Other historians such as Jacqueline M. Moore have also critically examined the idea of race uplift in the twentieth century. Indeed, *Booker T. Washington, W.E.B. DuBois and the Struggle for Racial Uplift* examines the conflicts between two prominent African American leaders during the early twentieth century who each subscribed to race uplift rhetoric. Moore argued that the concept of race uplift had multiple meanings that extended beyond economic and political prosperity for African Americans in the early twentieth century.⁷ While Moore's timeframe slightly precedes my analysis, I share her understanding of early twentieth century uplift as being multi-faceted throughout my examination of Flipper-Key-Davis as an educational institution.

The concept of race uplift was a dominant rhetoric during the early twentieth century. The idea that the only method of equality for the African American race during the Jim Crow era was through educational and spiritual growth was trumpeted by prominent Black leaders such as W.E.B. DuBois and Booker T. Washington. While the tireless works of these two heralded Black activists cannot be understated, I argue against the theory of race uplift that individuals like DuBois and Washington cosigned in the early twentieth century. Indeed, this thesis argues that

⁶ Kevin K. Gaines, *Uplifting the Race: Black Leadership, Politics, and Culture in the Twentieth Century*. (United States: The University of North Carolina Press, 2012)

⁷ Jacqueline M. Moore, *Booker T. Washington, W.E.B. Du Bois, and the Struggle for Racial Uplift*. (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources, 2003)

had financial inequities been addressed in race uplift rhetoric, institutions like Flipper-Key-Davis would have had a much higher survival rate in the early twentieth century. Financial discrepancies between institutions serving white Oklahomans opposed to historically Black institutions like Flipper-Key-Davis were often insurmountable for the latter and by ignoring these inequities, uplift theorists had a problematic impact on twentieth century Black education. By challenging the theory of racial uplift through education, I may run the risk of offensive dialogue. In no way is the information that follows intended to disrespect former leaders of the African American community. However, I find it necessary to address the failures of educational uplift in the early twentieth century as doing so may help contemporary scholars understand the existing racial biases of the American educational system.

Historically Black Colleges and universities operating during the age of uplift faced many external and internal pressures to succeed. From Flipper-Key-Davis University to Langston University, African Americans in Oklahoma were quite familiar with the theories of uplift and rooted their educational programs in this dialogue. Unfortunately for most of these Black educational institutions like the Girl's Training School at Sapulpa, uplift rhetoric did not serve their best interests. The belief that African Americans had an equal opportunity to succeed educationally and financially in the Jim Crow era was simply false and the internal and financial setbacks that these institutions faced could not be alleviated by a *Talented Tenth* or a few successful academic years. My analysis of Flipper-Key-Davis university will rely heavily on the financial instabilities that uplift dialogue often ignored. I attempt to draw out the significance of the universities' finances, along with operational details, in the hopes that a more accurate depiction of historically Black educational institutions during the early twentieth century can be uncovered. Indeed, I argue against uplift theorists and claim that the idea that the federal

government had provided the African American race with all the tools necessary to provide an equal educational experience could not have been further from the truth.

The goal of this thesis is twofold; to tell the story of a once vibrant historically Black college, whose history has been overshadowed by the success of other universities and an unwillingness to grapple with the failures of the uplift era and secondly, to examine Black education in the twentieth century from a different perspective. This new perspective will seek to place the experiences of defunct universities at the forefront of discussions on race uplift in the early twentieth century. While the success of HBCUs like Langston University can offer a hint of success during the uplift era, the example of Flipper-Key-Davis reveals why the narrative of uplift had little to no hope of survival for a majority of HBCUs across the state of Oklahoma due to a variety of underlying factors. Before examining the intricacies of uplift, I find it necessary to discuss how an institution like Flipper-Key-Davis would have functioned in the era. Being a private institution with ties to the African Methodist Church, Flipper-Key-Davis University was certainly aware of uplift discourse and even regurgitated some of the dialogue themselves. Not only will the story of Flipper-Key-Davis provide a new understanding of African American education in the twentieth century, but it will also grant the individuals associated with the institution the place in history that the archives and historiography have denied them for nearly a century.

After examining the story of Flipper-Key-Davis University I briefly shift my focus to uplift rhetoric and the negative impact that this dialogue had on educational institutions like Flipper-Key-Davis University. I use the examples of a university dedicated to the uplift of the African American race to critique the narrative of race uplift. Drawing on a range of sources which include, newspaper articles, court cases, speeches, and other documents about Flipper-

Key-Davis University, I will analyze student life on campus and across the state, bureaucratic affairs of the institution, and the role that the institution played in the era of educational uplift for African Americans. My aim is to uncover a previously untold history of Black education within the state of Oklahoma with the hopes that a more detailed depiction of the uplift era can be utilized to better understand the state of Oklahoma's educational system, past and present. Continuing to view institutions like Langston University as the barometer for Black education in the history of Oklahoma only furthers the myth that the uplift era was beneficial to all African American educational institutions. Contrarily, a focus centered around a defunct institution like Flipper-Key-Davis will provide a more realistic depiction of the impact that uplift dialogue had on Black educational institutions.

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The Story of Flipper-Key-Davis University

Flipper-Key-Davis University was founded in 1917 by the African Methodist Episcopal Church (AME). Named after prominent African American intellectuals and entrepreneurs Simeon Flipper, John B. Key, and George Winton Davis the university served as an institution for nearly two decades in the state of Oklahoma. Like other predominantly Black educational institutions in the state, Flipper-Key-Davis had religious ties and members on the university's Board of Education included reverends and bishops who also handled the logistic and finances of these institutions.⁸ The role of the AME church cannot be understated as it was through religion that most leaders believed African Americans could achieve equality during the era of segregation. Indeed, a spiritual uplift of the race was often attached to the mission of race uplift.

⁸ Andrew Smitherman, *The Tulsa Star* (Tulsa, Okla.), Vol. 9, No. 10, Ed. 1, Saturday, March 27, 1920, newspaper, March 27, 1920. Oklahoma Historical Society.

As such, Flipper-Key-Davis captures the true essence of the uplift era, in that the goal of the university was to uplift the African American race both spiritually and educationally.

Located in Tullahassee, Oklahoma, Flipper-Key-Davis University sat on 40-acres of land purchased from the United States government and featured two women's dormitory buildings, one men's dormitory building, a library, and a museum.⁹ Flipper-Key-Davis University and other historically Black colleges and universities in Oklahoma during the early twentieth century operated in a unique era when dialogues on education and equality were dominated by uplift rhetoric and the idea that African Americans failures could only be placed on themselves. Indeed, the concept of uplift through education placed a significant amount of pressure on these educational institutions to produce citizens that would advance the African American race in a time when racial segregation dictated society. The pressures of uplift coupled with limited funding, national economic turmoil, and internal conflicts ultimately led to the downfall of these Black higher educational institutions. Yet, at the height of their operations these colleges and universities served as a beacon of hope for African Americans within the state of Oklahoma, and much like the educational system currently present in the state, these academic historical actors made do with what little they had.

Flipper-Key-Davis experienced rapid success within the state of Oklahoma, recruiting African American students and faculty from various parts of the state. A glimpse at student life reveals that the university, like others, maintained a certain level of engagement with their student population which correlated to academic success in its early stages as an institution. Extracurricular activities at Flipper-Key-Davis ranged from athletic programs, Glee Clubs, and other departmental clubs. Students who were interested in these extracurricular programs paid a

⁹ Kaye M. Teall, *Black History in Oklahoma; A Resource Book*. Oklahoma City: Oklahoma City Public Schools, 1971. Oklahoma Historical Society.

small fee in order to participate.¹⁰ These programs were essential to the outreach of Flipper-Key-Davis across the state of Oklahoma. Being a private institution, it is possible that students were drawn to the university for extracurricular institutions. The basketball team would compete against other small private institutions across the state and even had exhibition game against the Manual Labor High School of Muscogee, another all-Black educational institution located five minutes away. Athletic programs allowed the university to extend its reach and attract more students to attend the only private Black educational institution in the state of Oklahoma. Furthermore, the ability to showcase the growth and development of their students through extracurricular activities likely fit the university's desire to uplift the race through education.¹¹

Flipper-Key-Davis University also garnered a significant amount of attention from the performances of their glee club in other cities throughout the state. Performing in various cities, the Glee Club was led by Professor Richard B. Harrison and Miss Ruth Moore, two talented and highly acclaimed African American performers. The Glee Club traveled around the state performing for African American residents while also showcasing their talents at African Methodist Episcopal chapels to attract funding for the university. Following their performance at the AME Chapel, the Glee Club went on to perform at an all-white Presbyterian Church in Enid, OK. Reviews for the performances were stellar and featured praises of several different students. Emma D. Belle, Gertrude Berry, Alice Turner, and Clara Snell were commended for their performances in Enid. Belle was an actress who specificized in tragic roles performed *I Am Not Mad* and “proved clearly that she was developing a temperament and an interpretation of

¹⁰ Roscoe Dunjee, *The Black Dispatch* (Oklahoma City, Okla.), Vol. 5, No. 42, Ed. 1 Friday, September 24, 1920, newspaper, September 24, 1920. Oklahoma Historical Society.

¹¹ Roscoe Dunjee, *The Black Dispatch* (Oklahoma City, Okla.), Vol. 5, No. 51, Ed. 1 Friday, January 17, 1919, newspaper, January 17, 1919. Oklahoma Historical Society.
Roscoe Dunjee, *The Black Dispatch* (Oklahoma City, Okla.), Vol. 5, No. 28, Ed. 1 Friday, June 11, 1920, newspaper, June 11, 1920. Oklahoma Historical Society.

extraordinary work.” Berry, a student from Oklahoma City and lead soprano for the Glee Club, showed “marked ability” in their performance as a lead singer. Alice Turner also hailed from Oklahoma City and read several excellent numbers alongside Clara Snell, who left her hometown of Dunbar, OK to attend Flipper-Key-Davis. An abundance of praise was bestowed upon Mr. Harrison and Miss Moore for their ability to provide such an entertaining show with only a few months’ notice. While Mr. Harrison and Miss Moore appreciated the praise they received, they were also likely aware of the how significant these compliments were to the institution of Flipper-Key-Davis.

The most notable outcome of the Glee Club’s 1920 performance in Enid was the impact it left on the individuals who witnessed it. Indeed, the audience had left the Presbyterian Church with a feeling that Flipper-Key-Davis University was certainly on the path to “race uplift.”¹² The positive reactions from the Enid crowd, not only highlighted the success of the Glee Club, but it also reinforced the narrative of uplift for Flipper-Key-Davis. Sending their students to perform across the state was essential for recruiting purposes and showcasing that the ideas of uplift were being achieved at Flipper-Key-Davis university. The Glee Club would return to Enid three years later to host a successful banquet where a “handsome sum was realized.” Perhaps those who attended the first performance felt the need to contribute to the university that they deemed to be on the path of race uplift. Motives aside, the ability to garner financial support for the university from Glee Club performances highlights the importance of extracurricular activities, while also illustrating the university’s investment in fulfilling their uplift mission. Extracurricular activities like the Glee Club were one of many ways that Flipper-Key-Davis managed to receive

¹² Roscoe Dunjee, *The Black Dispatch* (Oklahoma City, Okla.), Vol. 5, No. 51, Ed. 1 Friday, January 17, 1919, newspaper, January 17, 1919. Oklahoma Historical Society.

recognition throughout the state. The club was also a means to secure funding for the institution which, during its early stages in particular, needed all the financial help they could get.

Along with offering a variety of extracurricular activities to students, Flipper-Key-Davis University also provided their students with several course options. By 1920, the university had eight educational departments ran by African American professors which included: Religion (Rev. A.J. Patton), Sunday School (Prof. H.A. Maxwell), Mathematics (Prof. J.Q.A. Kelly), Commercial (Miss Dorothy I. White), Ancient Languages (Mrs. M.A. Dennis), Domestic Science & Art (Miss A.R. Johnson), Literature & History (Miss F.E. Nance), and Agriculture (Prof. JJ Thurman).¹³ Perhaps one of the most essential faculty members that the university was fortunate enough to employ was Professor R.B. Harrison who often traveled across the state of Oklahoma and parts of Arkansas to secure funding for the university.

The Flipper-Key-Davis faculty was primarily drawn from all-Black towns throughout the state of Oklahoma. These individuals maintained significant ties to their hometowns and likely helped recruit some of the students who attended the university. Indeed, professors and teachers at Flipper-Key-Davis were renowned throughout the state and they often appeared in local newspapers when they were back in town during school breaks.¹⁴ Not only were Flipper-Key-Davis instructors well-known in their hometowns, some of them also had ties to influential African Americans throughout the state. Indeed, Professor J.J. Thurman of the Department of Agriculture wrote a letter to Roscoe Dunjee, editor of *The Black Dispatch* praising Dunjee for all his work on uplifting the African American race. Thurman held Dunjee in high regards, claiming

¹³ Roscoe Dunjee, *The Black Dispatch* (Oklahoma City, Okla.), Vol. 5, No. 47, Ed. 1 Friday, October 29, 1920, newspaper, October 29, 1920. Oklahoma Historical Society.

¹⁴ Roscoe Dunjee, *The Black Dispatch* (Oklahoma City, Okla.), Vol. 5, No. 8, Ed. 1 Friday, January 2, 1920, newspaper, January 2, 1920. Oklahoma Historical Society.

The Muskogee - Okmulgee Oklahoma Eagle (Muskogee and Okmulgee, Okla.), Vol. 6, No. 8, Ed. 1 Thursday, April 10, 1980, newspaper, April 10, 1980; Tulsa, Oklahoma. Oklahoma Historical Society.

that *The Black Dispatch* and Roscoe Dunjee were “the greatest exponents of race rights.”¹⁵

Flipper-Key-Davis was featured in several issues of *The Black Dispatch*, during its existence and Dunjee publishing Thurman’s letter of praise shows the interest that other prominent African Americans in the state had in the success of the university. The consistent publication about Flipper-Key-Davis in *The Black Dispatch* also shows the potential that other African Americans saw in the university and their race uplift mission.

Like other Black educational institutions, Flipper-Key-Davis operated under the pressures of race uplift, a concept that was formulated and spread throughout the United States during the Reconstruction and Jim Crow era. Race uplift called for African Americans to seize control of their own social standings within the United States. Made famous by scholars and activists, most notably, W.E.B. DuBois and Booker T. Washington, uplift theorists believed that the primary method of uplifting the African American race during the Jim Crow era was through education. The pressures of race uplift often meant that educational institutions like Flipper-Key-Davis were placed under a microscope and had little room for failure. Due to the idea that African Americans were granted all the tools to be successful in education, the shortcomings of an institution or its students were widely publicized during the uplift era in print. Much like the case of Flipper-Key-Davis, the pressures of uplift were often placed on the shoulders of a Black educational institution at their own expense. By adopting the ideology of uplift, universities dedicated to uplift were subject to criticism from outsiders. Contrarily, it also meant that instances of success were widely covered in the press and brought about additional exposure and funding to the institution which can attribute to the early success of the university.

¹⁵ Roscoe Dunjee, *The Black Dispatch* (Oklahoma City, Okla.), Vol. 5, No. 26, Ed. 1 Friday, December 10, 1920, newspaper, December 10, 1920. Oklahoma Historical Society.

Race uplift for Flipper-Key-Davis however, carried a larger burden than other Black colleges in the state of Oklahoma. Being the only private all-Black higher education institute in the state meant that enrollment was limited, and the costs of attendance and maintenance were greater than other historically Black colleges and universities. The financial burdens on Flipper-Key-Davis took its toll as African American students across the state were more likely to attend cheaper colleges and universities solely based on the price of attendance. However, the religious ties that the university had with the African Methodist Episcopal church likely factored into their ability to attract students with the promise of both an educational and spiritual uplift. Regardless, having to compete with other educational institutions in the state was an uphill battle alone, but factoring in the national financial crisis of the early twentieth century made Flipper-Key-Davis a tougher sale to prospective Black college students than it already was. The pressures of uplift however, extended far beyond simply recruiting students to attend the university. Indeed, some of the pressures of uplift that Flipper-Key-Davis faced were more internal than external.¹⁶

Black educational institutions operating in the uplift era internalized the pressure of uplifting the African American race before the school doors were opened. In the case of Flipper-Key-Davis uplift language appeared in dialogues concerning the school before its opening coming from a bishop affiliated with the AME Church. In an address in Ardmore, Oklahoma Bishop Connor of Little Rock, Arkansas stated “What the negro will be in this country depends more upon what he does for himself than what others may do for him.”¹⁷ Language like that of

¹⁶ Worth J. Hadley, "Roscoe Dunjee on Education: The Improvement of Black Education in Oklahoma" (Ed.D. diss., University of Oklahoma, 1981). Oklahoma Historical Society.

J. P. Owens, *Clearview* (Okemah, Okla.: J. P. Owens, 1995).

Lauren A. Wendling. "Higher Education as a Means of Communal Uplift: The Educational Philosophy of W.E.B. Du Bois." *The Journal of Negro Education* 87, no. 3 (2018): 285–93. Oklahoma Historical Society.

¹⁷ W. H. Twine, *The Muskogee Cimeter*. (Muskogee, Okla.), Vol. 18, No. 26, Ed. 1, Saturday, July 7, 1917, newspaper, July 7, 1917. Oklahoma Historical Society.

Bishop Connor's added more pressure to students, faculty, and others who may have had a stake in the advancement of the African American race in the early twentieth century. By ignoring the inequities of the Jim Crow era, Bishop Connor implored the problematic language of uplift discourse. "The white folks" Connor continues, "have poured thousands of dollars into the negro schools in this country for our education, and they would feel more like it was not thrown away if we would arise now and help ourselves." Connor's speech in Ardmore captures the primary rhetoric of racial uplift in the Jim Crow era. With the pressures of uplift and competition throughout the state, the university may have been set up for failure before the first student set foot on campus. The uplift rhetoric that Bishop Connor implored in his speech placed unnecessary pressure on African Americans while ignoring the long history of racial oppression within the United States along with the racial inequities of the twentieth century education system. Placing all responsibility on African American intellectuals meant that any form of setback would carry a negative connotation on the entire race. External pressure of race uplift also played a major role in the early stages of Flipper-Key-Davis University. Shortly after its inaugural school year in 1917, Flipper-Key-Davis was soon dubbed "the last hope for African Methodism in Oklahoma." The religious ties of the institution can be attributed to the claim; however, the educational success of the university was just as important to the African Methodist Episcopal church since a successful institution would help highlight the effectiveness of Methodism and uplift. Whether this statement was uttered with blind faith in a fledgling college is unknown. What is known however, is that a Black college or university in Oklahoma had no hope of survival without funding.¹⁸

¹⁸ J. P. Orr, *The Altus Weekly News*. (Altus, Okla.), Vol. 18, No. 39, Ed. 1 Thursday, November 23, 1916, newspaper, November 23, 1916. Oklahoma Historical Society.

Most of the funding for Flipper-Key-Davis, particularly in the early stages of the university, was fronted by John B. Key. Key served as the first president of the university from 1917–1919 then assumed the lesser role of school treasurer. Lauded by his peers as a “financial genius,” Key was essential in the university’s financial operations. Hailing from Okmulgee, OK, he became a millionaire and a powerful member of Oklahoma’s lucrative oil industry. However, his rise to financial security was not without its difficulties. Key migrated to Oklahoma sometime during the late nineteenth century when the territory was opened for settlement, laying a claim in Oklahoma County. In 1904 he moved his business operations to Okmulgee and began expanding into the grocery business. Utilizing his ability to bargain and trade, Key eventually gained the financial reputation necessary to shift his focus into real estate. Shortly before the opening of Flipper-Key-Davis University, he ventured into the oil industry where he found great success. By 1919 he held the most profitable business blocks in the city of Okmulgee and became a leading example for race uplift in Oklahoma.¹⁹ Though little dialogue is available from the soft-spoken J.B. Key, his legacy can be explained in a speech he gave at the State Capitol building in which he declared, “I have made a resolve to dedicate all that I have to the interest and the upbuilding of my race.”²⁰ Key’s statement highlights his investment into Flipper-Key-Davis as he believed that the university could serve as an instrument of race uplift. By receiving a quality education, Key believed Black Oklahomans would be able to prosper financially within the state amidst the challenges posed by Jim Crow laws. The drive to uplift the African

¹⁹ Roscoe Dunjee, *The Black Dispatch* (Oklahoma City, Okla.), Vol. 5, No. 5, Ed. 1 Friday, February 28, 1919, newspaper, February 28, 1919. Oklahoma Historical Society.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

American race fueled J.B. Key and the university in its early years. However, adequate funding would have been harder to receive without the tireless work of other individuals.

Flipper-Key Davis University's affiliation with the AME Church ensured a steady flow of funds from church services and other ventures throughout Oklahoma and parts of Arkansas. Indeed, chapels in both states donated thousands of dollars to the fledgling university. Two primary donors to the university were the congregations at Ward Chapel and Avery Chapel—the largest chapels under the AME umbrella in the early twentieth century. Although the exact amount of money that these chapels raised for the university is unknown, both chapels organized donations and fundraisers that appear sporadically in periodicals between the 1918 and 1919 academic calendar years. Ward Chapel sent a sum of \$1000 to the university in January 1919 and Avery Chapel sent an additional \$400 that same year. While these numbers are more than likely higher than what is expected of the general contributions of the Chapel on a week to week or month to month basis, it does highlight the ability and willingness of the AME church to contribute to the growth of the university financially. The success of the university benefited both the spread of Methodism and the goal of uplifting the African American race through education. It should come as no surprise that the AME church would be able to generate funds from their own congregations for the university. The funding that the university received from these AME congregations is yet another indication that many Black Oklahomans believed in the mission of race uplift. However, funding from religious institutions was not limited to the AME church. Indeed, other African American religious officials and institutions raised funds for the advancement of the race through education. A Baptist pastor from Lawton, OK, for example, amassed a generous sum of \$789 for education that was distributed throughout various all-Black colleges and universities in Oklahoma. The ability of church officials regardless of their religious

denomination to generate funds for historically Black colleges and universities throughout the state shows that individuals were invested in the uplift narrative and held a firm belief in its effectiveness.²¹

While funding from the AME church and other religious affiliations reflected a strong community belief in the university's mission for race uplift, the early stages of the university required a significant amount of funding for financial upkeep and development. After his re-election as president of the university in a contested race, J.B. Key had massive plans for the university. As if donating \$1,800 in 1918 and an additional \$3,000 in the spring of 1919 was not enough, Key had his eyes set on more improvements. Although the university was relatively new, the buildings were outdated and needed improvements. At the time of Key's re-election, Flipper-Key-Davis University had two dormitories that separated their male and female student populations. Having attracted a significant number of female students to the university in the 1918–1919 academic year, Key set his sights on constructing another dormitory for women to manage the growing student population. The dormitory had an estimated cost of \$50,000 and prominent figures within the university including Bishop Connor, Prof. J.I. Jones, and President Key issued a call for money across all AME affiliated churches. By the time the call was issued, J.B. Key had already purchased 25,000 bricks for the building, showcasing once again his desire to provide for the university he had such high hopes for.

²¹ Roscoe Dunjee, *The Black Dispatch* (Oklahoma City, Okla.), Vol. 5, No. 50, Ed. 1 Friday, January 10, 1919, newspaper, January 10, 1919. Oklahoma Historical Society.
Roscoe Dunjee, *The Black Dispatch* (Oklahoma City, Okla.), Vol. 5, No. 33, Ed. 1 Friday, September 12, 1919, newspaper, September 12, 1919. Oklahoma Historical Society.
Roscoe Dunjee, *The Black Dispatch* (Oklahoma City, Okla.), Vol. 7, No. 44, Ed. 1 Thursday, October 5, 1922, newspaper, October 5, 1922. Oklahoma Historical Society.

Key's promise of dedicating his life to race uplift was on full display as he worked tirelessly to get the second women's dormitory built. The building itself likely represented the progress that the university was making in its early stages. The initial fundraising call yielded an additional \$2,506.75 in a matter of three months. While the call for funding yielded a significant amount of money, records indicate that the university did not meet their goal of raising \$50,000 for the second women's dormitory. Records also indicate however, that the second women's dorm was built in the 1919–1920 academic year, leaving room for interpretation as to how the university secured the necessary funding for the building. First, it is possible that initial call for funds may have yielded the total necessary for the building, though data suggesting that the call only yielded roughly \$2500 in three months makes this scenario unlikely. Another scenario could be that the Board of Trustees had the funds allocated already and the call for funds was simply a means of filling the void of \$50,000 from the university's endowment. While more likely than the aforementioned scenario, the Board shelling out a large sum of money for a dormitory that was not unanimously approved is unlikely. Based on the information presented concerning President Key and his willingness to place his own funds into the university and the fact that he proposed the second women's dormitory himself, it can be concluded that Key probably paid most of the costs to erect the second women's dormitory building. Possessing the funds to do so, this scenario fits the narrative of the early years of Flipper-Key-Davis University and the idea that Key would stop at nothing to fulfill his goal of race uplift through education. This scenario seems the most likely based on the wealth amassed by President Key, he certainly had the financial capability to pay for the entire building.

With the addition of a second women's dormitory Flipper-Key-Davis' administration now faced the challenge of recruiting more students to the university, however an international

crisis would lead to the university experiencing another form of struggle: a global pandemic.²²

The influenza outbreak in the early twentieth century had a significant financial impact on colleges and universities across the state of Oklahoma, including Flipper-Key-Davis University. Like most educational institutions, Flipper-Key-Davis needed to adjust to the effects that the influenza outbreak had on the United States economy. The possibility that the university was losing money due to the pandemic is highly likely as most institutions struggled with inflation at the time. While the cost of attendance at Flipper-Key-Davis did not increase significantly during the pandemic, slight increases in tuition and other fees highlights the university's ability to adapt to certain financial hardships. Flipper-Key-Davis managed to continue its steady growth and avoid any significant losses due to the influenza outbreak. The costs of attendance for the 1920–1921 academic year are showcased in the figure below:

²² Roscoe Dunjee, *The Black Dispatch* (Oklahoma City, Okla.), Vol. 5, No. 33, Ed. 1 Friday, September 12, 1919, newspaper, September 12, 1919. Oklahoma Historical Society.

FLIPPER-KEY-DAVIS UNIVERSITY
Tulahassee, Oklahoma

Will Open its Fifth Annual Session Wednesday, Sept. 8, 1920

The increase in the cost of many food and school supplies compels us to make a small advance in our rates. The cost will be as follows:

Enrollment Fee	\$2.50
Contingent Fee	2.50
Athletic Fee	1.00
Key Deposit (returnable)-.....	1.00
Board and Tuition per month.....	\$14.00—\$126.00
Laundry, per month	\$1.50—\$13.50
For month, \$15.50—For year	\$146.50
For year, paid on entering	\$119.50
This amount includes fees.	
Music and special subjects will cost extra.	
Piano lessons, per month (4 lessons)	\$2.50
Sewing Fee, per year	1.00
Commercial subjects, each per month	1.00

BOOKS will cost from \$3.50 to \$6.00, according to classification of student. Uniforms will be furnished at reasonable rates. * Each Student is required to bring two sheets, two pillow cases, two blankets or quilts, towels and napkins. * All money for schooling should be sent directly to the president

J. I. JONES, President

Image courtesy of the Gateway of Oklahoma History.²³

The ability of Flipper-Key-Davis University to maintain their upward trajectory of development during a global pandemic is a testament to the school’s leadership. Though costs did rise due to inflation, the university continued to develop and attract students in each academic year.

Statistics indicate that by the 1920 academic year, Flipper-Key-Davis had approximately 75

²³ Roscoe Dunjee, *The Black Dispatch* (Oklahoma City, Okla.), Vol. 5, No. 42, Ed. 1 Friday, September 24, 1920, newspaper, September 24, 1920.

students enrolled and 10 teachers on their faculty.²⁴ Based on the cost of tuition, fees, and books, Flipper-Key-Davis University had the same affordability as most public state universities across the United States. Not only could African Americans be attracted to the university through promises of educational uplift, but the university was also more affordable than most other institutions in the state offering similar programs of study. After calculating inflation from the 1920–1921 academic year and current inflation, it can be concluded that the total cost of attending Flipper-Key-Davis University in 1921 was approximately \$2,059.41, making the university one of the most affordable Historically Black colleges in the state of Oklahoma. For comparison, the cost of general expenses such as, registration fees, athletic fees, and board/laundry were slightly more expensive at Langston University at the front end of the Great Depression.²⁵ That a private higher educational institution dedicated to the uplift of African Americans maintained affordability during a global pandemic illustrates the sincerity of university officials in terms of race uplift. A sharp increase in tuition and fees could have been justified due to the influenza pandemic, but university officials opted to maintain the affordability of education at Flipper-Key-Davis in order to fulfill their goal of race uplift. Not only did Flipper-Key-Davis survive financially during the influenza outbreak, but they also had some of their most successful academic years in terms of student retention, graduation rates, and educational race uplift.²⁶

Three years after its opening, Flipper-Key-Davis University was a well-oiled machine experiencing an abundance of success that would have pleased racial uplift leaders like W.E.B

²⁴ Roscoe Dunjee, *The Black Dispatch* (Oklahoma City, Okla.), Vol. 5, No. 47, Ed. 1 Friday, October 29, 1920, newspaper, October 29, 1920. Oklahoma Historical Society.

²⁵ *Langston University Catalog, 1929-1930*.

²⁶ Roscoe Dunjee, *The Black Dispatch* (Oklahoma City, Okla.), Vol. 5, No. 41, Ed. 1 Friday, September 17, 1920, newspaper, September 17, 1920. Oklahoma Historical Society.

DuBois and Booker T. Washington. The pressures of uplift and in-state competition, though still present, were not significant enough to deter the university's progress. By the end of its 1920 academic year, Flipper-Key-Davis closed its most successful academic session to the date and cemented themselves as an educational institution for African American race uplift. Indeed, at the height of uplift it was a small private African Methodist college that continuously found themselves in various newspapers and periodicals across the state of Oklahoma. Being used as an example for other institutions to follow meant that Flipper-Key-Davis University was on the path to fulfilling their goal of uplifting the African American race through education. The closing ceremonies of the 1919–1920 academic year highlights the growing success of the fledgling university dedicated to uplift.

The closing ceremonies orchestrated by Flipper-Key-Davis university often garnered the attention of notable African American intellectuals and AME church officials who were interested in seeing the progress that the university was making towards race uplift. Like most educational institution during its era and today, Flipper-Key-Davis University conducted a commencement dedicated to graduating students and celebrating the university. However, the commencement ceremony orchestrated by Flipper-Key-Davis was much more extravagant and time-consuming than more traditional and contemporary commencements. Indeed, officials viewed these ceremonies to demonstrate the progress and success that the university was experiencing in relation to their goal of uplifting the race. While most universities dedicated a few days to commencement ceremonies, Flipper-Key-Davis University set aside an entire week to celebrate its second graduating class. Though information on the first commencement ceremony is unavailable, it is likely that the university took the same approach as showcasing their progress towards uplift was of the utmost importance. The reasoning for this lengthy

commencement ceremony can be attributed to the ongoing success that the university was experiencing by 1920. Indeed, the university now had two successful graduating classes, survived the influenza outbreak, and was showing no signs of slowing down on their path to racial uplift. The festivities held by the university during this week of commencement ranged from performances by the Glee Club, church sermons from different pastors across the region, sporting events, and instructional teachings that were open to the general public. By making their commencement ceremony open to the public eye, the university was able to display their progress to individuals who were interested or invested in the idea of educational race uplift. The complete itinerary for the 1919–1920 Commencement was as follows:

On Thursday May 27, 1920, the Commercial and Industrial Departments opened festivities by delivering lessons on typewriting and short handing. These lessons were led by students from each department and were likely open to the general public. It is highly likely that a majority of those in attendance were either parents who wanted to make sure that their students were receiving an adequate education at Flipper-Key-Davis or individuals who were seeking to gain more information on typewriting or short handing. These events were also intended to attract future students to the university and more funding from investors, by demonstrating to the public that the university was determined to deliver on its promise to provide uplift through education. By having their students and faculty deliver lessons to the general public, individuals were able to see first-hand the steps that the university was taking on their journey of uplift.

On Friday May 28, 1920, the Music and Grammar department took over festivities and entertained those in attendance with a production of the school's Alma Matter, instrumental solos and duets from students in the Glee Club, and various readings. The Glee Club, still under the direction of Miss Ruth Moore offered those in attendance a glimpse at some of the extra-

curricular activities available at the university while also performing and demonstrating the success that the university was achieving during the uplift era.

Commencement ceremonies were not recorded on Saturday May 29, 1920. Whether festivities were cancelled or simply not included in the itinerary is unknown. Regardless, Sunday May 30, 1920, was filled with events for those in attendance, all of which were tied to the African Methodist Church. The day featured three full sermons taking place at 10:00AM, 2:30PM, and 8:00PM, respectively. A full day of sermons is no surprise for Flipper-Key-Davis University during commencement week as their affiliation with the African Methodist Episcopal Church would indicate. Unfortunately, the transcripts of these sermons are not available, however, it is highly likely that race uplift was the focal point of these sermons as ties to religion and education dominated the rhetoric of this era.

Monday May 31, 1920, began with the second annual Farmers Convention that the university in which various farmers and continued with a message from delivered by T.M Greene, a member of the university's board of directors, where he iterated the university's mission. The message though not recorded more than likely featured dialogue centered around uplifting the African American race through education. The remainder of the day featured lessons on farming and animal control delivered by various individuals ranging from students at the university and local farmers. All demonstrations were given on university property and open for discussions amongst the general public.

Tuesday June 1, 1920, was highlighted by the second day of the farmers convention. Much like the first day of the convention, the second day featured more demonstrations concerning agriculture and livestock care. As the day progressed the Girls Physical Culture Club performed a variety of songs and poems to those in attendance, contests and games were also

played across campus by the afternoon. The day was concluded by a musical program delivered by the Conner Literary Society. Offering their university as a place of gathering likely exhibited and strengthened the ties that Flipper-Key-Davis had with locals around their community—ties that were essential for the university's future.

A meeting of the board was conducted before activities began on Wednesday June 2, 1920. After the meeting concluded, a slate of outdoor activities commenced under the direction of Professor R.B. Harrison. A three-team tournament featuring Flipper-Key-Davis University, the Manual Training High School of Tullahassee, and the Tullahassee City Basketball Team. The basketball tournament was followed by an Oratorical contest featuring members of the Glee Club and other musically gifted students with prizes gifted to the winners.

The final day of festivities took place on Thursday June 3, 1920. A full week of festivities culminated with Commencement Exercises filled with choruses and a performance of *Thank God for a Garden* by Miss Gertie Berry, a former member of the Glee Club and an alumna of the university.²⁷ After diplomas were awarded, the city of Tullahassee hosted a Pageant led by the directors of the Glee Club. Admission was 25 cents, and the event featured a performance of *Depicting in Song and story the life of the Negro since first landing in America*. By situating the university within the longer trajectory of African American history, this choice of performance carries significance and is an indication of the university's desire to portray itself in an uplifting manner. While this performance served as an instrument to chronicle the history of African Americans, Flipper-Key-Davis also used it to position themselves into the early twentieth century discussions around race uplift. As such, those in attendance left Flipper-Key-Davis with

²⁷ Roscoe Dunjee, *The Black Dispatch* (Oklahoma City, Okla.), Vol. 5, No. 33, Ed. 1 Friday, September 12, 1919, newspaper, September 12, 1919. Oklahoma Historical Society.

a sense that the university was indeed well on the path to uplifting the African American race through education.²⁸

A newly established private college for African American education showcasing their progress to an open public should come as no surprise during the era of uplift. The early stages of the institution were essential in gaining favor by ensuring intellectuals and investors that the institution was of great benefit to the African American race. However, no amount of instructional discourse between students and the general public could remove the lingering pressures of uplift from the university.

Indeed, from its first inaugural academic year to its closing, Flipper-Key-Davis University faced the uphill challenges of race uplift. While Flipper-Key-Davis University displayed their progress to those in attendance at their commencement ceremonies, concerns about the university still loomed. Though significant progress was made in early years, administrators and spectators interested in the university would soon understand that overcoming the pressures of uplift would be nearly impossible. Concerns about the university's likelihood of survival emerged in newspaper articles from the day of its opening in 1917. By 1918, a Muskogee newspaper posed the simple question, "What's the matter with Flipper-Key-Davis College?"²⁹ Surprisingly, a question of such magnitude is left unanswered in the periodical. However, the university was in fact dealing with an internal crisis as early as its second year of operation. Two weeks prior to the loaded questions appearance, an article titled "Flipper-Key-Davis Sorrows" found its way into an edition of the *Black Dispatch*.³⁰ The proximity of the two

²⁸ Roscoe Dunjee, *The Black Dispatch* (Oklahoma City, Okla.), Vol. 5, No. 42, Ed. 1 Friday, September 24, 1920, newspaper, September 24, 1920. Oklahoma Historical Society.

²⁹ W. H. Twine, *The Muskogee Cimenter*. (Muskogee, Okla.), Vol. 18, No. 34, Ed. 1, Saturday, March 30, 1918, newspaper, March 30, 1918. Oklahoma Historical Society.

³⁰ Roscoe Dunjee, *The Black Dispatch* (Oklahoma City, Okla.), Vol. 5, No. 7, Ed. 1 Friday, March 15, 1918, newspaper, March 15, 1918. Oklahoma Historical Society.

articles indicates that the early struggles of the university were being chronicled throughout the state. The sorrows of the university, however, were neither financial nor related to the pressures of uplift. Indeed, the university gained publicity during the 1918 academic year due to the death of a student who appeared to be well known throughout the area. Alice Lynch was a member of the Flipper-Key-Davis rhetoric class that competed in debates throughout the area and her death stunned the university to the point where a resolution needed to be written to make sense of the event and provide answers to those in mourning.

The language of the resolution drafted by the Flipper-Key-Davis rhetoric class highlighted the religious affiliations of the university and its students. Indeed, a tragic event like the death of a student on campus was seemingly justified from a religious standpoint. Opening with praise to God, the resolution continues, “It is not within our providence to question the ways of the Almighty.”³¹ Part of the document is dedicated to Alice Lynch who is credited for living “a life full of Christian servitude and one worthy of emulation... and by virtue of these facts we feel that God has gathered to himself another one of his flowers.”³² A copy of the resolution was sent to the family of the late Alice Lynch and to the press for publication. It was also signed by a variety of students who were probably members of the Flipper-Key-Davis Rhetoric Class or had some affiliation with the deceased student. Approximately twenty-one students (13 girls and 8 boys) signed the document along with Miss C.A.R. Grant, the residing professor of the rhetoric class. While it is uncertain how exactly Alice Lynch passed away at Flipper-Key-Davis, the reaction of her classmates helps to highlight the camaraderie between students at the university. Contrarily, there is no indication that the university board released a statement concerning the death of a student on campus. A gap in the archives makes speculating that administrators were

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

not concerned about Alice Lynch's death problematic, however, the resolution from students being published does leave room for interpretation. Perhaps university officials were too concerned that the death of a student on campus would negatively impact enrollment rates or reflect poorly on their care of students. It is also likely that a statement was given concerning the death of a student on campus and this information is simply not available. Regardless, the fact that a death of one student yielded a resolution that was signed by nearly two dozen students highlights the unity present between students and faculty across campus. The language of the resolution shows that the university did indeed abide by its moral code of religion as God is used to justify such a tragic event. Lastly, the amount of public attention that the death of Alice Lynch garnered throughout the region shows that individuals were interested in the success and development of the university during its early stages of operation. Indeed, a newly established Black educational institution that was dedicated to the uplift of the African American race would immediately be placed under a microscope, which made the university's goal of achieving race uplift more difficult for years to come.

When analyzing a historically Black college of the twentieth century, the concept of uplift is bound to appear. The pressures placed on the shoulders of Flipper-Key-Davis were more significant however due to their religious ties to the African Methodist Church. Black Oklahomans likely viewed the university as a two-way progressive institution for uplift, both spiritually and educationally. Indeed, the narrative of uplifting the African American race extended beyond education; AME religious officials also believed that a spiritual uplift carried just as much significance as educational uplift. Although Flipper-Key-Davis was the only private historically black college in the state of Oklahoma at the time, other educational institutions also operated with religious ties dedicated to uplifting the African American race. These colleges and

universities, much like Flipper-Key-Davis, experienced the difficulties of securing financial support for their institutions.

An article published in a 1919 edition of the *Black Dispatch* highlights the early financial difficulties of Flipper-Key-Davis while also tying the university to other educational institutions like the Girl's Training School at Sapulpa. The article begins with a singular statement, "The greatest need of Oklahoma is Christian school."³³ While the language used throughout the newspaper article is typical from a religious uplift standpoint, the author was highly critical of established educational institutions, like Flipper-Key-Davis, because they believed that university officials had not been completely honest with the community about the school's finances. Indeed, the author cited the financial instabilities of other Oklahoma colleges to argue that schools like Flipper-Key-Davis University could not survive in the state of Oklahoma unless something was done to reform the questionable leadership on display at some of these institutions. Referencing the history of Christian education for African Americans in the state, the author states, "In the past twenty-five years we have established and lost a number of Christian schools and these of the present will fail unless we examine carefully what caused us to lose them."³⁴ Most of the failures leading to the demise of these educational institutions stemmed from leadership, decision-making, and experience. To make their case, the author pointed to the early financial struggles of Flipper-Key-Davis and the university's efforts to avoid debt or bankruptcy in its first few years and called for "experienced, competent school heads"—an appeal that underscores the pressure that university officials felt from their own community to ensure the success of these schools. These critiques suggest that although most Black Oklahomans

³³ Roscoe Dunjee, *The Black Dispatch* (Oklahoma City, Okla.), Vol. 5, No. 38, Ed. 1 Friday, October 17, 1919, newspaper, October 17, 1919. Oklahoma Historical Society.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

believed in uplift rhetoric, these beliefs were accompanied with sharp criticism in the event of wrongdoings and setbacks. However, most critics of Black educational institutions shared their critiques in the hopes that these institutions would succeed.

Sometime before the 1920–1921 academic school year, President J.B. Key was replaced by Professor J.I. Jones, who served as the acting president of the university until officials granted the position to T.M. Greene in 1922.³⁵ The exact reason for Green replacing J.B. Key as president of the university is a mystery. Possibly J.B. Key resigned from the university on good terms. Perhaps he believed Greene would be a better fit for the university and decided to stepdown. Yet this speculation also leaves the door open for another possibility. Perhaps J.B. Key and members of the board had some disagreements as to how the university should be ran. Surely a higher educational institution dedicated to race uplift would have some differing opinions on logistics, especially during the early twentieth century when financial hardship seemed to be the norm for many Americans.

The approximate date of Key's resignation (or termination) is absent from the archives, however, a 1922 lawsuit brought against the university by Electric Supply Company can be used to discern the trajectory of the university after Key was no longer in office. The Electric Supply Company claimed to have contracted for an electric lighting plant with Flipper-Key-Davis University on November 1, 1919 and alleged that they had not received any payment for their services. This case not only provides a trajectory for the university after Key's departure, but it also offers details about disagreements between university officials and suggests the possibility of internal strife. Tulsa was the closest major city to the university, and it is likely that the Electric Supply Company handled at least some electrical operations for Flipper-Key-Davis in its

³⁵ Walton Brown, *The Peoples Elevator* (Guthrie, Okla.), Vol. 30, No. 11, Ed. 1 Thursday, August 10, 1922, newspaper, August 10, 1922; Guthrie, Oklahoma. Oklahoma Historical Society.

early years. The timing of the transaction suggests that this new plant was built to supply electricity to the second women's dormitory that was announced before the start of the 1919 academic year. President J.B. Key along with other prominent figures appeared in the court records, including J.M. Connor, Jones A. Johnson, C.R. Tucker, T. Wiggins, and F.M. Delancey, all of whom served on the university's board of directors.³⁶ Witness testimony from Mr. H.C. Stevens, an employee at the Electric Supply Company revealed, however, that the company was only involved in business with President Key and no other members of the board—meaning that Key likely contracted with the electric company without approval from the university board. The likelihood of Key going around the board to acquire this electrical plant for the second women's dormitory is significantly high when considering his determination to have the dorm built. Mr. Stevens also stated that he looked directly to President Key for the payment of the lighting plant as other members of the board were not present when the two worked out a contract for payment.³⁷ The case was dismissed as the plaintiffs were not able to provide sums for their court fees and the plaintiffs were told that a lack of evidence also factored into the court's decision to dismiss the case.³⁸

It is nearly impossible to know what exactly was happening at Flipper-Key-Davis University while this lawsuit was ongoing. The university may have maintained the same level of productivity it had been experiencing despite the pending legal issues. It would also make sense that the members of the university board clashed with President Key for involving the university in such a protracted legal process. Regardless, the early stages of this case and the

³⁶ *Electric Supply Company. vs. Flipper-Key-Davis University*, Stipulation, no.5260, Wagoner County, State of Oklahoma. Judge Charles G. Watts Collection, Box 74: Dead File 7, Folder #4.

³⁷ *Electric Supply Company. Vs. Flipper-Key-Davis University*, Direct Examination, no.5260, Wagoner County, State of Oklahoma. Judge Charles G. Watts Collection, Box 74: Dead File 7, Folder #4.

³⁸ Letter from Carter & Gordon Lawyer to Judge Charles G. Watts, November 8th, 1923, Muskogee, Oklahoma. Judge Charles G. Watts Collection, Box 74: Dead File 7, Folder #4.

information provided about President Key indicates that he and members of the board may have had differing views on the direction of the university and Key was more than prepared to empty his own pockets to implement his uplift vision and for the progress of the university.

Once the Electric Supply Company paid the sum for their court fees, the case was reintroduced in 1923. In the renewed court case, the contract between President Key and the Electric Supply Company served as the centerpiece of the prosecution's argument. The contract stated that President Key was solely responsible for payment of the lighting plant under the stipulation that it served its purpose for at least fifteen days.³⁹ In total the plant cost \$1,700 when the contract was signed, and the Electric Supply Company claimed to have never received full payments from either President Key or the university. The plaintiffs did note that they received a total of \$400 in payments for the lighting supply plant in 1920, but due to the previously agreed 8 percent annum interest were now owed a grand total of \$1628.38. In order to avoid the legal process, the Electric Supply Company informed the lawyers of Flipper-Key-Davis that they were willing to accept a payment of \$1350, an offer that university officials swiftly declined.⁴⁰

While the case appears to be one-sided, Flipper-Key-Davis had a chance to defend itself against the Electric Supply Company's accusations. The university denied all material allegations, while also denying any involvement with the Electric Supply Company, claiming that they were not indebted to the plaintiff. The true significance of the argument comes shortly after this denial. The argument presented by the university board states:

For further answer the defendant alleges the truth to be, that on information and belief and it therefore charges said contract was signed by a majority of the persons [whose] names appear thereon, acting in their individual capacity, but was not executed by this

³⁹ *Order for Power and Light Outfits or Accessories*, November 1st, 1919, Letter from J.B. Key to Western Electric Company Incorporated. Judge Charles G. Watts Collection, Box 74: Dead File 7, Folder #4.

⁴⁰ Letter from Electric Supply Company to S.T. Wiggins, February 2nd, 1923, Wagoner, Oklahoma. Judge Charles G. Watts Collection, Box 74: Dead File 7, Folder #4.

defendant nor anyone authorized so to do; that at said time it had a president and secretary who were authorized to act in such matter only after a meeting with of its directors, favorably agreed and directing such purchase and contract, which was not had in said instances and is therefore void as to the defendant and not binding on it.⁴¹

Insisting that their president and secretary (both positions were filled by J.B. Key) were operating independently, the university was willing to have their former president take the fall for the alleged contract and lack of payment to the Electric Supply Company. Furthermore, the use of past tense solidifies that J.B. Key was no longer the president of the university at the time of the court hearings. Whether the court case was the sole reason for Key no longer being president of the university is unclear, yet it is evident that Flipper-Key-Davis University used their former president and co-founder as a scapegoat in this court case, likely fracturing the relationship between the Key and university officials.

The board's reasoning for placing Key at the center of these allegations is unknown; perhaps university officials wanted to put an end to a legal process that had lasted for several years. It is also possible that board members did believe that Key had operated on his own accord and as such they felt as though he should bear the consequences of his own actions. Regardless, the court case signifies a turning point for the university's future as no information of Key handling university operations is present following the court's decision in 1924. While officials may have been frustrated with former President Key for this legal process, the board of directors did attempt to clear his name to an extent. The board claimed that former President Key understood that the university board was not in full support of the lighting plant and decided to write the Electric Supply Company, calling off the shipment.⁴² The defense of their former president was followed by a glaring accusation that the light plant did not meet expectations.

⁴¹ *Electric Supply Company. vs. Flipper-Key-Davis University*, Answer, no.5260, Wagoner County, State of Oklahoma. Judge Charles G. Watts Collection, Box 74: Dead File 7, Folder #4.

⁴² *Ibid.* p.2.

Indeed, the defendants went as far as to deem the light plant “wholly worthless” and claimed, “that either through improper installation or inherent fault... said so-called light plant never gave even occasional reasonable service.”⁴³

After all evidence was presented in 1924, the court case—which spanned nearly two years—finally had a decision. The jury ruled in favor of the Electric Supply Company and Flipper-Key-Davis University was ordered to pay a sum of \$750, nearly half of what the plaintiffs had claimed they were owed by the defendants.⁴⁴

The 1924 case *Electric Supply Company. vs. Flipper-Key-Davis University* marks a significant moment of transition for the university. Defending themselves in a court of law illustrates that the university was concerned about their public and legal image as an institution and would go to great lengths to defend themselves—including the removal of J.B. Key as president. However, the 1924 court case also highlights the existence of tension between university officials, which during the age of uplift could spell trouble for an educational institution like Flipper-Key-Davis University. Indeed, the existence of internal conflict would be seen as a sign of poor leadership, and in an era where the public’s opinion of an institution carried so much significance, one court case could negatively impact the trajectory of an institution like Flipper-Key-Davis.

Information on Flipper-Key-Davis University following the 1924 court case is scant. What is known however, is that the university shifted to a junior college format sometime after the court case and operated as such until it closed in 1936. The shift to a junior college format may have been a response to the departure of J.B. Key, as officials may have found it more cost

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Letter from Charles & Gordon Lawyers to Fred Carter, November 17th, 1924. Judge Charles G. Watts Collection, Box 74: Dead File 7, Folder #4.

effective to operate as such now that Key's finances were no longer in play. As the 1924 court case severed ties between J.B. Key and the university, significantly, his name was removed from the institution when it changed to a junior college. Indeed, Flipper-Key-Davis was no more after the court case as it changed to Flipper-Davis College sometime after Key was no longer the President.⁴⁵ The trajectory of the university cannot be fully examined as the archives possess little to no information on Flipper-Davis College.

The lack of information on a once vibrant university and community is puzzling indeed. One could speculate that board members decided to keep the affairs of the university more secluded after the departure of Key. But what does this say about the institutions desire to uplift the African American race? Did the university still possess the drive for uplift that once fueled their former president? Or had they abandoned this goal due to the financial hardships that they surely faced after Key's departure? While nothing about Flipper-Davis College can be substantially proven, there are multiple directions that the university could have gone once it converted to a junior college. First the move to a junior college could have been just what the university needed following the removal of J.B. Key. It is possible that more students could have been attracted to the college as a two-year institution as opposed to when it was a four-year university. It is also possible, however, that the junior college transition may have hurt the university financially if the cost of attendance increased following the end of the influenza pandemic and J.B. Key's departure. Perhaps the shift led to a gradual decline of university finances that culminated with the stock market crash of 1929. While details about the finances of Flipper-Davis College in the late 1920s and early 1930s are unavailable, there is glaring evidence that the junior college experience was not as successful as officials may have expected.

⁴⁵ Jimmie Lewis Franklin, *Journey Toward Hope: A History of Blacks in Oklahoma* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1982).

Unfortunately, Flipper-Davis College much like other historically Black colleges and universities that operated in the state of Oklahoma during the early twentieth century was unable to maintain operations following the Great Depression. Engulfed by a struggling national economy, the college amassed significant debt and closed its doors in 1936.

A legal process that occurred in the college's last year of operation may help shed light on some of the final days of Flipper-Davis College. In 1936, Earl Jones Sports Shop, a sporting goods company in Chicago filed a lawsuit against Flipper-Davis College alleging that the college was indebted to their company for a sum of \$94.59 for athletic supplies. Issues about the university's existence as a junior college or four-year institution also emerged in the ensuing legal process. A letter forwarded to Flipper-Davis College officials warned that legal action would be taken should the College fail to pay off their debt.⁴⁶ The lawyers of the sporting goods company informed their clients that receiving payment may require a lawsuit, due to the validity of the college and their history of paying their debts. By 1936, Flipper-Davis College was in the care of W.T. Johnson, who was most likely the institution's last president before it officially closed. The sporting goods company decided to take legal action against Flipper-Davis College.⁴⁷

The ensuing legal process undertaken by the Earl Jones Sports Shop yielded little to no progress in terms of their payments. Confusion emerged about whether the lawsuit should be filed against Flipper-Davis College or Flipper-Key-Davis University. While both institutions operated in the same location and under the same Methodist branch, the debt claimed to be owed to the sporting goods company may have been lent to the school when it was still operating as a

⁴⁶ *Earl Jones Sport Shop Co. vs. Flipper-Davis College, July 25th, 1936.* Judge Charles G. Watts Collection, Box 109: Dead File 19, Folder #2.

⁴⁷ Letter from Watts & Watts Attorneys to Sporting Goods Industries Clearing House, July 25th, 1936. Judge Charles G. Watts Collection, Box 109: Dead File 19, Folder #2.

four-year university. Upon further research, the attorneys for the sporting goods company discovered that Flipper-Davis College was no longer in operation and had closed a few months before the case was brought forward. Furthermore, the college had other pending cases concerning their debt, one of which alleged that the college owed approximately \$168.33 to a creditor.⁴⁸ Verifying the university's finances and leadership was difficult since Flipper-Davis College was a non-profit educational institution and therefore was not required by law to make annual report to any state departments. Thus, no records of university officials were on file in the Oklahoma State Department.⁴⁹ The limited number of files about Flipper-Key-Davis University were "rather confusing" to the Oklahoma Department of State and it soon became clear that this lawsuit would be a lengthy affair. A lack of information on the university during its time as a junior college and after the departure of J.B. Key highlights the seclusion of the university. That an institution dedicated to educational uplift would remove itself from the public eye serves as an indication that the university may have begun to question the attainability of their uplift mission, or perhaps the university was bearing the brunt of financial hardships and decided to isolate themselves from public view as a response.⁵⁰

Nearly six months into the case, the Earl Jones Sports Shop reached out to their attorneys for another update on the progress of the case.⁵¹ After their search for the validity of Flipper-

⁴⁸ Letter from Watts & Watts Attorneys at Law to Sporting Goods Industries Clearing House, September 25th, 1936. Judge Charles G. Watts Collection, Box 109: Dead File 19, Folder #2.

⁴⁹ Letter from Watts & Watts Attorneys at Law to Frank C. Carter, October 26th, 1936. Judge Charles G. Watts Collection, Box 109: Dead File 19, Folder #2.

Letter from Department of State to Watts & Watts Attorneys at Law, Oklahoma City, Ok, October 28th, 1936. Judge Charles G. Watts Collection, Box 109: Dead File 19, Folder #2.

⁵⁰ Letter from Watts & Watts Attorneys at Law to Frank C. Carter, December 10th, 1936. Judge Charles G. Watts Collection, Box 109: Dead File 19, Folder #2.

Letter from Department of State to Watts & Watts Attorneys at Law, December 12th, 1936. Judge Charles G. Watts Collection, Box 109: Dead File 19, Folder #2.

⁵¹ Letter from Sporting Goods Industries Clearing House to Watts & Watts Attorneys at Law, Chicago, IL, January 15th, 1937. Judge Charles G. Watts Collection, Box 109: Dead File 19, Folder #2.

Davis College yielded no return, the attorneys responded to their clients stating that they had not yet filed suit. Their reasoning behind not filing suit stemmed from their efforts to find any information on the institution. The attorneys were also unsure whether the institution operated as an Ohio corporation or an Oklahoma corporation, or whether it was indeed a corporation at all. The response continues by providing information as to the whereabouts of the now abandoned Flipper-Key-Davis University with significant detail. The response states:

This institution's plant and property is out about a half a mile from Tullahassee, and about 15 miles from Wagoner. We have been over there and looked the [grounds] over but were unable to see into any of the buildings. The buildings are all frame structures. We found no one on the grounds but were advised(*sic*) by a party living nearby that a caretaker lived in one of the buildings and was looking after the property.⁵²

In response, the sporting goods company attorneys stated that they had recently found the bishop of the A.M.E. Church and alleged that plans were being made for the school to be reopened.⁵³ Lawyers for the sporting goods company revealed that the school buildings and grounds were estimated to be worth \$2,500 with an additional \$500 in fixtures and equipment.⁵⁴ After failing to locate any school officials the Earl Jones Sports Shop decided to withdraw their complaint and never filed a lawsuit.⁵⁵ The 1937 one-sided conflict between Flipper-Key-Davis University (or Flipper-Davis College) and the Earl Jones Sports Shop shows that the once vibrant university turned junior college closed its doors with a massive amount of debt. This also highlights that while the doors were closed, the college itself was still being legally sought after—whether officials were aware of it or not.

⁵² Letter from Watts & Watts Attorneys at Law to Sporting Goods Industries Clearing House, January 20th, 1937. Judge Charles G. Watts Collection, Box 109: Dead File 19, Folder #2.

⁵³ Letter from Watts & Watts Attorneys at Law to Sporting Goods Industries Clearing House, February 18th, 1937. Judge Charles G. Watts Collection, Box 109: Dead File 19, Folder #2.

⁵⁴ Letter from Sporting Goods Industries Clearing House to Watts & Watts Attorneys at Law, Chicago, IL, February 26th, 1937. Judge Charles G. Watts Collection, Box 109: Dead File 19, Folder #2.

⁵⁵ Letter from Watts & Watts Attorneys at Law to Sporting Goods Industries Clearing House, February 27th, 1937. Judge Charles G. Watts Collection, Box 109: Dead File 19, Folder #2.

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Conclusion:

It would be easy to write the legacy of Flipper-Key-Davis University as another failed project of race uplift through education in the early twentieth century. However, the university showed promise in its early years and had it not been for a falling out with some of the university's founders, the trajectory of the university may have been completely different. While the amount of debt is undeniable, it is only one of the many problems that an institution like Flipper-Key-Davis University faced in the age of uplift. One of the largest gaps in the uplift narrative is a lack of attention to the significance of funding in the longevity of educational institutions. By neglecting the importance of financial stability, the uplift narrative itself deemed any financial struggles as a sign of incompetent leadership rather than addressing the inequities that black educational institutions faced during the era. Perhaps instead of relegating institutions like Flipper-Key-Davis to a merely indebted institution that was unable to keep its doors open following the Great Depression, we should view institutions like Flipper-Key-Davis University and Flipper-Davis College as true symbols of the uplift era. Regardless of their pure intentions to uplift the African American race through education, the university itself failed for many reasons outside of finances. Not only did the narrative of race uplift ignore the financial difficulties that institutions like Flipper-Key-Davis University faced, it also did not take into consideration the possibility of internal strife among leaders, competition for enrollment, miscellaneous tragedies, and legal battles. Instead of viewing the institution itself as a failure, educational scholars should reexamine the rhetoric that guided these historically Black colleges and universities.

While institutions like Flipper-Key-Davis made do with the funding that they managed to secure, the inequities in comparison to other educational institutions in the state of Oklahoma

that barred African American students from attending were far too significant. Indeed, white educational institutions received significantly more funding than historically Black colleges during the Jim Crow era. As such, uplift became unattainable for most Black colleges who measured their own success through the lens of predominantly white institutions with better funding. Had these discrepancies been accounted for in uplift dialogue, perhaps the state of Oklahoma would have more than one historically Black college operating in the state today. The failures of institutions like Flipper-Key-Davis University cannot be placed solely on university officials and doing so would ignore the many factors that played into the university's tenure such as financial stability and internal strife. By ignoring these factors, uplift rhetoric ultimately played a part in the downfall of many Black educational institutions.

The historically Black colleges and universities that no longer operate in the state of Oklahoma have been considered outliers in the history of African American education. When theoretically, institutions like Langston that managed to survive the pressures of uplift should be considered the outliers because educational institutions succumbing to the theory of race uplift was much more common than those who successfully navigated through it. This critique of the uplift era is in no way intended to discredit the works of racial uplift theorists. Indeed, it is due to the tireless efforts of those individuals that a university like Flipper-Key-Davis University could have opened their doors to African Americans interested in receiving an education. The 107 Historically Black Colleges and Universities operating in the United States are also thanks in part to those individuals who dared to seek control of their own direction as a race.

Unfortunately for defunct institutions like Flipper-Key-Davis University, the narrative of uplift had a damaging effect on how the university operated. University officials were often unnecessarily critical of the institution and sought to achieve unattainable goals that eventually

led to their downfall. Indeed, the false notions of uplift played a significant role in the failure of many Black educational institutions, and should this narrative continue to be regurgitated in educational discourse, there will surely be more cases like Flipper-Key-Davis University.

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