

The Legacy of branch Normal College is better understood as a struggle for survival. Remarkably, the institution survived against such great odds from within and those from outside its walls during the first fifty years of its existence. The institution survived partly because of great men of wisdom and determination like Joseph Carter Corbin, Isaac Fisher, Frederick T. Venegar, and Jefferson Ish. and because of people recently freed from slavery who were determined to get an education against all odds. To understand the history of this institution is to understand what the State of Arkansas has not done as much as what has been done to educate the black population of the State.

The story began in 1872 with the opening of Arkansas Industrial University (now the University of Arkansas) in the northwest corner of the state, which was the farther district from the State's negro population. The school was said to be open to all, regardless of race. However, by the end of 1873, the race issue had ushered in a bill in the State Senate to locate a Branch Normal College of the Normal Department of the Arkansas Industrial University southeast, east, or south of Pulaski County, "especially for the convenience and well-being of the poorer classes."

For two years after the bill became law, more was needed to implement the statute's provisions. In July 1875, Joseph Carter Corbin, a well-educated Black man who had served as State Superintendent of instruction and Chairman of the Board of Trustees for Arkansas Industrial University (1873-74), was hired by the Boards Committee on Branch Normal College to find a suitable location for the school. Finding Pine Bluff as an appropriate location for the college, Corbin was asked to assume the duties as Principal of the school.

The first location for the Normal School was an old, dilapidated one-story frame house built to serve as a barrack and located on the corner of Lindsey and Sevier streets (now Second Avenue and Oak Street). Corbin's effort to open the school at the beginning of September was delayed because promised repairs to the building had yet to be made, and the school's furniture, which had been ordered from Chicago, was lost when a boat bringing it up the Arkansas river sank. Nonetheless, the school opened on September 27, 1875, with seven students in attendance. Corbin described these students as scholastically heterogeneous - one could read very well but not write legibly. Others knew enough mathematics to cipher through ratio and proportion but needed to be reading at a first-grade level. These students' previous academic requirements were like those of students entering the University of Fayetteville. The students entering Branch Normal College were undoubtedly disadvantaged since 1.) they and their parents were just ten years removed from slavery and 2.) "Few," if any, preparatory schools of moral character had existed before this time in the State.

In June 1882, after seven years, Corbin reported with great pride, "The first colored student that ever graduated and received a college degree in the State was graduated from Branch Normal College." Between 1882 and 1895, ten students received the Bachelor of Arts degree before the reduction of the collegiate program at Branch Normal. Despite Joseph Corbin's meritorious services in the growth of the college and his efforts to improve the educational level of the negro students. The Board of Trustees did not renew his contract in 1902.

In 1891, the Board accepted the provisions of the second Morrill Act of 1890 and agreed to build agricultural and mechanical departments at the Branch Normal College. By 1902, the Board had decided to introduce the Tuskegee education system at Branch Normal, i.e., scientific farming and

associated trades such as woodworking, blacksmithing, etc., making the farmer self-sufficient and economically independent.

Isaac Fisher, a graduate of the Tuskegee Institute and a disciple of Booker T. Washington, succeeded Corbin and led the institution until 1911. But Fisher needed help working out his Tuskegee idea or accomplishing anything substantial at Branch Normal. Fisher had no control over the school's finances and no voice in the appointment and dismissal of teachers; this was done by the Board of Trustees, most often without consulting Fisher. He needed a college degree to handle the college curriculum as Corbin could. While Fisher fought opposition throughout his tenure, a lack of qualified hands-on faculty led to a depletion of required standard courses in the Normal and Classical Departments, reducing the college to a substandard level. By the end of the 1910-1911 school years, students still needed to pass an examination by the Superintendent of Public Instruction. No student graduated; Fisher felt compelled to resign.

Following the resignation of Fisher, W.S. Harris was named superintendent and head of the College. Frederick T. Venegar was named head or Principal of the Normal Department, not the entire college. Harris and Venegar remained in these positions until the 1914-1915 school year.

Branch Normal reached its lowest ebb in stature during the Harris-Venegar administration. Reductions in academic programs left the institution as an elementary and secondary school by the 1914-1915 school year. Finances were mismanaged; therefore, necessary expansions in the curriculum were not realized. This resulted in an accumulated surplus, and the Board of Trustees directed that the fiscal management of the College be transferred to the State Superintendent of Education during this period. A student strike in 1915 lasted more than two weeks, compelling them to close the College indefinitely. However, the school reopened in the fall of 1915 with the termination of Superintendent W.S. Harris.

Succeeding W.S. Harris as superintendent of Branch Normal, Jefferson Ish was the first natural Arkansan to head the institution. Under his administration, a standard high school program and a Home Economics Department were established. The faculty and curriculum were expanded, laying the foundation for a multi-purpose College. Fisher's most significant achievement was a reorganization in the direction of making the Institution a land-grant college as contemplated by the 1890 Morrill Act. To do this, he established a strong Agriculture Department for the first time and trained in allied trades. The foundation for the college had finally been laid. Frederick T. Venegar was reappointed as principal during Jefferson Ish's administration.

Dr. John Brown Watson, a graduate of Brown University, was appointed as the first President of Arkansas A.M.&N. College in June 1928 after serving for several years as president of Leland College at Baker, Louisiana. Before Watson assumed the presidency, the college was called the Arkansas Agricultural, Mechanical, and Normal School, which served as a Junior College with preparatory and elementary schools and a six-week summer session for teachers. The title for the head of the school was superintendent.

Within the first few years of his tenure, Watson succeeded in reinstating the four-year bachelor's degree program, moved the college to its present location, and reorganized the faculty into standard academic departments and divisions. In 1929, a new site for the college had been purchased; the

building began, completed, and furnished the same year, with Watson and his faculty and students moving in on December 15. By the end of the 1929-30 school year, Watson had been awarded the first two bachelor's degrees at the college since 1885.

Dr. Watson worked steadily to improve the curriculum and quality of teaching at A.M.&N. and became a dominant force in the college's progress. It was a difficult struggle to establish the college program, particularly in the depression years of the 1930s. However, if needed, President Watson was prepared to offer his financial aid to permit a student or faculty member to go on to graduate study. He also worked to bring the best possible faculty to Pine Bluff, seeking out talented young educators who were starting their careers, with the knowledge that after a few years, many would go to larger institutions that could offer them more.

President Watson had established his reputation as a strong leader and a man of firm convictions, earning the nickname "John Bull" among faculty and students. A strict disciplinarian, he expected everyone on campus to keep active and usefully occupied. Watson felt that the college needed more money to support teachers who were at least of average value to the college.

By the time of his untimely death in 1942, the college had reached its most significant height under his administration.

Maintaining the spirit (mission) of the college was foremost on the minds and in the hearts of the students, faculty, and alums & supporters of A.M.& N. College during the merger with the University of Arkansas system. The union had been vigorously opposed because they feared the traditional role of the college would be destroyed.

Having served as president of A.M.& N. College for 29 years, Dr. Lawrence A. Davis, Sr. became the first Chancellor of the newly merged University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff in 1972. He was to serve only one year, resigning in June of 1973. Dr. Davis emphasized the university's primary mission: to assist underprivileged students while not excluding the brightest and most talented students. He insisted that integration, as the law of the land, should be recognized and practiced. During 1972, the enrollment of non-black students increased. It should be noted that A.M.& N. College had an integrated faculty long before 1972. Dr. Davis' one-year tenure as chancellor was beneficial to making the transition from A.M.& N. College to the University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff as smooth as possible.

Following the resignation of Lawrence A. Davis during the summer of 1973, Dr. Johnny B. Johnson, a professor of teacher education, was tabbed by Dr. David Mullins, President of the University of Arkansas System, to serve as acting chancellor. At the same time, a national search was conducted to find an able individual to head the university, academically and socially, during a period of uncertainty as to the future role of the institution.

On July 1, 1974, Dr. Herman B. Smith, Jr. assumed the office of Chancellor. Dr. Smith immediately set out to improve the physical appearance of the campus. The upgrading of the campus included the construction of new parking lots; the resurfacing of existing parking lots; the renovation of two dormitories (Childress and Holderness Halls) as classrooms; the renovation of the old library building (now Childress Hall); and the demolition of several campus landmarks including the former president's home, the old home economics building, the Arts and Sciences building, Joseph

C. Corbin Laboratory School (all constructed in 1929). New buildings were completed with a new science building (Kountz-Kyle) in 1972, a home economics building (Adair-Greenhouse), and a new administration building in 1977.

Smith served the university for almost seven years. Under his leadership, new programs were introduced to the curriculum, a vigorous student recruiting drive was launched, and the university received increased state funding and support from the private sector. In 1975, UAPB obtained \$307,000 from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, the largest grant ever received from any reserved source. In January 1981, Dr. Smith announced his resignation. Immediately following his resignation James Martin, President of the University of Arkansas System, appointed a committee to oversee the administration and operations of the campus until June 30, 1981, or until a new chancellor could be selected. The members of the committee appointed Dr. Aaron Van Wright, Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs; Dr. Lee Torrence, Vice Chancellor for Student Affairs; Benson Otovo, Vice Chancellor for Fiscal Affairs; Dr. Sellers J. Parker, Research Director and Administrator for the 1890 Extension Programs; Dr. Lawrence A. Davis, Jr., Dean of Arts and Sciences; and Dr. Walter Littlejohn, who served as chairman. It should be noted that this was the second time a committee had administered the university.

In September of 1981, Dr. Lloyd V. Hackley was appointed chancellor. As chancellor, Dr. Hackley gained state and national recognition as an outspoken proponent of quality educational standards for all students. Accomplishments during his tenure include the re-accreditation of the University by the North Central Association of Colleges and Universities; various academic departments received accreditation from their respective accrediting body, including music, The National Association of Schools of Music; Home Economics, the American Home Economics Association; Nursing, the National League of Nursing. The University College was established in 1982. The \$7.5 million Health, Physical Education, and Recreation Complex, started under Smith's administration, was completed in 1984. The State Legislature released \$1.5 million to renovate Caldwell Hall, the oldest existing campus building currently houses administrative and student support programs. Dr. Hackley inaugurated the first multi-purpose endowment campaign and secured state funding for a dormitory complex. Dr. Hackley resigned from his position in October 1985 to become Chancellor of Fayetteville State University in North Carolina.

Following Hackley's resignation, Dr. Johnny B. Johnson was appointed provost. In August 1986, Dr. Charles A. Walker accepted the position of chancellor. During his tenure, the University was successful in generating phenomenal research funds – ranking the school third among all Arkansas institutions of higher learning in terms of research funds received. Federal funds were secured for the expansion of the dormitory complex initiated by Hackley and the renovation of the former ROTC building to house the Center for Multi-purpose Research and Sponsored Programs. Approval was granted for two master's degree programs in elementary and secondary education in 1991, marking a milestone in the educational offering of UAPB.

Following Dr. Walker's resignation during the summer of 1991, Carolyn Blakely served as interim chancellor, becoming the first female to hold the position. As interim chancellor, she was immediately confronted with the university's financial deficit, implementation of a sudden new tuition payment policy at registration for UAPB students, and review of the university's security department.

During Dr. Lawrence A. Davis, Jr.'s administration, the university was affectionately called the "Flagship of the Delta." When Dr. Davis took the helm as chancellor, in record time, he stabilized the school's finances and raised the morale of the faculty, staff, and students.

The unanimous choice of the board of trustees, Dr. Lawrence A. Davis, Jr., was appointed chancellor of UAPB on November 5, 1991. Davis's first year was spent filling the 22 empty positions he inherited, including a security chief and an athletic director. After a two-year ban, the football program was reinstated, and a new coaching staff was hired. Within two years, the football program was at an all-time high, playing for the national championship of the national association of intercollegiate athletics (NAIA), Division I.

With his crucial personnel in place, Davis labored to address as many concerns as possible while giving impetus to enhancing the teaching, research, and service functions the university had performed well for over 100 years. During his tenure, he oversaw the completion of multiple multi-million-dollar buildings and upgrades of campus facilities. Davis accomplished many of his initial goals for enhancing this fine institution, including implementing a regulatory science program and installing a Ph.D. In Aquaculture and Fisheries program.

Having served several years as dean of the school of education and being thoroughly familiar with the faculty, staff, and student clientele, Dr. Calvin Johnson felt at ease stepping into his role as interim Chancellor. However, some of his main challenges had to deal with leadership, accreditation, and assessments in instruction. As chancellor, he had oversight of the entire campus. He knew that the buck had stopped with him. Yet, Dr. Johnson was able to keep the ship on course. Some milestones during Dr. Johnson's tenure were the renewal of accreditation for the Teacher Education Program, the initiation of the first annual Chancellor's Excellence Awards, and the football team winning the 2012 SWAC Championship.

Following a national search, Laurence B. Alexander became Chancellor of the University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff on July 1, 2013. Dr. Alexander was nominated by the University of Arkansas System President Donald R. Bobbitt and approved by the Board of Trustees.

Dr. Alexander has led UAPB to increase enrollment and fundraising and develop new nursing and biochemistry programs during his tenure. He is a Go Forward Pine Bluff Task Force member, Education Chair of the local United Way Campaign, and the Board of Directors of Fifty for the Future, the Jefferson County Industrial Foundation Board, and the Arkansas Research Alliance Board.

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This activity was paid for in total or part by funding from the U. S. Department of Education, Office of Postsecondary Education, Institutional Services Program, Title III, Part B, Historically Black Colleges and Universities Program, or Student Aid and Fiscal Responsibility Act.