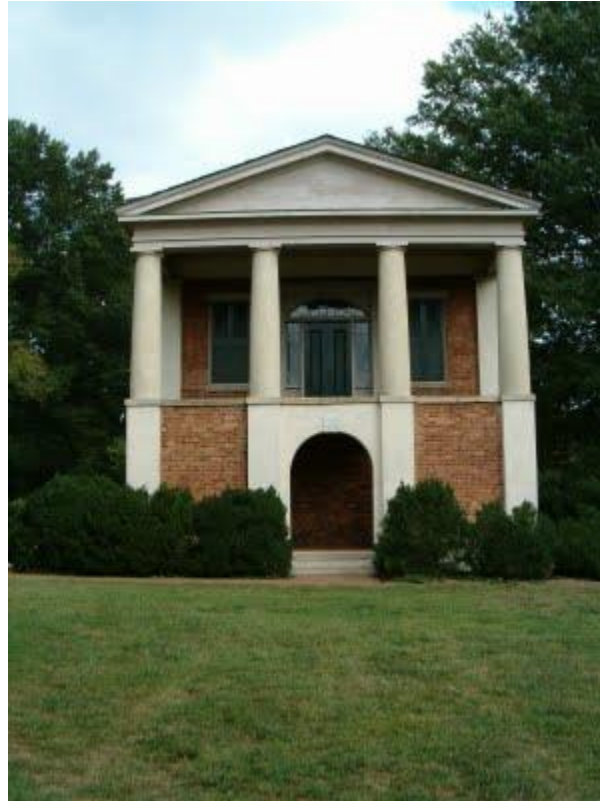


Davidson College: Philanthropic Hall

From the Nomination Form for the National Register of Historic Places, Nov. 29, 1971



Like the companion structure it faces (Eumenean Hall), Philanthropic Hall is a small but strikingly monumental two-story rectangular brick building three bays wide and three bays long, with the second level expressed as a piano nobile. A handsome prostyle tetrastyle portico dominates the main (northwest) facade. The brick walls are laid in both [Flemish and common bonds](#), with Flemish bond employed on the sides and upper section of the main facade, and common on the rear and the lower portion of the facade.

At the first level, the main facade is divided by four plain, heavy stuccoed brick piers that rise from slightly projecting bases, and support the [Doric columns](#) above. The two flanking bays at the first level are filled with a brick screen wall above a high stuccoed water table. The central bay is of brick recently covered with stucco and features a large, open roundheaded arched entrance accented only by a plain keystone, inscribed "Philanthropic Hall, 1837." This entrance provides access to the concealed stair that rises on each side behind the brick screen walls in two flights to a central entrance landing on the floor above.

At the second level, which is separated from the first by a granite stringer, a massive column rises above each of the four piers. Corresponding full-height corner pilasters with simple molded caps occur at each end of the facade. The tympanum of the well-proportioned pediment is covered with horizontal flush weatherboards. The main central entrance, located at this level, consists of a double door, each leaf marked by a long flat panel, flanked by ten-pane [sidelights](#) above small flat panels. A large [fanlight](#) extends over the door and sidelights. The entire entrance is framed by wide fluted pilaster strips with rounder corner blocks supporting a lintel marked by a central rectangular panel containing a Greek fret pattern. Flanking the entrance are large windows containing [six-over-nine sash](#) and featuring stone sills and wooden lintels surmounted by a row of headers. They are fitted with louvered blinds.

The sides of the building are divided into three bays by full-height stuccoed pilasters that repeat the design of the corner pilasters. The head of an iron tie rod running through the building is visible in each pilaster. Each bay is marked at both levels by windows like those flanking the main entrance. In the northeast side is a central basement entrance with a two-light [transom](#) and a granite stoop. The rear of the building is not pedimented, but the cornice returns slightly. Dominating this facade is a fine Palladian window at the main level. The two narrow windows in the basement have been bricked up, and an entrance has been added. The roof at the rear is pierced by two interior brick chimneys that flank the Palladian window.

The main floor of Philanthropic Hall houses one large hall, which is ornamented with fine classical trim. It is bounded by a wide molded baseboard and a delicate plaster cornice. A large plaster medallion containing concentric rings of acanthus, rosebud and palmetto motifs, located in the center of the ceiling, reappears in quarter sections in the corners of the room. The outer acanthus ring of the quarter section carries around the room in front of the molded cornice. Suspended from the medallion is a crystal chandelier, made in France and exhibited in the New York Crystal Palace in 1853. The plain chimney breasts project slightly into the room on either side of the Palladian window, which is framed, like the other windows, with a simple molded architrave.

During its 1956 conversion to office use, the basement interior was apparently completely renovated. The present Greek Revival mantel and base-board adorned with tiny dentils are not original.

From the earliest days of Davidson College until the turn of the twentieth century, student life and government centered around two debating groups, the Eumenean and Philanthropic societies.

The Concord Presbytery voted to establish an institution of higher learning in western North Carolina on March 12, 1835; on August 25 the presbytery resolved to purchase two tracts of land in Mecklenburg County from William L. Davidson; and on the following day they voted to name the school Davidson College in honor of Davidson's father, William Davidson, a Revolutionary War hero. The college began exercises March 1, 1837, and by the end of that year a number of buildings had been constructed on the new campus.



Less than four months after the college opened, Philanthropic (familiarily called "Phi") Society held its first meeting (June 22), and within the first year had enrolled thirty members. For many years most meetings of the organization were held in a room in the Chapel. The two societies, secret and formal in nature, were primarily debating organizations, but they had a much more important influence than their avowed purpose might suggest. Society rules were very strict about the behavior of their members, imposing fines for fighting, swearing, intoxication, or "lying to the faculty." There were "vigilance committees" for reporting offenses. Since nearly all students were members of one society or the other, "student government really dates from the beginning," with the regulation of behavior coming from the two societies. It is said that "around the two halls centered college loyalty and affection." They provided excellent libraries and financed almost all the annual commencement activities.

In November, 1842, Eumenean members decided to erect a hall of their own, and in January of the following year members of the "Phi," also wishing to construct their own building, met with them to confer about the design of the two buildings. Despite long rivalry between the two societies, a spirit of cooperation accompanied the planning and construction of the hall. It was decided that "each Society should act independently, but that the halls should be 'alike in size, material, and magnificence,' and cost \$1,500 apiece." Sites were selected December 14, 1848, and construction began soon afterward. The two halls were designed to complete the original open-ended quadrangle plan of the campus. Eumenean on the west and Philanthropic on the east are two-story pavilions with tetrastyle pedimented porticos. Their design as well as their position at the end of the quadrangle, with one-story dormitory "rows" between them and the axial Chapel, gave the campus an appearance similar to the more elaborate quadrangle at the University of Virginia, designed by Thomas Jefferson.

Philanthropic Hall was dedicated on February 16, 1850, with an address by the Reverend W. W. Pharr. Once the building was completed, considerable efforts and money were expended to furnish it suitably. A local innkeeper, Mr. H. P. Helper, was dispatched to New York to purchase furniture for the Philanthropic Hall, and he was instructed "not to get red curtains in any shape or form." On April 8, 1854, a "committee of correspondence" was asked to write to Columbia and request a Mr. Standly "to purches for us a chandelier suitable for this hall." On June 3, the society minutes recorded that the money for the chandelier was being sent to Columbia, and two weeks later a bill to a Mr. McNeely "for putting up our chandelier" was to be paid. It is said that the chandelier was made in France, a duplicate of the one under which Napoleon III was married to Eugenie de Montigi in 1853. According to an 1876 account, the duplicate was "exhibited at the Royal Palace [probably the Great Exhibition in the Crystal Palace] in London in 1851, and afterwards sent to New York and exhibited there in the Crystal Palace in 1853." This latter exhibition failed, and the chandelier (which still hangs in "Phi" Hall was one of the items sold to pay off debts.

The two societies continued to dominate student life, although the Civil War brought a lengthy "adjournment sine die." The post-war difficulties of University of North Carolina led to its students being dispersed all over state. Some came to Davidson in the fall of 1868, and a number of them joined the Philanthropic Society and "at once set about its rehabilitation, with a new and ampler constitution and laws modeled after those of the Dialectic Society to which they had belonged at the University. The Society at once took on new life and influence in the student-body."

The revitalized societies flourished after the war but toward the end of the century their dominance of the student body began to wane somewhat. The colors of the two

societies -- pink (Eumenean) and blue (Philanthropic)--had always combined to make the school colors, but in 1895 the students voted to adopt crimson and black as Davidson's official colors. Debating had long been the exclusive territory of the societies, but in 1907 Davidson students began taking part in intercollegiate debating. During the nineteenth century nearly all students had belonged to one of the societies, but by 1920 the members of the two societies included only thirty-five percent of the students. In the twentieth century, a wider variety of organizations have given student life a greater diversity. The two societies no longer run campus affairs, but they continue to use their original halls as literary societies. In 1956 Philanthropic Hall was restored and remodeled.

Philanthropic Hall is one of the primary landmarks of the Davidson College campus. Built by a society that played a dominant role in the college from its founding, the structure has been used continuously for its original purpose. The wisdom of the early building committee in stipulating that there be a degree of freedom in the details of the two halls but that they be "alike in size and magnificence" is displayed in the pleasing relationship of the two facing buildings that complete the original quadrangle. Like its companion structure, Philanthropic Hall exhibits the subtle play of simple massive, classically-derived forms that characterize the best of the Greek Revival style. In size and basic configuration it is like Eumenean Hall, but differences in detail introduce a satisfying degree of variation.