

John Warren Davis

A trailblazing West Virginia educator

WVSU first came to national prominence under Davis' guidance

By **STAN BUMGARDNER**
For Daily Mail WV

FOR NEARLY the first century of our nation's history, formal education was reserved almost exclusively for the wealthy who could afford private schools. Very few educational opportunities existed for African Americans, and Southern states made it a crime to educate slaves.

In the middle of the Civil War, which ultimately ended the inhuman practice of American slavery, Congress began to address national educational inequities.

In 1862, Congress passed and President Abraham Lincoln signed the Morrill Act, funding land-grant institutions in each state so young people from more modest backgrounds could study farming and mechanical arts on a more scientific level.

The fundamental result, though, was a revolution in education. For the first time, everyday Americans could now obtain what amounted to high school and college educations.

In 1867, the doors of the Agricultural College of West Virginia opened in Morgantown; it was renamed West Virginia University the next year. But, as in many other states, the doors of our state land-grant institution were not open to African Americans — or, for many years, to women. The only higher education option for African Americans in the Mountain State was at the privately run Storer College in Harpers Ferry, located a long distance from most West Virginians.

In 1890, Congress addressed this national problem by passing the Second Morrill Act, requiring states with segregated land-grant institutions to create separate schools for African Americans. As a result, 17 former slaveholding states that practiced segregation opened Black land-grant institutions.

In 1892, the West Virginia Colored Institute — as it was originally known — opened at what would become known as Institute in western Kanawha County. The campus was built on a former plantation and sold to the state by a family who'd once been enslaved there [see James Haught's "Institute: It Springs from Epic Love Story," January 1971 West Virginia History; David Fryson's "A Most Enigmatic Relationship," Summer 2020 Golden Seal; and the 2020 film "River of Hope," available on Amazon Prime].

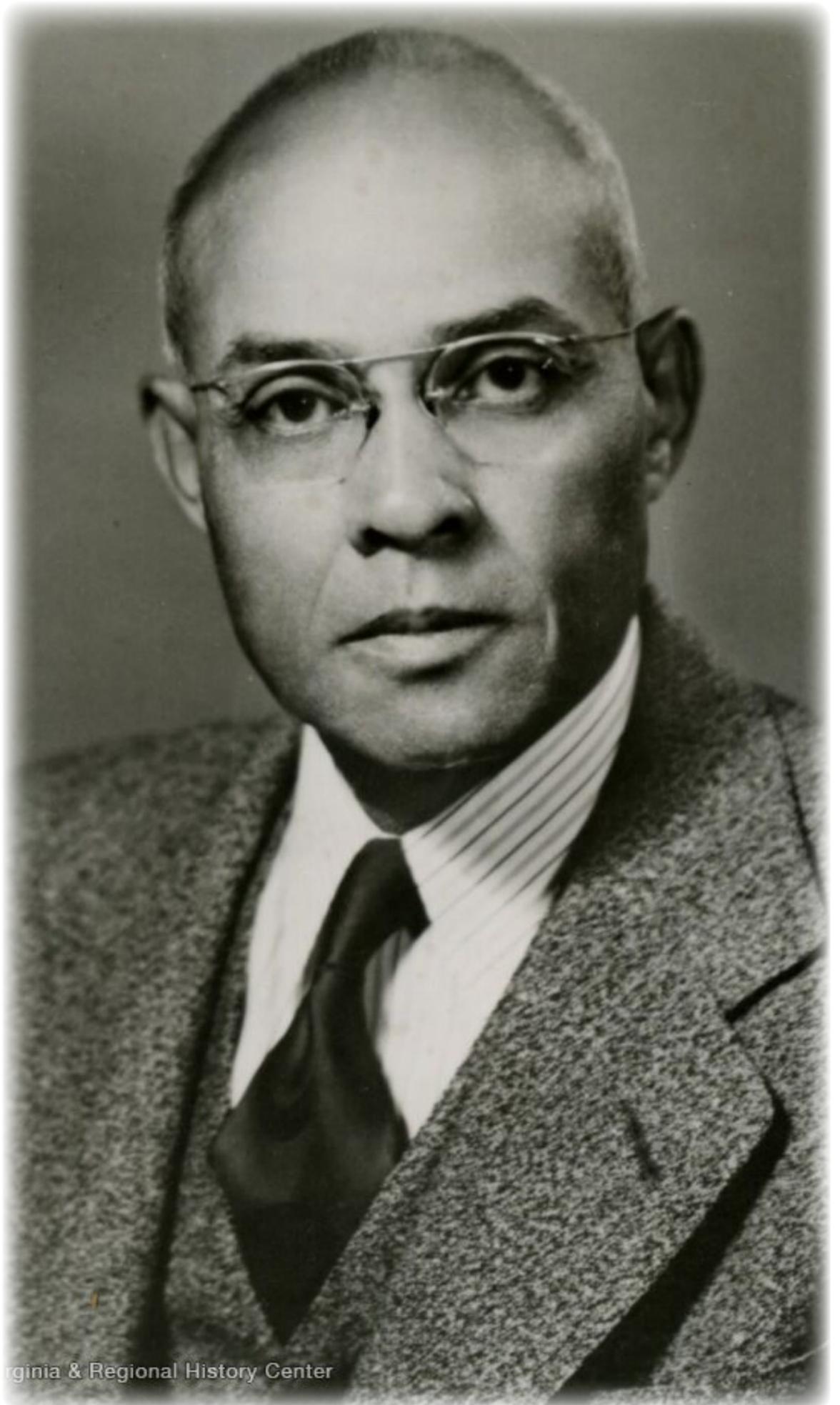
The school's first three presidents — J. Edwin Campbell, John H. Hill and J. McHenry Jones — did much of the early heavy lifting just to get the school up and running.

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As it says in the headline, John Warren Davis was a trailblazing educator at West Virginia State and beyond.



West Virginia & Regional History Center

John Warren Davis

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John Warren Davis, then president of WVSC, meets with a soldier in 1952. Davis' influence was instrumental in integrating the military.