

# Title Page & Abstract

An Interview with James Davis

Part of the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library  
*Historians Speak* Oral History project

Interview # HSI-A-L-2012-005

James Davis, Emeritus Professor of History and Geography at Illinois College in Jacksonville, was interviewed on the date listed below as part of the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library's *Historians Speak* Oral History project.

Interview dates & location:

Date: Feb 22, 2012      Location: Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library

Interview Format: Digital audio

Interviewer: Ted Hild, Former IHPA employee & ALPL volunteer

Transcription by: Patty Maynor

Edited by: Jan Culp and Rozanne Flatt, ALPL volunteers

Interview  
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The interview is archived at the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library in Springfield, Illinois.

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# Abstract

James E. Davis, *Historians Speak*, # HSI-A-L-2012-005

**Biographical Information / Overview of Interview:** James E. Davis was born in Detroit, Michigan on September 27, 1940, and was educated in the public schools of suburban Detroit. He graduated from Wayne State University with a Bachelor of Arts degree in 1962, and a Master of Arts degree in 1966. In 1971, he received a Doctor of Philosophy degree from the University of Michigan-Ann Arbor for United States history.

Davis began his career teaching history and English in junior and senior high schools in Dearborn. He taught for nine years before earning his Ph.D. in 1971, the same year he joined Illinois College at Jacksonville, Illinois. He remained on the faculty there for his entire career, which ended with his retirement in 2011. He taught geopolitics, theoretical geography, and United States history, with an emphasis on the frontier and Civil War. He was a two-time recipient of the Harry Joy Dunbaugh Distinguished Professor Award, considered the highest honor bestowed upon an Illinois College faculty member. He is the author of three books, *Frontier America*, *Dreams to Dust*, and *Frontier Illinois*. Much of his research was funded by grants from the National Endowment for the Humanities. Davis also has directed Illinois College interns at the Illinois State Museum, the Illinois State Historical Library and the Illinois State Archives.

In the interview he discusses the influence of his family in valuing education. His father in particular was a professional engineer who continued his own education to include classical languages, political science, and literature. Education is a principal theme of the interview as Davis describes his career in the context of teaching at different levels and during the period of significant social change in the second half of the twentieth century. He discusses his time in graduate school where he was influenced by historian Shaw Livermore and geographer Gunnar Olsen. While he worked as a school teacher and later as a graduate student focusing on his dissertation, he did not become involved in campus unrest of the Viet Nam War era. He did, however, notice the accomplishments of New Left historians, wherein he found an agreeable approach to the study of history that acknowledged groups of people previously ignored. He believes that post-modern history in its rejection of any certitude had little to offer and will soon fade in its popularity.

Looking back on a half-century of teaching, Davis considers the 1960s as the Golden Age of education in the United States, followed by peaks and troughs, but generally declining in the following decades. Discipline, or lack of it, is the best example of decline.

Davis began teaching at Illinois College when he received an invitation to apply for a soon-to-be-vacated faculty position for teaching history and geography. After a visit to the campus and a brief telephone interview with the college president, he accepted the college's offer and moved to Jacksonville with his wife and infant daughter during the summer of 1971, which commenced a busy year that called for creating lecture notes, lesson plans, completing the details of his dissertation, and raising a young family.

**Subject Headings/Key Words:** Professor James E. Davis; Detroit, Michigan; Education, Frontier—United States history; Historiography—United States history; *Frontier America*, by Davis; *Dreams to Dust*, by Davis; *Frontier Illinois* by Davis; Illinois College; Jacksonville, Illinois

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