

**The Burke Library Archives, Columbia University Libraries,  
Union Theological Seminary, New York**

**Missionary Research Library Archives: Section 4**

**Finding Aid for**

**Bertha E. Davis Papers, 1892 – 1946**



Passport Application, 1923. Credit to: National Archives and Records Administration, Washington D.C., *Passport Applications, 2 January 1906 – 31 March 1925*, Collection Number: ARC # 583830 / MLR # A1 534; NARA Series: M1490; Roll #: 1923.

Finding Aid prepared by: Kristen Leigh Southworth, March 2012  
With financial support from the Henry Luce Foundation

**Summary Information**

**Creator:** Bertha Ettie Davis, 1871 – 1970  
**Title:** Bertha E. Davis Papers  
**Inclusive dates:** 1892 – 1946  
**Bulk dates:** 1932 – 1940  
**Abstract:** American Baptist foreign missionary to Burma from 1899 to 1931, where she helped establish schools. Collection contains diaries, address books, expense records, photographs, a copy of the 1946 Anglican Bishop's Report from the Diocese of Rangoon, and other personal items relating to Davis' life before, during, and after her missionary work.  
**Size:** 4 boxes, 1.50 linear feet  
**Storage:** Onsite storage  
**Repository:** The Burke Library  
Union Theological Seminary  
3041 Broadway  
New York, NY 10027  
Email: [burkearchives@library.columbia.edu](mailto:burkearchives@library.columbia.edu)

### Administrative Information

- Provenance:** Originally part of the independent Missionary Research Library, these records were moved with the MRL to the Brown Memorial Tower of Union Theological Seminary in 1929. In 1976 the records were accessioned to the Burke Library archives with the closure of the MRL.
- Access:** Archival papers are available to registered readers for consultation by appointment only. Please contact archives staff by email to [burkearchives@library.columbia.edu](mailto:burkearchives@library.columbia.edu), or by postal mail to The Burke Library address on page 1, as far in advance as possible. Burke Library staff is available for inquiries or to request a consultation on archival or special collections research.
- Access Restrictions:** The collection is unrestricted to readers. Certain materials, however, are in a fragile condition, and this may necessitate restriction in handling and copying.
- Preferred Citation:** Item description, MRL 4: Bertha E. Davis Papers, box #, and folder #, The Burke Library at Union Theological Seminary, Columbia University in the City of New York.

### Biography

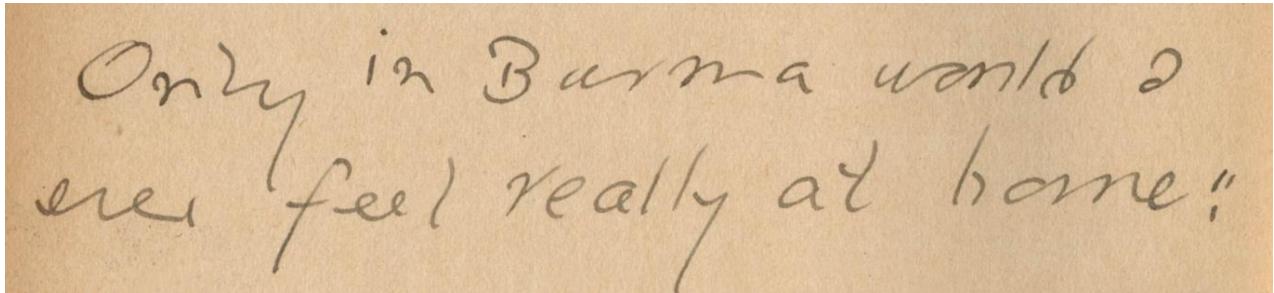
Bertha Ettie Davis was born on November 18, 1871 to a farming family in Livonia, Indiana. Davis graduated from Franklin College in 1896, and in September 1898 took her missionary entrance examination in Chicago; eight months later she completed her training with the American Baptist Foreign Missionary Society. Davis was initially appointed to Tharrawaddy Station in Burma, and was later sent to Mandalay. She is documented as having lived in Burma from December 1899-April 1907, December 1908-August 1911, and May 1916-April 1922, but her diaries indicate that she served as a missionary until 1931, when she returned home from Rangoon to be close to her aging mother and family.

Davis' missionary work was primarily in education. In a 1906 report she was acknowledged for the important help she gave in the high school, as well as her special supervision of the lower classes. The success of the primary department was credited to her as well. Davis was concerned with the preaching of the Gospel and with creating "civilized" Christian communities in contrast to her critical perception of Catholic villages. According to her diary entry from February 11, 1900, "...in the Catholic country through which we passed the villagers were dirty and repulsive to an extreme degree. Some were almost naked and many wore charms and beads along with an excessive amount of heathen jewelry."

Three years after her return to the United States in 1934, she suffered from a gastrointestinal illness that doctors could not identify. She was hospitalized in Billings, Montana for nearly two months, and continued receiving tests and injections after her release with no known diagnosis.

Davis never married, but continued traveling in the vicinity and pursuing local church work, in spite of a recurrent sense of loneliness and despondency. After her mother died in December 1937, she admitted to never really feeling at home in Indiana and wanted to return to Burma.

Instead, in 1939 she traveled extensively on the West coast before moving to Orlando, FL that same year. Davis later returned to Salem, IN, where she died in July 1970 at the age of 98.



Bertha E. Davis Diary, April 20, 1938.

### Sources:

From the materials in the collection, as well as:

Greene, Diane. "Indiana Baptist History 1798-1908" Page created 9/1/2001

<http://homepages.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~dpgreen/IBH/page290-291.htm>

National Archives and Records Administration (NARA); Washington D.C.; *Passport*

*Applications, January 2, 1906 - March 31, 1925*; Collection Number: *ARC Identifier 583830 / MLR Number A1 534*; NARA Series: *M1490*; Roll #: 1923; 291.

SS Death Index Number: 262-82-7970; Issue State: *Florida*; Issue Date: 1963.

### **Collection Scope and Content Note**

The bulk of Bertha Davis' collection contains her diaries prior to, during, and after her missionary work in Burma from 1899-1931. Earlier diary entries (1892-1899) reveal the details of her final years at Franklin College, her announcement to her father of her intention to become a foreign missionary, and her entrance into the American Baptist Foreign Missionary Union's training program in Chicago.

There are only two brief diaries from her time in Burma: one from February 1900, and a later entry on scrap paper from July 22, 1916. These entries, however, contain a great deal of unique information including the weather in Burma, descriptions of the villages, relationships between protestant and Catholic missionary stations, and folk tales from the Karen people, an ethnic group in Southern Burma:

One was that God once brought three books to earth and gave one to the white man, one to the Burmans and one to the Karens. The white man kept his and followed its teachings. The Burmans put theirs up on a shelf and worshipped it. The Karen left his around and the dog ate it up. Then they asked God for another book but he could not give it to them. So they worshipped the dog and followed him. When he died the chickens ate his flesh and so they now follow the chicken and that is why they decide by chicken bones.

Most of the diaries in the collection document Davis' life after returning to the United States. These span from 1932 to 1940 and discuss her life traveling locally and participating in various church-related activities. In 1934 she began suffering from a gastrointestinal illness and was hospitalized in the fall of that year, later describing herself as "an experimental object" during her time there. She continued to have bowel problems after her release. In 1939 she traveled west, stopping in Prescott, AZ, Redlands, CA, Walnut, CA, Los Angeles, CA, San Diego, CA, Fresno, CA, Kerman, CA, and Mendota, CA where she visited a camp of migrant workers from Mexico. Later that same year she moved to Orlando, FL, although she continued to make frequent visits to Indiana.

Through the diaries Davis discusses the details of her family relationships, including the negative reaction of her father Albert when she announced in 1895 her intention to become a foreign missionary, the care of her mother Matilda before her death 1935, and her relationship with her brother-in-law, Fred Knox (husband of Bertha's sister, Anna Belle) and the particularly difficult relationship she had with her nephew, Dwight Knox. Throughout her diaries, Davis records the weather with great consistency and detail.

In addition to her diaries, the collection contains nine address books, six ledgers of Davis' expense records that date from 1916 to 1937, and three memo books containing a combination of addresses, expenses, notes, and diary entries, some of which relate to her time in Burma. The collection also includes an undated account of Davis' memories from childhood, some correspondence, a Longmans' Burmese Primer from 1933 with language exercises in Burmese phonetics, an undated class grade record, and a document entitled "Ecclesia Resurgens: Bishop's Report for the half year ending 31<sup>st</sup> Dec. 1945." Printed in 1946, this report was compiled by George Algernon West, Anglican Lord Bishop of Rangoon, who was one of the first British civilians allowed back into Burma after the defeat of the Japanese in World War II. It details his experience of post-war return, including an account of rebuilding his cathedral, which had been converted into a distillery for Japanese occupiers, the process of re-establishing the diocesan administration, and stories of Christian victory and persecution during wartime.

There is a scrapbook of photographs, some of which are presumably from her time in Burma, but it has suffered significant water damage and requires conservation measures.

### **Processing**

Metal clips and staples were removed from materials except for those that would have been further damaged by their removal. Materials were placed in new acid-free folders and boxes. Acidic items were separated from one another by interleaving with acid-free paper as needed. Books were placed in acid-free envelopes or wrapped. Any items in an advanced state of deterioration were placed in Mylar envelopes.

**Contents list**

Box	Folder	Contents
1	1	Diary, December 1892 – January 1894
1	2	Diary, June 1895 – January 1899
1	3	Diary, February 2-19, 1900 and July 22, 1916
1	4	Diary, February – October 1932
1	5	Diary, 1934
1	6	Diary, January – April 1935
1	7	Diary, January 1935 – July 1938
1	8	Diary, April 1936 – August 1936
2	1	Diary, July 1936 – March 1937
2	2	Diary, February – September 1939
2	3	Diary, September 1939 – August 1940
2	4	Address Books, circa 1899 and 1923
2	5-8	Address Books [19??]
3	1	Expense Record Ledgers, 1916 and 1930
3	2	Expense Record Ledgers, 1931 – 1935
3	3	Expense Record Ledgers, 1935 – 1937
3	4	Memo Book, 1897
3	5	Memo Books, 1903-1924
3	6	Longmans' Burmese Phonetic Language Primer, 1933
3	7	Ecclesia Resurgens: Bishop's Report from Diocese of Rangoon, 1946
3	8	Correspondence, 1914 – 1960
3	9	Notes on Childhood [19??]
3	10	Class Grade Records [19??]
4	1	<b>[Restricted]</b> Scrapbook