

10-1-1923

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Recommended Citation

MacBride, Dorothy. "Lieutenant Jefferson Davis." *The Palimpsest* 4 (1923), 346-357.

Available at: <https://ir.uiowa.edu/palimpsest/vol4/iss10/3>

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Lieutenant Jefferson Davis

Jefferson Davis! To many the name conjures up visions of the tall, angular President of the Confederate States of America. But to others, familiar with the story of frontier days in western Illinois and Wisconsin and in eastern Iowa, the name is a reminder of a young second lieutenant, fresh from West Point, reporting for duty at old Fort Crawford. Indeed, the crumbling ruins of old Fort Crawford recall to the mind of the visitor at Prairie du Chien many interesting tales of the frontier, among which the experiences and the romance of the gracious young officer from the South are of more than passing interest.

Jefferson Davis was only twenty years of age when he graduated from West Point in July, 1828, but he was every whit an officer, so his comrades testified. Distinguished in his corps for his military bearing and his lofty character, he was considered a perfect type of a southern "West Pointer". In stature he was tall and erect. His complexion was fair, his features delicate, his forehead high, and his blue eyes were large and clear. His whole conduct was indicative of self-esteem, pride, determination, and personal mastery.

Such was the young man who, after a vacation at

the home of his brother in Mississippi, took passage on a Mississippi River steamboat for Jefferson Barracks at St. Louis, accompanied by his faithful negro slave, James Pemberton. He arrived at Jefferson Barracks late in the autumn of 1828 and was assigned to duty at Fort Crawford which, at Prairie du Chien, shared with Fort Snelling at the Falls of St. Anthony the task of guarding the frontier of the Upper Mississippi.

In the early months of 1829 Davis was detailed to superintend the cutting of timber on the banks of the Red Cedar River in northern Wisconsin. The task consisted mainly of cutting the logs on the banks of the river, dragging them to the water, fastening them together in large rafts, and guiding them down to the Chippewa River and thence to the Mississippi. When they arrived at Prairie du Chien, they were used in constructing new fortifications and buildings at the fort. It was very hazardous work to direct some of the rafts over the rapids of the small streams, and the Indians were hostile and often very troublesome. But Davis's power to meet exigencies successfully carried them all safely through many a serious predicament.

Once the company was hailed by a party of Indians who demanded a trade of tobacco. As they appeared to have no hostile intentions, Davis and his men paddled over to the bank to parley. Someone in the party discovered, however, that their peaceful tones were merely a cloak to hide their

hostility, and warned Davis of the danger. The soldiers hurriedly pushed out into the stream and the Indians, yelling with fury, followed them. Realizing what little chance white men had against such experienced paddlers, Davis conceived the idea of rigging up a sail with a blanket. A strong and treacherous wind made this rather dangerous but, as it was a chance between certain death from the Indians and possible death from drowning, they were willing to risk every available chance of escape. The sail was quickly hoisted and the contrivance worked well. They soon sped on far ahead of their enraged pursuers and the Indians had to yield the race to Davis.

Not long after Jefferson Davis came to Fort Crawford, a strange coincidence occurred. George W. Jones, whom he had known at Transylvania University as a friend and classmate, was at that time living at Sinsinawa Mound, about fifty miles from Fort Crawford. "One night about nine o'clock", Jones writes in his autobiography, "I heard a voice hallooing outside. I stepped out and could barely see two men on horseback. The near one said:

'Does Mr. Jones live here?'

I replied: 'I am Mr. Jones.'

'Can we get to stay all night with you?'

'Yes', I replied, 'but you will have hard fare, for I have no bed. I can give you some buffalo robes and hobble your horses out, as my horse is. But where are you going?' I asked.

He replied: 'To Fort Crawford, at Prairie du Chien.'

'Where are you from?'

'From Galena.'

'Why, sir, you are twelve miles off your road.'

He then asked: 'Mr. Jones, did you ever go to college at Lexington, Kentucky?'

'Yes, I did.'

'Do you remember a college boy by the name of Jeff. Davis?'

'Yes, I shall never forget that dear boy.'

'Well,' he replied, 'I am Jeff.'

I jumped out, hauled him from his horse, and said: 'Dear Jeff! You shall come in and sleep in my bunk.' "

In the summer of 1829 Lieutenant Colonel Zachary Taylor, commonly called "Old Rough and Ready", was transferred from Fort Snelling to the command of Fort Crawford. Taylor brought his family with him — his wife, his son, and three beautiful daughters. The presence of the pretty young ladies doubtless spread commotion in the hearts of homesick young officers, and the young southerner proved to be no exception.

Soon after their arrival, however, Davis was ordered to Fort Winnebago, another important post on the northwestern border. It commanded the portage between the Fox and Wisconsin rivers on the waterway from the Great Lakes to the Mississippi River, and was the strategic center of opera-

tions in case of attack by the many tribes of Indians living in northern Wisconsin. Here again, he was busy with improvements upon the fort.

Life at Fort Winnebago was not as severe and trying as at some of the other frontier forts. Excursions, reconnaissances, card playing, and theatricals improvised by the young officers and their wives occupied the spare hours. Davis had several pieces of furniture made for the officers' quarters from the heavy timber of the region. Some of this furniture has been preserved and is highly valued by the antiquarians of Wisconsin.

In 1831 Davis returned to Fort Crawford and was ordered up Yellow River in Wisconsin to superintend the building of a sawmill. His diplomatic powers were severely put to test there, for it was no small task to keep the Indians in the neighborhood in a friendly state of mind. But he soon learned that flattery and good management were much cheaper and more effective than cold lead, and were also easier to apply. He gained the regard of all the surrounding tribes to such an extent that he was dignified with the title of "Little Chief". For one of his experience his success as superintendent of the sawmill was remarkable.

After his return from the Yellow River assignment, Jefferson Davis was sent by his commanding officer, Zachary Taylor, to effect the removal of the miners who were unlawfully working the lead mines in the vicinity of Dubuque. Trouble had been

threatening in the Galena-Dubuque region for some time. The Indians opposed trespassing on their land, while the miners felt that an ungrateful government was thwarting their right to exploit the rich veins of lead. A previous attempt to dislodge the fearless miners from the Iowa side had failed and young Davis faced a difficult task.

The situation was tense: feeling ran high and whiskey flowed freely. Davis, however, had known some of the miners previously at Galena and the influence of his friend, George W. Jones, aided him in handling the situation. Determined not to resort to force, he held many conferences with the miners in an effort to settle the question peaceably.

Mrs. Varina Howell Davis in her book, *Jefferson Davis, Ex-President of the Confederate States of America, A Memoir*, relates that on one occasion Davis had arranged to meet several of the miners for a conference at a little drinking booth in the vicinity of the mines. Before his arrival about twenty-five miners had already assembled. A friend, who had heard the miners threaten to kill the lieutenant if he entered the cabin, begged him not to go in. But Davis, his daring challenged to the fighting point, boldly entered at once, greeted them all pleasantly, and added, "My friends, I am sure you have thought over my proposition and are going to drink to my success. So I will treat you all". Whether admiration of his daring or a reconsideration had changed their attitude is not known, but whatever it

was, they immediately gave him a hearty cheer. Negotiations went more smoothly after that.

Davis worked patiently and persistently and did succeed in persuading the miners to leave the Iowa land and to recross the Mississippi. With the assurance that their claims to the lead-mine region would be recognized after a treaty had been made with the Indians to open the Iowa country for settlement, the miners packed up their tools and left peaceably with their families. The situation had been diplomatically and deftly handled by the southern lieutenant. Years afterwards Davis wrote of this episode, "It has always been to me a happy memory that the removal was accomplished without resort to force, and, as I learned afterward, that each miner in due time came into his own."

Like the sudden bursting of a storm spreading terror in a peaceful valley came the Black Hawk War in 1832 to cause alarm throughout northwestern Illinois and southwestern Wisconsin. Black Hawk, smarting under his alleged wrongs, recrossed the Mississippi from his new home in Iowa to his old home in Illinois, and thereby touched a match to the powder of the short and decisive struggle which brought together men and officers who later became famous on the battle-fields of Mexico and in the Civil War. Fate decreed that two men — one destined to become President of the United States of America, the other to guide the course of the Confederacy — were to participate in the Black Hawk

War. One was then a captain of Illinois volunteers; the other was a lieutenant in the regular infantry.

Mrs. Davis claims that the paths of the two men crossed during the campaign in Illinois. It is entirely possible that the officers met, and they may have messed together. The dramatic tradition, however, that Jefferson Davis administered to Abraham Lincoln the oath of allegiance to the Constitution of the United States seems to be ill-founded.

Although Davis conducted himself with credit to his company in the Black Hawk War he is remembered more for an event which occurred after the Indians had been crushed and Black Hawk captured than for any exploits during the struggle itself. When it was decided to send Black Hawk and his braves down to Jefferson Barracks, Davis was ordered to conduct them there. The prisoners were well treated by their young escort, for courtesy to a fallen foe was then considered one of the first obligations of "an officer and a gentleman". The proud old chief appreciated the kindly attitude of Davis toward him, and spoke of him thus in his autobiography:

"We started for Jefferson Barracks in a steam boat, under charge of a young war chief (Lieut. Jefferson Davis), who treated us with much kindness. He is a good and brave young chief, with whose conduct I was much pleased. On our way down we called at Galena and remained a short time.

The people crowded to the boat to see us, but the war chief would not permit them to enter the apartment where we were, knowing, from what his own feelings would have been if he had been placed in a similar position, that we did not wish to have a gaping crowd around us."

With Black Hawk in confinement at Jefferson Barracks, Lieutenant Davis again returned to Fort Crawford. His friendship for Sarah Knox Taylor soon ripened into ardent love which was reciprocated by the charming daughter of "Old Rough and Ready". Colonel Taylor, it is said, always considered his own presence necessary to the proper entertainment of his daughters' callers. One writer is inclined to think that the "young men of to-day would not care to have their prospective fathers-in-law quite so attentive as Taylor was to his prospective sons-in-law. He insisted on being present on the occasion of their visits; and when tattoo was sounded, he would yawn and say, 'It is time for all honest people to be in bed.' That meant that the young man had to leave."

The Colonel's presence did not bother Sarah's suitor in the least, however, for it was not long before their engagement was announced. When the news was told to Taylor, he remarked that he had the kindest feeling for his daughter's choice, but he had hoped that none of his daughters would ever marry into the army, for none knew better than he the trials and anxieties of a soldier's wife. His fair

daughter soon convinced him that that was too trivial an obstacle to place in their way. It was not long, however, until the "kindliest feeling" changed: a bitter quarrel arose between Davis and Taylor — one which never abated.

A court martial had been ordered at the garrison. Taylor acted as president, while Davis, Major Tom Smith, and a young officer who had just reported for duty constituted the rest of the court. When they assembled, the young officer appeared in civilian clothes, offering the excuse that his uniform had been delayed at St. Louis. Taylor, who was a stickler for rules and customs, refused to consider any cases until the officer could take his seat in full uniform. An angry discussion over the question thereupon ensued between Taylor and Smith (a bitter feud already existed between the two). A vote was called for and, much to Taylor's surprise and chagrin, Davis voted with Smith to go on with the trial. Taylor became so enraged that he turned to Davis with an oath, declaring emphatically that any man who would vote with Tom Smith on a question like that could never marry his daughter. He forbade him to ever enter his home again.

The transfer of Davis from a second lieutenant in the infantry to the position of first lieutenant and adjutant of the First Dragoons in 1834 took him away from Fort Crawford to Fort Gibson, Arkansas. But if Taylor had hoped that the removal of Davis would change the attitude of his daughter, he was

very much mistaken. Distance did not affect their pretty romance in the least — in fact it was chiefly on account of the separation that Davis resigned his commission that year. On June 30, 1835, he severed all connections with the United States army.

Then it was, certain romanticists tell us, that he returned to old Fort Crawford to settle the dispute with Taylor. Miss Sarah told her father that, as he could allege nothing against the character of her fiancé, she intended to marry him soon. But neither time nor distance had abated the stubborn father's feelings, and he flatly refused his consent to their marriage. And so, regardless of silly feuds and stubborn fathers, it is said, the young couple planned to elope. At night, choosing the darkest hour before the dawn, they would steal forth from the fort; escape to the other side of the river; be secretly married at McGregor; and return to the fort as man and wife. Only the mighty river and the bluffs towering high above the elopers, mute witnesses to the thrilling escapade, could be trusted with their secret.

This, the romanticists tell us, actually happened. Some insist that they never returned to the fort but hastened away down the Mississippi to Kentucky. It is one of the legends woven from the traditions of the iron-barred window and the old sentinel post which still remain in Prairie du Chien as eloquent reminders of the romance of frontier days. But romance and facts often disagree. Historians say that it was not the silent bluffs of the Mississippi

that witnessed the marriage but a peaceful southern plantation in Kentucky. The true story is that shortly after the departure of Davis from the fort, Miss Taylor decided to go to live with her aunt in Kentucky. She engaged a stateroom on the steamer *St. Louis* and prepared to leave. A last appeal was made to her father but the firm and unyielding Colonel remained resolute. He never saw his daughter afterward, and the estrangement between him and Davis never healed during her life.

Miss Taylor remained with her aunt until Davis came for her after his resignation at Fort Gibson. Two of the Colonel's sisters, his oldest brother, and other members of the Taylor family were present at the marriage. The young couple then left for the Davis plantation, "Brierfield", on the Mississippi some thirty miles below Vicksburg. Their romance, however, was short lived for in the autumn of that year the young bride caught the fever then so prevalent in the lower Mississippi region, and died.

And so to-day, whether the reader admires or condemns the later career of Jefferson Davis, only kindly thoughts are aroused by his conduct as a young lieutenant in the Upper Mississippi Valley. Romance and adventure, hardship and pleasure, love and a great sorrow are the chapters in the story of Lieutenant Jefferson Davis.

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