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## A Biography of Richard J. Davant, Jr (1866-1915)

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A Biography of

" Richard J. Davant Jr. "

( 1866-1915 )

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History 500  
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July 31, 1984

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## I. Introduction

In recreating the life of a former Savannah mayor many gaps and unanswered questions come to the surface. This biographical report will seek to answer those questions and fill in the gaps with the available data I was able to uncover. It is my intention that the information I will present will bring the reader to the conclusion that Richard J. Davant Jr. was a "progressively" minded citizen who put the well-being of those around him in higher regard than his own and who contributed significantly to the betterment of Savannah during the period 1903-1915.

## II. Family Background and Early Childhood

The Davant family can be traced back to the lowlands of South Carolina near Beaufort in the 1830's where Richard's grandfather ( Charles ) owned a farm.<sup>1</sup> Both Richard's mother ( Anna Caroline Maner ) and father ( Richard Sr. ) were born in South Carolina.<sup>2</sup> Richard Sr. and his wife Anna came to the Savannah area from South Carolina in 1854.<sup>3</sup> He then set up a partnership with a Mr. Hawton and was involved in commission merchandising of cotton. Interested in not only his business in Savannah but farming as well, Richard ( Sr. ) decided to move his family to the country where he would be able to farm.

Richard J. Davant Jr. was born in Screven County near Sylvania on March 20, 1866.<sup>4</sup> One of five children, three sisters and one brother ( William M. ) Indications are that two of his sisters remained on the farm until they were married and relocated later to Atlanta and New York. Belle, the eldest died in 1897 <sup>at her</sup> of an extended illness.<sup>5</sup>

In 1868 the family moved to Guyton, to a larger farm, where Richard attend-

ed public schools. He then went to Georgia Military Academy in Milledgeville from 1879-1882 leaving that school at sixteen years of age.<sup>6</sup> Georgia Military Academy was an important step in Richard's preparation for manhood because the military tradition was strong in the Davant household. Richard's father was a member of the Chatham Artillery and a Commander in the Georgia Hussars with a long list of meritorious achievements; for example, several distinguished military campaigns in the War with Mexico in the 1840's.<sup>7</sup> Richard's brother, William, was also a member.<sup>8</sup>

### III. Pre-Judicial Period

In 1886 Richard decided to leave his families' farm in Guyton and relocate in Savannah. Moving into a rented residence at 17 Gordon Street and assuming a clerkship in the retail and wholesale grain business of Thomas P. Bond.<sup>9</sup> In his first few years of this clerkship Richard met his future wife ( Virginia C. Footman ) whom he courted and married on the 3rd day of September 1889,<sup>10</sup> the Evangelist minister Henry K. Rees presiding. His new wife, only 10 months his junior, was a native born Savannah Lady well respected by all accounts.<sup>11</sup>

Seeing that the clerkship under Mr. Bond was not satisfying enough for him Richard went into a partnership with his father in the general insurance business ( 1895 ). He continued in this capacity until his father's death in 1899, at which time he became partners with Mr. Hunt and remained with him until his political career began.<sup>12</sup>

His involvement in civic groups and established Savannah organizations is impressive prior to and including the years of his political life. He was a

13  
member of the distinguished Ogelthorpe Club, Savannah Yacht Club and German Club. He was admitted as a Mason in the Solomons Lodge #1 from October 12, 1909 until his death.<sup>14</sup>

There are also clear indications that Richard and Virginia were Christian people for they applied for and received membership in the Trinity Methodist Church Savannah, on the 21st of November 1897 and made annual pledges of \$35, to the church from that date till his death.<sup>15</sup>

When analyzing Richard Davant one needs to see that a great deal of his energy was directed to the Chatham Artillery and the Georgia Hussars. Beginning in 1899 Richard entered as a private and went through the ranks of quartermaster sergent ( Hussars ) to a Captain ( Chatham Artillery ) to a commission as Major in the 1st Battalion Field Artillery National Guard of Georgia in 1913.<sup>16</sup> While commanding officer it has been noted that his company won many national and state contests.<sup>17</sup>

While in Savannah the Davants moved quite often, possibly in search of the " right " home. Their decision to buy a home came on June 23, 1913 when they purchased a house and lot at 119 Park Avenue, Savannah for the price of \$5250.<sup>18</sup>

#### IV. Aldermanic and Mayoral Period

Richard and Virginia had no children. No explanation was found for this decision. Richard's time was spent with his Chatham Artillery obligations and other social fraternal organizations he belonged to, when he was not preparing himself for involvement in city government.

Richard was elected Alderman for the City of Savannah in 1903 with

Major Herman Myers. He received the 2nd largest vote in the election and  
was given the position of Vice-Chairman of City Council. <sup>19</sup> He was re-elected  
as an Alderman in 1906 under George W. Tadenan's ticket. During his tenure  
as an Alderman Richard Davant also found time to be a member of the Board  
of Education ( 1903-08 ) and Chairman of the Committee in charge of the  
<sup>20</sup>  
Fire Department.

On January 27, 1913, Richard J. Davant assumed the office of Mayor of  
Savannah. He had made his ambition perfectly clear to the citizens of Savannah.  
As Thomas Gamble stated in his Savannah News-Press article, " Mayor Davant's  
ambition was a Single one, to give to Savannah an administration of its affairs  
that would deserve and win the commendation of its citizens." <sup>21</sup> All available  
evidence I found certainly supports this contention!

The only negative side of his administration that I found was Richard's health.  
He was bothered by a pulmonary illness which necessitated him having to leave  
the city several times in attempts to recuperate. Even while absent for those  
short periods there was evidence of community concern and support for their  
Mayor. A newspaper article on September 9, 1915 attests to that. <sup>22</sup>

On December of 1914 Richard J. Davant Jr was re-elected as the Mayor of  
Savannah for 4 years ( <sup>→</sup> term of office law took effect 1-1915 ). All of  
Savannah was thankful for his re-election. He was called a ONE-MAN administration  
and immediately began putting forth more ideas on how to improve the methods  
of administering city affairs. <sup>23</sup> His ideas modeled the " progressive era " ideas  
prevalent in America during the early part of the 20th century. He created a  
control board to monitor garbage wastes in Savannah and set up the first city  
wide garbage disposal system. <sup>24</sup> He created positions of fire inspectors <sup>25</sup> and

26  
city surgeons. His Aldermanic board organized a proper accounting system for all departments, created new municipal docks and created an extensive city playground system.<sup>27</sup> He was instrumental in initiating<sup>28</sup> and carrying out the programs which created a new city auditorium, and a new municipal library. In so doing he had to solicit the Carnegie Foundation for a \$75,000. grant for the city library, and also have the voters of Savannah vote on a \$200,000. bond issue for the auditorium.<sup>29</sup> He was also instrumental in having various ordinances regulating meat shops, fish and poultry shops and food inspection requirements. Savannah's interests were certainly his interests. He won friends readily and held them strongly because of his impressive honesty. He was on a first name basis with many people throughout town.

As his strenuous pace at City Hall continued it became evident that his health would force him to take one of his many rest vacations in the mountains of North Carolina. On October 4, 1915 Richard returned from his last vacation and got back to the strenuous job of running the city. By the end of the week he was ready to take a short break at his farm in Millen Georgia, where he often went. It was reported that he had spent Saturday the 9th of October walking around his farm doing odd jobs. For dinner he met his close friend Dr. Mark E. Perkins for dinner at the doctor's house. After dinner the two men went for a walk and as they were nearing the Hotel Etill Richard began to complain about feeling ill. Shortly after that he collapsed and was pronounced dead by his good friend Dr. Perkins at 10:00 pm October 9, 1915.<sup>30</sup> The cause of death was listed as edema of the lungs which is a type of degeneration of one's muscular tissue.<sup>30</sup>

Savannah was shocked! The Savannah Morning News headlines of October 10th 1915 told the story. One of the many editorials, written by Thomas Gamble ( Mr. Davants secretary ) sums up the general public sentiment towards Davants death; " we doubt if Savannah ever had a mayor who gave more conscientious service in that capacity or who served his constituents with more zeal and more fidelity."<sup>31</sup>

As Savannah prepared their city for the funeral of a " loved one " Richard Davants body was transferred from Millen Georgia to Savannah on the Georgia Railroad the 11th day of October and arrived at 7:25 am.<sup>32</sup> There were several hundred people at the train station to pay their respects to their late Mayor. His body was placed in City Hall from Monday October 11,1915 through Wednesday October 13,<sup>33</sup> Ironically he had been on the building commission for the newly opened City Hall.

On the 13th of October Savannah gave their late mayor an impressive funeral with full military honors. Through the streets of Savannah thousands paid their respects. Services were held at Trinity Methodist Church and reports indicated that the service and march through town surpassed any held thus far.<sup>34</sup>

He was buried at Bonaventure Cemetary in Savannah and his burial was reported as being a very private family affair as requested by his widow.<sup>35</sup> Richards brother William, who was living in Beaufort at the time, came to Savannah for his brothers funeral and to be executor of the Last Will and Testament. Richard left his wife all his life insurance and their home on Park Avenue plus what remained of his assets, after liquidating his debts. This was a total of \$5311.37.<sup>36</sup> Interesting to note that he also bequeathed a sum of \$1500. to be given to his " second " love,<sup>37</sup> the Chatham Artillery.



His brother William then set about to sell his and Virginia's residence on Park Avenue and found a buyer, one Fr. William S. Kolius who paid \$5350. for the house and land. <sup>38</sup> With now over \$10,000. Virginia moved to 1817 Abercorn Street in Savannah and was last listed there as of the Savannah City Directory in 1918. <sup>39</sup> What became of Virginia is left for another researcher to uncover. She was buried in Savannah next to her husband on the 26th day of March 1960. <sup>40</sup> Being buried with her married name seems to indicate that she never remarried in those 45 years as a widow.

The work of Richard J. Davant, as mayor, will stand as a monument to him. Savannah is a better place for having been guided, even for so short a period, by such a leader. Everywhere one might look one finds evidence of the touch of his hand and the impact of his work will be felt for many generations of Savannahians to come.

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