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**David R. Dillon of Savannah**

Bennie Arkwright

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DAVID R. DILLON OF SAVANNAH

A Research Paper

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Class: History 300/500

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DAVID R. DILLON OF SAVANNAH

There have probably been few, if any, men whom by virtue of their colorful life style and philanthropy managed to capture the hearts of Savannahians to the extent as did our subject David R. Dillon.

Sportsman, Banker, Realtor, Boat Captain and owner, Civic Leader and Philanthropist were titles that were quite apropos for David R. Dillon.

Mr. Dillon was a very large land owner in the city as well as a very busy and shrewd businessman. There were times when his shrewdness as a businessman boarded an unprincipled if not illegal actions. It seems that Mr. David R. Dillon was fairly frequently involved in civil suits of one type or another. Nevertheless he was very socially prominent and enjoyed a fine reputation as a businessman. However, there were instances in which this social prominence and fine reputation would become somewhat tarnished. Such was the case when one of his sons tried to kill him before later killing himself.

By for the one role which was most responsible for D. R. Dillon's popularity was that as captain and owner of the river boat "Amazon." Not only did Dillon sometimes help some fellow Savannahians through the use of the "Amazon," but he was also involved in some Cloak and Dagger type operations pertaining to his boat.

The life of Savannahian David R. Dillon was one of excitement and intrigue right up to his 1881 marriage separation and subsequent departure for New York City where he died a few years later.

According to the 1850 Georgia Census for Chatham County David R. Dillon, having been born in the state of Georgia, was 29 years of age at the time census was taken.<sup>1</sup> His occupation was given as that of a merchant, and he was credited with owning real estate valued at \$2,000. Mr. Dillon also appeared in the same census as a member of a household headed by Catherine Warner. Neither reference showed any indication of family life.

However, just ten years later the 1860 Georgia Census for Chatham County listed David R. Dillon 39 as head of a household which included: Mary L. J., 15, Female; James J., 14, Male; Sarah, 12, Female; Benjamin, 10, Male; Alexander, 8, Male; Virginia, 5, Female; Ann Eliza, 3, Female; and David R. All last names Dillon.<sup>2</sup> Although Dillon at some point was married to a Rachel Dillon who was the mother of at least the four sons no mention was made of her in the census.<sup>3</sup>

Mr. Dillon was a very active business person and it can be assumed that the five dollars fine he paid in 1842 for violating the Sabbath ordinance was probably related to a business venture.<sup>4</sup> Whether it involved paying a fine for violation of the Sabbath or bringing a charge of Treason against someone, David Dillon was no stranger to the courtroom.<sup>5</sup> In the year 1871 David R. Dillon was involved in judicature on at least five different occasions.<sup>6</sup> In 1875 Mr. Dillon was the loser in a verdict favoring Virginia A. Sadler which directed that the mortgage being contested be cancelled and declared null and void.<sup>7</sup>

Since David Dillon was dead by 1885 he was not around to participate in what some sources described as a very interesting trial. "Among the cases called for trial in the U. S. Circuit Court yesterday a suit on a bond instituted by the United States against John H. Gould,

David R. Dillon and others. Gould was the late collector of internal revenue for the First District of Georgia. After being in office about a year he took to the woods. The government claims he defaulted in the sum of \$50,000. Promises to be one of the most interesting cases."<sup>8</sup>

Although David R. Dillon was officially listed as a banker in the press and various city directories, it seems that his advertisement in the city directory for 1870 as a "General Commissions Merchant" came closer to describing his livelihood.<sup>9</sup> A glance at the various newspaper advertisements over an extended period of time is quite useful in helping to ascertain the nature and sources of Mr. Dillon's income: Consider this 1851 advertisement for instance; "Wood, Cats, Corn, Hay, etc. for sale by David R. Dillon. Foot of West Broad Street."<sup>10</sup> Again in 1851 "\$20.00 Reward--twenty dollars will be paid for the apprehension and delivery of Simon, with proof to convict any person of harboring him. He is about 16 years of age, yellow complected, and came out of the estate of Rogers; or five dollars will be paid for his delivery to David R. Dillon."<sup>11</sup> An 1855 advertisement simply read "David R. Dillon, Market-Square-General Merchandise."<sup>12</sup> Equally simple was this 1859 advertisement; "Commission Merchant. David R. Dillon, 150 Bay Street."<sup>13</sup> Somewhere a bit more creative; "In this day of adulteration and humbuggery, when a man scarcely knows what he eats or drinks, it is refreshing to get hold of something which you feel no hesitancy in believing to be genuine. We had occasion to notice a few weeks since, the arrival of a cargo of pure Holland Gin, direct from Holland, imported by David R. Dillon, and we saw the bills of lading and could not doubt that it was an imported article."<sup>14</sup> "Several months ago, we spoke of the importance of a direct Southern Trade with Bremen and other German ports.

Mr. David R. Dillon, who has been active in his efforts to interest the businessmen of Savannah and of Georgia in this matter, has received a sample box of boots and shoes, of German manufacture, which the incredulous are invited to call and examine. There is no doubt but that those articles can be laid down here at least forty per cent cheaper than the same can be bought from the Northern states.<sup>15</sup> "Mr. David R. Dillon has left at our office some samples of negro shoes, of German make, which seem to us admirably suited for this section. Desirous of being independent of our Northern neighbors, we shall take pleasure in exhibiting these samples to our country friends and others, in the hope that they may find it advantageous to send orders for such shoes abroad."<sup>16</sup> "Whiskey for Sale. David R. Dillon, 150 Bay Street."<sup>17</sup> "Anyone having a Grist Mill with fans, Sieves, etc., complete, either steam or horse power, can hear of a purchaser, by applying to David R. Dillon, 150 Bay Street."<sup>18</sup> "Whitaker one door from corner of Bay. Banker."<sup>19</sup> "Our special dispatch from Atlanta states that Bullock has signed a bill incorporating the 'Prince Street Rail Road' and that among the corporates are John Screvan, John Lama, H. S. Fitch, George W. Wrylly, David R. Dillon and others."<sup>20</sup> "The U. S. Circuit Court Grand Jury found an indictment against T. B. Marshal for complicity in the Krzyzanowski revenue defrauding muddle. \$10,000 Bail--David R. Dillon served as Bondsman."<sup>21</sup> "Thomas Smith, J. Lamar and David R. Dillon along with others petitioned Council for right to construct Street Railway."<sup>22</sup> "For sale, one 10-horse engine. Complete. David R. Dillon."<sup>23</sup> It will be seen by his advertisement in another column that Mr. D. R. Dillon offers for sale several valuable properties including the building on Whitaker Street adjoining the News building,

in exchange for Savannah bonds. He has the reputation of being a shrewd businessman, and his proposal to sell valuable real estate for City bonds may be regarded as pretty strong evidence that he considers such securities a good and safe investment."<sup>24</sup> "For sale rent or trade for a smaller house the large brick house on the corner of State and Montgomery Streets on tow lots. David R. Dillon."<sup>25</sup>

As might be expected David R. Dillon was a slave holder but there is nothing to indicate that he profited from slave trading. In 1855 he paid a John M. Williams the sum of \$927.00 for two male slaves, John about 28 years of age and another about 25 years of age.<sup>26</sup> In 1856 David R. Dillon received six slaves from John F. O. Byrne as settlement for a \$4,000 debt.<sup>27</sup> In 1857 Mr. Dillon paid \$3,550 to John F. O. Byrne for a total of seven black slaves.

The buying and selling of land was a primary preoccupation of D. R. Dillon. It was customary for him to be on the buying end in the vast majority of these transactions. In 1853 Mr. Dillon purchased land on at least two occasions.<sup>28</sup> From 1855 to 1858 he engaged in no less than 14 land transactions and only twice as a seller.<sup>29</sup> From 1858 to 1867 he bought land on at least ten occasions.<sup>30</sup> From 1867 to 1872 Mr. David R. Dillon was involved in no less than 50 land transactions; in the overwhelming majority of these he served as grantee. And from 1872 to 1877 some ten transactions were made.

Among the land owned by David R. Dillon was the tract of land known as Dillon Town, which he purchased from George M. Willett.<sup>31</sup>

David R. Dillon was socially prominent and involved himself in various civic and community interest groups. He was an active member of the Board of Health.<sup>32</sup> As might be expected he was a registered

voter.<sup>33</sup> Dillon was a member of a rather popular racing club and was elected as one of the Patrol Judges for this local racing club located at Ten Brock Course.<sup>34</sup> During the Civil War Dillon was appointed along with 35 others by the Mayor "to superintend the formation of arms-bearing residents into companies and the selection of officers for the defense of their homes."<sup>35</sup> David R. Dillon was a member of the Executive Committee of the Democratic Party of Savannah.<sup>36</sup> In 1872 he was elected one of the directors of the Vernon Shell Road Company, which consisted of a distinguished group dedicated to improve the road.<sup>37</sup>

Quite often D. R. Dillon would lend a helping hand to those in need. In 1865 the local press carried the following report: "Prior to the departure of the S. S. Amazon yesterday for Augusta, several persons in needy circumstances applied to the agent and owner, Mr. David R. Dillon, and he furnished them gratuitously with passage to Augusta. This act of charity is worthy of record."<sup>38</sup> In July of 1868 Mr. David R. Dillon contributed 3 lots to be used to build a Rail Road Depot. He was given due recognition at the ground breaking ceremony.<sup>39</sup> When a movement was started for relief of families of two policemen killed by black rioters at the polls, D. R. Dillon provided \$100.00 to kick things off.<sup>40</sup>

In 1871 David R. Dillon, also known as Captain Dillon, proposed to give the use of for a term of years a sufficient quantity of land to a number of gentlemen to enclose a mile race track. The land was also to be used to host fair Association exhibitions and for training and practicing horses.<sup>41</sup> In 1875 he "tendered" the baseball clubs of the city a tract of land to be used as a baseball park.<sup>42</sup>

Dillon was shot three times on October 11, 1872 by his 18 year old son, Alexander who then killed himself in his father's office. The

shooting apparently stemmed from Dillon calling young Alexander a "miserable puppy" following a dispute pertaining to some work Dillon had asked his son to do. A bit of confusion surrounded the actual shooting. Some witnesses stated that young Alexander returned with a gun and fired after his father tried to disarm him. Others claim that young Alexander began firing as soon as he returned while his father tried to run. The Savannah Morning News claimed that Dillon tried to persuade them not to carry the story and when they refused he ordered them barred. Savannah Morning News reporters claim that while the doctors bandaged Dillon's wounds, as his dead son lay on the floor covered with blood, and his mother screaming, Dillon nonchalantly smoked his cigar without showing any sign of remorse.<sup>43</sup>

Captain David R. Dillon, in 1874, put in a claim of \$175,000 on the ground that "in February 1865 he was the owner of the steamer Amazon which was taken in March 1865 into the services of the U. S. Army at Savannah and continued in the service until June 24, 1865." For this service Dillon was paid a sum of \$28,998.18. According to Captain Dillon he could have made \$30,000 to \$40,000 per week. He presented a claim for \$144,668. Dillon asked that \$154,000 be paid to him in addition to the \$28,998 he received and signed paid in full.<sup>44</sup>

Quartermaster General Meigs responded that when the Amazon was confiscated it was found lying above a Rebel battery and a set of torpedoes and was unable to move. He further stated that the Captain (Dillon) was quite relieved when the union army relieved him from his duress. General Meigs stated that Captain Dillon stated to him on the 20th that the dangers of the unsettled state of affairs continued so great even after the U. S. had used his boat for 114 days, that it was

more than his life was worth to run the boat, and that he sold her for \$25,000 i.e. for not more than what he alleges would have been one week's profits had the U. S. left him in possession 4 months earlier in a worst state of affairs.<sup>45</sup> The claim was denied.

Two years earlier Captain David R. Dillon created quite an uproar when he travelled to Washington, D. C. to present his claim to the Southern Claims Commissioner. It was reported that he created quite a stir upon hotel keepers, liverymen and others as he attracted crowds by the thousands who followed him around as he visited the finest hotels. The crowd tried to carry him on their backs it was reported.<sup>46</sup> But the greatest delight took place when Dillon first arrived by ship. "Dave turned a double sommersault from the hurricane deck of the Acquia Greek steamer, landing on the wharf in perfect safety. This very extraordinary feat (for so young a man) completely won the hearts of the South Washington people who are noted for their affection for acrobatic artists."<sup>47</sup>

The 1865 press account of how the Amazon was confiscated makes exciting reading and contributes considerably to Dillon's swashbuckling reputation and image. "This morning the people on board the gunboat Pontiac were somewhat astonished to observe a high pressure river boat rounding the curve above her, and on her way to the city. A blank gun was at once fired by the Pontiac, but it did not have its natural effect of stopping the stranger. A shotted gun was then fired, and a shell was exploded ahead of the curious craft, and she turned around and headed up stream, stopped her engines and awaited the approach of a small boat from the Pontiac which on boarding her, found her to be the old S. S. Amazon, owned by Captain David Dillon. He had his family and house

furniture on board and had escaped with his vessel from Augusta. His boat and cargo consisting of about 70 bales of cotton are held for examination. Mr. Dillon is an old citizen of this city, and will doubtless retain possession of his property.<sup>48</sup>

According to an article in the local press The Philadelphia Public Ledger reported that the United States District Court issued an order restoring the steamer Magnolia to her owner. The Magnolia turned out to be none other than the S. S. Amazon which had been captured by the U. S. Pontiac in the Savannah River loaded with cotton of the confederate government. "The owner who was the Captain, produced evidence that he was a union man. This Magnolia is none other than the S. S. Amazon, owned by Daptain David R. Dillon, who brought her to Savannah having run the blockade from the upper Savannah River."<sup>49</sup>

In March 1866 a public auction was held for the Amazon.<sup>50</sup> By the end of March the following advertisement was run: Captain D. R. Dillon advertises for proposals for removing the machinery, engines, boilers from the steamer Amazon, which lies sunk in the Savannah River on the bar below Augusta.<sup>51</sup> David Dillon's claim for compensation was again revived as late as 1882.<sup>52</sup> Dillon also had a claim for rice and other things furnished Sherman's army.<sup>53</sup>

In 1881 David R. Dillon and his wife Rachel agreed to a legal separation; Dillon had already moved to New York a few months earlier.<sup>54</sup>

The Savannah Morning News, October 10, 1883 carried the following: A telegram received yesterday from New York announced the death from pneumonia of Captain David R. Dillon, formerly a citizen of this

city. He was about 62 years of age. He leaves a brother D. James  
Dillon of Brunswick, Ga.<sup>55</sup>

## FOOTNOTES

1. 1850 Georgia Census for Chatham County.
2. 1860 Georgia Census for Chatham County.
3. Last Will and Testament of David R. Dillon, 1881, Chatham County Court House. Chatham County does not have a certification of the marriage.
4. Daily Georgian, 1842, 8/13, p. 2, c. 6.
5. Savannah Daily Herald, 1865, 4/19, p. 2, c. 1.
6. Savannah Morning News, 1871, 1/10, p. 2, c. 6.  
Savannah Morning News, 1871, 3/1, p. 3, c. 4.  
Savannah Morning News, 1871, 4/10, p. 3, c. 5.  
Savannah Morning News, 1871, 5/22, p. 3, c. 5.  
Savannah Morning News, 1871, 6/12, p. 3, c. 4.
7. Savannah Morning News, 1875, 12/23, p. 3, c. 4.
8. Savannah Morning News, 1885, 4/25, p. 8, c. 2.
9. Directory of the City of Savannah For 1870, J. H. Estill Publisher.
10. Savannah Daily Morning News, 1851, 3/2,3, p. 4, c. 2.
11. Savannah Daily Morning News, 1851, 8/4, p. 3, c. 1.
12. Savannah Daily Morning News, 1855, 1/1, p. 2, c. 7.
13. Savannah Daily Morning News, 1859, 7/1, p. 2, c. 6.
14. Savannah Daily Morning News, 1859, 9/17, p. 2, c. 1.
15. Savannah Daily Morning News, 1860, 6/13, p. 2, c. 1.
16. Savannah Daily Morning News, 1861, 3/21, p. 2, c. 1.
17. Savannah Daily Morning News, 1862, 1/1, p. 2, c. 4.
18. Savannah Daily Morning News, 1863, 1/27, p. 2, c. 1.
19. Savannah Morning News, 1869, 8/28, p. 2, c. 5.
20. Savannah Morning News, 1870, 10/13, p. 3, c. 2.
21. Savannah Morning News, 1871, 11/4, p. 3, c. 1.
22. Savannah Morning News, 1872, 6/18, p. 3, c. 4.
23. Savannah Morning News, 1876, 4/23, p. 2, c. 8.

24. Savannah Morning News, 1878, 3/20, p. 2, c. 2.
25. Savannah Morning News, 1878, 8/1, p. 2, c. 8.
26. Chatham County Deeds Folio 000, p. 441.
27. Chatham County Deeds Folio 3P, p. 551.
28. Index to Chatham County Deeds.
29. Index to Chatham County Deeds.
30. Index to Chatham County Deeds.
31. The last Will and Testament of David R. Dillon, 1881, Chatham County Court House.
32. Savannah Daily Morning News, 1852, 6/24, p. 2, c. 5.
33. Savannah Daily Morning News, 1853, 4/7, p. 2, c. 7.
34. Savannah Daily Morning News, 1859, 1/3, p. 1, c. 1.
35. Savannah Daily Morning News, 1863, 8/5, p. 1, c. 1.
36. Savannah Morning News, 1871, 10/4, p. 3, c. 2.
37. Savannah Morning News, 1872, 5/18, p. 3, c. 1.
38. Savannah Daily Herald, 1865, 6/28, p. 4, c. 1.
39. Savannah Daily Herald, 1868, 7/16, p. 3, c. 1.
40. Savannah Morning News, 1868, 11/9, p. 2, c. 1.
41. Savannah Morning News, 1871, 5/22, p. 3, c. 1.
42. Savannah Morning News, 1875, 7/24, p. 3, c. 3.
43. Savannah Morning News, 1872, 10/12, p. 3, c. 2, 3.
44. Savannah Morning News, 1874, 5/26, p. 3, c. 3.
45. Savannah Morning News, 1874, 5/26, p. 3, c. 3.
46. Savannah Morning News, 1872, 1/24, p. 3, c. 3.
47. Savannah Morning News, 1872, 1/24, p. 3, c. 3.
48. Savannah Daily Herald, 1865, 3/2, p. 2, c. 4.
49. Savannah Daily Herald, 1865, 5/30, p. 2, c. 3.
50. Savannah Daily Herald, 1866, 3/21, p. 2, c. 3.

51. Savannah Daily Herald, 1866, 3/29, p. 3, c. 1.
52. Savannah Morning News, 1882, 2/6, p. 1, c. 4.
53. Savannah Morning News, 1872, 3/21, p. 1, c. 3.
54. *Probate Court* Chatham County, 1881.
55. Savannah Morning News, 1883, 10/10, p. 4, c. 2.

It is presumed that no known relatives remained in Savannah; though his wife Rachel was still alive as well as two sons and a daughter since they were involved in litigation surrounding his will. Much of Dillon's property was left to his former slave and trusted servant Daniel R. Dillon. See last statement and testament.

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