

Letters Throwing New Light on Jefferson Davis

(Copyright, 1913, by Frank G. Carpenter.)
 WASHINGTON, D. C., Nov. 8.—The manuscript division of the Library of Congress has just put into shape and made accessible to the historical student some interesting letters written by Jefferson Davis and his wife while the two were fleeing southward from Richmond at the close of the war. The letters were sent from one to the other in all sorts of ways, but in most cases by soldiers. The most of them were intercepted, and the collection finally came into the hands of Edwin M. Stanton, who was secretary of war. Mr. Stanton kept the letters among his private papers, and it was only after his death that they came to the national library. I am told that they have never been published.

These letters were written under conditions of terrible excitement. The confederacy was falling, and the sword of death hung by a hair over President Davis and his administration. The letters were written without any idea that they would ever be published, and they give perhaps the truest insight into the characters of Mr. Davis and Mrs. Davis and show the beautiful relations which they held to each other. I will let them speak for themselves.

The first letter is from President Davis after he had sold out his household effects in Richmond at auction and had fled southward to Danville, Va. Mrs. Davis was with her children at Charlotte, N. C. The letter reads:

"DANVILLE, Va., April 5, 1865. My Dear Wife: I have in vain sought to get into communication with General Lee and have postponed writing in the hope that I would soon be able to speak to you with some confidence of the future. On last Sunday I was called out of church to receive a telegram announcing that General Lee could not hold his position longer than till night, and warning me that we must leave Richmond, as the army would commence retreating that evening. I made the necessary arrangements at my office and went to our house to have the proper dispositions made there. Nothing had been done after you left and but little could be done in the few hours which remained before the train was to leave.

"I packed the bust (probably of Mr. Davis) and gave it to John Davis, who offered to take it and put it where it should never be found by a Yankee. I also gave him charge of the painting of the 'Heroes of the Valley'—both were ready to go after dark. The furniture of the house was left, and very little of the things I directed to be put up, including bedding and groceries, were saved. Mrs. Omelia behaved just as you described her, but seemed anxious to serve and promised to take care of everything, which may mean something.

"The auctioneer's account of sales \$25,000. Could not dispose of the carriage. Mr. Grant was afraid to take the carriage to his house, etc., etc. I sent it to the depot to be put on a flat car. At the moment of starting it was said they could not take it in that train, but would bring it on the next train. It has not been heard from since.

"I sent a message to Mr. Grant that I had neglected to return the cow and wished him to send for it immediately. Called off on horseback to the depot, I left the servants to go down with the boxes and they left Tippy. Watson came willingly. Spencer against my will. Robert, Alf, V. B. and Ives got drunk.

"David Bradford went back from the depot to bring out the spoons and forks, which I was told, had been left, and to come out with Gen. Breckenridge. Since then I have not heard from either of them.

"I had short notice and was interrupted so often and so little added that the results are very unsatisfactory.

"The people here have been very kind, and the mayor and council have offered assistance in the matter of quarters, and have very handsomely declared their unabated confidence. Do not wish to leave Virginia, but cannot decide on my movements until those of the army are better developed.

"I hope you are comfortable and trust soon to hear from you. Kiss my dear children.

"I weary of this sad recital and have nothing pleasant to tell. May God have you in His holy keeping in the fervent prayer of your ever affectionate husband."

"DANVILLE, Va., April 6, 1865.—Dear Winnie: Many thanks for your letter giving me an account of your situation at Charlotte. In my letter of yesterday I gave you all of my prospects which can now be told, not having heard from General Lee and having to conform my movements to the military necessities of the case. We are now fixing up an executive office where the current business may be transacted here, and do not propose at this time definitely to fix upon a point for a seat of war in the future.

"I am unwilling to leave Va. and do not know where within her borders the requisite houses for the Departments and the Congress could be found.

"I hope our dear children will be well when they have recovered from the effects of their journey. Enclosed please find two letters. As specimens of deep feeling and idle speaking, they might stand for extremes in their classes.

"Love to Maggie, little Maggie, Jeff, Billy, and little Winnie. Farewell, my love. May God bless, preserve and guide you."

"HUSBAND."

The next letter is from Mrs. Davis. It was written at Charlotte, N. C., and it begins with the affectionate title by which Mrs. Davis frequently addressed her husband:



Jefferson Davis in 1865



Mrs. Jefferson Davis.

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"HUSBAND."

"The next letter is from Mrs. Davis. It was written at Charlotte, N. C., and it begins with the affectionate title by which Mrs. Davis frequently addressed her husband:

"April 7, 1865.—My Own Dear Old Banny: Since my arrival here I have been so busy as to have only the evening to write in, and then but one room where the children most disconcerted, so I have written you but one disjointed letter.

"The news of Richmond came upon me like the 'abomination of desolation,' the loss of Selma like the 'blackness thereof.' Your telegram upon your arrival at Danville we have nothing except the wildest rumors, all, however, discouraging.

"I, who know that your strength when stirred up is great, and that you can do with a few what others have failed to do with many, am awaiting prayerfully the advent of the time when it is God's will to deliver us through His own appointed agent. I trust it may be you, as I believe it should be.

"It would comfort me greatly if you could only find an opportunity to write me a full, long letter. As soon as we are established here I am anxious to leave Mrs. Chestnut with the children and bring Li Pie (evidently the baby) to see you. I do not know how soon that may be. God grant it may be soon. The gentlemen I have seen here (the officers of the post) are exceedingly kind, and have offered me every civility in their power.

"The surgeon general was also very kind in his offers of service. Colonel Johnston, with his wife, called to see me. Mrs. Joe Johnston is here living with the cashier of the bank and family, and makes a very pretty fancy carriage and horse. I have not seen her, but I hear she is going out of town before long to some watering place or other. Mrs. Semmes went off yesterday for the south. I did not see her. The Wigfals are staying. I believe, with Mrs. Johnston, also. They arrived yesterday.

"I heard a funny account of Wigfal's interview with Beauregard. It seems he went to see him on his way to this place, and when the news of the evacuation of Richmond came, and that the enemy had not yet entered the town, the general said, 'Oh, they do not understand the situation! It is, or ought to be, a plan of Lee's to keep between Richmond and the enemy. If Grant attempts to throw troops between his army and Richmond, Lee can whip them in detail.' With this plan Wigfal was immensely satisfied.

"I cannot judge of the moral effect of the fall of Richmond. The people here were about as low down as they could be before, as I infer from little things, but upon the whole, I do not think the shock is as great as I expected.

"We had a digest of your address to the people today, and I could not make much of it, except an encouraging exhortation. Am anxious to see the whole thing. Numberless surmises are hazarded here as to your future destination and occupation, but I know that wherever you are and in whatever manner engaged it is in an efficient manner for the country. The way things look now the trans-Mississippi seems our ultimate destination.

"Where are you? How are you? What ought I to do with these helpless little unconscious charges of mine are questions which I am asking myself always. Write to me of your troubles freely, for mercy's sake. Do not attempt to put a good face upon them to the friend of your heavy heart. Since I left Richmond no such heart-felt welcome has been extended to me as the one I received here—they will hear of no change of place for the present and urge me with tears in their eyes to share with them the little they can offer. People call promptly and seem to feel warmly. Mr. Burt really seems to feel tenderly to us; pets the children and does every kind thing in his power to me. Mrs. Burt is more than affectionate.

"Jeffrey D. was taken quite ill on the 8th and is here sick at Mr. Trenholm's, but he is not well. He and Joe both had very badly swollen throats with high fever. Joe was nearly well and went on with the train which left here yesterday evening, having arrived in the night. I hear it has been stopped nine miles from here by a rumored rail below here. I do not know how true this is. I shall wait your further directions here. Do write every day and make the staff send the notes (I do not expect more) by officers coming this way—I am so unhappy and anxious.

"The children are well and very happy; play all day. Billy and Jim fret friends as ever. Little Winnie the sweetest little angelic thing in the world—she rode along in the wagon as we bumped over the horrid roads, making noise at everything—the children seemed to improve under it. Mr. Clay passed through here today, but did not stop long enough to see me. I felt quite disappointed, because he was so very kind to me at Chester and Charlotte; he sent me word he would see me at Washington in a very few days. * * *

"Margaret sends you her best love, little Pollie sends her and the boys—your little pet would I know feel for you if she hoped to find you.

"May God in His mercy keep you safe and raise up defenders for our bleeding country prays your devoted wife."

"Write to me, my own precious only love, and believe me as ever your devoted wife—

"Maggie sends love, as do Jeff and Billy—Has 'Ives' turned up? Did Johnson leave his family? Had Mrs. McLean got off? Did Mr. Minnegrove come out? Did we bring off anything when you came? Did you send the pest off out of the way? Did you bring the brandy? Where is Joe?"

Six days later Mrs. Davis had fled from Charlotte to Chester, S. C., and about the same time Davis had fled from Danville as he was on his way to Greensboro. Here are the letters:

"CHESTER, April 12, 1865.—My Dear Banny: The rumors of a raid on Charlotte induced me to come south, and a threatened raid here induces me to leave without making an hour's unnecessary stay. I go with the specie train because they have a strong guard and are attended by two responsible men. I am going somewhere, perhaps to Washington, Ga., perhaps only to Abbeville (S. C.). I don't know. Just as the children seem to bear the journey well I decide, General Chestnut seems anxious, as is the author of the letter you sent me to Charlotte, but so moody that I am wordless, helpless. The children are well, as are Maggie and I. Would to God I could know the truth of the horrible rumors I hear of you. One is that you have started for General Lee, but have never been heard of. Mr. Clay is here and very kind. He will catch up with my train and join me tomorrow.

"May God have mercy upon me and preserve your life for your dear wife."

It was on the day following this that Jefferson Davis wrote:

"GREENSBORO, N. C., April 14, 1865.—Dear Winnie: I will come to you if I can. Everything is dark. You should prepare for the worst by dividing your baggage so as to move in wagons. If you can go to Abbeville, it seems best as I now advise. If you can send everything there, do so. I have lingered on the road and labored to little purpose. My love to the children and Maggie.

"God bless, guide and preserve you, ever prays your most affectionate husband."

"P. S.—I sent you a telegram, but fear it was stopped on the road. General Bonham bears this. His horse is at the door and he awaits me to write this. Again and ever yours."

Five days later Mrs. Davis is at Abbeville. She writes despairingly as follows concerning herself and her children:

"ABBEVILLE, April 19, 1865.—My Dear Old Banny: The fearful news I hear fills me with horror. This is that General Lee's army is in effect disbanded. Longstreet's corps having surrendered. Longstreet's army has been extended to me as the one I received here—they will hear of no change of place for the present and urge me with tears in their eyes to share with them the little they can offer. People call promptly and seem to feel warmly. Mr. Burt really seems to feel tenderly to us; pets the children and does every kind thing in his power to me. Mrs. Burt is more than affectionate.

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"Margaret sends you her best love, little Pollie sends her and the boys—your little pet would I know feel for you if she hoped to find you.

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"May God have mercy upon me and preserve your life for your dear wife."

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(turbid by any pride of opinion or of opinion.)

"I have prayed to our Heavenly Father to give me wisdom and fortitude equal to the demands of the position in which Providence has placed me. I have sacrificed so much for the cause of the confederacy that I can measure my ability to make any further sacrifices required, and am assured there is but one to which I am not equal—my wife and my children. How are they to be saved from degradation or want is now my care.

"During the suspension of hostilities, you may have the best opportunity to go to Mississippi, and thence either to fall from Mobile for a foreign port or to cross the river and proceed to Texas, as the one or the other may be more practicable. The little sterling (money) you have will be a very scanty store, and under other circumstances would not be counted, but if our land can be sold, that will secure you from absolute want. For myself, it may be that our enemy will be to banish me. Or it may be that a devoted band of cavalry will cling to me, and that I can force my way across the Mississippi, and if unable to do more than what I can do to Mexico, and have the world from which to choose a location.

"Dear wife, this is not the fate to which I invited when the future was rose colored to us both, but I know you will bear it even better than myself, and that, of us two, I alone will ever look back reproachfully on my past career. I have thus entered on the questions involved in the future to guard against contingencies. My stay will not be prolonged a day beyond the prospect of useful labor here, and there is every reason to suppose that I will be with you a few days after Mr. Harrison arrives. Mrs. Omelia behaved very strangely about putting the things you directed. Robert says she would not permit to pack; that she even took Robert out of the mess chest when he had put a small quantity there.

"Little Maggie's saddle was concealed, and I learned after we left Richmond was not with the saddle and bridle which I directed to be all put together. At the same time I was informed that your saddle had been sent to the saddler's and left there. Everybody seemed afraid of connection with our property, and your carriage was sent to the depot to be brought with me. A plea was made that it could not go on the cars of that train, but should follow on the next. Specific charges and promise was given, but the carriage was left.

"The notice to leave was given Sunday, but few hours were allowed, and my public duties compelled me to rely on others. Cough on nothing as saved which you valued except the bust, and that had to be left behind.

"Mrs. Omelia said she was charged in the event of our having to leave, to place the valuables with the sisters, and that she would distribute everything.

I told her to sell what she could, and after feeling distrust, asked Mrs. Grant to observe her, and after that became convinced that she, too, probably under the influence of her husband, was afraid to be known as having close relations with us.

"Kiss Maggie and the children many times for me. The only yearning heart in the final hour was poor old Sam, wishing for 'pie cake,' and thus I left our late home, no had preparation for a search for another.

"Dear children, I can say nothing to them, but for you and them my heart is full, my prayers constant and my hopes are the trust I feel in the mercy of God.

"Farewell, my dear, there may be better things in store for us than are now in view, but my love is all I have to offer, and that has the value of a thing long possessed and sure not to be lost.

"Once more, and with God's favor, for a short time only, farewell."

"YOUR HUSBAND."

The letter of Mrs. Davis in reply to the above gives another affecting picture of the loving relations which always obtained between her and her husband.

"ABBEVILLE, S. C., April 25, 1865.—My Dear Old Husband: Your very sweet letter reached me safely by Mr. Harrison and was a great relief. I leave here this morning at 4 o'clock for the wagon train going to Georgia. Washington will be the first point I shall unload at. From there we shall probably go on to Atlanta or thereabouts and wait a little until we hear something of you. Let me beseech you not to calculate upon seeing me unless I happen to cross your shortest path toward your home, be that what it may.

"It is surely not the fate to which you invited me in brighter days. But you must remember that you did not invite me to a great hero's home, but to that of a plain farmer. I have shared all your triumphs, been the only beneficiary of them, now I am but claiming the privilege for the first time of being all to you these pleasures have past for me.

"My plans are these, subject to your approval. I think I shall be able to procure funds enough to enable me to put the two best to school. I shall go to Florida if possible, and from thence to over to Bermuda or Nassau, from thence to England, unless a good school offers elsewhere, and put them to the best school I can find and then with the two youngest join you in Texas—and that is the prospect which bears me up to be once more with you—once more to suffer with you if need be—but God loves those who obey Him, and I know there is a future for you. This people are a craven set, they cannot bear the tug of war.

"Here they are all your friends and have the most unbounded confidence in you. Mr. Burt and his wife have urged me to live with them—offered to take the chances of the Yankees with us—begged to have little Maggie—done everything in fact that relatives could do. I shall never forget all their generous devotion to you.

"I have seen a great many men who have gone through—no one has talked first. A stand cannot be made in this country! Do not be induced to try it. As to the Transmississippi, I doubt if at first things will be straight, but the spirit's there and the daily accretions will be great when the deluded of this side are crushed out between the upper and nether millstones. But you have now tried the 'strict construction' fallacy. If we are to require a constitution it must be much stretched during our hours of outside pressure. If it covers us at all, it is in the Transmississippi. I doubt if at first things will be straight, but the spirit's there and the daily accretions will be great when the deluded of this side are crushed out between the upper and nether millstones. But you have now tried the 'strict construction' fallacy. If we are to require a constitution it must be much stretched during our hours of outside pressure. If it covers us at all, it is in the Transmississippi. 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