**Jefferson Davis (1808-1889)**

by Lynda Lasswell Crist

Jefferson Davis, born in Kentucky on June 3, 1808, always considered Mississippi his true home. He represented Mississippi in Washington and in the Mexican War over a period of fifteen years, and spent another four years as president of the Confederate States of America, of which Mississippi was a part.

Davis and Mississippi grew up together. He arrived as a small child before Mississippi’s statehood in 1817, his memories beginning at Rosemont, a modest plantation in Wilkinson County near Woodville. At age eight, he left to attend boarding school at St. Thomas College near Springfield, Kentucky, returned to Mississippi two years later to enter [Jefferson College](http://mshistorynow.mdah.state.ms.us/articles/315/jefferson-college-in-washington-mississippi) in Adams County, and, in 1823, Davis enrolled at Transylvania University in Kentucky.

In 1824 two important events occurred in his life: his father died, and he entered the United States Military Academy in West Point at the urging of his much-older brother, Joseph E. Davis, whose political connections had secured the appointment. Joseph immediately assumed their father’s role in Jefferson’s life and became his mentor and most loyal supporter, in many ways shaping his destiny.

**Early military career**

At West Point Davis forged enduring friendships with men who became his fellow officers in the Mexican War and became generals on both sides in the American Civil War. Far from being the serious public servant of his adulthood, Davis was a carefree, fun-loving student. He racked up quite a record of demerits – firing his musket from his window, having long hair at inspection, skipping class and chapel, and other misconduct. Davis finished in the bottom third of his class. He was arrested once for being at a local tavern, and narrowly escaped dismissal from West Point for participating in the notorious “eggnog riot” in which inebriated cadets became riotous at a holiday party in Davis’s barracks. Despite his misdeeds, he graduated in 1828 as a second lieutenant of infantry and was posted to various frontier stations in Missouri, Illinois, and in Iowa and Wisconsin territories.

Another watershed year came in 1835 for the twenty-seven-year-old Mississippian. He had not yet decided on a career and strongly considered pursuing legal studies, but instead he married and left the army. His bride was Sarah Knox Taylor, the comely, youngest daughter of Zachary Taylor, one of his superior officers and a future United States president. The Taylors opposed the marriage, knowing military family life was beset with difficulties, but they soon realized that their daughter and Davis were determined to marry. After a June wedding, the newlyweds planned to begin life together on land provided by his brother Joseph. Then, tragedy struck. Sarah Davis died of malaria in September at Locust Grove plantation near Bayou Sara, Louisiana. Davis himself was desperately ill and was so devastated by sorrow that he became a virtual hermit at his plantation.

Named for the tangled wilderness it was in 1835, Brierfield was about 800 acres, located on Davis Bend on the Mississippi River south of Vicksburg, Mississippi. For eight years Davis worked alongside his slaves to improve the place, relying mainly on them and his brother Joseph, his closest neighbor, for companionship. In 1838, the young widower traveled to Washington, D. C., for a few months, thinking he might return to the army, but he soon returned to Brierfield. On the adjoining Hurricane plantation, Joseph Davis maintained a luxurious lifestyle, had an excellent library, and was always in touch with local and national politics. He had extensive connections with important people and was a worthy partner in debating events of the day. Five years later, prompted by his brother, Jefferson Davis entered politics for the first time.

**Congressional career**

Davis ran unsuccessfully for the Mississippi House of Representatives as a Democrat in a predominantly Whig county. Nevertheless, he gained valuable experience on the campaign trail and the following year traveled and spoke for the Democratic slate. In 1845 he was rewarded with election to the U. S. Congress and took his new wife with him to Washington.

Joseph Davis had engineered his brother’s match to Varina Banks Howell (1826-1906), the well-educated and vivacious daughter of a Natchez businessman. Her mother was only two years older than the groom, and once again, the bride’s parents were less than enthusiastic. Eventually they agreed to the match and the two wed at The Briars, the Howell family home. It was a marriage destined to last over forty tumultuous years. The Davises had four sons and two daughters, born between 1852 and 1864.

Jefferson Davis was a conscientious congressman and an avid participant in House debates, but was only in Washington for seven months before duty to his state led him to a position he did not seek. He was elected colonel of the First Mississippi Regiment, which was headed to the [war with Mexico](http://mshistorynow.mdah.state.ms.us/index.php?id=202). By subjecting his men to strict discipline and military rules, he molded them into an effective fighting unit that distinguished itself in the battles of Monterrey (September 1846) and Buena Vista (February 1847), both victories against a numerically superior foe. Davis was wounded at Buena Vista but refused to leave the battlefield until success was assured.

He returned to Mississippi, and as a wounded war hero was a popular choice to fill a vacancy in the U. S. Senate in the summer of 1847. When Congress was not in session, Davis traveled the length and breadth of Mississippi on speaking tours. He worked dawn to dusk, at home and in Washington, until 1851. At the last minute of a crucial governor’s contest, the Democratic State Rights candidate John A. Quitman withdrew from the race, and Davis was asked to become the Democratic candidate. Davis accepted the nomination and resigned his seat in the Senate, but lost in the November election to [Henry Stuart Foote](http://mshistorynow.mdah.state.ms.us/index.php?s=extra&id=123), the Union Party candidate. It was the last time he ever lost a bid for office and he seemed glad to relinquish public life for awhile. He resumed planting at Brierfield and was surprised when a Mexican War friend, president-elect Franklin Pierce, asked him to head the War Department, now called the Department of Defense.

Once more, in 1853, the Davises moved to Washington, residing there more or less full-time until January 1861. While Davis was busy at work, Varina Davis enjoyed the social life and educational possibilities of the nation’s capital. As secretary of war, Davis took a personal interest in a myriad of projects: enlarging and raising pay for the army; improvement of the West Point curriculum; surveying routes for a railroad to the Pacific; expanding and moving westward the “chain of forts” to protect settlers; enlarging the Capitol; construction of the Washington aqueduct; improvement of national defenses, especially rivers and harbors; importing camels for army transportation in the West; developing scientific advances in weaponry; sending the first-ever military commission abroad to observe European armies in the Crimean War; and, all the while, serving as one of the president’s closest advisers on domestic policies.

At the end of President Pierce’s term in 1857, Davis was re-elected to his favorite spot, a seat in the U. S. Senate where he advocated a strict interpretation of the Constitution. In the period leading up to the American Civil War, Davis was a prominent spokesman for the South, but a moderate one, never calling for war and laboring to keep the Union together until Mississippi seceded from the Union in January 1861. Davis resigned his Senate seat and returned home, sick at heart. He accepted the position of major general to command the state’s army and prepare the state for defense. Never one to think that the United States would allow the seceded states to leave in peace, he foresaw a terrible conflict – as he phrased it, “troubles and thorns innumerable.”

**President of Confederate States**

The major general was tending his garden at Brierfield when the news came of his election as president of the Confederate States of America. Varina Davis would later write that she thought surely some family member had died when she saw his reaction to the telegram. Duty-bound, he left the next day for Montgomery, Alabama, to accept the presidency. Davis was chosen as president because no other southerner had a military and political record equal to his.

As the only president of the Confederacy, Davis was in a unique situation as he struggled to run a war and, simultaneously, to mold a new country. Like his northern counterpart, Abraham Lincoln, Davis had epic struggles with his army commanders, the state governors, and Congress. Unlike Lincoln, he lacked the essential resources to ensure success. During the four-year war, he mourned Confederate losses, especially the deaths of many friends and family members in military service. After Robert E. Lee surrendered the main Confederate army on April 9, 1865, Davis was captured in May while trying to make his way across the Mississippi River to lead southern forces that had not yet surrendered.

Indicted for treason and imprisoned for two years at Fort Monroe, Virginia, Davis endured solitary confinement and limited contact with the world beyond the fort, his health and morale declining until his release in May 1867. He was now a man without a country, had no salary or savings, and had no home because Brierfield had been seized by Union troops in 1862 and sold in 1866. Along with thousands of others, he had gambled all and lost all on the Confederacy. With a wife and four children age three to twelve to provide for (two sons had died), he lived in Canada and England, hoping to find a suitable job. Finally, in 1869 he agreed to be president of a Memphis, Tennessee, life insurance company and lived there until the mid-1870s.

**Beauvoir**

His fortunes changed in 1876. A longtime admirer, Sarah Ellis Dorsey, offered him a cottage on her seaside estate near Biloxi, Mississippi, as a place to write his memoirs of the war. There, Jefferson Davis was home at last. He loved [Beauvoir](http://mshistorynow.mdah.state.ms.us/index.php?id=284), a property that provided welcome peace and quiet. The property became his when Dorsey bequeathed it to him in her will. During the 1880s he penned his two-volume memoir of the war, along with another book and several magazine articles. He and Varina Davis, who helped him with writing, entertained rafts of visitors, and they regained ownership of Brierfield after a long legal battle. Davis resumed extensive traveling, speaking mainly at Confederate veterans’ events.

In November 1889 he fell ill at Brierfield and died in New Orleans on December 6, most likely of pneumonia. Before an estimated crowd of 200,000 people – the South’s largest funeral – he was interred in Metairie Cemetery in Louisiana, and in 1893, re-interred in Hollywood Cemetery in Richmond, Virginia, the Confederate capital identified with his most famous political years.

*Lynda Lasswell Crist is editor and project director*, [The Papers of Jefferson Davis](http://jeffersondavis.rice.edu) *at Rice University*.

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**Jefferson Davis lesson plan**

Karla Smith, Biloxi, Mississippi

**Overview**

Usually remembered as the only president of the Confederacy during the American Civil War, Jefferson Davis’s pre-Civil War service to his state and country are often not recognized or emphasized. Davis was a West Point graduate who became a war hero of the U.S.-Mexican War. He represented Mississippi in the U.S. House of Representatives, as well as in the U.S. Senate. Under President Franklin Pierce, Davis served his country as secretary of war. His career in public service shows a man who was dedicated and duty-bound to his state and country.

**Curricular Connections**

Mississippi Studies Framework: Competencies 1, 3 and 4.

**Teaching Level**

Grades 7 through 12

**Materials and Equipment**

*Mississippi History Now* article, [Jefferson Davis](http://mshistorynow.mdah.state.ms.us/articles/287/jefferson-davis-1808-1889)
Overhead
Chalkboard
Unlined paper for timeline
Pen or pencil
Unlined paper for poem
Internet access

**Objectives**

The students will:

• Construct a timeline of events in Davis’s life.
• Construct a chart on Davis’s accomplishments.
• Create a poem about the life of Jefferson Davis.

**Opening the Lesson**

The teacher will ask the student the following questions:

Which Mississippian has many streets, schools, even a national highway, named in his honor? You will also find his likeness carved on Georgia’s Stone Mountain.

Why is Jefferson Davis well-known? (More than likely, students will remember him for his service as the first and only president of the Confederacy during the American Civil War.)

After the students give their responses, the teacher will tell them that over the next few days, they will learn about Jefferson Davis’s service to his state and country prior to the American Civil War, and his life after the war.

**Developing the Lesson**

Have students plot the years and significant events in the life of Jefferson Davis on a timeline, working alone or with a partner. Instruct the students to use the *Mississippi History Now* article to find the significant events in Davis’s life.

After students complete their timelines, ask volunteers to share the events they chose to list. Through the sharing of these events, the teacher will assess student understanding of the key events of Davis’s life. The teacher can record the events on an overhead transparency or chalkboard.

Have students use the *Mississippi History Now* article, and other resources, to create a chart that classifies the accomplishments of Davis’s career. A three-column chart can have headings such as “Military,” “National,” and “State,” and students can list his level of service, accomplishments and/or contributions under each heading.

Once the students complete the charts, the teacher will lead a class discussion about Jefferson Davis’s accomplishments as a public servant. During the discussion, the teacher will ask students what leadership characteristics were needed to carry out his accomplishments. The teacher can list the information on the chalkboard or an overhead transparency in order to allow students to check and add information to their charts.

In recognition of Jefferson Davis’s lifelong love of poetry that he shared with his wife, Varina, the students will work with a partner to write a poem about an aspect of Jefferson Davis’s life. Each student group can be instructed to compose the same type of poem, or each student group can be assigned a different type of poem. The following types of poems are suggested: Free verse; Acrostic; Ballad; Cinquain; and Diamante. Explanations and examples for each type of poem can be located through the [Poetry Shadow website.](http://www.shadowpoetry.com/resources/wip/types.html)

Allow the students to read their poems to the class. The teacher may even want to hold a poetry contest for this assignment.

**Closing the Lesson**

The teacher will tell the students that William L. Yancey, a leader of the Southern secession movement, welcomed Jefferson Davis to Montgomery, Alabama, for his inauguration as the provisional president of the Confederate States of America and said, “The man and the hour have met.” After sharing this quote, the teacher will ask the students the following questions:

What did Yancey mean by his statement, “The man and the hour have met?”

Based on your study of Jefferson Davis, why was he the man for the hour?

**Assessing Student Learning**

• Class participation
• Timelines
• Charts
• Poems

**Extending the Lesson**

Plan a program that would commemorate the June 2008 bicentennial of Jefferson Davis’s birth.

Compare and contrast the lives of Jefferson Davis and Abraham Lincoln.

Plan a field trip to Beauvoir.

Read the *Mississippi History Now* article on [Beauvoir](http://mshistorynow.mdah.state.ms.us/index.php?id=284).

Create a list of places and sites named or built in honor of Jefferson Davis.

Research the Mexican War battles of Monterrey and Buena Vista. Suggest reading the *Mississippi History Now* article on the [U.S.-Mexican War](http://mshistorynow.mdah.state.ms.us/index.php?id=202)

Create a resume for Jefferson Davis.

Research [The Papers of Jefferson Davis](http://jeffersondavis.rice.edu/) at Rice University to complete the following three activities:

* Research the loss and restoration of Jefferson Davis’s citizenship.
* Analyze Jefferson Davis’s Farewell Address to the U.S. Senate.
* Analyze Jefferson Davis’s First Inaugural Address.