**Beauvoir**

By Lynda Lasswell Crist

Beauvoir is not the oldest or grandest historic home in Mississippi but it is surely an amazing and colorful survivor, considering the frequency of gulf coast hurricanes, not to mention the steady march of progress that has transformed the Mississippi coast from a sleepy location for fishing villages and summer homes to a bustling tourist destination. If Beauvoir’s walls could talk, they would tell some fine stories.

On a scenic plot of land directly facing the Gulf of Mexico about halfway between Gulfport and Biloxi, Beauvoir enjoys a privileged status as a National Historic Landmark. It has had a number of owners, some more important than others. One can easily see why it is called Beauvoir, meaning “beautiful view.” Sparkling water and a white sandy beach are visible from the front steps. Behind the house the view is almost as nice, with spacious gardens, a lagoon called Oyster Bayou, and woods full of great live oaks, wild azaleas, jasmine, magnolias, pines, yaupon, chinaberry, hickory, cedar, and other old trees and shrubs—a peaceful, safe home for birds and small animals and the site of a serene nature trail.

The main house at Beauvoir was built in the 1850s by James Brown, a prosperous planter from Madison County, Mississippi, who wanted a summer home for his family. Brown wisely planned his house for its specific location on the beach. Beauvoir is a raised cottage, meaning its foundation is placed on massive pillars, not flat on the ground, allowing flood waters to flow through the ground level. With wide porches all around, high ceilings, and big windows, Beauvoir was designed to welcome cooling breezes from the gulf in the days before air-conditioning. Brown used brick for the pillars and wood for the house itself, which has been painted white with green shutters for most of its life. He paid close attention to the quality of the building materials, many of which were imported and quite expensive at the time. With only eight rooms, Beauvoir has a simple floor plan and it is easy to imagine actually living there. In addition to the main house, Brown constructed two smaller cottages in what is now the front yard and some service buildings in the back, such as a fine brick kitchen. The Brown family owned Beauvoir for about twenty-five years.

In 1873 Sarah Ellis Dorsey, a famous and wealthy author from Natchez, Mississippi, bought the house and christened it Beauvoir. A gracious hostess who was known for her great parties, Dorsey lived there until 1879, when Beauvoir’s most famous resident took possession.

**Home of Jefferson Davis**

Beauvoir is best known as the retirement home of Jefferson Davis, ex-president of the Confederate States of America. He first learned to love the house and location when he rented one of the front cottages in 1877. From 1879 until his death in 1889 he owned Beauvoir and lived there with his wife Varina and daughter Varina Anne (called Winnie). His son, Jefferson Davis Jr., a teenager in the 1870s, lived with his parents briefly before settling down to a bank job in Memphis. The Davises’ daughter Margaret and her children came as often as possible from their home in Colorado; they stayed in the guest cottage for weeks at a time during the 1880s. There were others who lived with the Davises, too. A few servants helped with cooking, cleaning, and gardening. There were always family pets, mainly horses and dogs.

During his first few years at Beauvoir, Jefferson Davis wrote his autobiography in the cottage called the Pavilion. He had many visitors—in fact, too many at times. As a famous person, Davis was sought out by journalists, tourists, and friends, all of whom wanted to know more about his long, action-packed public career, especially about the American Civil War. In the days before telephones, interviews and conversations were face-to-face. The guests arrived in wagons or stepped off the train at “Beauvoir station” on the railroad that ran behind the property, only about half a mile away. Once at the house, the visitors often ate outdoors on the broad verandas while talking with Davis about books, people he knew in Washington before the Civil War and in Richmond during the war, the Mexican War (when he led Mississippi troops in battle), politics, his family, his travels, the Civil War itself, and current affairs. His opinions on friends and enemies alike were of great interest to everyone.

Days passed quietly for Davis when there were no house guests or business to attend to. The warm climate was pleasant most of the time, and the elderly gentleman enjoyed long walks on the beach and sitting on benches, gazing at the gulf, or viewing the gardens. As he wrote in 1877, “The sea is immediately in front, and an extensive orange orchard is near. Beyond that is one of those clear brooks, common to the pine woods, its banks lined with a tangled wood of sweet bay, wild olive and vines… By night I hear the murmur of the sea rolling on to the beach, by day a short walk brings one to where the winds sigh through the pines, a sad yet soothing sound.”

Beauvoir even had its own pier in the days before the highway was built. Anyone could walk from the front steps across the lawn and directly onto the beach for swimming and relaxing. There was always plenty to eat because Beauvoir was a small working farm, with fruit trees and grape vines, as well as chickens, hogs, sheep, geese, turkeys, cows, and a vegetable garden. Neighbors shared what they had, and seafood was abundant.

Jefferson Davis enjoyed life on the Mississippi coast, but after his death, Varina Davis was lonely and unhappy. She longed for the companionship of friends and the excitement and bustle of city life. She was uncomfortable in the heat of summer but most important, she discovered that she could not afford to live there on her own. The big place was costly to maintain with her limited income. Entertaining visitors was expensive and frequent hurricanes meant constant repairs. In the early 1890s she and Winnie moved to New York City to earn their living as writers.

**Soldiers’ Home**

After Winnie died at a young age, Varina Davis was even less interested in returning to Mississippi and made the difficult decision to sell Beauvoir. But she did not want to sell to just anyone, fearing the house would be torn down and its association with Jefferson Davis would be lost forever. Finally, in 1902, the Mississippi Division of the United Sons of Confederate Veterans bought her husband’s beloved retirement paradise and Beauvoir entered yet another phase of its existence as the Jefferson Davis Soldiers’ Home.

Hundreds of veterans and some Confederate widows moved in, living in barracks constructed for them. A hospital, dining room, and chapel were added for their convenience. Gardens and a large cemetery behind the house provide a final resting place of about eight hundred veterans, along with the Tomb of the Unknown Confederate, and the grave of Jefferson Davis’s father, who was a soldier in the American Revolution.

The Jefferson Davis Shrine, as Beauvoir is also known, is operated by descendants of Confederate veterans with help from the State of Mississippi, and has been open to the public since 1941. It has been an official museum since 1956. Fortunately, many personal items belonging to the Davis family are still in place and the house welcomes visitors every day, just as when Davis himself lived there. Visitors see some wonderful furniture that Jefferson Davis enjoyed and some that he had built specially for the house, many family portraits, and Winnie“s large piano, along with her music book and some of her artwork. Jefferson Davis’s bedroom on the back of the house has his rocking chair, cigar stand, and a small trunk used on his travels for over forty years.

**Beauvoir House**

In 1998, Beauvoir added another building, the Jefferson Davis Presidential Library. Inside is an auditorium showing a film about Davis, a large museum that highlights his long and eventful life, and a library for research. Some of his own books are available for viewing. Strolling in the gardens is still a perfect way to appreciate the natural beauty and calm that Davis and others treasured while living there.

If the walls could speak, they would tell of the early days of building when the house took form and stood tall, of the years when Sarah Dorsey and the Davises lived there, and of the rich conversations with all their guests, no doubt including many secrets and gossip from the war. Then came the veterans with their own tales of courage and suffering, and after them thousands of tourists, all of whom share different opinions on history and life. Beauvoir would surely also tell about and mourn the severe damages caused by hurricanes, especially Camille in 1969 and Katrina in 2005.

Indeed, the Beauvoir House and the Jefferson Davis Presidential Library suffered heavy damage from Hurricane Katrina when it struck the Mississippi Gulf Coast on August 29, 2005, the worst disaster ever to hit the United States. The five other buildings at the site were destroyed. Restoration at Beauvoir is ongoing—for updates go to <http://www.beauvoir.org> (accessed May 2007).

No matter the season, however, everyone is impressed with Beauvoir, a splendid survivor with a truly “beautiful view.”

*Linda Lasswell Crist is editor and project director of The Papers of Jefferson Davis at Rice University.*

Posted June 2007 – Mississippi History Now

**Selected Bibliography**

Burr, Frank A. “Jefferson Davis, The Ex-Confederate President at Home,” *Tyler’s Quarterly Historical and Genealogical Magazine,* January 1951, 163-80 [1881 interview].

Davis, Jefferson. *Private Letters,* edited by Hudson Strode. New York: Harcourt, Brace &
World, 1966.

Evans, William A. “Jefferson Davis Shrine: Beauvoir House,” Journal of Mississippi History, October 1940, 3-8.

Evans, William A. *100 Questions and Answers about Beauvoir House* (pamphlet).

Jones, J. William. “A Visit to Beauvoir—President Davis and Family at Home,” *Southern Historical Society Papers,* 1886, 447-54.

Jones, Mrs. Wilbur Moore. *Historic Beauvoir.* Hattiesburg: United Daughters of the Confederacy, 1921.

Thompson, V. Elaine. “The Battle for Beauvoir: Who Won the Lost Cause?” Paper presented at the Gulf South History and Humanities
Conference, Hammond, Louisiana, October 1998.

**Generalizations Chart**

**Instructions:** Generalizations are broad statements that represent main ideas about important events. Using the *Mississippi History Now* article “Jefferson Davis Soldier Home – Beauvoir,” locate at least three or four details that support the accuracy of the generalizations listed below and list them in the column provided on the chart. Be sure to cite the paragraph and/or page number where your facts were located. In addition to completing the two generalizations listed below, write three generalizations about the article and list facts to support these generalizations.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Generalization**  | **Facts**  |
| There were multiple obstacles that affected the establishment of the Jefferson Davis Soldier Home - Beauvoir.  |  |
| Organizations were instrumental in the establishment of the Jefferson Davis Soldier Home - Beauvoir.  |  |
| Women were instrumental in the establishment and operation of the Jefferson Davis Soldier Home – Beauvoir.  |  |
| The Jefferson Davis Soldier Home – Beauvoir was one of the few veterans’ homes to welcome female residents. |  |
|  |  |

**Jefferson Davis Soldier Home – Beauvoir - Lesson Plan**

Karla Smith, Biloxi MS

**Overview**

On December 10, 1903, the Jefferson Davis Soldier Home – Beauvoir opened in Biloxi, Mississippi. Over the course of fifty-four years, more than 1,800 residents called Beauvoir home. These residents included Confederate veterans, their wives, and widows. In 1957, control of the property was returned to the Mississippi Division of the Sons of Confederate Veterans after the last two residents were relocated to retirement homes. In 2014, the University of Southern Mississippi’s Department of History began a study tracing the lives of the veteran residents of the Jefferson Davis Soldier Home from the 1850s through the twentieth century. The Beauvoir Veteran Project has shown that Mississippi’s Confederate home was one of the few to welcome female residents, to have a female superintendent, and to have female members serve on its board of directors.

**Curricular Connections**

Mississippi Studies Framework: Competencies 1, 3 and 5

**Common Core Standards**

RH.3; WHST.2, 4-6

**Teaching Level**

Grades 7 through 12

**Materials/Equipment**

* *Mississippi History Now* article, [“Jefferson Davis Soldier Home – Beauvoir”](http://www.mshistorynow.mdah.ms.gov/articles/411/jefferson-davis-soldier-home-beauvoir)
* Computer
* Internet access
* [Generalizations Chart](http://www.mshistorynow.mdah.ms.gov/file_download/49/GeneralizationsChart_JDavisSoldier.pdf)
* Projector
* Screen or board

**Objectives**

The student will:

1. Determine generalizations and supporting details about an historical event.
2. Compose a written assignment from a specific point of view.

**Opening the Lesson**

The teacher will show the students photographs from the *Mississippi History Now* article, “Jefferson Davis Soldier Home – Beauvoir.” Additional photographs can also be located on the website for the Beauvoir Veteran Project ([beauvoirveteranproject.org](http://www.beauvoirveteranproject.org)). The teacher will ask students the following questions about the photographs:

1. Where do you think these photographs were taken?
2. Who or what do you see in the photographs?
3. How are these photographs connected or relevant to one another?
4. Why are photographs an important form of historical documentation?
The teacher will tell the students that they will have an opportunity to learn more about the subjects in the photographs as they study the Jefferson Davis Soldier Home – Beauvoir.

**Developing the Lesson**

1. The teacher will distribute to the students a copy of the *Mississippi History Now* article, “Jefferson Davis Soldier Home – Beauvoir.” The students will be encouraged to annotate the article as they read. Once students have completed the reading, the teacher will distribute to the students a copy of the Generalizations Chart (attached) or display the chart on a screen or board for students to copy into their notebooks.
2. The teacher will have the students reread the *Mississippi History Now* article in order to complete the Generalizations Chart. The students may work independently or with a partner for this activity.
3. Once the students have completed their charts, the teacher will lead a class discussion about the article by asking student volunteers to share information listed on their charts.
4. For the next portion of the lesson, the teacher will use the **RAFT** activity. For this writing activity, students choose a **R** ole (point of view), **A** udience (specific reader to whom the assignment is being written), and **F** ormat (letter, news article, editorial, journal entry, etc.). The **T** opic for the assignment should be the Jefferson Davis Soldier Home – Beauvoir. The role students should use for this writing assignment should be one that is relevant to the home between 1894 (the date Beauvoir is first suggested as a veterans’ home) and 1957. Students can assume the identity of one of the residents of the home. Information about individual residents can be found on the website for the Beauvoir Veteran Project ([beauvoirveteranproject.org](http://www.beauvoirveteranproject.org)). Suggestions for other roles for the writing assignment are listed below.
	* One of the individuals mentioned in the Mississippi History Now article
	* A citizen writing to a member of the Mississippi legislature in support of the establishment of the Jefferson Davis Soldier Home – Beauvoir
	* A newspaper editorial written in support of the establishment of the Jefferson Davis Soldier Home – Beauvoir
	* An employee of the Jefferson Davis Soldier Home – Beauvoir
	* A newspaper article written about the opening or closing of the Jefferson Davis Soldier Home – Beauvoir
5. Once the students have completed their assignments, the teacher may ask for student volunteers to share their assignments with the class.

**Closing the Lesson**

The teacher can play the recording of Private Laurentine Higbie singing “Veteran’s Last Song,” which is found on the website for the Beauvoir Veteran Project ([beauvoirveteranproject.org](http://www.beauvoirveteranproject.org)). The teacher will ask the students to interpret the meaning of the song’s lyrics. The teacher may also ask students to consider if there is a difference between how the public chose to remember or romanticize the lives of Confederate veterans and how these veterans actually lived following the war.

**Assessing Student Learning**

* Class participation
* Chart
* Assignments

**Enrichment**

* Take a field trip to Beauvoir.
* Invite a guest speaker to talk to the students about conducting historical research.
* Conduct research on current issues relevant to Mississippi’s veterans.
* Follow-up this lesson with other Mississippi History Now lesson plans.