

Jefferson Davis

This story is about the Yankee's Jefferson Davis. Not quite as famous as the President of the Confederate States of America. In all of the history of the U. S. military and all the wars fought there is only one recorder case of a general killing a fellow general. There have been cases of threats, and even challenges to a duel, but this is the only time that anger developed into carrying out the act of murder. In a duel, Confederate Major General John S. Marmaduke killed Major General Lucius M. Walker.

One of Davis' contemporaries, General James B. Fry, wrote after the war was over, "He was a born military chieftain. He was brave, quiet, obliging, humorous in disposition and full of ambition, daring, endurance and self-confidence." General Fry (**photo below**) was the man who had arrested Davis for murdering his commanding officer.



Jefferson Columbus Davis was born in Clark County, Indiana, on March 28, 1828. He left home when he was only seventeen years old to fight in the Mexican War. In February of 1847 in the battle at Buena Vista he was given the nickname "boy-sergeant of Buena Vista." The following year he was commissioned as a second lieutenant in the U. S. Artillery. Over the next ten years he would serve in army outposts from Maryland to the Rio Grande. First Lieutenant Davis was at Fort Sumter when the North Carolinians began firing on the fort. He was promoted to Brevet Brigadier Davis only nine months after the war started.

South Carolina voted to secede from the Union on Thursday, December 20, 1860. The secession was followed by four months of stand-off between South Carolina and the Federal government. During the darkness of night on Wednesday, December, 26, the 70 man garrison at Fort Moultrie moved to the safer confines of Fort Sumter in the middle of Charleston Harbor. Davis was in charge of a small rear guard that remained in Moultrie manning the canons with orders to destroy any South Carolina boats that might try to interrupt their movement. Davis could have started the Civil War at that moment. Luckily

the men were successful in their transfer to Fort Sumter. Davis had the canons spiked, burned the gun carriages and cut down the flag pole before they transferred to Sumter.

Some historians have erroneously reported that Davis aimed the first canon at the Confederates when they began the bombardment on Fort Sumter. That honor actually belongs to Captain Abner Doubleday who has become known as the founder of baseball, probably another erroneous report without foundation. Doubleday later explained that he aimed and fired the first gun and did so without any “feeling of self-reproach.” Davis began firing almost simultaneously. Doubleday wrote, “I soon heard their guns on the opposite side of the fort, echoing my own.”

The shelling of Sumter continued for thirty-four hours and more than 3,000 rounds were launched on the fort. On Saturday, April 13, 1861, the parties agreed to a peaceful surrender, allowing the Union troops to march out the next day with “banners flying and with drums beating ‘Yankee Doodle’.” They boarded a Union ship and set sail for New York.

In August of 1861, Davis was the colonel of the 22nd Indiana Infantry and was ordered to assist Major General John C. Fremont in defending St. Louis. The “Pathfinder” was soon impressed enough to appoint him a temporary brigadier general with 15,000 troops under his command. The war department approved the promotion and named him as a brevet brigadier general U.S. Volunteers with a date of rank of December 18, 1861. At the Battle of Pea Ridge, Arkansas in March 1862, Davis was the commanding officer of a division in the Union victory. He then moved to Corinth, Mississippi, and participated in the siege of that city and pursued the Confederates during their subsequent abandonment of the key rail hub.



Davis, suffering from weakness and exhaustion, took a 20 day furlough in August and returned to his home and wife in Indiana. Could his problem have been mostly homesickness? He had been married for just a year and was absent most all of that time. His recovery was cut short when CSA Generals Braxton Bragg and E. Kirby Smith launched twin invasions of Kentucky in September. Bragg had captured Munfordsville, moved on to Bardstown and was threatening Louisville. Davis voluntarily ended his leave and offered his services. Unfortunately, he was ordered to Louisville to assist Major General William “Bull” Nelson in defending the city, a move that would end in tragedy.

Davis and Nelson (**photo at left**) clashed from the very beginning and they could have not been more different physically. The “small, sallow, blue-eyed, dyspeptic-looking” Davis was less than five-feet-nine inches and weighed 120-125 pounds. Nelson was “in the prime of life, in perfect health, six-feet-two inches in height and weighing 300 pounds.”

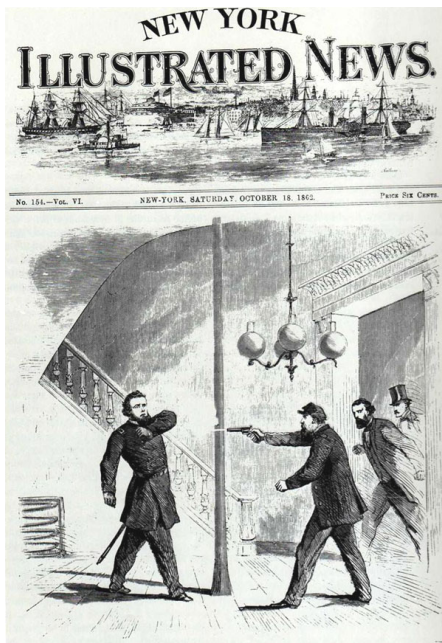
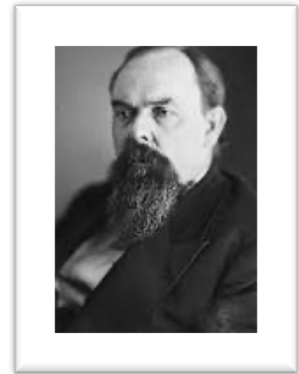
Shortly after Davis’ arrival, Nelson asked for a report on Davis’ effort to organize a home guard. When Nelson learned that very little progress had been made he became

outraged. Nelson raged at Davis and then removed him from command and ordered him back to the Department of the Ohio in Cincinnati.

Davis, being a stubborn little fellow, demanded that he receive the respect due him as a general officer and told Nelson that he did not have the authority to order him anywhere. Nelson turned to his adjutant-general and said, "Captain, if General Davis does not leave the city by nine o'clock tonight, give instructions to the provost-martial to see that he shall be put across the Ohio."

Davis returned to Cincinnati under the command of Major General Horatio G. Wright. Union Major General Don Carlos Buell entered Louisville on September 25 and superseded Nelson in the chain of command. Wright, believing that presence of Buell would prevent further trouble between the two generals, sent Davis back to Louisville. A tragic decision.

Davis entered the Union headquarters in the Galt House in the morning of Monday, September 29, 1862, in the company of Indiana Governor Oliver P. Morton (**photo at right**) and some other friends. As Nelson exited the breakfast room, Davis confronted him and demanded satisfaction for being insulted at their last meeting. Nelson treated him as if he were an infant saying, "Go away, you damn puppy. I don't want anything to do with you." Davis threw a hotel visitor card that he was holding in Nelson's face. Nelson gave him a back-handed slap to the face and turned on his heels and walked away.



The unarmed Davis quickly called for a pistol and a member of his party, attorney Thomas W. Gibson, an old friend from the Mexican War, loaned him his. Davis went after Nelson and caught him at the bottom of the stair case. Davis called out Nelson's name and when Nelson turned Davis shot him in the chest from a distance of about three feet. Nelson was able to climb up the stair case and collapsed on the second floor landing. "Send for a clergyman, I wish to be baptized. I have been basely murdered." Within the hour he breathed his last.

Colonel James B. Fry, Buell's chief of staff, arrested Davis, wrote, "Davis, though greatly agitated, showed no sign of rage. He was glad to be taken from his surroundings and placed into formal military custody by a friend and proper military official."

That was the beginning and almost the end of the military's involvement in the case of the United States vs. General Jefferson C. Davis. General Buell was outraged over the murder but he was too engrossed in his own problems to give the Davis case any time. He had the Confederates practically beating on his door and a lot of enemies in the war department that wanted to take command away from him. Fry said that Buell did not have "the high officers necessary to constitute a proper court martial, nor could he give the necessary attention for preparing the case for a trial

in Louisville.” And as always, politics reared its head. Governor Morton had considerable political influence and he left for Washington immediately following the shooting to lobby on his friend’s behalf. The war department did nothing about the case and ignored a request from Buell to have the court martial moved to Washington. Just a few days after the shooting, Davis was a free man again. Since there were no charges filed against Davis, General Wright ordered his release and added his personal thoughts that he “... was satisfied that Davis acted purely on the defensive in the unfortunate affair.”

By early November, Davis was in command of a division in Major General William S. Rosecrans’s Army of the Cumberland in Tennessee. He found that the troops in his division “half admired, half feared him as the killing of the bullying Nelson.” In the months ahead Davis would be active at the Battle of Stone’s River (Murfreesboro to the Rebs) in December 1862. He was involved with the Yanks disastrous defeat at Chickamauga in September 1863. He was on the victorious side at Missionary ridge which opened the gates for Sherman’s destruction of Atlanta.

On May 18, 1864, Davis executed a bold move that led to the capture of Rome, Georgia. The tide turned against him when he was assigned the illogical task of assaulting Kennesaw Mountain in late June. He suffered a great loss in the Confederate victory. Davis was amply rewarded in August of 1864 when he was promoted to brevet major general and given command of the XIV Corp. Sherman said, “Thenceforward I had no reason to complain of the slowness of inactivity of that splendid corps.”

General Sherman began his famous/infamous March to the Sea on November 16, 1864, and Davis’ corps moved with him on his left wing and tore up railroads as they traveled. It would also bring on the second scandal in Davis’ military career. The column swung south and ran into country that was covered with swamps and creeks.

His corps also accumulated another problem. Vast numbers of former and escaped slaves would follow him, and all the other Sherman columns. This was a huge problem for an army that was moving as fast as they could and depending on foraging for their needs. Sherman sent an order to his field commanders directing that the refugees not be “encouraged to encumber us on the march.” This rather vague order left the options to obey it wide open for interpretation. In order to cross the many creeks it was necessary to build pontoon bridges which could then be transported to the next creek. Davis interpreted it to mean that it was permissible to pull in the bridge as soon as his troops crossed and before the refugees could follow. This left the slaves to be captured by the pursuing Rebel cavalry. The first incident to attract national attention occurred on December 3, 1864, on Buckhead Creek near Millen, Georgia. The creek was only about 40 feet wide, but was very deep. The 58th Indiana volunteers had a Chaplain by the name of John J. Hight and he reported that the bridges were pulled up, leaving “a large crowd of colored refugees” on their own. Someone shouted, “The Rebels are coming” according to Hight’s report and the slaves panicked and “made a dash for the river.” Some of them made it across, but many others drowned. The Chaplain placed the blame on Davis and called him “a military tyrant without one spark of humanity in his makeup.”

The same thing happened again a week later near the town of Springfield on Ebenezer creek. This time, five or six hundred women, children and old men were left to the mercy of Major General Joseph Wheeler’s cavalry troops. On this occasion it was a 58th Indiana doctor, James C. Patten, who would lay the blame on Davis and report that it was “a most dastardly trick.” He further stated that some of the slaves “were drowned

in trying to get over on logs.” He called Davis a rather hard customer” and added, “If I had the power, I would hang him as high as Haman.”

Lieutenant Colonel James A. Connolly noted in his report to congress that the “crossing was a very delicate operation, for the enemy was just in our rear, undoubtedly listening for every sound that would indicate a movement on our part.” Davis also reported that the bridge had come under fire from a Confederate gunboat in the Savannah River. No harm was done. General Sherman pointed out that the bridges were in constant use and that they had to be moved to the next stream as quickly as possible.

Davis (**photo at right**) had no more conflicts and remained with Sherman through the end of the war. Sherman and Grant recommended promotion for Davis, but that was not going to happen after his previous transgressions.



When his volunteer commission expired in 1866, he was appointed a colonel in the regular army and first garrisoned in Alaska and then California and saw action in the famous Modoc War.

James Fry again reported that, “The last years of his life were passed in broken health and were somewhat embittered by disappointment at not having received the brigadier-generalcy, for which he felt qualified and he, as well as others, thought he had earned by his services in the Civil War; but I never heard that he expressed, and I do not believe he felt, any regret for having killed Nelson.

While returning to Fort Leavenworth, Kansas after attending a Civil War reunion in Washington, he made a stop in Chicago and a cold turned into pneumonia. He died in the Palmer House on November 30, 1879. His remains are interred in the Crown Hill Cemetery in Indianapolis, Indiana. Monument photos below.





Headstone in the Maysville Cemetery in Maysville, Kentucky