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Mrs. Jefferson Davis



Picture of Mrs. Davis, taken just before her last illness (Insert)
Copy of water-color painting of Mrs. Davis made in Washington just before the war.

WIDOW NAME
OF MRS. JEFFERSON DAVIS

Was Called Varina Banks for Intimate Friend of Her Mother.

SIGNATURE OFTEN MISLEADING

Letter V, Says H. D. Allen, Was Used to Signify Veuve, the French Word for Widow, Customary in Mississippi Country.

BY H. D. ALLEN,
Boston, Mass.

Varina! The name given by Jonathan Swift, 1667-1745 (Dean Swift, author of "Gulliver's Travels"), to a Miss Waring, whose brother he had known earlier at Trinity College, Dublin, who refused to marry him, on account of his poverty and her poor health.

Varina! A short distance below Dutch Gap, on the left shore, is the famous old plantation known as Varina. Few places on the lower James River in Virginia possess more historic interest than this grand old farm.

The name also is said to have been derived from a variety of Spanish tobacco called Varinas. Varina was once the home of John Rolfe and his Indian bride Pocahontas. It was also the home of Rev. William Stith, and it was here that he wrote his "History of Virginia."

There seems to be a great difference of opinion in the South regarding the maiden name of Mrs. Jefferson Davis. After considerable research work, I have found evidence which I believe cannot be successfully broken down. As a contribution to the history of the Southland, I venture to hope that the data in regard to Mrs. Davis in this article will be copied by every Southern newspaper, as it gives facts not to be found in any biographical works or histories.

**GRANDFATHER GOVERNOR
OF NEW JERSEY**

Varina Banks Howell was the daughter of William Burr Howell and Margaret Louisa Kempe Howell. She was born on May 7, 1826. Her paternal grandfather was Governor Richard Howell, of New Jersey. Her maternal grandfather was James Kempe, an Irish gentleman, who came to Virginia after the Emmett rebellion. She was named for Mrs. Varina, Stanton Banks, the wife of George Banks, of Natchez, Miss. Mrs. Banks was one of the devoted friends of Varina's mother, Mrs. William Burr Howell, and she was given the name of Varina Banks as a compliment only. No part of the name, therefore, comes from either the Burr or Howell branches of the family. It is probable that Varina had no special interest in Mrs. Banks, and no special liking for the name Banks, and this is probably the reason why she so seldom

She married Jefferson Davis on February 26, 1846, and "The Briars," where the marriage took place, still is standing (December, 1916) about a mile south of Natchez, on a bluff overlooking the river. The marriage record shows "Jefferson Davis, William B. Howell, Varina Howell" with the name of the minister. While the public life of the Davis family was one long storm, their private life was full of peace and sunshine. By her loving ministrations and intellectual companionship she greatly contributed to enable Mr. Davis to achieve that career which has made his name immortal. When overcome by misfortune, she met the inevitable like the true daughter of a noble sire.

**SIGNATURE MEANT
"WIDOW" JEFFERSON DAVIS**

Mrs. Davis, after the death of her husband, often signed her name "V. Jefferson Davis," the "V" being the initial letter of "veuve" the French word for "widow." This is a custom in the South, in the New Orleans and Mobile region and in the lower Mississippi country. Her signature, when so shown, means "Widow Jefferson Davis," and not Varina Jefferson Davis, as so many Southern historians state. One historian says her name was Varina Jefferson Howell. This, of course, is impossible. It is a very singular fact that the records of the Chancery Court at Vicksburg, Miss., show that she signed her will as Varina Jefferson Davis, which must have been an inadvertence and could not have been correct. The proper legal signature for such a document would have been Varina Banks Howell Davis.

In connection with my historical notes on Confederate money, to go with the collection I am assembling for the Brookline Public Library, I wish to give one of many illustrations of the friendly feeling and co-operation of the South in any efforts to make a notable contribution to the history of the Southland. For a long time I have been needing a photograph, and the autograph of Clement Claiborne Clay, whose portrait adorns the \$1 bill of 1863-64. I wrote to the Mayor of Huntsville, Ala. (I do not yet know his name, even), and, after outlining my work, asked his assistance. He turned my letter over to Mrs. Milton Chapman Humes, of that city, who sent me the much-wanted autograph, also a picture, which proves to be a remarkable and comparatively unknown group picture showing the late President Jefferson Davis and late C. C. Clay. The picture was the property of Mrs. C. C. Clay, who died at Huntsville, Ala., in July, 1915, at the age of ninety-two years.

**STRANGE INSCRIPTION
ON BACK OF PHOTOGRAPH**

On the back of this photograph is

the following remarkable inscription in the handwriting of Mrs. Clay:

The Martyrs.

"Photos of Jefferson Davis, ex-President of the Southern Confederacy, Clement Claiborne Clay, ex-United States Senator, ex-Confederate Senator and ex-Peace Commissioner to Canada where Horace Greeley met him, but peace, I caught them on the wing at Memphis, Tenn., and forced them to street attire to give me the promised picture, which I call the Martyrs' twins. Neither photo does justice to the originals, both being very handsome men of the highest intellectual type. (Signed) Virginia Carolina Clay, wife of C. C. Clay."

It thus appears that Mrs. Clay braced a golden opportunity to a fine group photograph, which or the other of the gentlemen promised her. I still need photos of John C. Calhoun, George Washington Pickens, and Mrs. Governor Pickens of South Carolina, and written signatures of John C. Calhoun, Stonewall Jackson, Mrs. Jefferson Davis, George Washington Pickens and Mrs. Governor Pickens of South Carolina. I do not doubt that I shall finally, by the aid of my friends, be able to finish the proposed task, which is wholly unpaid and has meant an expenditure of time and money when it should be absolutely free for me to copy.

As to the autograph of Mrs. Davis, I need one in either of the following forms:

Varina Howell, Varina Banks Howell, Varina B. H. Howell, Varina Burr Davis, Varina Banks Howell Davis, Varina Howell Davis, Varina Jefferson Davis.

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