

THE FIRST MRS.

JEFFERSON DAVIS.

Pathetic Story of Beautiful Sarah Knox Taylor Davis.

The Daughter of a President of the United States,

Brought as a Bride to the Little Town of St. Francisville,

Where She Passed Away After a Brief Married Life--Her Grave on Locust Grove Plantation.

IN company with Mr. W. R. Percy, a leading attorney of St. Francisville, I recently visited the grave of Mrs. Jefferson Davis, the first wife of the first and only President of the Confederacy. So many years have elapsed and so many stirring events have transpired since Sarah Knox Taylor Davis was laid to rest in the beautiful Locust Grove Cemetery that the memory of her very existence has almost passed from the mind of the busy public of to-day. Mrs. Davis was the daughter of President Zachary Taylor, and probably one reason why more has not been written about this charming and accomplished lady is due to the fact that at the time of her death neither her husband nor father had gained any especial distinction. The one was a colonel, the other a lieutenant in the United States Army. Her brief history becomes a matter of interest and importance on account of the brilliancy of the subsequent careers of both father and husband, one as President of the United States, and the other as President of the Confederate States, and both as eminent soldiers and statesmen.

The tomb of Mrs. Davis is in the family burial ground on the old Locust Grove Plantation of Mr. and Mrs. Luther Smith in West Feliciana Parish, La. It is about six miles from the twin towns of Bayou Sara and St. Francisville. Mrs. Smith was a sister of Jefferson Davis and the property is still occupied by her descendants. Shortly after their marriage, Mr. and Mrs. Davis came on a visit to Mr. Smith's charming and cultured home, and it was during this visit that Mrs. Davis passed to her reward.

Of this visit and its attendant fatality I quote from the memoir of Jefferson Davis by his wife (Varina Jefferson Davis):

"Very soon after their arrival Mr. Davis was taken very ill with malarial fever and the day after Mrs. Davis became ill also. They were both suffering greatly; he was considered very dangerously ill, and they were nursed in different rooms. He was too ill to be told of her peril and delirium saved her from anxiety about him. Soon after the fever set in she succumbed to it, and hearing her voice singing loud and clear a favorite song, 'Faith Bells,' he struggled up and reached her bedside to find her dying. The poor young creature drew her last sigh Sept. 15, 1835, and was buried in his sister's family burying ground. None of her own relations stood by her grave, but her husband's family grieved over her with an affectionate sense of their loss and intense sympathy with her bereaved husband."

It is stated that the loss of his wife nearly decided Mr. Davis to forever live in seclusion and withdraw entirely from the activities to which he was accustomed. His grief and illness combined came near to wrecking his life, and only a long rest in the mild Cuban climate, with careful nursing, saved him.

The young couple were married without the consent of Colonel Taylor. He was opposed to his daughters marrying soldiers, because of the many discomforts to which officers' wives were necessarily subjected. Yet, despite this opposition, all three of them married soldiers, and in each case the husband became a man of distinction.

Lieutenant Davis met his future wife at Fort Crawford in 1832, while Colonel Taylor's regiment was stationed there. Lieutenant Davis was also assigned to this post. It was a case of love on first sight and they soon became engaged. When asked for his consent to their marriage, Colonel Taylor refused. It was soon after this that in a court-martial Colonel Taylor wished a lieutenant, a member of the court, to be reprimanded for violating the regulations by appearing at court-martial without full dress uniform. The offender asked to be excused, and in the vote Lieutenants Davis and Smith voted contrary to the Colonel, which they had a perfect right to do. As there was an angry feud between Taylor and Smith, the Colonel regarded Mr. Davis' vote as a personal affront and became highly incensed. He swore that no man who voted with Tom Smith should ever marry his daughter. He forthwith forbade Davis from entering the quarters as a guest and repudiated him utterly. Pride and stubbornness kept them estranged for many years.

Again quoting from Mrs. Davis' memoirs:

"Miss Taylor finally went to her father and told him that she had waited two years, and as during that time he had not alleged anything against Lieutenant Davis' character or honor, she would therefore marry him. She had inherited much of her

father's decision of character, and felt the manifest injustice that further delay would inflict on her lover. A boat arrived from St. Louis, and near the time it was to return Captain McRoe, with the knowledge of her family, engaged a stateroom and escorted Miss Taylor to it. Colonel Taylor was transacting some regimental business on the boat, and while he was there his daughter made another attempt to reconcile him to her marriage, but all in vain, so she sorrowfully gave up hope of winning his consent, and proceeded on her journey."

Lieutenant Davis joined her in Kentucky, where at the home of her aunt they were married in the presence of many of Colonel Taylor's family, including his two sisters, his oldest brother, and his son-in-law. Such was the elopement.

In 1845 the two men met while Mr. Davis was en route to his second marriage. He and General Taylor chanced to meet on the same boat. On this trip an entire reconciliation took place. Their friendship and mutual regard were cemented by their intimate association in the Mexican War.

Locust Grove is now occupied by Mr. Stephen C. Sterling and his charming family. Mrs. Sterling was Amanda, the daughter of Dr. Joseph Smith, who was the son of Luther Smith and wife, nee Davis.

Surrounding the grave of Mrs. Davis is a magnificent grove. During the early morning hours when I stood by the tomb of the gifted and lovable woman the birds she loved so well in life were singing their sweetest. I am told that there is scarcely an hour in the day that the mocking bird is not heard singing o'er her grave. H. H. AHRÉNS.