

The Early History of the Davis Family
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This month's history article focuses on David Davis' family, specifically his grandfather, George Mercer Davis, who came to Florida from South Carolina in 1853. Florida was among the newest states in the Union at the time, earning statehood in 1845. Settlers such as Davis streamed south to stake their claim in America's vast southernmost frontier. For the bulk of those recent arrivals, Florida only went as far south as Lake George, the source of the St. Johns River – to them North Florida was Florida.

Born on April 26, 1832, George Mercer Davis came to Palatka, Florida as a talented twenty-one-year-old carpenter. The hand-hewn rafters he supplied for St. Mark's Episcopal Church in 1854 were among his first major contributions to his new hometown. On May 5th of that same year, Davis married fellow South Carolinian Martha A. Baisden. Eleven months later, in April 1855, the Davises welcomed their first child into the family. Harriet "Hattie" Davis was the first of eight children born to George and Martha Davis. Their second child (and David's father), George Riley Davis, arrived January 15, 1857. Like his sister, George Riley was born in Palatka.

The Davis family left Palatka sometime between 1857 and 1860, going upriver to the new settlement of Welaka, on the eastern bank of the St. Johns River, twenty miles south of Palatka and seventy-five miles south of Jacksonville. According to the 1860 Federal Census, the family's new land held a value of \$1,000, plus Davis had an additional \$500 in personal property (a combined total of \$30,000 in today's dollars). The census also reveals that the Davis family lived better than most of their neighbors. Of the sixty-six total families enumerated in Welaka, only fourteen held more real estate

and twenty-five owned more personal property.

The relative peace and progress of the Davis family, like that of almost every family in Florida, if not the South, would soon be shattered. Long simmering national tensions between North and South finally boiled over with the 1860 presidential election. South Carolina was the first state to leave the Union in protest over Abraham Lincoln's victory, followed by Mississippi on January 9, 1861. The next day, Florida's secession convention voted to depart. Soon, Florida would join a new nation, the Confederate States of America, headed by Mississippi's Jefferson Davis.

Members of the Davis family were caught up in this early surge of southern patriotism. When their fourth child was born in 1862, they named the boy Jeff, giving him the same name as the Confederate president. The family had returned to Palatka by this time, though nothing exists in the historic record to explain the move.

George Mercer Davis enlisted, along with forty-four of his neighbors, in the Confederate Army in Palatka on August 2, 1862 as a member of the First Partisan Rangers Battalion. His unit's designation would change to Company B, Second Florida Infantry Battalion (IB) on June 24, 1863. By that time, Davis had seen light action in the defense of his state. That would soon change.

Perhaps the most overwhelming period of Davis' military service was as a member of the Army of Northern Virginia during the Union siege of Petersburg, Virginia, which began in June 1864. Arguably the most sensational episode of the siege was the Battle of the Crater, July 30, 1864. Union soldiers of the Forty-eighth Pennsylvania dug a 511-foot mine shaft underneath the Confederate lines. The former anthracite coal miners then dug a seventy-five foot powder chamber running parallel to,

and twenty feet below, the Rebel positions. The chamber was filled with explosives and, at 4:44 a.m. on July 30, 1864, the command was given to light the fuse.

The initial blast, which opened up a crater nearly a quarter acre in size, instantly killed or wounded 278 Confederate soldiers, but the Rebels soon regrouped and began pouring a merciless fire down on Union troops, who had crowded into the crater in an attempt to get through the Confederate lines. By 9:30 in the morning the battle was over. Total losses were 4,000 Union soldiers dead, wounded or missing, and 1,300 Confederate casualties, most of them wounded. The battle was a Confederate victory, but the morale of both sides sank in the aftermath.

Eventually the rigors of military service, the prolonged separation from his wife and children and the growing hopelessness of the Confederate cause, drove Davis to desert the siege lines at Petersburg on August 22, 1864. He did not go alone. With him were Sergeant David A. Dunham and Private Alexander L. Davis (no relation), both of whom enlisted with Davis in Palatka two years before. Two other Palatkans, Privates John Green and Lewis Roberts, were killed at Petersburg before Davis' desertion. The three deserters, soon captured by Federal soldiers, took an oath renouncing the Confederate cause and pledging their allegiance to the United States. They were then sent to Philadelphia – the war, for them, was over. Davis returned to Florida after the war and eventually became a prosperous businessman.

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