ESSENTIAL CIVIL WAR CURRICULUM

# Varina Howell Davis

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Of all the women who have served as First Ladies in this country, Varina Howell Davis was probably the unhappiest. She was thrust into a role, First Lady of the Confederacy, that she was not suited for by virtue of her personal background, physical appearance, and political beliefs. But because she was married to Jefferson Davis, she had no choice but to take up her role when he became the Confederate President.

Contrary to stereotype, politicians' wives do not always agree with their husbands. This was the case in the nineteenth century, just as it is today. Varina Davis's family background was significant in shaping her values. For good reason, she called herself a "half breed," with roots in the North and the South. Her father, William B. Howell, was a native of New Jersey, and his father, Richard, was a distinguished Revolutionary War veteran who became governor of the state in the 1790s. Young William joined the U. S. Navy, served in the War of 1812, and afterwards he explored the Mississippi River Valley. He chose to settle in Natchez, an inland port on the Mississippi. There he married Margaret Kempe, the daughter of an Irish-American plantation owner who migrated from Virginia to Mississippi. Her father James Kempe, Varina's maternal grandfather, had an impressive military record, serving in both the Revolutionary War and the War of 1812.

Varina, the Howells' oldest daughter, was born on May 26, 1826. (The name, given in honor of one of her mother's friends, rhymes with "Marina.") She spent her early years in comfortable circumstances. William Howell prospered as a merchant, and his family resided at the Briars, a roomy, pleasant house in the heart of Natchez. William owned several house slaves, but he never bought a plantation. When the Panic of 1837 swept the country, he went bankrupt. He tried several other business ventures, but he could not rebuild his fortune. The family survived on the charity of relatives and friends. That meant that the young Varina had to learn how to cook and sew, and she helped her mother look after her siblings, six in all. For many years, she felt embarrassed by her father's failure. She nevertheless got a better education than most women of her generation. George Winchester, a New Englander who settled in Mississippi, worked as her tutor free of charge, and she attended an elite boarding school in Philadelphia because a wealthy relative probably paid the tuition.

In the Quaker city, she often visited her Howell kinfolk, and she became fond of them all. She had classmates from all over the country, some of whom became her good friends. Varina was an excellent student, and she developed a lifelong love of reading. When she returned to Natchez as a teenager, she was expected to marry and start raising children, the universal destiny for all American women in the 1840s. She had several counts against her on the marriage market. She was the daughter of a bankrupt merchant, and she did not have the traditional upbringing of a Southern "belle," being well-educated and highly verbal. Although she had glossy hair and big dark eyes, she was tall and slim with an olive complexion, which was considered unattractive in the nineteenth century. She had few suitors until she met Jefferson Davis while visiting friends in rural Mississippi in 1843. Instantly she fell in love with this elegant older man, while he was smitten by her youthfulness and her vivacious personality. He was willing to overlook her impoverished background; she was too poor to have a dowry. They became engaged, and in 1845 they were married at the Briars.

Varina's husband turned out to be a very conventional man. He owned a large plantation near Vicksburg, and he was a military man, a graduate of West Point who had served on the western frontier. Reasonably good-looking, well-mannered, and always well-dressed, he was an excellent shot and a first-rate horseman. His views on gender were typical for a man of the planter elite: he expected his wife to defer to his wishes in all things. He was set in his ways for a man in his thirties, and he was strong-willed. She wanted a partnership, what historians would call companionate marriage. She also began to grasp that he still idealized his first wife, Sarah Knox Taylor, called Knox, who died a few months after they wed in 1835. For the rest of her life, she felt that she was in Knox's shadow. After Jefferson and Varina settled at his plantation, Brierfield, in Warren County, Mississippi, the newlyweds had some heated conflicts about money, the in-laws, and his absences from home. Jefferson had long been interested in politics, and in 1845, he won a seat as a Democrat in the House or Representatives.

To keep the marriage together, young Mrs. Davis decided to capitulate. Her mother taught her that family duty mattered more than anything, and Varina absorbed that lesson. She agreed to conform to her husband's wishes, so the marriage stabilized on his terms. He made all the financial decisions, and he gave her an allowance for household bills. He decreed when she could visit her family in Natchez. But she came to enjoy life in Washington, a small, lively town with residents from all parts of the country. Quickly she made friends in both political parties, and she met accomplished individuals from many fields, such as the painter James McNeill Whistler and the scientist Benjamin Silliman. Her own family grew, as she gave birth in 1852 to Samuel, the first of six children, and she delighted in her offspring. Jefferson's political career flourished, especially after his service in the Mexican War in 1846-1848. Democratic President Franklin Pierce appointed him to serve as Secretary of War from 1853 to 1857, and in 1857, he re-entered the United States Senate.

The Davises returned to his plantation, Brierfield, several times a year. Jefferson was one of the richest planters in Mississippi, the owner of over seventy slaves. He had a reputation for providing adequate food, clothing, and shelter for his bondsmen, although he left the management of the place to his overseers. During these semi-annual visits, Varina was responsible for making clothes for the slaves and administering medical care, as was true for most planters' wives. She learned the names of all the bondsmen, as her husband did not. In 1852, she commented that slaves are "human beings, with their frailties," her only generalization about the institution of bondage before the Civil War. Although she and her husband were both pro-slavery, they diverged on the issue of race, for Jefferson once compared slaves to animals in a public speech. In general, he loved the countryside, and he often said that the happiest times of his marriage to Varina were spent at Brierfield. She actually found the tedium of rural life depressing, and she was always glad to return to the capitol.

Varina Davis spent most of the fifteen years between 1845 and 1860 in Washington, where she had demanding social duties as a politician's wife. Society there was fully bipartisan, and she was expected to entertain on a regular basis. The couple rented comfortable houses in town, where she organized many receptions and dinner parties. She set a fine table, and she acquired a wardrobe of beautiful clothes in the latest fashion. She had the gift of small talk, as her husband did not. Her wit was sharp, but she knew how to put guests at ease, and her contemporaries described her as a brilliant conversationalist. She met most of the major players in national politics, including Henry Clay, Daniel Webster, Charles Sumner, as well as Presidents Zachary Taylor, Franklin Pierce, and James Buchanan. As political tensions rose in the late 1850s over the issue of slavery, she maintained her friendships with Washingtonians from all regions, the Blairs of Maryland and Missouri, the Baches of Pennsylvania, and the Sewards of New York among them. She became good friends with First Lady Jane Appleton Pierce, a New Hampshire native, over their shared love of books. She met new people, such as Mary Boykin Chesnut, wife of a South Carolina Senator who came to Washington in 1858. By the end of the decade, Davis was one of the city's most popular hostesses. Looking back from the 1880s, she told friends that her years in antebellum Washington were the happiest of her life.

During the political crisis of 1860-1861, the prospect of secession frightened Varina Davis. She believed that secession would bring war, and she knew that a war would divide her family and friends. The chief issue in the Presidential election of 1860 was the expansion of slavery into the territories of the trans-Mississippi West. Four candidates ran, expounding different positions on the issue: Stephen Douglas, the Illinois Democrat, wanted to let settlers decide the slavery question prior to their becoming organized territories; John C. Breckinridge, the Kentucky Democrat, acknowledged that secession would probably follow if anyone threatened to halt slavery's expansion into the West and believed that secession was an inherent right of the states; John Bell, the Tennessean and former Whig, argued that all political issues, including slavery, should be resolved inside the Union; and Abraham Lincoln, the Illinois Republican, insisted that the expansion of slavery into the West had to stop. Varina knew Douglas, Breckinridge, and

Bell from her years in Washington; neither she nor her husband ever met Lincoln. Her comments that winter, plus statements she made later, reveal that she thought slavery was protected by the U. S. Constitution. She opposed the abolitionist movement, and she personally benefited from slavery, for her husband's plantation paid for her lovely clothes, the nice houses, and the expensive china. But she thought Abraham Lincoln's election in 1860 was not sufficient to justify South Carolina's flight from the Union, and she observed that the existing Union gave politicians ample opportunity to advocate states' rights. Both of her grandfathers, and her father, helped create the Union through their military service, and she had many Yankee kinfolk. She hoped that the sectional crisis could be resolved peacefully, although she did not provide any specifics. Over the course of his political career, Jefferson had become more openly hostile to Northerners, but Varina never shared his regional antagonisms. If she could have voted in 1860, she probably would have voted for John Bell. Her husband voted for John Breckinridge.

It is also clear that Varina Davis thought her spouse was not suited to be a head of state. In 1860, she knew that Jefferson was being discussed as the head of any confederation of states, should they secede, but she wrote that he did not have the ability to compromise, an essential quality for a successful politician. In her opinion, he and his friends were too "radical." Jefferson would have been better off serving in the military, she discerned. Moreover, Mrs. Davis believed that the South did not have the material resources, in terms of population and manufacturing prowess, to defeat the North, and that white Southerners did not have the qualities necessary to win a war. According to Mary Chesnut, she thought the "whole thing" would be a "failure." Davis said she would rather stay in Washington, even with Lincoln in the White House. But when her husband resigned from the Senate in January 1861 and left for Mississippi, she had to go with him. When Jefferson was chosen provisional president to lead the new Confederacy in February 1861, she had to go with him to Montgomery, Alabama, the first Southern capitol, and then to Richmond, Virginia, the permanent capitol. She had young children to raise, no money of her own, and no occupation. If she ever considered divorce, she would have discovered that the Mississippi legal system made it very difficult, and she knew it still had a terrible stigma, especially for women. So she went.

In Richmond, she was now in the spotlight as the First Lady. The family lived in a large brick house, jokingly dubbed the Gray House, in a prosperous neighborhood. Mrs. Davis ran the house with a staff of about twenty people of both races. Her peers carefully assessed her hosting skills, her wardrobe, and her physical appearance, as has been true for politicians' wives throughout American history. She followed Washington social customs, hosting large public receptions and small private dinners. She served excellent food and drink, and her tasteful clothes were admired. She had friends in Richmond who came from Washington, such as Mary Chesnut, and Judah Benjamin, a former U. S. Senator from Louisiana. Her neighbor Anne Grant, a Quaker and merchant's wife, became a lifelong friend. But Davis's dark complexion became an issue, more than at any time in her life. Members of Richmond society, many of them preoccupied with skin color, called her a "mulatto" or "squaw" behind her back. She was taller than most women, about five foot six or seven, which seems to have made some of

her peers uncomfortable. Her figure had filled out, so that she was now judged too fat rather than too thin. Her dry humor sometimes fell flat. She was supremely literate and could not hide it in her conversation. Her literary references met blank stares of incomprehension.

Most important of all, she did not truly support the Confederate cause. She was a political moderate by the standards of the 1860s, pro-Union and pro-slavery, and she was surrounded by deeply partisan conservatives. She could not adjust to her new role in the spotlight, where everything she said was scrutinized. She fumbled from the start. In 1861, she declared at her receptions that she felt no hostility towards her Northern friends and relatives. A personal visit to Richmond that year by one of her Yankee cousins, an unidentified female Howell, only underscored the point. She missed Washington, and she said so, repeatedly. Rumors sprang up that Davis was corresponding with her Northern friends and kinfolk, which was in fact true, as private couriers smuggled her letters across the Mason-Dixon line. In 1862, when her husband was formally sworn in as Confederate President under the permanent constitution, she left in the middle of the ceremony, remarking later that he looked as if he were going to a funeral pyre. After Richmond hospitals began to fill up with the wounded, she nursed soldiers in both armies. She began to say in private that she hoped the family could settle in England after the South lost the War, and she said it often enough that it got into the newspapers. To no surprise, she wrote in January 1865 that the last four years had been the worst years of her life.

The Davis marriage during the War is something of a mystery. The couple spent most of their time together in Richmond, so they wrote few letters to each other, compared to the years before 1861 and after 1865. The surviving documentation indicates that she still subordinated herself to her husband. Following antebellum patterns, he still made all of the financial decisions, and he rarely, if ever, discussed politics or military events with her. She cared for him when he was sick, which was often, since he tended to fall ill under stress. They rejoiced in their children, and they had two more during the war, William, born in 1861 and Varina Anne, born in 1864; when their son Joseph died after falling off a balcony in 1864, the parents grieved together and comforted each other. But Varina could not conceal from him her deep, genuine doubts about the Confederacy's chances. When she was in North Carolina in 1862, he had to ask her by letter if she believed in his success. She responded that she did, which was not really true. Later that summer, she informed him she would take a paying job outside the home when the war ended, assuming that they would probably lose their fortune. She also told him that if the South lost the war, it would be God's will.

When U.S. Grant's army drew close to Richmond in 1865, Varina Davis refrained from gloating about her predictions of the Confederacy's defeat. She had to focus on the next chapter in the family's life. In late March, Jefferson insisted that his wife and children should leave for the Florida coast, where they would then depart for England. Varina left, as her husband told her to do, and a few days later he fled the city for Texas, where he hoped to establish a new Confederate capitol and keep fighting. Jefferson

sometimes deviated from his route to check on his wife and children, and they were all together when Union forces caught them at a roadside camp in Georgia in May 1865. As federal soldiers called out for them to surrender, Jefferson tried to escape. He put on a raincoat, and she threw a shawl over his head; as he crept into the woods, Varina explained to the troops that it was her mother. A federal soldier realized that this tall person was the Confederate President, and as he raised his gun to fire, Mrs. Davis threw herself in front of her husband and probably saved his life. (The press reported that he had been captured in woman's clothes, which was not quite accurate.) Jefferson was arrested and taken to Fort Monroe, Virginia, and she was put under house arrest in Savannah, Georgia. After several months, she was allowed to go. Immediately she began lobbying for her spouse's release, and when the government permitted it, she visited him in prison. The Andrew Johnson administration, and the Republican Party, could not decide what to do with Jefferson, so in 1867 he was released on bail. He never went to trial, and he never swore allegiance to the United States government.

The next two decades proved to be a miserable time for the Davises. Jefferson had indeed lost his fortune with the end of slavery, and now he needed a job. The family moved to England, where he tried to start an international trading firm. Varina hoped they would settle permanently in London, a great city she found most stimulating. But her husband had no experience as a businessman, so he gave up on the idea, and they returned to America. He began working for an insurance company in Memphis, but the firm went bankrupt. Desperate for money, Jefferson moved to coastal Mississippi, where an aging widow, Sarah Dorsey, offered him her home, Beauvoir, evidently out of pity. He arrived there in 1877 without consulting his wife, but she had to follow him there from Memphis, just as she had to follow him to Montgomery and Richmond in 1861; he still made the major decisions in the relationship. After Sarah died in 1879, she left her considerable estate to Jefferson, so the family no longer faced destitution. But miseries continued to rain in upon them. Two sons, William and Jefferson, Jr., died, as did five of Varina's siblings, and a number of her close friends, such as Mary Chesnut, who passed away in 1886.

In the postwar era, the Davises were still famous, or infamous. The American public perceived Jefferson as the embodiment of the Lost Cause, and the press recorded his every move, whether he lived in London, Memphis, or Beauvoir. In his correspondence, he debated other political and military figures about what happened, or what should have happened, during the war, and he made public appearances at Confederate reunions. At Beauvoir. the family had little privacy. Strangers appeared to ask Jefferson for his autograph, to give him a present, or simply to talk to him, so Varina had to act the part of hostess yet again. She grew tired of the inquisitive strangers at the door, as she admitted to a friend, but she had to be polite. She was happy to see some callers, such as Oscar Wilde, who came by during his tour of the United States. With the witty young Irishman, she had a most enjoyable talk about books. She cared for her husband when he fell ill, and she wrote most of his letters for him. She helped him finish his memoir, which appeared in 1881. In this bitter tome, he denounced his enemies, tried to justify secession, and blamed other people for the Confederacy's defeat. He said

nothing about his own wife's heresies. In his last years, Jefferson remained obsessed with the war. By contrast, Varina did not like to dwell on all the men who died in what she called a "hopeless" struggle. She told a relative that her association with the Confederacy had been "accidental," anyway.

Gossip began to spread that Jefferson had a wandering eye. During the conflict, Yankee newspapers claimed that he had fathered several children out of wedlock, and in 1871, the national press reported he had a sexual encounter with an unidentified woman on a train. Varina responded to both allegations with total silence; she said nothing about them in writing, at any time. In Memphis, Jefferson fell in love with Virginia Clay, wife of Southern politician Clement Clay. Attractive, well-preserved, and charming, Mrs. Clay had been an enthusiastic supporter of the Confederacy, and for that reason alone, she probably would have made Jefferson a better wife. For three years in the early 1870s, he wrote fervent love letters to her, and she may have been the mysterious woman on the train in 1871. The romance tapered off, probably because they were both married to other people, yet he was crushed when he discovered in 1887 that she planned to marry a childhood sweetheart after Clement's death. In a heart-broken letter, which he composed himself, he confided that he still loved her. Varina seems to have known nothing of this. In fact, she observed in 1889 that Jefferson loved his first wife more than he loved her. But she was at his side when he died of pneumonia in December of that year, and she did what widows were supposed to do, attending the elaborate funeral, wearing black in his memory, and keeping his name, Mrs. Jefferson Davis. In 1890, she published a memoir of her husband, full of panegyrics about his military and political career. She omitted most of her private sorrows and disappointments, especially regarding the War.

To the astonishment of many white Southerners, the widow Davis moved to New York City in 1890. She had practical reasons for this decision, which she spent the rest of her life explaining: Jefferson's estate did not leave her much money, and she had to work for a living. Her youngest daughter, Varina Anne, called "Winnie," wanted a writing career, and New York was the nation's publishing center. The lack of privacy at Beauvoir made Varina increasingly uneasy. All these reasons make sense, but the truth was she always preferred urban life, and New York was the nation's largest metropolis. Varina and her daughter settled happily in the first of a series of apartments in Manhattan, where they both launched careers as writers. Joseph Pulitzer, editor of the New York World**,** had met the Davises in the 1880s, and he liked Varina. He offered her an annual stipend to write for his paper, so she turned out articles on safe topics such as Christmas in wartime Richmond. She published other bland articles, such as an advice column on etiquette. Winnie wrote two novels, which received mixed reviews. They both established a new network of friends and exchanged visits with their many Howell relatives in the Northeast. Varina read a great deal, attended the opera, went to the theater, and took carriage rides in Central Park. Her residence in Gotham excited much criticism from white conservatives in Dixie, who demanded that she return to the South. The city of Richmond offered her a permanent residence, free of charge, but she said no thanks.

Winnie Davis, her youngest daughter, became famous in her own right. Tall and thin, with an olive complexion like her mother, she was a reader like her mother and even better educated. She had spent most of her youth in boarding school in Germany, and she spoke fluent German and French. When she returned to America in the 1880s, she accompanied her father on his public appearances. The nickname she earned, "Daughter of the Confederacy," was misleading. Although she was born in Richmond in 1864, she knew little of the South or the rest of her native country. She was eager to please her parents, however, and she continued to travel with her father; after his death, she made public appearances on her own. The white Southern public developed a strangely proprietary view of Miss Davis, and an uproar ensued when she became engaged to a Syracuse lawyer, Alfred Wilkinson. Conservatives declared it unsupportable that Winnie should marry a Yankee, and after wavering for some time, she broke the engagement in 1890. Her mother initially favored the match, indifferent to Wilkinson's Yankee background, but she disapproved when she realized he did not have much money. Just as significant, Varina wanted Winnie as her own companion in New York. All four of her sons were dead, and her other daughter, Margaret, had married a banker and moved to Colorado in the 1880s. So Winnie remained with her mother, leaving the city to appear at Confederate events. One such event virtually killed her: she contracted a fever after going to a veterans' reunion in Atlanta and died a few weeks later at a resort in Rhode Island in 1898. The devastated mother was overcome, and she grieved for Winnie for a long time.

In New York, Varina Davis became an outspoken advocate of reconciliation between the North and South. White Northerners and white Southerners had more in common than they realized, she declared. She went to veterans reunions for the Union and the Confederacy, and she joined both the Daughters of the American Revolution and the United Daughters of the Confederacy. Her friendship with Julia Dent Grant reflects her views on reconciliation. They met by chance in 1893 at a hotel near New York, and they became good friends. They had more in common than might be evident at first glance. Both were famous, both had their critics as First Ladies, and they came from similar backgrounds: Grant, a Missouri native, was the daughter of a small-scale slave-owner. Their relationship was celebrated, for the most part, in the North, and largely ignored in the South. Davis nonetheless published an essay in the New York World defending U. S. Grant from his critics, denying that he was a "butcher." In 1901, she met Booker T. Washington in New York, again by chance, and they had a short, polite conversation. She made some unorthodox public statements, observing that woman suffrage might be a good idea, although she did not formally endorse the cause. In 1901, she said something even more startling. She declared in a newspaper article that the North won the war because it was God's will, exactly what she said in a letter to her husband in 1862.

In her late seventies, Varina's health began to deteriorate. She contracted pneumonia and died in a hotel on Central Park on October 16, 1906, aged eighty.

Obituaries appeared in the national and international press, with some barbed commentary from the Southern papers. One Richmond journal chose to remind the public of her wartime statements that she missed Washington. Frederick Grant, son of Ulysses and Julia Grant, arranged for a military escort to accompany the body to Richmond, and President Theodore Roosevelt sent a wreath. Her funeral in Richmond attracted a large crowd, as she was buried next to her husband and children. The tombstone read, "At Peace," but there was one last controversy in her long, eventful life. Before her death, she had written a letter defending her right to live in New York City, and she gave it to a friend, asking that it be made public after she passed away. The letter created a sensation, resulting in another round of debate about her widowhood in the North. Then the public forgot Davis and her heresies, largely because she did not conform to the stereotypes of her time, or our own time. She was not a proper Southern lady, nor was she an ardent Confederate. And she mustered the courage to say what she truly thought about the War, and to say it in a newspaper in 1901, that the right side won the Civil War.

**Varina (Howell) Davis**

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| Born | May 26, 1826, while her parents visited relatives in Louisiana |
| Died | October 16, 1906, New York New York |
| Buried | Hollywood Cemetery, Richmond Virginia |
| Father | William Burr Howell |
| Mother | Margaret L. Kempe |
| Career Milestones | 26 February 1845, married Jefferson Davis in Natchez, Mississippi<br>22 February 1862, Jefferson is formally sworn in as Confederate President in Richmond, Virginia; Varina Davis leaves the ceremony<br>late March 1865, Varina and the children fled Richmond<br>10 May 1865, she and Jefferson were captured by federal troops in south Georgia<br>6 December 1889, Jefferson died in New Orleans<br>18 September 1898, daughter Varina Anne Davis died in Narragansett, Rhode Island<br>16 October 1906, Varina Davis dies in New York, New York<br>November 1906, her letter on her residence in the North becomes public |

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