

VARINA DAVIS, BEAUVOIR, AND THE FIGHT FOR CONFEDERATE MEMORY

By: Evan R. Spencer

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Thesis Committee:

Dr. Robert Hunt, chair

Dr. Kelly Kolar

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ABSTRACT

Varina Davis, the First Lady of the Confederacy, had a remarkably contentious relationship with southerners after her husband's death in 1889. She conflicted with groups like the United Daughters of the Confederacy [UDC] over Civil War memory in ways that now seem counterintuitive. These battles demonstrate a fundamental incompatibility between the UDC's "Lost Cause" memory and the *actual* past as southerners like Varina experienced and remembered it. The Lost Cause did not serve as a ubiquitous memory, but constructed a past that supported the missions of the UDC in the present. Any person—southern or northern—who undermined Lost Cause mythology was a threat to the Daughters and their mission. Varina's struggle with southern groups throughout the last years of her life illustrates the incompatibility between the Lost Cause and the actual history of the Civil War.

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INTRODUCTION

In 1906, Varina Howell Davis sold Beauvoir, her home on the Mississippi Gulf Coast, to the Sons of Confederate Veterans [SCV] and United Daughters of the Confederacy [UDC]. She had two purposes in mind: first, that the house would be a perpetual shrine to her husband and the ex-president of the Confederacy, Jefferson Davis; and second that the land surrounding the mansion would serve as the grounds for a Confederate veterans' home. Beauvoir—which means “beautiful view” in French—was Jefferson's final home. He retired there in 1877 and began writing *Rise and Fall of the Confederate Government*, which gives his perspective on the Civil War. He spent the final twelve years of his life enjoying the beachfront and live oaks that gave Beauvoir its name. After his death, Varina wanted to consecrate the grounds in memory of Jefferson's service to the southern people. By the 1890s, the SCV and UDC had created an infrastructure for memorialization that should have aligned perfectly with the First Lady's wishes. Led by the Daughters, Lost Cause advocates produced memorials and opened soldiers' homes at an unprecedented rate. Common sense suggests that the Beauvoir sale should have been simple, as both parties involved seemed to have similar goals.

Despite the fact that both Varina and the UDC wanted to establish a shrine and a soldiers' home at Beauvoir, the sale was anything but straightforward. Throughout the nearly seventeen years of Varina's life as a widow, she faced almost unbelievable scrutiny from southerners. The most prominent detractors of the First Lady were the United Daughters, which is surprising given Varina's place in Confederate history. Varina faced criticism based on where she lived, what events she chose to attend, and

what she said in public. The Daughters attacked her throughout the 1890s and did not prove to be allies in the Beauvoir sale.

Varina should have been the perfect figurehead for the Lost Cause. She was born and raised in Mississippi, lived her entire adult life married to one of the most prominent southern politicians, and had been intimately connected with all aspects of the Confederacy. In fact, some historians have presented her as a proponent of the Lost Cause. Caroline Janney concludes, “Varina Davis’s public comments and writings served to inflame rather than dampen sectional hostilities.”¹ Because of this, Janney lumps Varina into a category of Lost Cause advocates—such as the Daughters—that ardently opposed the concept of reconciliation. Creating a category of “anti-reconciliationists,” however, suggests a rapport that simply never existed between Varina and the younger generation of Lost Cause advocates.

Although it seems logical that the First Lady and the Daughters of the Confederacy would hold similar ideas about the Confederate past, their contentious relationship suggests otherwise. For example, in 1902 the Richmond chapter of the UDC planned to build a memorial arch to Jefferson near the Virginia capitol building. Instead of being pleased with the honor bestowed on her husband, Varina denounced the plans. The two parties disagreed on the nature of memorial arches; Varina wrote that an arch was symbolic of victory, and that “a triumphal arch to a man whose cause failed...is an inappropriate expression of respect for his memory.” This disagreement, however, is made even more interesting because of the fact that the UDC did not even ask for

1. Caroline Janney, *Remembering the Civil War: Reunion and the Limits of Reconciliation* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013), 241.

Varina's opinion on the matter. Instead, she found out about the plans and felt compelled to criticize them publicly, due to her "vital interest in the matter."² In response, the Richmond papers gave Varina what she characterized as a "old fashioned setting down," as they "repeated a good many things the ladies were said to have uttered about me. Of course, these things hurt me greatly and I was kept in a stew all the time."³ This type of tension characterized Varina's relationship with the UDC and other southerners with interests in the Lost Cause. The primary question, then, is *why* Varina and groups like the UDC did not get along. What caused this seemingly endless strife between the two parties that otherwise appeared to have had complementary goals?

Conventional questions about southern Civil War memory focus on the Lost Cause as a foil to northern Unionist or Emancipationist memories. In this framework, southern memory is lumped into one "Lost Cause." This helps to contrast the southern vision of the past from its northern counterparts, but it does not answer the question posed above. Grouping all southern memory together into one category conceals the discord between southerners about the war.

In examining Varina's life, it becomes clear that the traditional modes of interpretation are lacking something crucial. In what is the seminal argument of the traditional analysis of Civil War memory, David Blight presents three categories: "white supremacist," "emancipationist," and "reconciliationist" visions of the war. He argues that by the 1890s, northern whites who adopted the "reconciliationist" vision accepted the

2. *Daily Clarion-Ledger* (Jackson, MS), March 28, 1902, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, Jackson, Mississippi.

3. Varina Davis to Mary and A. McC. Kimbrough, July 8, 1902, Jefferson Davis Papers, 1795-1913, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

Lost Cause in the interests of white supremacy. In the process, whites erased the legacy of emancipation and focused on the heroics of both sides' soldiers. Some historians have expanded Blight's model, allowing for a fourth category or some fluidity in the memory, while others refute the model altogether. If Blight were correct, Varina would clearly have to fit into the white supremacist group, as it is the only "southern" memory in the framework. Blight's model, therefore, falls short of explaining the friction between certain elements *within* what we can call southern Civil War memory.⁴

Many historians have disputed Blight's framework. Despite this, they have not yet moved past the traditional interpretation of the Lost Cause as ubiquitous. Caroline Janney, who systematically dismantles Blight's framework, still presents the Lost Cause as *the* southern memory of the war. She argues that each side maintained a unique memory, even if they espoused "reconciliationist gush" at events like battlefield reunions. As the time between the war and the present increased, Janney writes, "the Confederate Cause remained distinct. Its memory and symbols continued to stand apart, suspended in time and inseparable from the war." Although she argues that memory was fluid, she presents the Lost Cause as an overarching southern memory that came directly from the Confederacy itself. Others, such as Karen Cox in her seminal study of the UDC, approach the Lost Cause from a similar perspective. According to Cox, the Daughters were

4. David Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2001), 3-8; William Blair, *Cities of the Dead: Contesting the Memory of the Civil War South, 1865-1914* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 1-10; and Gary Gallagher, *Causes Won, Lost, and Forgotten: How Hollywood & Popular Art Shape What We Know About the Civil War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 1-4. Blair writes, "The categories of reconciliationist, white supremacist, and emancipationist do not always hold up. There was a great deal more fluidity and more overlapping concerns" (4). Gallagher agrees with this analysis, but still uses Blight's framework.

consumed by the need to combat reconciliation, which stood in stark opposition to the Lost Cause. They refused to accept or endorse reconciliation without first ensuring the vindication of the Confederate generation. Cox is certainly correct that the United Daughters vehemently opposed reconciliation. However, each of these arguments presents the Lost Cause as a rigid, almost dogmatic *southern* memory, which does not allow room for the disputes between southerners that occurred in the years after the war.⁵

Despite the fact that the UDC was against the concept of reconciliation, the “vindication” argument falls flat when considering Varina’s troubles. Varina, as Janney astutely observed, was not a reconciliationist, yet she did not advocate for UDC’s vision of the Civil War. She did not fit into any of the categories created by contemporary historians. The cause of the problems Varina encountered was much deeper than whether or not she stood for reconciliation. It was an issue of memory itself. Varina lived through the late antebellum period and Civil War. She vividly remembered the events and political systems that preceded the war, and would not allow the younger generation of southerners to dictate the terms of memory.

Varina’s memory demonstrates that the Lost Cause was not a continuation of the culture of the actual Confederacy, as Janney argues. Instead, southerners created it *after* the war to deal with specific issues. Over time, the uses for the Lost Cause evolved as political and social climates changed. By the 1890s, groups like the UDC had staked their

5. Janney, *Remembering the Civil War*, 1-11; and Karen Cox, *Dixie’s Daughters: The United Daughters of the Confederacy and the Preservation of Confederate Culture* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2003), xi-xii. Although Cox focuses on the Daughters’ efforts to “vindicate” the Confederate generation, she also discusses their impact on southern society through the educational, benevolent, and social elements of their mission.

mission around the mythology that had been created in the aftermath of the war. Anyone who undermined this history served as a threat to the Lost Cause, and therefore to the mission that the Daughters had in the present. Historians have focused on proving that the UDC opposed reconciliation—which they did—but have failed to notice the attacks on fellow southerners who dared to remember history that challenged them. Because Varina attempted to commemorate the Civil War as she remembered it, she challenged the Lost Cause constructs that the Daughters relied on.

Of course, Varina Davis was not the only former Confederate to challenge the Lost Cause. Several Confederate leaders openly disputed myths that southerners created after the war. The most prominent examples of this are former cavalry leader John Mosby and general James Longstreet. Both men rejected many of the Lost Cause's assertions both in the immediate aftermath of the war and throughout the rest of their lives. David Blight writes that both Mosby and Longstreet “embraced new economic development and acted with a spirit of unionism to resist Lost Cause mythology.” According to Blight, Mosby specifically rejected the idea that slavery had not played a role in the war, and refused to attend Confederate reunions because he could not “stand the speaking” of Lost Cause sympathizers. In response to his “apostasy” from the Lost Cause, “Virginia diehards never forgave” him and “slandered him as a turncoat.”⁶

Longstreet, on the other hand, became a controversial figure both for his own postwar actions and his military record. In the aftermath of the war, Longstreet encouraged southerners to not only cooperate with Reconstruction, but to collaborate directly with Republicans. William Garrett Piston argues that Longstreet was not

6. Blight, *Race and Reunion*, 293, 297.

necessarily advocating sectional reconciliation, but instead encouraging southerners to get involved in the party that held power. Despite this, Longstreet became the unwitting scapegoat for the Confederacy's loss. Jubal Early of the *Southern Historical Society Papers* fashioned Longstreet's postwar betrayal of the cause into a narrative that blamed him for the Confederacy's loss at Gettysburg. By blaming the loss on Longstreet—who was not viewed as a traitor to the cause—Early held up the newly formed myths about the North's victory.⁷

Much like Mosby and Longstreet, the First Lady represented the *actual* history of the antebellum and Civil War eras. However, her unique position in the antebellum South and Confederacy gave her the ability to directly challenge groups like the UDC. Analyzing Varina Davis's life allows for a better understanding of the political nature of memory and the creation of usable pasts in the aftermath of the Civil War. Chapter I establishes the context for Varina's post-war memory by examining her experiences in these events. Instead of backing up the Lost Cause, her memories actually served to undermine many of its assertions and myths about the past. Chapter II demonstrates the incongruity between the Lost Cause and the *actual* past. This incompatibility led to conflicts between the two parties that were not caused by "reconciliation." The largest and most important of these struggles was the sale of Beauvoir, which is covered in Chapter III. The sale was the culmination of the contentious relationship between Varina's memory and the Lost Cause. More than a house, each party came to view Beauvoir as the place where they could commemorate their version of Civil War

7. William Garrett Piston, *Lee's Tarnished Lieutenant: James Longstreet and His Place in Southern History* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1987), 105-120.

memory. Varina's life demonstrates that the Lost Cause created an unquestionable past that was not rooted in the *actual* Confederacy, but in the present-minded interests of groups like the UDC.

CHAPTER I
Life Before the Lost Cause: The Civil War Era through the Eyes of Varina Davis

Varina Davis lived through a past that was fundamentally different from the one that groups like the UDC promoted in the 1890s. Born in 1826, Varina grew up in a society that the Lost Cause would later seek to erase. The UDC, which formed in 1894, featured women who were very young during the Confederacy's actual existence. Most members were born after 1850, meaning that they had not reached adulthood when the war began. Varina, on the other hand, had actually lived the "Old South," had seen the political process at work in the late antebellum period, and had experienced the Confederacy first-hand. To understand the later conflicts Varina had with the United Daughters, it is necessary to examine her background.

Varina's actual experiences undermine the Lost Cause creation of the past in a variety of ways. She never identified with it because it was not the world she experienced. Throughout her life, Varina identified as many things—a Whig, a unionist, a politically knowledgeable First Lady—that did not mesh with ideas that the Daughters made essential to the Lost Cause. In addition to her own criticisms of the UDC and their constructions of the past—which will be explored at length in Chapters II and III—Varina's life demonstrates that the Lost Cause's depiction of everything from the "solid south" to the secession crisis and Civil War was not focused on history, but something they developed for their own purposes.

Varina Howell was born on May 7, 1826 in Natchez, Mississippi to a family of mixed regional origins. She did not hail from a distinctive or separate "South," but from a highly interconnected union. Her grandfather was Richard Howell, a major during the

Revolutionary War, close friend of George Washington, and four-term Federalist governor of New Jersey. Her father William Howell, himself a distinguished veteran of the War of 1812, moved from his home state of New Jersey to settle in Natchez several years before her birth. In Varina's youth, a Yale-educated and Massachusetts-born Whig named George Winchester served as her personal tutor. Under his guidance, she developed "Whig proclivities" that would stay with her throughout her life. In 1836, she attended a prestigious girls' academy in Philadelphia. Additionally, although William Howell had moved his family to Natchez, most of the Howells still lived in the North. Varina maintained close relationships with her relatives in all parts of the country.¹

Varina's early relationship to Jefferson Davis continued this theme of union. When the couple met in 1843, Varina noted their differences. She wrote to her mother, explaining that Jefferson had "an uncertain temper, and has a way of taking for granted that everyone agrees with him when he expresses an opinion, which offends me." Yet, she continued, "Would you believe it, he is refined and cultivated, and yet he is a Democrat!"² In this letter, Varina's two categories align with the political system of Jacksonian America. She—a Whig—was surprised to learn that Jefferson was a Democrat because he was refined and cultivated. From the Whig perspective, the advent of Jacksonian democracy had caused an influx of unsophisticated and rude men into the

1. Joan Cashin, *First Lady of the Confederacy: Varina Davis's Civil War* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006), 9-25.

2. Varina Banks Howell to Margaret K. Howell, December 19, 1843, in *The Papers of Jefferson Davis*, ed. James T. McIntosh, vol. 2, 1841-1846 (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1974), 52-53.

political sphere.³ Jefferson, however, did not exude these qualities, and Varina quickly fell in love with him. In the antebellum period, people usually defined themselves according to the union's political culture more than they did according to their region. Varina defined herself as a Whig, not as a person from a distinctive "South."

Varina Davis and Antebellum America

Jefferson's status as a Democrat did not mean that he and Varina were incompatible. In fact, Jefferson's first wife Sarah Knox Taylor was the daughter of prominent Louisiana Whig Zachary Taylor. After Sarah's death, Jefferson maintained a familial relationship with "Old Rough and Ready" until the latter's death in 1850. Although she had noted their differences, Varina quickly fell in love as the couple courted. For his part, Jefferson was very respectful of Varina's Whig sensibilities, and attempted to show her that her initial impression of him as a refined and cultivated Democrat was correct. In one letter, Jefferson described an encounter with a "Whig Lady" who accosted him on his way home from Natchez. He wrote, "On my way up from Natches [sic] a whig [sic] Lady gave me quite a political lecture, warning me against the stain of poke berries [a reference to James K. Polk], and informing me that Genl [sic] Jackson had ruined the country." In response to the woman's diatribe, Jefferson

3. Richard Bushman, *The Refinement of America: Persons, Houses, Cities* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1992), 425-34. Bushman argues that for the Whig Party to survive, they had to accept the new role of lower classes in the political sphere. To do this, they emphasized the dignity of quiet, simple farmers. However, Whigs did not equate dignity and participation in the political sphere with being "refined and cultivated," as Varina demonstrated in her comment about Jefferson. Bushman writes, "The Whigs solved the problem of class in 1840 by projecting an egalitarian political society while preserve inequality in culture" (432).

responded respectfully and “assured her that I should fear to meet her on the stump.”⁴ In a later letter, he begged, “Pray never again allow a whig report to affect you.” While it is unknown what “whig report” affected Varina, Jefferson understood that his betrothed had a different political background.⁵

Despite their political differences, the couple wed in February 1845, as Jefferson was rising in the Mississippi Democratic Party. Their marriage got off to a rough start, as Jefferson and Varina’s expectations of their relationship apparently did not align. In 1847, Jefferson composed a will that left his plantation to his brother Joseph. Varina believed that Joseph had influenced his brother in order to deprive her of her spousal rights. Jefferson expected Varina to defer to his judgment and when she did not, he punished her for it.

During their dispute over the will, Jefferson was appointed to a vacant seat in the U.S. Senate. When he went to Washington, D.C., he forced Varina to stay at home. From Washington, he wrote, “I cannot bear to be suspected or complained of, or misconstrued after explanation, *by you*. Circumstances, habits, education, combativeness, render you prone to apply the tests which I have just said I cannot bear.” He went on to threaten that her actions, which were contrary to those “demanded by your duties as a wife,” would drive him to “temporary stupefaction” or “vicious associations.” Jefferson left his threat vague so that Varina would have to decide what exactly he meant by “vicious

4. Jefferson Davis to Varina Banks Howell, June 22, 1844, in *Papers of Jefferson Davis*, vol. 2, 173.

5. Jefferson Davis to Varina Banks Howell, September 6, 1844, in *Papers of Jefferson Davis*, vol. 2, 207.

associations.”⁶ He also implied that all she had to do to save the situation was accept her role as his wife. In order to reunite with her husband and attempt to live happily, Varina recognized that she had to make peace with Jefferson’s expectations and capitulate to his desires. Although the beginning of their relationship was troubled, Varina accepted her role, devoted her life to Jefferson, and joined him in the capital.⁷

Varina’s experience in the Washington was directly tied to her husband’s political career. Although Jefferson would later become the president of the Confederacy, his politics in the late antebellum period were moderate. He believed that the concept of states’ rights did not contradict his reverence for the U.S. Constitution. As such, he supported a state’s *right* to secede from the union, but never advocated for such an action to occur. In 1858, as sectionalism grew and more people feared conflict in the near future, Jefferson gave a speech at Faneuil Hall in Boston. In his address, he announced to loud cheers, “I feel an ardent desire for the success of the State Rights Democracy...on which alone I rely for the preservation of the Constitution, to perpetuate the Union, and to fulfill the purposes which it was ordained to establish and secure.”⁸ Although he would leave the union when Mississippi seceded in 1861, Jefferson believed in compromise and had never been an impassioned advocate of secession.

6. Jefferson Davis to Varina Howell Davis, April 18, 1848, in *The Papers of Jefferson Davis*, eds. James T. McIntosh, Lynda L. Crist, and Mary S. Dix, vol. 3, 1846-1848 (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1981), 301-03.

7. Cashin, *First Lady of the Confederacy*, 31-53.

8. “Jefferson Davis’ Speech at Boston,” October 11, 1858, *The Papers of Jefferson Davis*, accessed August 25, 2015, <https://jeffersondavis.rice.edu/Content.aspx?id=80>

In the complex political climate of the 1850s, there was no consensus in the North or South on the issue of states' rights and secession. In 1851, for example, Jefferson replaced fire-eater John Quitman on the Democratic ticket for Mississippi's gubernatorial election. Jefferson balanced his support for slavery with his belief that it could be preserved within the union. Quitman, on the other hand, called for immediate secession—a call that was not popular among the people of Mississippi at the time. The Mississippi Democratic Party chose Jefferson over Quitman because of his more moderate position. In the general election, Jefferson faced Henry Foote, a long-time rival whom many considered little more than an abolitionist.⁹ Foote narrowly defeated Jefferson in the election, leading Varina to note that Jefferson “is just finding out what I predicted, and everybody but his friends knew, that the Southern Rights cause is the losing one now.”¹⁰

Varina's mention of “Southern Rights” is a reference to Jefferson's response to the Compromise of 1850. Jefferson—among other southern Democrats—called for state conventions to repudiate the Compromise and stand together against abolitionists in the North. At times, Jefferson's language approached disunionism. In one speech, he

9. William C. Davis, *Jefferson Davis: The Man and His Hour* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1991), 211-17; and “Speech at Fayette,” July 11, 1851, in *The Papers of Jefferson Davis*, eds. Lynda L. Crist, Mary S. Dix, and Richard E. Beringer, vol. 4, 1849-1852 (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1983), 186. Davis writes that Jefferson and Foote were archrivals while they both served Mississippi in the U.S. Senate. Foote “had not been content with ardently supporting the 1850 Compromise measures...[he] returned home and organized a new Union Democratic Party, consisting of Union Democrats and old Whigs” (211). In his speech at Fayette, Mississippi, Jefferson complained that the Compromise bill had been passed because of “Southern deserters” including Foote.

10. Varina Howell Davis to Richard and Margaret Howell, October 28, 1851, in *Jefferson Davis: Private Letters, 1823-1889*, ed. Hudson Strode (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1966), 64.

proclaimed that the South must protect itself “in the Union if she can and out of it if she must.” Jefferson’s use of disunionist rhetoric, according to William C. Davis, was an attempt to convince the abolitionists to ensure Southern Rights without the need for secession.¹¹ His actual view seems to have been more moderate. He declared, “The history of the South has been one of steady adherence to the Union, and I doubt not in both, the present generation will emulate the conduct of their siers [sic].”¹² While Jefferson advocated for Southern Rights, he believed that the South could achieve its goals within the union. Jefferson’s defeat at the hands of someone more openly opposed to secession illustrates that Mississippi, even nine years before the Civil War, was not necessarily on a trajectory towards secession. Further, the Democratic party chose Jefferson to replace Quitman because his moderate position was much more viable than Quitman’s secession-now platform.¹³

Varina’s statement—that the “Southern Rights” cause was losing—demonstrates the depth of her belief in the political system. As an individual with Whig sensibilities, Varina favored order and polite political discourse within the confines of the union. As such, she often attempted to convince her husband to engage in calm debate instead of being vitriolic. In 1850, after Jefferson made a speech condemning New Hampshire Democrat John Parker Hale, Varina responded by asking him to tone down his future

11. Davis, *Jefferson Davis*, 208-09.

12. “To Lowndes County Citizens,” November 22, 1850, in *Papers of Jefferson Davis*, vol. 4, 140.

13. Carol Berkin, *Civil War Wives: The Lives and Times of Angelina Grimke Weld, Varina Howell Davis, and Julia Dent Grant* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2009), 141; and Davis, *Jefferson Davis*, 211-17.

remarks. She wrote, “In the papers you sent me I saw your very forcible little speech in partial answer to Mr. Hale’s vituperations against slavery. It was a little too violent, more so that I would have liked to hear you be, however well deserved the censure might be.”¹⁴ Varina clearly believed that politicians should act honorably even under stress, and she requested that her husband act accordingly.

After losing his bid to be Mississippi’s governor, Jefferson returned to Washington as Franklin Pierce’s Secretary of War. In this position, Jefferson oversaw the expansion and modernization of the military. He set out to improve the military by increasing its size, professionalism, and pay scale.¹⁵ The primary motivation during Jefferson’s tenure was securing the West for expansion and settlement. He fiercely lobbied for the Gadsden Purchase, which added land in present-day New Mexico and Arizona. He also purchased camels from the Middle East to assist in traversing and surveying desert lands that might serve as a corridor for the planned Transcontinental Railroad. The major obstacle in securing the West was the continual hostility with Native Americans. Jefferson proposed a plan to consolidate small military posts into large

14 Varina Howell Davis to Jefferson Davis, January 25, 1850, *Papers of Jefferson Davis*, vol. 4, 62.

15. Davis, *Jefferson Davis*, 225, 232-35. During Jefferson’s tenure as Secretary of War, the military increased from 10,417 to 15,562 regulars. He implemented uniform changes, pushed for technological improvements in armaments and fortifications, oversaw explorations of the Western territories, and prepared training manuals for state militias. In 1855, he sent three leading officers to Crimea to “observe everything from supply and transportation to weapons and fortifications” (233). Perhaps most impressively, Jefferson accomplished these advancements in peacetime. Davis writes, “With America’s traditional suspicion of a large standing army in peacetime, the old regular service was constantly kept bouncing between the needs of an expanding territory and the parsimony of a Congress that rarely saw the need to spend money on the military” (225).

strongholds that would serve as bases for seasonal campaigns into Indian Territory. As Secretary of War, Jefferson was not concerned merely with southern issues. Through his leadership, the United States military modernized and became an effective tool for serving the needs of an expanding United States.¹⁶

When Jefferson became Secretary of War, the Davises moved back to Washington, D.C. In the capital city, the families of southern and northern politicians not only coexisted peacefully, but also maintained close friendships that crossed sectional lines. Even the most vitriolic men in the Capitol returned home to boarding houses or rental properties that they often shared with those of opposing views. The Davises rented their house near Lafayette Square from Edward Everett, a Massachusetts Whig who would eventually give the two-hour speech immediately preceding Lincoln's Gettysburg Address. The Davises' relationship with Everett shows that political opposition did not necessarily mean social discord. Everett was a staunch unionist—he wrote columns¹⁷ tying the Mount Vernon Ladies' Association's work to the unionist cause and eventually became the vice presidential nominee of the Constitutional Union Party ticket in the 1860 presidential election. By living in a house near Lafayette Square, the Davises gained the

16. William J. Cooper, *Jefferson Davis: American* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2000), 272-78; and Davis, *Jefferson Davis*, 223-39.

17. Edward Everett, *The Mount Vernon Papers* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1860); and "Edward Everett," in *George Washington Digital Encyclopedia*, edited by George F. Stoltz III, Mount Vernon Estate, 2012. Robert Bonner, the proprietor of the *New York Ledger* approached Everett in 1858 with the idea of Everett writing a weekly column to help raise funds for the Mount Vernon Ladies' Association. In 1860, the columns were published as the *Mount Vernon Papers*. According to Mount Vernon's *George Washington Digital Encyclopedia*, Everett's efforts singlehandedly raised \$69,000, more than one third of the total purchase price of the mansion.

society of nearby politicians including Louisiana Democrat John Slidell and influential banker William Corcoran. The sectional diversity of Washington's social circles would later contribute directly to Varina's perspective on the increasing sectionalism in other areas of the country.¹⁸

Washington's political class used their intersectional social relationships to affect the political process. Few politicians isolated themselves or their families from the company of those with opposing views. For example, social gatherings at William Corcoran's home played a role in breaking the stalemate that had prevented the Compromise of 1850 from gaining support in Congress. As sectionalism increased around the country, the capital city's social circles remained cordial and intersectional. The Davises maintained friendships with northern Republicans, even those as outspoken as William H. Seward.¹⁹ William C. Davis notes that Jefferson, although known for his cold demeanor in Congress,

18. Rachel A. Shelden, "Messmates' Union: Friendship, Politics, and Living Arrangements in the Capital City, 1845-1861," *Journal of the Civil War Era* 1, no. 4 (December 2011): 471-72.

19. Varina Davis, *Jefferson Davis: Ex-President of the Confederate States of America, A Memoir by His Wife*, vol. 1 (New York: Belford Company, Publishers, 1890), 571; Davis, *Jefferson Davis*, 261; and Varina Davis to Her Mother, December 16, 1857, in Strode, *Private Letters*, 97. In her memoir of Jefferson, Varina remembered Seward fondly. When she gave birth to her third child, she encountered serious complications from childbirth and lay close to death. Her nurse could not reach her due to a blizzard. Seward, Varina wrote, "Though he did not know us, he had his own fine horses harnessed to a sleigh, and brought Mrs. Hetzel [the nurse] to me. . . . This service introduced him to us, and after all those long years of bitter feuds, I thank him as sincerely as my husband did to the last hour of my life" (571). According to Davis, Seward visited Jefferson almost daily during the latter's absence from the Senate due to an infection. In a letter to her mother, Varina described a dinner she attended where she sat next to Seward and Vermont Senator Solomon Foote, both of whom were vocal opponents of the Davises' political interests. Nonetheless, Varina described the evening as "pleasant."

Enjoyed excellent social relations with men of all political hues during his years in the Senate. His closeness to Seward and to [Pennsylvania Republican Simon] Cameron and even a passing acquaintance with [Massachusetts Republican Charles] Sumner showed that he could leave the heat of the debates in the Senate.²⁰

Despite the growth of sectionalism elsewhere in the country, many Washington politicians believed that they could continue the culture of cooperation that had defined the capital city for decades. The speed and vehemence of the secession movement in southern legislatures took many of the South's federal politicians by surprise, including the Davises. Varina, who had become accustomed to the intersectional nature of politics in the capital, wrote Jefferson on November 15, 1860, complaining that talk of secession dominated conversations. From Washington, she recalled an anti-disunion speech her husband made earlier:

There is intense interest felt here to know what you are doing or will do. I always say I don't know, and can't guess...People talked so impudently of disunionism before me that I hunted up my old white satin flag 'If any man call me a disunionist I will answer him in monosyllables.'...and declared I'd hang it up and quarrel with the first person who said a word.

Further, Varina noted that "*Everybody is scared, especially Mr. Buchanan.*"²¹ In her letter, Varina's diatribe against disunion parrots rhetoric from a speech that Jefferson gave while stumping in 1851. In her marriage, she retained her own worldview while still

20. Davis, *Jefferson Davis*, 271.

21. Varina Howell Davis to Jefferson Davis, November 15, 1860, in *The Papers of Jefferson Davis*, eds. Lynda L. Crist and Mary S. Dix, vol. 6, 1856-1860 (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1989), 371-72.

understanding her role. As a Victorian wife, she had to speak through her husband. In this instance, however, she repurposed Jefferson's words to assert her own opinions.²²

Clearly, the Davises valued the union and did not view it as something that was easily broken up. While his wife wondered what his position was, Jefferson cautiously approached the topic of secession. In early November, Robert Barnwell Rhett, Jr. inquired about the senator's position. Jefferson responded, "If South Carolina should first secede," as Rhett presumably stated that it would, "the position of Missi. would probably not be changed by that fact."²³ Although Jefferson believed that Mississippi would not necessarily follow in the footsteps of South Carolina, many in his home state felt that he was being too cautious about secession.²⁴

Although the Davises both valued the union and believed in compromise, they were not unconditional unionists. Jefferson believed that secession was constitutionally legal. However, his correspondence with Rhett in November 1860 suggests that he did not believe the causes were sufficient to break up the union he had served both in the military and as a politician. Nonetheless, when Mississippi seceded on January 9, 1861,

22. In the speech, Jefferson announced, "When a man charged him with being a disunionist, he should make a monsyllabic [sic] answer which was not fit to be used before that assembly, yet which was the only one that ought to be used to his foul assailants." Jefferson Davis, "Speech at Fayette," July 11, 1851, in *Papers of Jefferson Davis*, vol. 4, 206.

23. Jefferson Davis to Robert Barnwell Rhett, Jr., November 10, 1860, *Papers of Jefferson Davis*, vol. 6, 369.

24. *Papers of Jefferson Davis*, vol. 6, 373. The editor notes that "One knowledgeable Mississippian stated flatly in mid-November that the people were 'a long way in advance' of their leaders on secession and asked the governor "where is Jeff Davis?"

Jefferson decided to leave his position in the United States Senate. He wrote to several northern friends expressing the hope that their friendships would not be affected by his actions. To former president Pierce he wrote, “Civil War has only horror for me, but whatever circumstances demand shall be met as duty and I trust be so discharged that you will not be ashamed of our former connection or cease to be my friend.”²⁵ Despite this, Jefferson believed that the situation demanded that he leave the union, and he did so without much public hesitancy.

Varina’s views on the eve of the Civil War are best described as both pro-slavery and states’ rights and pro-union. Joan Cashin writes that Varina “believed the states had the right to secede and thought armed resistance might be necessary, but the *casus belli* were not yet sufficient; that she wanted the states to remain in the Union and try to effect another compromise.”²⁶ Judging by her statement referring to disunionism as “impudent,” it appears that Varina did not believe that the South should secede at that time. After the war, Varina wrote to her friend Mary Chesnut and explained that she blamed South Carolina for their “hasty action.”²⁷ Although she believed that the southern states had the right to secede, her extant writings fail to expose the point at which she felt secession would be justifiable. Her desire to compromise was a remnant of her Whig background

25. Jefferson Davis to Franklin Pierce, January 20, 1861, in *Jefferson Davis: The Essential Writings*, ed. William J. Cooper, Jr. (New York: Random House, Inc., 2003), 189.

26. Cashin, *First Lady of the Confederacy*, 97.

27. Varina Davis to Mary Boykin Chesnut, September 20, 1865, cited in Cashin, *First Lady of the Confederacy*, 167.

and her clear understanding of the way that national politics worked in the late antebellum period.

When Jefferson decided to leave his post in the Senate, his wife had little choice but to follow him to Mississippi. Despite this, she did not like the idea of leaving Washington and its diverse social circles behind. In December 1860, Varina privately expressed concerns to many of her northern friends about losing their companionship in the event of a sectional war. Elizabeth Blair Lee, daughter of prominent Republican Francis Preston Blair, wrote, “Mrs. Jef [sic] asked me if I was going down south to fight her—I told her no. I would kiss & hug her too tight to let her break any bonds between us.”²⁸ In this quote, Lee exposes the true sense of unionism that existed before the war. The bond of mutual interest in the union helped to maintain friendships, even in the midst of the secession crisis. Only after the war, with the advent of Lost Cause memory, would friendships like the one between Seward and the Davises seem impossible.

Other friends noted that Varina voiced her preference for living in the city over the plantation life that she feared would dominate her future in Mississippi. Elizabeth Keckley, a former seamstress employed by the Davis family—and later employed by Mary Todd Lincoln—wrote, “Mrs. Davis was warmly attached to Washington, and I often heard her say that she disliked the idea of breaking up old associations, and going South to suffer from trouble and deprivations.”²⁹ Varina’s sentiments demonstrate how

28. Elizabeth Blair Lee to Samuel Phillips Lee, December 17, 1860, in *Wartime Washington: The Civil War Letters of Elizabeth Blair Lee*, ed. Virginia Jeans Lee (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991), 18.

29. Elizabeth Keckley, *Behind the Scenes: Or, Thirty Years a Slave, and Four Years in the White House* (New York: G.W. Carleton & Co., Publishers, 1868), 69.

difficult it was to break up the union. Whatever objections they may have had, Mississippi's secession in January 1861 forced the Davises to leave the Union.³⁰

From Unionist to First Lady

With Mississippi's secession, the Davises left Washington and headed home to an uncertain future in Mississippi. But history would not allow them to stay at their plantation for long. Because of his moderate views and experience as a statesman and military expert, the Constitutional convention of seven seceded states chose Jefferson to be the provisional president of the Confederacy. William C. Davis notes that "ironically, a movement conceived in extremism gave birth to itself by compromise" by choosing Davis as its leader.³¹ Although the convention's vote had been unanimous, some delegates had doubts about Jefferson because they feared that his pre-secession commitment to compromise would remain. These fears were certainly reasonable, as anyone who knew the Davises would have recognized their belief in the concept of the union. When Jefferson received word of the convention's decision, he reacted with surprise and genuine anguish at being chosen for the position. Varina later recalled that upon learning the news, Jefferson, "Looked so grieved that I feared some evil had befallen our family. After a few minutes' painful silence he told me, as a man might speak of a sentence of death. As he neither desired nor expected the position, he was

30. Jefferson Davis, "Farewell Address," *The Papers of Jefferson Davis*, eds. Lynda Lasswell Crist and Mary Seaton Dix, vol. 7, 1861 (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1992), 18-23. In Jefferson's famous resignation speech given to the Senate on January 21, 1861, he noted that even if he did not believe Mississippi to be correct in seceding, "because of my allegiance to the State of which I am a citizen, have been bound by her action." Despite this, he publicly expressed his support for Mississippi's decision during his speech.

31. Davis, *Jefferson Davis*, 303.

more deeply depressed than before.”³² Varina’s exact thoughts as Jefferson ascended to the Confederacy’s highest office are unknown. Either the First Lady did not commit her thoughts to paper, or her letters did not survive.

Although Jefferson and Varina had not wanted to leave the union, let alone be the leaders of the Confederacy, Jefferson accepted the call of the people and became the president of the new nation. In the first days of his presidency, he alleviated fears that he would seek to re-enter the union through compromise by declaring his willingness to defend the Confederacy through war. When the people called for Jefferson to lead their cause, he left his own concerns and opinions behind at Brierfield Plantation. Although Varina came along for the ride, she did not necessarily share her husband’s vehement support for the war effort.³³

As First Lady of the Confederacy, Varina was a public figure in ways that she had neither anticipated nor desired. As will be shown, her devotion to her northern friends and her doubts about the Confederacy’s chances would become topics of contention that plagued her throughout the Civil War. Many southerners suspected that Varina was not fully devoted to the new state or its soldiers. These suspicions were largely correct; Varina never fully embraced the Confederate cause. She also found it hard to adjust from Washington’s social spheres—which featured diversity of opinion and background—to Richmond’s emphasis on family ties and planter-class elitism. Despite this, Varina knew that her family was inexorably tied to the Confederacy and its fate. Throughout the war, she demonstrated a keen critical awareness of the new nation. Her analysis of the war

32. V. Davis, *Jefferson Davis*, vol. 2 (New York: Belford Co., 1890), 18-19.

33. Davis, *Jefferson Davis*, 301-06.

defied the expectations of those who expected her to be a rabid supporter of the Rebellion. Richmond society did not believe that Varina devoted herself to the cause, and because of this, they attempted to discredit her.

In the early years of the war several scandals exacerbated southerners' concerns about Varina. In May 1862, Jefferson sent his wife and children to Raleigh because Union troops were advancing towards Richmond. Many in the capital felt that the First Lady had abandoned her station, and found her lack of faith in Confederate troops disturbing. Catherine Edmonston wrote in her diary, "I fear she [Varina] does not strengthen her husband, or she would never have abandoned her post & set such an example to the rest of the women of the Confederacy."³⁴ Although Varina had not wanted to become an "example" for other Confederate women, people expected and demanded something other than prudence from her. The attacks from Richmond society did not come simply because Varina left the capital. The criticisms came from the expectations that some southerners placed on the First Lady, and they foreshadow the problems that Varina would have as an unwitting public figure in the 1890s.

Another scandal broke in May of 1862, when William A. Jackson—a coachman that the Davises had formerly enslaved—escaped to Union lines and gave two interviews to the *New York Tribune*. The second interview covered topics from Jefferson's physical ailments to the personalities of southern generals. Of particular interest, though, were the statements Jackson made about the First Lady. He described her as politically knowledgeable, as well as being interested in and critical of the intricacies of military

34. Catherine A. D. Edmonston, *Journal of a Secesh Lady: The Diary of Catherine Ann Devereaux Edmonston 1860-1866*, eds. Beth G. Crabtree and James W. Patton (Raleigh: North Carolina Division of Archives and History, 1979), 176.

maneuvering. When Jefferson refused to keep her informed, he noted, Varina interrogated generals or went to the War Office herself to obtain information. Upon learning that the Union had captured New Orleans, she reportedly said, “If it is really so that New Orleans is taken, we are done...If that is so, I have no further interest in the war.”³⁵

In her private correspondence with Jefferson, Varina displayed a critical understanding of the Civil War and her new nation. From Raleigh, Varina wrote her husband regularly. Her letters included updates on the children and their living situations, but they focused on military events. She told Jefferson that she devoted her evenings to “the Richmond papers, and the Bible,”³⁶ and filled her correspondence with pointed commentary on topics ranging from McClellan’s leadership of the Union Army to her opinions on the rumors she heard in Raleigh. She often asked Jefferson to verify or add to information that she had learned in newspapers.³⁷ When the press fell short, she wrote, “If it is possible send me dispatches every little while, there are such rumor mongers

35. “Jeff. Davis’s Coachman,” *New York Daily Tribune*, May 24, 1862, accessed May 2, 2015, *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*, Library of Congress (hereafter referred to as “*Chronicling America*,” which can be accessed online at chroniclingamerica.loc.gov. Individual articles can be found by searching for newspaper name and accessing the calendar view).

36. Varina Howell Davis to Jefferson Davis, May 26, 1862, in *The Papers of Jefferson Davis*, eds. Lynda Lasswell Crist, Mary Seaton Dix, and Kenneth H. Williams, vol. 8, 1862 (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1995), 199.

37. Varina Howell Davis to Jefferson Davis, [May 28, 1862?], in *Jefferson Davis Papers*, vol. 8, 200. In the letter, Varina wrote that she had learned from newspapers that the Confederacy had “been inaugurating balloons” for reconnaissance, and curiously asked, “Did they see anything?”

here.”³⁸ In a letter dated May 30, 1862, Varina responded to the rampant rumors by displaying her knowledge of the military’s movements. She wrote:

It seemed to me that McClellan would scarcely dare to fall back to defend Maryland, but that seems to be the expectation here. I presume he must fight or be deposed, and that right soon the panic about Washington would be increasing and public censure too strong for him—I hear a great many rumors here, and a great deal of twaddle about “dash,” but the only impression it makes is to provoke pity for so much ignorance. One man told me that he dreaded McClellan’s retiring to defend Washington he hoped for a fight.³⁹

Varina’s observations about McClellan, which differed from what she was hearing in Raleigh, proved to be astute. Just six days prior to composing her letter, Abraham Lincoln sent his general a telegraph, saying, “I think the time is near when you must either attack Richmond or give up the job and come to the defence [sic] of Washington.”⁴⁰

38. Varina Howell Davis to Jefferson Davis, June 3, 1862, in *Papers of Jefferson Davis*, vol. 8, 220.

39. Varina Howell Davis to Jefferson Davis, May 30, 1862, in *Papers of Jefferson Davis*, vol. 8, 205-06.

40. Lincoln telegraph to George B. McClellan, May 24, 1862, quoted in Stephen W. Sears, *George B. McClellan: The Young Napoleon* (New York: Ticknor & Fields, 1988), 190; and Ethan Sepp Rafuse, *McClellan’s War: The Failure of Moderation in the Struggle for the Union* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005), 215-16. In Varina’s May 30 letter, she was apparently responding to rumors that McClellan was preparing to abandon his successful push into the Peninsula in order to defend Washington. Although it is unclear exactly what prompted these rumors from the Confederate perspective—the Peninsula Campaign had been decisively successful to this point—it appears that Lincoln also entertained the idea of bringing McClellan back to Washington. After Stonewall Jackson’s victory at Front Royal on May 23, Rafuse writes that Lincoln “became frantic for the safety of Washington” (215). In response to his fears, Lincoln composed his May 24 telegram to McClellan and ordered Irvin McDowell’s troops to remain in the Shenandoah Valley rather than join McClellan’s forces on the Peninsula. McClellan, Rafuse writes, was “flabbergasted” by Lincoln’s decision to withdraw support from the Peninsula Campaign in favor of the Shenandoah Valley. In Raleigh, perhaps the general sentiment—much like Lincoln’s—was that Jackson’s

Varina's critical analysis of the events of the Civil War demonstrates that she was more than a passive observer. In addition to her denunciation of the calls for "dash," she criticized those around her that thoughtlessly celebrated the Confederacy's every move. She wrote, "The expectations here of [General "Stonewall"] Jackson's campaign are vague, and senseless, as well as the wildest ever dreamed of and I don't know how mortal man is to do the half cut out for him."⁴¹ Varina favored calm analysis to jingoism, and never shied away from offering Jefferson her opinion on current events.

When Varina made her exclamation about New Orleans, she displayed her keen understanding of the southern economy. In the antebellum period, New Orleans served as the domestic center of the cotton kingdom. Walter Johnson describes the city as a center of trade that was comparable to Liverpool and New York City. He argues that the Crescent City port were integral to the American side of the global cotton market. Cotton was the driving force of the southern economy, and Varina's statement shows that she understood its importance to the Confederacy. Sven Beckert demonstrates that the "empire of cotton" connected southern planters to global markets. Varina, who managed Brierfield plantation, understood New Orleans's immense value in connecting the region to the transatlantic cotton economy. Varina's belief that New Orleans was integral to the

victory at Front Royal posed a serious threat to Washington. Varina's letter suggests that Confederates—at least in Raleigh—expected Jackson's forces to push forward into the capital. However, she also rails against those who would rather see McClellan continue his attacks so that the "fight" they wished for would come. Although Varina did not believe McClellan would return to Washington, she would have preferred it to any "fight" that put her husband in direct danger.

41. Varina Howell Davis to Jefferson Davis, June 3, 1862, in *Papers of Jefferson Davis*, vol. 8, 220.

Confederacy's future proves that she understood it as a nation with political and economic needs that had to be balanced with the military's needs.⁴²

Although the new nation created new opportunities, many citizens felt that the First Lady should not have any doubts about the nation or its military, and she definitely should not publicly voice her displeasure. Unfortunately for Varina, she did not live up to the expectations that came with her position as the chief executive's wife. Instead of simply devoting herself to "the cause," she critically analyzed situations and then voiced her opinions. The "correct" response to the fall of New Orleans—when one was fully devoted to the cause—was to fall into a short-lived depression that quickly faded into determination. In Montgomery, W.L. Yancey wrote that "the fall of New Orleans has created a profound impression upon the public mind here—While there is some depression—there is far more determination to make renewed exertions—and to sacrifice all for the cause."⁴³ Additionally, Varina retained her friendships from Washington, and

42. Walter Johnson, *River of Dark Dreams: Slavery and Empire in the Cotton Kingdom* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2013), 84-86; Sven Beckert, *Empire of Cotton: A Global History* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2014); Matthew Pratt Guterl, *American Mediterranean: Southern Slaveholders in the Age of Emancipation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008); and Michael T. Bernath, "The Confederacy as a Moment of Possibility," *Journal of Southern History* 79, no. 2 (May 2013): 299-338. Matthew Guterl writes that seceding from the Union was an ambitious attempt to perfect the political, social, and economic systems the South had cultivated. Defeat would permanently end this ambition, along with the economic opulence created by slave capitalism. Although defeat ended the project in nationhood, Guterl notes that the "Confederacy brought new light and air to these ideas, allowing them to grow in unpredictable ways." Michael Bernath describes the Confederacy as a "moment of possibility" that gave the South the opportunity to reform several aspects of society. Free from conflicts with northern abolitionists, some Confederates felt that they could finally push for gender, slavery, and political reforms.

43. William Lowndes Yancey to Jefferson Davis, May 5, 1862, in *Papers of Jefferson Davis*, vol. 8, 164-65.

even allowed them to influence her views on the war. After hearing rumors that Stonewall Jackson had captured several Union officers, she wrote that although she was pleased, “on Mrs. McLane’s [Margaret Sumner McLean] account I am really sorry we have [General Edwin V.] Sumner, though I would not say so to anyone but you.”⁴⁴

Despite her genuine desire for the Confederacy to win, Varina was not rabid.

Throughout the war, Varina’s inability to hide her reservations about the Confederacy’s chances caused problems in the press. In January 1864, for example, another enslaved person—James Dennison, who had been with the Davises for over twenty years—escaped to Union lines and gave an interview. He commented on Varina’s doubts, saying that “Mrs. Davis, in conversation with female friends frequently talks of the Confederacy as hopeless, and is loud in regrets for the lost pleasures of Washington.”⁴⁵ Earlier in the war, Varina intimated this hopelessness in a letter to Jefferson. She wrote, “If we are not successful, God has ordered it, and will choose his own time and field...as for me, I fear it is one word for the Confederacy, and ten thousand words of prayer for you.”⁴⁶ In response to the press coverage of his wife’s concerns, Jefferson wrote to Varina in Raleigh, admonishing her to speak with caution. He wrote, “We must learn to measure our words with a caution proportionate to the values others place on them.” With this statement, he cautioned the First Lady to pay

44. Varina Howell Davis to Jefferson Davis, July 6, 1862, in *Papers of Jefferson Davis*, vol. 8, 282.

45. “Narrative of an Intelligent Contraband,” *The Smoky Hill and Republican Union*, February 20, 1864, *Chronicling America*.

46. Varina Howell Davis to Jefferson Davis, June 5, 1862, in *Papers of Jefferson Davis*, vol. 8, 224.

attention to the way that the public would interpret her words and actions. He begged her to “be of good cheer and continue to hope that God will in due time deliver us from the hands of our enemies,” so that the “others” would stop attacking her in the press.⁴⁷

When calling into question Varina’s support for the southern cause, Richmond elites often directly attacked her physical appearance and her background. In doing so, they attempted to use the “southern lady” trope to discredit the First Lady’s position of authority, as well as the presumed absence of support for the Confederate cause.⁴⁸ Many

47. Jefferson Davis to Varina Howell Davis, May 16, 1862, in *Papers of Jefferson Davis*, vol. 8, 178-79.

48. Historians have dismissed the idea of a drastic cultural difference between the antebellum South and the antebellum North. With this dismissal, the concept of the traditional southern lady as a legitimate ideal for feminine behavior in the antebellum South is not viable. Elite southern women lived very similar lives to their counterparts in the North, with access to education, domestic power, and political influence. For the view of southern women as distinctive from American women, see Anne Firor Scott, *The Southern Lady: From Pedestal to Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970). Scott argues that “in the South the image of the lady took deep root and had far-reaching social consequences. The social role of women was unusually confining there” (x-xi). Additionally, she presents elite white women as victims of a paternalistic slave society. When the Civil War brought drastic change to southern culture, southern women were able to expand their influence and break out of the mold of paternalism.

More recently, historians place elite white women within the slave system, not as outliers or victims of it. Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1988); Laura F. Edwards, “Down From the Pedestal: The Influence of Anne Scott’s Southern Ladies,” in *Writing Women’s History: A Tribute to Anne Firor Scott*, ed. Elizabeth Anne Payne (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2011), 28-63; and Walter Johnson, *Soul by Soul: Life Inside the Antebellum Slave Market* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 78-116. Fox-Genovese criticizes Scott’s view, writing that “It has even been argued that the plantation mistress closely resembled slave women in being the victim of the double burden of patriarchy and slavery” (47). Instead, she posits that slaveholding women recognized that “their class position afforded them innumerable privileges relative to the other women in their society” (96). Elite white women participated in the system of slavery, which was central to the southern culture, politics, and economy. Edwards argues that southern women were active in the antebellum public sphere, helping to shape the trajectory of southern history. Johnson ties

southerners noted Varina's physical appearance, which they often described as "dark" rather than the preferred "fair." Sallie Putnam, a member of Richmond's elite society, wrote of Varina, "She may justly be considered a handsome woman, of noble mien and bearing, but by no means coming under the description of the feminine adjective 'pretty.'"⁴⁹ Others referred to her as "a coarse Western woman"⁵⁰ and believed her to be unfit to be Jefferson's wife. Catherine Edmunston, who was critical of Varina's flight to Raleigh in May 1862, attempted to rationalize Varina's supposed lack of faith in the Army of Northern Virginia by expressing her own doubts about Varina's background. She wrote:

Mrs. Davis is, I hear, a Philadelphia woman! That accounts for her white nurse & her flight from Richmond. I fear that she is not worthy of her husband, for I learn that she is neither neat or Ladylike in her dress, travels in old finery with bare arms covered with bracelets. Would that our President, God bless him, have married a truehearted Southern woman for a wife. She never would have deserted him!⁵¹

When southerners criticized Varina's appearance, it often coincided with opinions on the First Lady's devotion to the Confederacy. By combining her opinion of Varina's retreat from Richmond with criticism of her physical appearance and sectional ties, Edmunston used the "southern lady" trope to discredit her. Additionally, Richmond

the patriarchal Old South's idealism directly to the slave markets. In slave markets, white men could purchase their legitimacy, as well as their wives' legitimacy.

49. Sallie A. Brock Putnam, *Richmond During the War: Four Years of Personal Observation* (New York: G.W. Carleton & Co., Publishers, 1867), 38.

50. Mary Boykin Miller Chesnut, *Mary Chesnut's Civil War*, ed. C. Vann Woodward (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1981), 136.

51. Edmunston, *Journal of a Secesh Lady*, 180.

editor Edward A. Pollard—one of the Davises’ most voracious critics—described Varina as “tawny, even to the point of mulattoism,” while implying that she exerted a great deal of influence over her husband’s “delicate” nature.⁵² By portraying her as dark-skinned, coarse, and unrefined, some southerners used a layered attack on Varina’s very image as First Lady.

In addition to attacking Varina, southerners voiced displeasure with Jefferson’s leadership throughout the war, arguing that he was not prepared to do whatever it took to win the war against the Union. On several occasions, editors of prominent southern newspapers such as the *Richmond Examiner* and *Charleston Mercury* attacked Jefferson’s military leadership. The most prominent example was the response to the failure to invade Washington after the Confederate victory at Manassas. The press, influenced by P.G.T. Beauregard’s report that Jefferson had stopped his impending invasion, believed that the President’s inaction might have stopped the Confederacy from gaining a total victory in the early stages of the war. The *Mercury*, which constantly lambasted Jefferson, hoped that the next time the Confederacy won a battle, they “would not have to wait half a year for wagons or for Jeff Davis to recover his health or for Beauregard to write a fancy report of the battle.”⁵³

The fiercest analyses of Jefferson’s policy often came from those who had been rabid secessionists before the war. They believed that Jefferson—a moderate in the antebellum period—did not deserve to lead the Confederacy. Mary Chesnut, who lived in

52. Edward A. Pollard, *Life of Jefferson Davis: With a Secret History of the Southern Confederacy* (Philadelphia, PA: National Publishing Company, 1869), 154-55.

53. *Charleston Mercury*, quoted in Chesnut, *Mary Chesnut’s Civil War*, 205.

Charleston during the war, complained about the *Mercury*'s unending criticisms of Jefferson. She speculated that the *Mercury*'s editor had hated Jefferson from the very moment he was chosen to lead. Many South Carolinians believed that the Revolution demanded a fire-eater. Chesnut thought that the *Mercury* favored Barnwell Rhett, who “had howled nullification, secession, &c so long, when he found his ideas taken up by all the Confederate world” felt that he should rule the new nation.⁵⁴

The inauspicious relationship between Varina and her southern critics during the war did not end with the fighting in 1865. Her relationship with the people of the South would never quite recover from the war years. While Jefferson was imprisoned at Fortress Monroe, Varina's loud cries for his release gained her some sympathy across the South.⁵⁵ However, the former First Lady did not forgive the southern people for putting the Davis family into the presidency and then criticizing their moves. After being released from prison, Jefferson believed that the southern people would take care of him and his family, but Varina privately expressed doubts. She wrote:

I dread the return to America as a country in which we are to live and die...I turn sick with the thoughts of what you will undergo while you see the ideal people of your lifes [sic] long love change into a mere temporizing people of expedients—

54. Chesnut, *Mary Chesnut's Civil War*, 142; and Davis, *Jefferson Davis*, 435-39. Davis discusses the animosity that Jefferson faced in the press, particularly from the *Charleston Mercury* and the *Richmond Enquirer*. Editors attacked anything from actual war policy to Davis's religious choice—he was confirmed in the Episcopalian church early in the war. Davis argues that the Confederacy was rife with dissent and discord. Jefferson's critics illustrate this point; the Confederacy's president did not often find support in Congress, the press, or at times from the public.

55. Cashin, *First Lady of the Confederacy*, 175. Cashin writes that in the immediate aftermath of the war, Varina “was the wife of a prisoner whom many white Southerners saw as a martyr for the cause, which mitigated much of the animosity toward him, and her.”

this death in life is the most harrowing of all sorrows....May God give you the strength to bear it. I have loved the people of our country through sympathy with you, but have not partaken thoroughly of all your expectations if I have of your enthusisms [sic].⁵⁶

This statement demonstrates Varina's absolute frustration with the South. Jefferson thought that his people would always support him, but Varina sensed that southerners would disappoint the Davises—who had sacrificed all for their “cause”—as they moved into the future.

Varina's private comments to Jefferson foreshadowed her problems in the future. Her later apprehension grew out of her experiences during the war. The memory of being criticized relentlessly in the press for simply understanding the prospects of the nation prepared Varina for her interactions with a younger generation of southerners. After defeat, Jefferson remained steadfastly loyal to the cause. He expressed disappointment that white southerners seemed to accept Reconstruction, and he spent much of his time contemplating the Confederacy's downfall. By contrast, Varina seems to have accepted reunion. She devoted her time to caring for her children and extended family, worrying about the family's finances, and securing her husband's release from prison. She did not and could not love the Confederacy—or the southern people—like Jefferson did.

56. Varina Howell Davis to Jefferson Davis, December 3, 1869, Jefferson Davis Papers, W.S. Hoole Library and Special Collections, University of Alabama.

CHAPTER II
**Varina Davis and Her “Pseudo Friends”: The First Lady and Lost Cause
Advocates, 1890-1902**

After the antebellum and Confederate periods ended, the Davises suddenly became less important as the South faced Reconstruction. In the aftermath of the Union’s victory, southerners immediately began creating a memory that both assuaged the pain of defeat and gave them political power moving forward. In order to regain control of their political systems, southerners needed to frame the Union victory in a way that made defeat honorable. While still mourning the loss of their dead, they simultaneously invented traditions, historical narratives, and political regimes that created a sense of “southern” identity that had not existed before the Civil War. They rejected the very notion of harmony within the union in favor of sectionalism. In the process, southerners began molding the past into something different from what Varina Davis had endured.

By the 1890s, groups like the United Daughters of the Confederacy (UDC) had inherited this post-war memory and made it completely unrecognizable to people like Varina. Their “Lost Cause” made ideas like the myth of the enduring South and the supposed moral superiority of the Confederacy into marching orders for a new generation of southern whites. Over time, the UDC cultivated an image of the Confederacy that they intended as a guide for their generation to follow. The Daughters’ mission to uphold the social structure of the past through education, memorialization, and charity depended on their ideas about antebellum and Confederate history. They relied on the created image of the South as a unique entity whose virtuous cause supported their mission in the present.

For those with stakes in this Lost Cause, Varina was a threat. The former First Lady’s experiences before, during, and after the Civil War did not align with the UDC’s

version of history. She represented a history of compromise, unionism, and diversity that undermined the very foundations of the Lost Cause. Instead of a virtuous rebellion precipitated by the need for self-government, Varina insisted that rabble-rousing South Carolinians had forced the South into rash action. Instead of being born of legitimate republican need, the Confederacy had been a poorly timed mistake. Secession had forced the Davises to abandon their position as unionists—a position not uncommon among southerners—to become the leaders of a rebellion that they did not fully embrace.

With this discord in mind, it seems inevitable that the Varina and the UDC would clash over their interpretations of the past. Indeed, after her husband's death in 1889, Varina increasingly found herself at odds with the self-appointed carriers of the invented Confederate traditions. Because she represented an actual, lived past—which undermined the premises that the Lost Cause rested on—she developed an openly contentious relationship with the Daughters and other southerners that last until her death in 1906. Through her words and actions, Varina consistently challenged the version of the past that was integral to the UDC's mission. In the last decades of her life, Varina battled with southerners over a variety of issues. When taken together, these clashes illustrate the incompatibility of the Lost Cause's created past with Varina's lived experience.

The differences between Varina's memory and the UDC's narrative are especially evident in their contrasting missions in the 1890s. Varina's stated purpose after her husband's death in 1889 was to vindicate Jefferson and his cause. The UDC's goal was to create an honorable past—through the veneration of the “Confederate generation”—that they could use in the present. On the surface, there seemed to be little tension. Because Jefferson served as the Confederacy's only president, the UDC sought to support him as a

part of his “generation,” and Varina sought only to defend her late husband. Yet despite the apparent harmony, the two parties engaged in open hostilities until Varina’s death in 1906.

The Beginnings of the Lost Cause

Immediately after the Confederacy’s defeat, southerners began to create a narrative that helped them understand the past and its implications in the present. Several different groups with varying interests initially shaped the Lost Cause. Ladies’ Memorial Associations (LMAs), prominent writers like Jubal A. Early, and militant groups like the Ku Klux Klan helped shape the memory of the Civil War into a politically usable narrative during Reconstruction. Each group fashioned their own version of the Lost Cause. Later, the United Daughters of the Confederacy (UDC) would take elements from all of these groups and bring the Lost Cause into the twentieth century. The narrative that these groups created in the aftermath of defeat set the stage for the later conflicts between Varina and the UDC.

Before the UDC’s rise to prominence in the 1890s, LMAs created certain Lost Cause traditions. On the surface, the main purpose of an LMA was to bury the Confederate dead and tend the gravesites. In the aftermath of an extraordinarily bloody and contentious war, however, the women of LMAs played a much more political role. In their quest to honor the dead, they organized activities like parades and Confederate Memorial Day, which were highly political affairs. These events celebrated the Confederacy, helped to create a romanticized “Old South,” and allowed former Confederate men to speak publicly about their past. Because women were officially

excluded from mainstream partisanship, memorial events put on by LMAs were not seen as treasonous, while events organized by the former Confederates themselves might have been viewed that way. Additionally, by celebrating the Confederate dead, LMAs participated in the creation of a southern national identity—an identity that was crucial to the Lost Cause.¹

The actions of LMAs and other Lost Cause groups not only served to honor the dead, but to challenge the notion of Confederate defeat. LMAs contributed to this by openly celebrating the Confederacy as the North attempted to reconstruct the South. When the Union won the Civil War in 1865, former Confederates immediately began to discredit their victory. Prominent writers such as Confederate general Jubal A. Early constructed a narrative that the Union won by military might alone. The Confederate cause, they contended, had been just and the Union victory did not change that. In 1868, Early and other like-minded men formed the Southern Historical Society (SHS) to help control the narrative of the Civil War. Under Early's leadership, the SHS presented a history of the war that made Confederate defeat into a moral victory. Although the Union's troops had won on the battlefield, Early proclaimed:

1. Caroline Janney, *Burying the Dead but Not the Past: Ladies' Memorial Associations and the Lost Cause* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 1-14, 61; and William A. Blair, *Cities of the Dead: Contesting the Memory of the Civil War South, 1865-1914* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 1-10. Janney argues that the Lost Cause's earliest appearance was in the mourning activities of the LMAs in the immediate aftermath of the war. She writes that "memorial activities lay clearly within the province of female mourning," so northern observers allowed them to carry on. However, "Because women were able to lay the groundwork for commemoration immediately after the war, ex-Confederates could later glorify their past without much resistance from northern observers" (5). Blair also examines the activities of LMAs. He places the memorialization efforts of LMAs within the context of the political response to Reconstruction. In "cities of the dead," he notes, "disloyalty and resistance to Reconstruction seemed to prosper" (5-6).

It has been, and will continue to be, thought better to deserve success than to achieve it; and by such, the deeds of the virtuous and truly great will always be valued according to their real merit, though success may not have crowned them.²

In making this statement, Early discredited the Union's victory by locating virtue in defeat. The Union defeated the South's troops, but they did not conquer their righteous cause.

Lost Cause groups like the LMAs and SHS sought to discredit the Union victory in the Civil War in order to dispute the legitimacy of Reconstruction governments. They insisted that the Union's military might had not supplanted the South's right to self-government. As such, the North did not win the right to control the South after Appomattox. Even during the war, the Confederacy desperately tried to reject the Union's claims to power. In response to Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation—which asserted the Union's right to plan and carry out emancipation—some in the Confederacy promoted plans to “arm-and-emancipate” southern slaves. In addition to a legitimate need for more troops, southern leaders wanted to control the emancipation process. Bruce Levine argues that the Confederacy's plan would have offered a more limited freedom than Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation. The proposals, Levine writes, “aimed to salvage not only southern national independence but also (and *thereby*) as much of the Old South's economy and basic social structure as could now be saved.”³ Although the Confederacy did not enact these proposals, Lost Cause groups in the aftermath of the war

2. *Proceedings of the Southern Historical Convention*, 22, quoted in Charles C. Osborne, *Jubal: The Life and Times of Jubal A. Early, CSA, Defender of the Lost Cause* (Chapel Hill: Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, 1992), 435.

3. Bruce Levine, *Confederate Emancipation: Southern Plans to Free and Arm Slaves during the Civil War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 15.

continued the legacy of rejecting the Union's right to "reconstruct" the South's racial and political structures.⁴

By the 1890s, the groups that appeared immediately after the Civil War had accomplished many of their goals. The LMAs had successfully reentered the bodies of Confederate soldiers and helped to create a strong sense of southern nationalism in invented traditions such as Confederate Memorial Day. Jubal Early and the SHS had joined the LMAs in discrediting the North's victory in order to question the legitimacy of Reconstruction. Additionally, groups such as the Ku Klux Klan had applied brutal violence in an effort to "redeem" the South politically. Although this violence was extralegal, southerners argued that the KKK simply used any means necessary to remove the illegitimate Reconstruction governments.

The UDC Inherits the Lost Cause

When Caroline Goodlett and Anna Raines founded the UDC in 1894, they inherited the traditions and narratives of the LMAs and the SHS. However, they faced different issues than the ones that had motivated their predecessors. The Reconstruction governments of the 1870s had been "redeemed" through the efforts of the first generation of Lost Cause advocates. Without the pressing political need of "redemption," the next generation applied the Lost Cause to a variety of new issues. Although the work of earlier

4. Levine, *Confederate Emancipation*, 1-15, 148-64; Osborne, *Jubal*, 430; and Richard Beringer, Herman Hattaway, Archer Jones, and William Still, Jr., *Why the South Lost the Civil War* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1986), 391-97. Levine equates the post-war Black Codes to the limited version of freedom proposed in the Confederacy's arm-and-emancipate policy. He writes that the "half-free status for blacks that Confederate emancipation's proponent's had projected in 1864-65 had by 1865-66 therefore become the best that maters thought they could hope for" (161). These black codes stood in stark opposition to the 14th and 15th Amendments, which proposed a much wider vision of black freedom.

southerners paved the way for the UDC, the Daughters would make the Lost Cause into something new.

The UDC formed after several regional organizations calling themselves “Daughters of the Confederacy” appeared in the early 1890s. These regional groups undertook new projects, such as opening homes for Confederate veterans. However, local leaders such as Raines (Savannah, Georgia) recognized that tying the organization’s purpose to the care of aging veterans meant that it would cease to exist when the last of them passed. In an article in the *Confederate Veteran*, Raines reflected on the transient nature of her current work, proposing a group “whose work should be the same that we were then doing, and, in addition, that of perpetuating the memories of these men when they should be no more.”⁵ Her organization, the Ladies’ Auxiliary to the Confederate Veterans’ Association, re-formed into an organization calling itself the “Daughters of the Confederacy.” Upon learning that other groups of women called themselves by the same title, Raines wrote to Goodlett and proposed that they create an overarching organization for all women’s auxiliary, memorial, and aid societies. Goodlett responded positively, and the two women began planning what would become the UDC.⁶

Goodlett and Raines imagined a group with multiple purposes. They would continue caring for poor and aging Confederate veterans, but they would also focus on a wider variety of social and political issues. Karen Cox writes that the UDC’s objectives

5. “United Daughters of the Confederacy: Origins, History, and Growth of the Organization,” *Confederate Veteran* 6, no. 10 (October 1898): 451.

6. Karen Cox, *Dixie’s Daughters: The United Daughters of the Confederacy and the Preservation of Confederate Culture* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2003), 16-18.

were “formally referred to as memorial, benevolent, historical, educational, and social,” which contributed to their main goal of, “vindication for the Confederate generation.”⁷ The wide variety of activities that the group would undertake over the next twenty years grew out of Raines’s desire to add “perpetuating the memories” of aging veterans to the mission of caring for them physically. Of course, the memory was not a “perpetuation” of Confederate memory, but a politically motivated interpretation of the past.

In September 1894, newspapers around the South announced, “a meeting of the ladies of the South is to be held at Nashville, Tenn. September 10. The object of the meeting is to adopt a constitution and by-laws for the organization and government of the Daughters of the Confederacy.”⁸ At this meeting, the UDC officially formed with six southern states as members.

Over time, the Daughters grew into one of the most powerful—if not the most powerful—proponent of the Lost Cause. However, the sacred memory they created and promoted differed from the one passed on to them. Many of the UDC’s members had not been alive during the antebellum period, while the majority had not reached adulthood until after the Civil War. This meant that these women were motivated by something other than an actual memory of the war.

Instead of being driven by the need to overturn Reconstruction, the UDC used the narrative of “Confederate victory” to advance an agenda for the 1890s. They created what

7. Ibid., 2-3.

8. “Daughters of the Confederacy,” *Staunton Spectator* (Virginia), September 19, 1894, accessed July 6, 2015, *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*, Library of Congress (hereafter referred to as “*Chronicling America*,” which can be accessed online at chroniclingamerica.loc.gov. Individual articles can be found by searching for newspaper name and accessing the calendar view).

Cox calls “Confederate progressivism”: a number of benevolent activities informed by their dedication to the Lost Cause—educating the descendants of poor Confederates, funding schools to produce young teachers that could teach the “true history” of the Civil War, and caring for aging Confederate veterans. The UDC’s benevolent mission was a response to the need to uphold the racial and social hierarchy of the South in the face of rapid change. They blended Progressive ideals—education and public welfare—with the manufactured traditions of the previous generation of Lost Cause promoters. In doing so, they created a contemporary purpose for the narrative of Confederate victory and the myth of the enduring South.⁹

The UDC’s mission of Confederate Progressivism depended on the acceptance of their version of Civil War and antebellum history. They relied on the idea that the South had always been a distinct entity that existed outside of the confines of the union. Continuing the legacy of Jubal Early, the Daughters also contended that the Confederacy’s cause was morally superior. Without the notion of a blameless past, Confederate Progressivism would lose its credibility in the present. As such, the

9. Cox, *Dixie’s Daughters*, 1-5, 40-44. Cox discusses the rise of the UDC in terms of its members being “New Women,” or women who admired and emulated their perceptions of the woman’s role of the antebellum world, while also establishing a political role in the “New South.” These women were well connected, educated, and at least middle class, but they had not grown up on the massive plantations of the antebellum South. They were more influenced by industrialism and Progressivism than they were by the “Old South.” Additionally, Cox argues that the political climate was instrumental to the changes in the Lost Cause in the 1890s. She writes that the UDC came to power as “white political supremacy was being sanctioned by every southern state legislature... Moreover, northern whites... expressed both sympathy and admiration for southern whites, adopting a more conciliatory tone on the subject of southern race relations. This... provided a supportive climate for a movement that celebrated white heroes” (4-5).

Daughters attacked anyone who questioned their interpretation of history. In discussing the founding principles of the UDC, Raines wrote:

I am pained to see and realize that so many of our people have accepted and are preaching the Creed that there is no North or South, but one nation...No true Southerner can ever embrace this new religion...and those who do should be ostracized by the 'Daughters of the Confederacy.'¹⁰

Raines understood that the UDC could not allow anyone to question the merits of the Confederate experiment. In order to carry out their mission, the Daughters insisted that their version of antebellum and Civil War history was indisputable.

The UDC's vitriolic insistence on their interpretation of the past put them at odds with people in the North and South. People across America noted that the Daughters' rhetoric made them treasonous. Isabel Worrell Ball, of the Woman's Relief Corps, wrote, "these 'howlers' of the U.D.C. are a menace to the South, and sow seeds of treason where lilies of peace are trying to take root."¹¹ Although condemnations poured in from northerners, it is important to note that the Daughters also faced a fair amount of criticism from the South. R.J. Cooke, editor of the *Methodist Advocate Journal*, wrote that while the UDC was usually harmless, their recent rhetoric made him uncomfortable. He wrote:

10. Anna Raines to Caroline Goodlett, April 29, 1894, Rutherford Scrapbooks, vol. 2, *Museum of the Confederacy*, cited in Caroline Janney, *Remembering the Civil War: Reunion and the Limits of Reconciliation* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013), 243.

11. "Rallied Against Histories," *National Tribune* (Washington, D.C.), November 21, 1912, cited in Janney, *Remembering the Civil War*, 261. On pages 247-251, Janney describes the Women's Relief Corps (WRC) as a foil to the UDC. They celebrated the Union's victory and attempted to carry on patriotism attached to the Union cause. The WRC used education, carrying for veterans, and patriotic displays as part of their "patriot instruction campaign," which Janney argues was "not only national in scope; it was also aimed in large part at white southerners" (247).

[The UDC] takes itself quite seriously, or thinks it does, and emphasizes its self-assumed mission by misrepresenting the heroes and principles of the American Union. One essayist read a paper glorifying the Confederacy and asserting that its principles were right. Now if this sort of treason is permissible, why not allow Emma Goldman, the ‘Daughter of Anarchy’ to address audiences and declare the principles of anarchy to be right?¹²

Historians have argued that the UDC’s intransigence was the result of their opposition to sectional reconciliation: the idea that as the Civil War grew more distant, the majority of northern and southern people agreed on a common narrative of the conflict. This allowed the former enemies to put aside their differences and celebrate a common history that focused on military valor and sacrifice. Historians traditionally argue that the Daughters opposed reconciliation because the group focused on vindicating the Confederate generation. The UDC sought to stall the progress of reconciliation until after they had achieved a full exoneration of their predecessors in the form of a northern acceptance of their version of the Civil War.¹³

12. “Daughters of the Confederacy Criticised,” *Confederate Veteran* 10, no. 1 (January 1902): 3-4.

13. David Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2001), 3-8; Cox, *Dixie’s Daughters*; Janney, *Remembering the Civil War*; M. Keith Harris, *Across the Bloody Chasm: The Culture of Commemoration among Civil War Veterans* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2014); Blair, *Cities of the Dead*, 1-10; and Gary Gallagher, *Causes Won, Lost, and Forgotten: How Hollywood & Popular Art Shape What We Know About the Civil War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 1-4. Blight provides the seminal argument for the centrality of reconciliation in the 1890s and 1900s. He argues that the southern “white supremacist” vision of the war joined with the northern “reconciliationist” vision around the joint interest of white supremacy. He examines battlefield reunions, arguing that the soldiers’ acceptance of one another signaled the reconciliation of the North and South. More recently, however, historians have questioned the simplicity of Blight’s model. M. Keith Harris specifically refutes Blight’s “reconciliation premise.” It obfuscates what he calls the more complex “negotiation process” of reconciliation (5). Blair and Gallagher each argue that Blight’s framework is too simplistic and that reconciliation was not as straightforward as it

Although historians contend that the Daughters set themselves apart based on their vehement opposition to sectional reconciliation, this argument does not paint a complete picture of the UDC's motives. While it is true that the UDC opposed sectional reconciliation, their hostility was not simply because they wanted to "exonerate" and "vindicate." The fact that their missions in the present depended on a vision of the South as separate and morally superior meant that the Daughters had to contest reconciliation. They resisted not simply because of the desire to vindicate, but because their organization's power to guide the current generation was contingent upon people's acceptance of their interpretation of the past. The UDC certainly attacked reconciliation, but it was not the root of their vitriol. Reconciliation was simply one target of the UDC's larger campaign to assault anything that challenged their usable past.

Varina Davis and Challenges to the Lost Cause

Given the UDC's insistence on their version of the past, they resisted anything that suggested reconciliation in any form. Varina Davis, who had lived during the real war, remembered a markedly different history from the one that the UDC created. As discussed in Chapter I, Varina recalled the antebellum period and Confederacy in a way that challenged the UDC's constructions of the past. She had identified as a Whig and a unionist. In her mind, the Confederacy was a mistake from the outset, as fire-eating

seemed at battlefield reunions. Janney argues that women—of both sections—were much less likely to espouse reconciliationist rhetoric than their male counterparts. Of the UDC, she writes, "Reconciliation, however, clearly was not the objective of the Daughters... The UDC was committed first and foremost to vigilantly protecting the memory of the Confederacy—whatever the cost" (258). In the same vein, Cox wrote that the UDC "remained steadfast in their belief that reconciliation was possible only when the Confederate generation was exonerated."

secessionists had forced sensible people to forego any further compromises. Varina's memory contested every aspect of the UDC's mythology.

On several occasions throughout the last decades of Varina's life, her words and actions challenged the UDC's manufactured history. In several episodes, she faced intense criticism from southerners over seemingly unconnected and unimportant decisions. From issues such as where the former First Lady resided to her opinion on the rhetorical significance of memorial arches, Lost Cause groups found reason to disparage Varina. The battles over seemingly trivial issues illustrate the fundamental point. The history Varina remembered and wanted to commemorate was irreconcilable with what the Lost Cause had created.

Despite Varina and the UDC's major differences, some historians have placed the two in the same group of anti-reconciliationists. Janney, in her examination of women and reconciliation, noted, "many of Varina Davis's public comments and writings served to inflame rather than dampen sectional hostilities." The example Janney cites in support of this statement is a letter in which Varina "sternly defended the Confederate cause."¹⁴ However, presenting Varina as an anti-reconciliationist and lumping her together with the Daughters conceals the disparities between the two. The reconciliation paradigm does not explain the contentious relationship that Varina had with the UDC.

"Why Mrs. Davis Lives North"

The first major conflict between Varina and promoters of the Lost Cause occurred when the former First Lady moved to New York City. On the surface, the move was a

14. Janney, *Remembering the Civil War*, 241-42.

practical choice for the recently widowed Varina and her daughter Winnie. After Jefferson's death in 1889, she struggled financially and could not afford the cost of living at a remote beach house in Mississippi.¹⁵ Additionally, Varina cited her poor state of health as a reason for leaving the South, as New York's climate was much more agreeable to her.¹⁶

Although her move seems innocuous on the surface, it created a serious rift between Varina and Lost Cause advocates. Varina did not believe that there was a compelling reason for her to stay in the South. As will be seen, she viewed the South as simply a part of the *nation* that she lived in. Whether she lived in New York or New Orleans, Varina defined herself as a citizen of the interconnected United States. Varina's move, therefore, challenged the Lost Cause's notion that the South was somehow separate from the rest of the country. By moving to New York, Varina illustrated a much more unified nation than the Lost Cause could admit. Although other southerners moved to the North after the Civil War, Varina's status as a public figure made the move much more controversial. Furthermore, while in New York, Varina befriended Julia Dent Grant, the widow of Union general and U.S. President Ulysses S. Grant. If the First Lady of the Confederacy could move to the North, feel at home, and make friends with former enemies, the myth of two separate societies fell apart. Additionally, Varina's absence

15. Varina Davis to Sallie Morgan, September 1, 1891, Jefferson Davis Papers, 1795-1913, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. (Hereafter cited as JD Papers, LOC). Varina wrote that she could not live at Beauvoir because "I have not the means to live there...as my income is not \$1,000 a year" and she had not profited from her book *Jefferson Davis: A Memoir by His Wife*.

16. Varina Davis to Maj. Morgan, April 20, 1891, JD Papers, LOC. From New York, Varina wrote that her doctor said she "could not survive a week to go to Jackson" because of her poor health and the humid climate of the South.

from the South meant that she could not participate in Lost Cause events, which further angered southerners.

The attacks that Varina faced focused on her devotion to “the South” as Lost Cause advocates defined it. On one occasion in 1897, the *Birmingham Age-Herald* complained that the former First Lady, “so rarely visit[s] the South or evince[s] any interest in this section, which conferred upon their husband and father the highest honor within its gift.” The author had also noticed Varina’s absence from Lost Cause events, and sarcastically noted the First Lady’s predisposition to illness. He wrote, “Invitations to Confederate reunions have been as productive of serious incapacitating illness...as the exposure to typhoid or malarial germs is to the majority of people.”¹⁷ To the *Age-Herald*’s editor, Varina’s absence from the South was disgraceful because it conflicted with her ability to be a spokeswoman for the Lost Cause.

In response to the criticisms over her move, Varina protested that moving to the North did not undermine her love for the South. In several statements, she illustrated that she believed that living in New York should not cause any problems. In response to an attack from Mississippians, Varina wrote:

How could they think that after all the sacrifices I have made for the South, born, bred in it, and indissolubly connected with it, indeed feeling daily the weight of the prejudices of our enemies against us because of our devotion to it...how could they suppose I did not love it? If anything could have alienated me it would be such a suggestion on their part.¹⁸

17. *Birmingham Age-Herald*, cited in “Sarcasm,” *Greenville Times* (Mississippi), September 8, 1897, accessed July 10, 2015, *Chronicling America*.

18. Varina Davis to Mary Kimbrough, November 18, 1894, JD Papers, LOC.

From New York, Varina chided those who attacked her for not loving “the South” as she defined it. She could not understand why southerners would question her love for the region simply because she lived elsewhere. To her, any suggestion that the sections were separate was artificial. In another letter, Varina again criticized those who questioned her love for the South, writing:

A Mississippi paper however is the only one which has attacked me north or south....As Akbar said of his foster brother, ‘There is a river of milk flows between’ Mississippi and me and I cannot cross it into enmity.¹⁹ If such an impression is sought to be made to my pseudo friends, I can trouble the stream.²⁰

Here, Varina’s strained relationship with the “pseudo friends” of the South is evident. Although Varina shared a common homeland—a metaphorical wet-nurse—with southerners, she warned that she would contest those who challenged her.

Southern criticism of Varina’s move was at least partially provoked by the news coverage she received in the North. The move already challenged a central tenet of the Lost Cause without northern commentators saying anything. However, newspapers such as the *New York Times* openly celebrated Varina’s presence in their region. In 1897, the *Times* chastised the author of the *Age-Herald* article, which it called “not very wise and not very courteous.” The *Times* wrote that the *Age-Herald* “criticises [sic], as severely as

19. Varina’s “river of milk” comment references a common story about Akbar, the third ruler of the Mughal Dynasty of India (ruled from 1556 to 1605). According to his chronicler, Akbar said, “Between me and Aziz is a river of milk that I cannot cross.” The “river of milk” refers to the fact that Akbar and Aziz shared a wet nurse as babies. Ruby Lal writes, “What Akbar’s words...point to is a relationship between two people that is made through milk, but is actually on par with blood-relationships” (Ruby Lal, *Domesticity and Power in the Early Mughal World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 194.

20. Varina Davis to Sallie Morgan, September 1, 1891, JD Papers, LOC.

the author dares, Mrs. Jefferson Davis and her daughter for taking up residence in New York and thus ‘abandoning’ the South.” Importantly, the author continued by writing, “What difference does it make, anyway? New York and Birmingham are not cities whose inhabitants are aliens to each other, or whose interests are opposed.”²¹ In this statement, the *Times* clearly rejected the idea that the South was different, while also defending Varina from southern critiques. The seemingly unlikely union of the Confederate First Lady and northern newspapers served as a major assault on the Lost Cause.

Varina’s actions further challenged the Lost Cause when she became friends with Julia Grant in 1893. The two women happened to be staying in the same hotel in New York, and they quickly struck up a friendship. Across the country, newspapers announced the meeting of the improbable friends. In Mississippi, editors included short snippets announcing the fact that the two had met. For its part, the *New York Times* editorialized about the meaning behind their meeting. On June 26, 1893, the *Times* quotes an unnamed “young lady” betrothed to a cavalry officer at West Point as saying:

I think it is the most beautiful thing.... One is the widow of the leader of the Confederacy and the other the widow of the soldier who did most to bring about victory. Of course each of them must have become a strong partisan of her husband’s views, and yet there they are... talking and smiling to each other on the friendliest terms. I think nothing like that ever occurred before, do you?²²

To a young woman of the UDC’s generation, such a friendship seemed impossible because of the fact that each woman was a “strong partisan” of her own views. To

21. “Personals,” *New York Times*, September 8, 1897, accessed July 10, 2015, (*New York Times* from 1851 to present can be accessed on the *Times*’ website by searching for the date of the article).

22. “Mrs. Grant and Mrs. Davis: The Acquaintanceship Promises to Ripen Into Warm Friendship,” *New York Times*, June 26, 1893, accessed July 11, 2015.

Varina, however, it must have felt like a natural extension of her past life as a Washington socialite. She was accustomed to having friends from all political and social backgrounds, and Grant was no exception to the rule.

While some celebrated the friendship of the two former First Ladies, it received tepid coverage in the South. Varina's relationship with Grant recalled a history that was contrary to what many southerners wanted to remember. The *St. Landry Democrat* dryly reported that "sensational features were lacking" from their meeting and wrote, "they sat down and had a quiet chat for a few moments. That was all."²³ As other newspapers around the country hoped that their acquaintanceship would "ripen into warm friendship," the *Democrat* downplayed the meeting altogether. Newspapers in Mississippi contained short paragraphs with little fanfare. The *Macon Beacon* simply reported that the two "had a long talk."²⁴ Southern newspapers could not explain the friendship without challenging the central tenets of the Lost Cause, so they simply reported the fact that the two women had met.

Jefferson's Ashes and Varina's Confederate Memory

When Jefferson died in December 1889, more than 200,000 people attended his funeral procession in New Orleans. A nearby newspaper noted that the funeral "was the most imposing spectacle ever witnessed in this country. Over 200,000 people witnessed the funeral cortege...a soldier, statesman, patriot and hero has gone to rest—may it be a

23. *St. Landry Democrat* (Louisiana), July 15, 1893, accessed July 11, 2015, *Chronicling America*.

24. "Mesdames Grant and Davis Meet," *Macon Beacon* (Mississippi), July 1, 1893, accessed May 1, 2015, *Chronicling America*.

calm and peaceful one.”²⁵ Despite this wish, the first two years of Jefferson’s eternal rest saw a contentious debate over where his remains should reside. States from across the former Confederacy petitioned the newly widowed First Lady for years following Jefferson’s death. Before his death, Jefferson told Varina, “you must take the responsibility of deciding this question. I cannot—I foresee a great deal of feeling about it will arise when I am dead.”²⁶ After a long decision process, Varina eventually decided to bury her husband in Richmond because of the way that she envisioned Jefferson’s role in Confederate memory. By choosing the capital of the Confederacy, Varina gave Jefferson’s ashes to the defeated nation rather than an individual city or state.

The most successful pleas for the right to bury Jefferson seem to be the ones that appealed to Varina’s view of Confederate memory. She wanted Jefferson to be memorialized properly, writing, “I feel I must guard [Jefferson] from forgetfulness and neglect.” Although Mississippi had a legitimate claim as their home state, Varina wrote, “I will not make an immediate decision but will certainly not give him to Mississippi until I see the preparation which I think due his services.”²⁷ Mississippi appears to have only appealed to Varina based on the fact that Jefferson lived in the state for the majority of his life. While she certainly considered this, her decision demonstrates that she wanted Jefferson to be placed in the context of the Confederate nation as a whole. Varina ultimately decided to bury her husband in Richmond because he had been “in many

25. *St. Tammany Farmer* (Covington, Louisiana), December 14, 1889, accessed July 19, 2015, *Chronicling America*.

26. Varina Davis to A. McC. Kimbrough, October 16, 1894, JD Papers, LOC.

27. Varina Davis to Maj. Morgan, April 20, 1891, JD Papers, LOC.

senses the property of the whole country” and “should rest among the heroic dead of all the states who fell in defense of the Confederacy.”²⁸

While Mississippi failed to place Jefferson in the context of the Confederate nation, other cities—such as New Orleans, Montgomery, and Richmond—petitioned the First Lady based on their relative importance in that context. New Orleans, which had done an admirable job of conducting Jefferson’s funeral and maintaining his temporary burial site, attempted to convince Varina based on its importance to the economic existence of the Confederacy. The *New Orleans States* wrote, “As it was eminently proper that New York, the great city of the North, should be chosen as the place of burial of Gen. Grant, so should New Orleans, the largest city of the South, be selected as the location of the monument and tomb of Jefferson Davis.”²⁹ This appeal would have connected with Varina, who had clearly demonstrated knowledge of New Orleans’s significance during the Civil War. She also made note of Montgomery’s bid, which recalled the fact that Jefferson had been elected and inaugurated there when it served as the provisional capital of the Confederacy.³⁰

Because Varina wanted her husband’s grave to be in a city that could properly honor his service to the Confederacy as a nation, Richmond had the strongest chance to

28. Mrs. Davis’s Decision,” *The Charlotte Democrat*, July 17, 1891, accessed July 10, 2015, *Chronicling America*.

29. *New Orleans States* quoted in *St. Landry Democrat* (Louisiana), June 27, 1891, accessed July 10, 2015, *Chronicling America*.

30. “Mrs. Davis’s Decision,” *The Charlotte Democrat*, July 17, 1891, accessed July 10, 2015, *Chronicling America*. Of Montgomery’s bid, Varina wrote: “Alabama remembered that within her borders he was elected President of the Confederate States; there he had been inaugurated; that Montgomery had been the first capital.”

win her approval. In 1891, the former Confederate capital sent a committee to New York to convince her. In their visit, they talked of the Davises' familial connections to the city—Winnie was born there during the war and another Davis child was already buried there—but they focused on Jefferson's role as president of the Confederacy. General Peyton Wise, a member of the committee, noted that “although the beloved one who has now departed shed much lustre [sic] upon Mississippi, . . . he achieved his chief glory and fame in Virginia.” The *Richmond Dispatch* noted that Varina “was much affected by those remarks,” and promised to make her decision within ten days.³¹ Shortly after the Richmond committee's overtures, Varina decided that the former capital was the best place to bury her husband.

The decision to bury Jefferson in Richmond was the result of Varina's desire for Jefferson to be placed in the context of the Confederacy as she remembered it. She felt that Richmond was the best place to ensure that her husband's service to the Confederate nation would be properly commemorated. After she made the decision, she wrote a letter that newspapers across the country published. This document described the efforts of other states to secure the president's remains. She thanked each state for their thoughtful appeals, but notably did not mention South Carolina's bid at all. According to the *New Orleans Picayune*, which reported the various claims to Jefferson's remains, “Charleston, that first blew the bugle-blast of southern independence, had their just claims.”³²

However, Varina would not have viewed South Carolina's claims as “just,” because she

31. “Jefferson Davis: The Richmond Committee Performs its Mission,” *Richmond Dispatch*, June 24, 1891, accessed July 10, 2015, *Chronicling America*.

32. *New Orleans Picayune*, cited in “Mrs. Davis' Decision,” *Richmond Dispatch*, July 19, 1891, accessed July 10, 2015, *Chronicling America*.

resentfully remembered them as fire-eaters that had forced the untimely secession movement in 1860. Her refusal to even thank South Carolina for their attempt demonstrates that Varina did not entertain proposals that did not appeal to her memory of the Confederacy.

The Humanity of General Grant

After moving to New York, Varina and Winnie occasionally wrote articles in Joseph Pulitzer's *New York World*. Many of the articles were about etiquette and history, but one in particular highlights the way that Varina's memory of the Civil War challenged the created Lost Cause version of history. In a 1901 article titled "The Humanity of General Grant," Varina used her personal connection to Julia Grant and her memory of the war to present an image of Grant as an honorable and heroic man. In response, the *Baltimore Sun* printed articles that refuted Varina's points based on a Lost Cause sense of historical merit. The *Sun* argued minute details of Varina's anecdotes because they challenged the very fabric of the Lost Cause.

Varina's article focused on Grant's leadership of the Union Army from Vicksburg to Appomattox, and presented him as a noble man. The primary point of contention in the article was an anecdote about Grant and Lee's interaction at Appomattox Courthouse—the very moment of Confederate defeat. She wrote:

A soldier might well have forgotten all but the desire to possess the sword of Lee, that precious symbol of the knighthood of the nineteenth century. General Grant did not keep it 'as a trophy,' but respectfully returned it to the hand that had made its fame as deathless as that of Excalibur.³³

33. "The Humanity of General Grant," *New York World*, April 1901, quoted in "An Immortal Quartette," *Pascagoula Democrat-Star* (Mississippi), May 17, 1901, *Chronicling America*.

Varina presented Grant as a figure of compassion during the Confederacy's defeat—a man who respected Lee and did not want to keep his sword as a trophy. In her story, Lee offered his sword to Grant in surrender, signifying that the South would no longer fight against the North. The underlying implication was that the hostilities were over and there was no further need for fighting. The two sides had conducted themselves honorably and there was a meeting ground for the future.

The implications of Varina's telling of the sword anecdote did not align with the Lost Cause. Her spin on the tale emphasized the exact moment of Confederate defeat—a moment that the Lost Cause downplayed as a mere military surrender. The tacit understanding between Grant and Lee that sectional hostilities would cease as the sections reunited completely undermined the claim that the moral purpose of the Confederacy had lived past Appomattox. As such, Varina's panegyric to Grant required a response from Lost Cause advocates.

The *Baltimore Sun* ran an article in August 1901 featuring the correspondence of Spotswood Bird (a private in the Army of Northern Virginia) and Colonel Thomas R. Marshall, which served as the rebuttal to Varina's "Humanity of General Grant." In the *Sun's* version of the sword story, Lee arranged the terms of surrender so that the Confederate officers would not have to relinquish their sidearms. Bird wrote:

It follows, of course, that neither General Lee himself, nor a single one of the Confederate officers ever thought for a moment about surrendering, or offering to surrender, his sidearms, but after receiving their paroles, marched out of the Federal lines with their sidearms buckled on.³⁴

34. "The Sword of Lee," *Baltimore Sun*, August 1901, quoted in *Southern Historical Society Papers*, vol. 29, edited by Robert A. Brock (Richmond, VA: Southern Historical Society, 1901), 269-73.

This version of events implied a completely different outcome than the one Varina remembered. By declining to participate in a ceremonial surrender, Lee discredited the Union's victory. His refusal to turn over his sword to the victorious Grant symbolized that the South's defeat was material only. By keeping his sword, Lee announced that the South would remain morally superior. Although the military was defeated, the cause was not.

"I am BITTERLY Indignant at the Disrespect"

While Varina made clear that her memory did not align with the Lost Cause, the UDC was becoming more powerful. This set the stage for direct conflicts between the two. The most prominent example of Varina's troubles with the UDC was the struggle to sell Beauvoir as a memorial to Jefferson and a soldiers' home, which will be covered in depth in Chapter III. Before Varina attempted to sell her house, however, she encountered the Daughters' wrath on several occasions. These episodes demonstrate the fact that Anna Raines's statement about who the Daughters' should "ostracize" did not apply exclusively to reconciliationists, but to a broader category of people who challenged the manufactured history that the Daughters depended on to carry out their mission.

The first of these direct conflicts came in 1898 with the tragic death of Winnie Davis at the age of 33. Because Varina chose Richmond as Jefferson's burial site, the Richmond UDC was responsible for maintaining the Davis family's plot in Hollywood Cemetery. According to Joan Cashin, Varina disagreed with the Daughters over the design of the statues for Winnie's grave. During the disagreement, someone apparently told the First Lady that there would be no room for any more people in the plot if they

followed her plan. The conflict was eventually resolved in Varina's favor, but the Daughters clearly did not appreciate her meddling in their commemorative efforts.³⁵

The Richmond UDC's response to their dispute with Varina was much more contentious than a simple artistic disagreement. First, they offered to pay for the First Lady's travel expenses, lodging, and meals so that she could afford come to Richmond for the funeral. However, they later "leaked the story to the press that one of the meals cost sixteen dollars."³⁶ The gravity of this leak rose from the earlier outrage over where Varina lived. In the Richmond dispute, southern women criticized her for accepting the charity of the South while living in the North. In response to the earlier criticisms, Varina wrote to her son-in-law Addison Hayes, complaining that the women accused her of being "indelicate" and un-ladylike.³⁷ They could not seem to let go of their attempts to shame the First Lady into moving back to the South. In response to the Daughters' criticisms, Varina wrote to her friend Anne Grant:

I am galled to the quick by things which have been published in the newspapers of the utterances of the Richmond chapter of the Daughters...I should not have accepted the invitation if I had suspected ill feelings on their part...I do not propose to explain my feelings to anyone but you, but I am BITTERLY indignant at the disrespect attempted to be offered...and the incivilities Mrs. Randolph [President of the UDC] managed to make us feel.³⁸

35. Cashin, *First Lady of the Confederacy*, 292-94.

36. *Ibid.*, 293.

37. Varina Howell Davis to J. Addison Hayes, Jr., n.d., Varina B. Howell Davis Letters, University of Alabama Library, Tuscaloosa, quoted in Suzanne T. Dolensky, "Varina Howell Davis, 1886 to 1906: The Years Alone," *The Journal of Mississippi History* 46, no. 2 (May 1985): 103.

38. Varina Davis to Anne Grant, December 2, 1898, Eleanor S. Brockenbrough Library, The American Civil War Museum, Richmond, Virginia, cited in Cashin, *First Lady of the Confederacy*, 293.

Clearly outraged by the Daughters' actions, Varina wrote to her son-in-law to complain that the ladies accused her of being "indelicate" and un-ladylike."³⁹ In this episode, Varina learned not to underestimate how fiercely the Daughters would respond to any direct challenges to their commemorative authority.

Despite their conflict in 1898, when the Richmond UDC proposed to build a Jefferson Davis memorial arch in 1902, Varina felt compelled to voice her opinion on the matter. The Daughters planned to build the arch at the intersection of Broad and 12th Streets, just below the state capitol. They evidently did not want Varina's opinion on the planned monument, and did not inform her of their plans. Polk Miller, writing in the *Richmond Dispatch*, asked Varina for her opinion on the matter, and she responded with perhaps the strongest public condemnation of the UDC that she ever wrote. She was infuriated that the Daughters would not ask her for her advice, due to her "vital interest in the matter." Although she apologized for doing so publicly, Varina strongly condemned the Daughters and their plan. She explained:

An arch has heretofore been built to perpetuate the deeds of the many, and has generally expressed the fact of some signal victory achieved by them: but a triumphal arch to the memory of a man whose cause failed...is an inappropriate expression of respect for his memory, and certainly will excite ridicule in many quarters.⁴⁰

39. Varina Howell Davis to J. Addison Hayes, Jr., n.d., Varina B. Howell Davis Letters, University of Alabama Library, Tuscaloosa, quoted in Dolensky, "Varina Howell Davis," 103. `

40. *Daily Clarion-Ledger* (Jackson, MS), March 28, 1902, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, Jackson, Mississippi.

The dispute over the symbolic significance of a memorial arch highlights the difference between Varina's memory and the UDC's Lost Cause. In the UDC's version of the past, the "cause" was victorious, even though the military had been defeated. An arch, the sign of "some signal victory," would appropriately commemorate Jefferson in the Lost Cause narrative. However, Varina clearly disagreed with the idea that Jefferson—and by extension anything connected to the Confederacy—had been victorious. While Varina vividly remembered the pain and embarrassment that defeat had caused her family, the Daughters morphed that same defeat into a victory that propped up their myths. In choosing an arch to commemorate Jefferson, the Richmond UDC supported the myth of Confederate victory—a myth that Varina could not endorse.

Varina's Final Defense

Varina's constant struggles with the UDC and other proponents of the Lost Cause took their toll on the First Lady. In 1894, amidst several of the controversies discussed above, Varina wrote an ante-mortem statement to answer to the "abuse or criticism showered upon me in every quarter of my native state." She sent the letter to her friends Judge Allen McCaskill Kimbrough and his wife Mary Kimbrough, whom she told could use it "hereafter as you please." The implication was that the Kimbroughs could read or publish the document upon her death as a means of vindicating her. Varina wrote the statement—of which only one typed page still exists—to answer the three criticisms that she felt were the most unfair. The first was her decision to give Jefferson's ashes to Richmond, the second that she did not praise Mississippi highly enough in *Jefferson Davis: A Memoir by His Wife*, and the third that she lived in New York instead of in the

South. Unfortunately, only her response to the first criticism, as well as the beginning of her response to the second, survives.

The initial purpose of the statement was to respond to specific critiques levied against her. In response to the vitriol over her decision to bury her husband in Virginia, Varina explained that Jefferson told her “you must take the responsibility of deciding this question. I cannot—I foresee a great deal of feeling about it will arise when I am dead.” Further, he told her that he would be just as content under an oak tree at Beauvoir as he would anywhere else. Despite this, even Jefferson knew that there would be multiple suitors for his remains. After Jefferson’s death, she explained, she required time to consider all of the options. She described a meeting with Governor Lowery of Mississippi, in which she “expressed no decision and yet so much expected to give him to Mississippi as if I had promised.” After leaving the meeting, Governor Lowery “said he was sure Mr. Davis would be given to another state!” and Varina “went home in utter desolation.” In response to the negative reviews of her book, she detailed the editors’ requirements and blamed the absence of Mississippi history on having to “condense” the work three times.⁴¹

Varina’s statement is more significant because of her intent in writing it than the actual contents. She wrote the statement in 1894 to answer to the specific claims against her in Mississippi. As the 1890s progressed, however, Varina came to view the document as a defense against all of the criticisms she faced. The UDC’s attacks in 1898 most likely influenced her to pen a letter to the Kimbroughs on December 20, 1899, reminding

41. Varina Davis to Judge Allen McCaskill Kimbrough, October 16, 1894, JD Papers, LOC.

them of the statement's existence. She wrote that although she marked the original document "not for publication," she intended that the Judge "do me justice knowing the cause unfound." She went on to explain that she did not want to publish it during her lifetime, "For there were never a truer saying than 'he who excuses himself accuses himself.'"⁴² In 1905, amidst the fierce struggle to sell Beauvoir, Varina returned to the ante-mortem statement, asking the Kimbroughs to make a copy so that "if anything happened to one the other might remain for it is in the nature of a death bed document and justifies me."⁴³ In the twelve years between writing the document and her death, Varina's ante-mortem statement had expanded from a response to the specific denunciations of Mississippians to something that "justified" her.

Varina's relationship with promoters of the Lost Cause highlights the incompatibility of the historical narratives remembered and commemorated by each side. Varina recalled a history of unionism that she believed to be intact in the 1890s. Moving to the North and becoming friends with Julia Grant did not contradict her love for the South. For the UDC, these seemingly innocuous personal decisions were a threat to their entire existence. They staked their mission of Confederate Progressivism on the notions of Confederate victory and the enduring South. Varina's actions, along with her words in stories like "The Humanity of General Grant," were embarrassing to the Lost Cause. The differences between Varina's lived experience and Lost Cause ideology explains why the Daughters, on numerous occasions, criticized the First Lady of the Confederacy publicly.

42. Varina Davis to Mary Kimbrough, December 20, 1899, JD Papers, LOC.

43. Varina Davis to Mary Kimbrough, October 1, 1905, JD Papers, LOC.

The constant attacks that Varina faced throughout the 1890s foreshadowed what was ahead in the most contentious struggle between the two groups: the sale and management of Beauvoir.

CHAPTER III
“Away in a Sea of Trouble over Things at Beauvoir”¹

“I find now that I have been grievously maligned about Beauvoir,” wrote Varina Davis on January 3, 1905.² It had been nearly three years since the Mississippi division of the Sons of Confederate Veterans (SCV) had agreed to purchase Beauvoir—her home on the Mississippi Gulf Coast—from Varina with the purpose of establishing a soldiers’ home and memorial to Jefferson Davis. This dual purpose was of utmost importance to Varina, whose primary mission in life was to memorialize her husband. Late in 1903, however, Varina heard rumors that the SCV was considering a proposal to knock down walls inside of Beauvoir to build a mess hall for the veterans. According to the terms of the deed, the Sons could not alter the house itself for any reason.³ In a letter to her friend and legal advisor Judge Allen McCaskill Kimbrough (hereafter referred to as the Judge), she disparaged the plan, writing:

I would rather give the money back to the Sons than have any desecration and injury done to the house....I will not sell it to be chopped up by persons who do

1. Varina Davis to the Kimbroughs, April 2, 1902, Jefferson Davis Papers, 1795-1913, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. (Hereafter cited as JD Papers, LOC).

2. Varina Davis to A. McC. Kimbrough, January 3, 1905, JD Papers, LOC.

3. National Register of Historic Places, “Beauvoir”—Jefferson Davis House, Biloxi, Harrison County, Mississippi, National Register #71000448. Beauvoir is a “Raised Louisiana Cottage.” It is raised on nine-foot brick pillars and designed to allow each room access to a porch that surrounds the entire house. All eight rooms open onto either the front or rear verandas to allow breezes from the Gulf of Mexico to ventilate the home. When Varina owned the home, at least two outbuildings existed—a kitchen and a library cottage that often served as a guesthouse. As they do today, the grounds stretched to the Gulf and were shaded by Live Oak trees. For images of the house please visit www.Beauvoir.org

not care for it as the residence of their only and tortured President who brought himself and his family to abject poverty by his devotion to the cause.⁴

In this instance, Varina shows that her priority in selling Beauvoir was enshrining the memory of her husband. Her response to the rumor demonstrates that she believed the house itself to be a physical embodiment of Jefferson's service to the Confederacy. To Varina, the suggestion to dismember the house was an affront akin to "desecrating" Jefferson. Even though she had struggled to sell Beauvoir for years, she was willing to terminate the sale because of the insult.

Varina's words—and her determination to see Jefferson enshrined at Beauvoir—often caused conflict with the other groups involved in the sale. The Mississippi division of the United Daughters of the Confederacy (UDC), led by Lizzie George Henderson, battled with Varina over the leadership of the house. They repeatedly twisted Varina's words, portraying her—and by association, her goals—in a negative way to advance their own agenda. When Varina said that she could not allow the desecration of Beauvoir, she clearly meant that the SCV could not physically alter the home. The UDC, however, distorted Varina's demands into a claim that Varina did not want the veterans to go in the house at all, because they were unworthy of entering a shrine to Jefferson. Despite the fact that Varina did not object to the veterans using the house, the UDC warped Varina's concern for Jefferson's memory into an outright dismissal of the veterans.

The Daughters believed that Varina's goals got in the way of theirs—to care for the veterans as part of their Confederate progressivism. In the controversy over whether the veterans could enter Beauvoir, the UDC showed that they were willing to

4. Varina Davis to A. McC. Kimbrough, November 24, 1903, JD Papers, LOC.

purposefully misrepresent Varina's interests. In response to their claims, Varina wrote, "I have heard that there are people in Biloxi and elsewhere who say I announced that my 'house was too good for the veterans,' etc. Now if I had stolen the house and traded on their sympathy they could abuse me no more."⁵ The abuse of the unnamed "people in Biloxi" was absurd, and Varina knew it. Despite this, she did not publicly respond to the criticisms, knowing that the people of Mississippi would not necessarily take her side in the dispute.

In the years following Jefferson's death, Varina's relationship with Mississippians had been strained at best and hateful at worst. When she wrote the Judge complaining about the "people in Biloxi," she referenced Sir Walter Scott's poem *The Lady of the Lake*. She wrote, "'Oh who... would be the King of such a many headed monster thing,' as the 'People,' but I will love them as long as I live nevertheless." In this line, Varina paraphrases the situation of King James V of Scotland, who is embroiled in a feud with his former mentor, James Douglas. In Canto 5, stanza 29, the people hail Douglas as their leader and declare their love for him over James V. The next stanza displays James V's resentment of the people, who he believes are "fantastic, fickle, fierce, and vain" because of their changing allegiances.⁶ Varina equates herself to James V, the legitimate king whom the people reject in favor of Douglas. In her comparison, she is King James, and the people have rejected her as a legitimate representative of Confederate memory. Instead, they sided with the UDC and the Lost Cause memory of the war. This

5. Varina Davis to A. McC. Kimbrough, October 16, 1904, JD Papers, LOC.

6. Sir Walter Scott, *The Lady of the Lake* (Edinburgh: John Ballantine and Co., 1810), Canto V, stanzas 29-30, Project Gutenberg, accessed August 3, 2015, <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/3011/3011-h/3011-h.html>

comparison speaks volumes to Varina's understanding of her place in Civil War memory. She recognized that in order to represent Jefferson correctly, she would have to take on the UDC and prevent them from controlling Beauvoir.

The "Mount Vernon" of the Confederacy and Confederate Progressivism

The contention surrounding the sale was not simply a fight over money or over the building itself. It was a battle over who would get to determine what the site represented. On the one hand, Varina placed innumerable value on the house as a physical representation of Jefferson's sacrifices and contributions to the Confederacy. After years of battling with the UDC over Jefferson's memory, Varina believed that Beauvoir could be the quiet memorial to Jefferson that she had so desperately wanted.

Varina wanted memorialization at her house to represent the version of history that she remembered—a tragic history of personal sacrifice on behalf of a failed national experiment. After the Confederacy fell, Jefferson fell from grace. He had been exiled, stripped of his citizenship, and largely forgotten as southerners faced Reconstruction. At Beauvoir, he found a quiet refuge, away from torturous reminders of his role in the Confederacy's defeat. Beauvoir symbolized a new beginning for Jefferson, a place where he could escape from his past failures and the failure of the Confederacy. After Varina left for New York City in 1890, the house stood empty and neglected, nearly destroyed by the ravages of nature and time. Beauvoir's decay in some ways mirrored Jefferson's downfall, and Varina wanted to rescue Beauvoir—and Jefferson's legacy—by memorializing the past as she remembered it. Her house on the coast of Mississippi was the logical place to construct this narrative.

Varina's efforts to preserve Beauvoir as a memorial to Jefferson and her memory of the Civil War drew comparisons to Ann Pamela Cunningham's preservation of Mount Vernon. In the 1850s, Cunningham rescued the famous home of George Washington from hotel developers and preserved it as a memorial to a sacred past. In doing so, she promoted unionism and compromise as sectional tensions grew.⁷ Cunningham's contemporary efforts to save the Union through preserving Mount Vernon struck a chord with Varina in the 1890s. Under the UDC, the Lost Cause grew into something that Varina did not recognize. She remembered a history of unionism and compromise—a history that Cunningham and Mount Vernon represented. Varina wanted Beauvoir to resemble Mount Vernon in more than the preserving a statesman's home. She believed that Beauvoir could potentially serve as a reminder of what Confederates lost when they left the Union.⁸

7. Patricia West, "Inventing a House Undivided: Antebellum Cultural Politics and the Enshrinement of Mount Vernon," in *Domesticating History: The Political Origins of America's House Museums* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Scholarly Press, 1999); and Matthew Mason, "'The Sacred Ashes of the First of Men': Edward Everett, the Mount Vernon Ladies Association of the Union, and Late Antebellum Unionism," in *Remembering the Revolution: Memory, History, and Nation Making from Independence to the Civil War*, eds. Michael A. McDonnell, Clare Corbould, and Frances Clarke (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2013). An integral part of the Mount Vernon Ladies' Association was the "bond of Union and political regeneration." The growing sectional tension motivated Cunningham and other members of the MVLA in their work.

8. Late in the process of selling the home, several newspapers reported on Beauvoir being the "Mount Vernon of the Confederacy": Bertha Demaris Knobe, "Historic Houses Preserved by Societies of American Women," *New York Tribune*, May 7, 1905, *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*, Library of Congress (hereafter referred to as "*Chronicling America*," which can be accessed online at chroniclingamerica.loc.gov. Individual articles can be found by searching for newspaper name and accessing the calendar view); and "Where Jeff Davis Lived and Wrote," *The Times Dispatch* (Richmond, VA), June 4, 1905, *Chronicling America*.

After Jefferson's death, Varina wanted to preserve the house with this memory in mind. Varina's ideal "Mount Vernon of the Confederacy" would not be steeped in all of the mythology of the Lost Cause, but a monument to the sacrifices that Jefferson made when he resigned his U.S. Senate seat and later became the president of the Confederacy. In the 1890s, Varina believed that the younger generation of southerners did not understand or even care about the actual effects of the Civil War on her generation. In a letter to Kimbrough, she defended herself by outlining the material losses triggered by the Davises' decision to leave the Union. However, she also exposed the way that she constructed "the South" as a part of the Union in her memory. In defending her love of the South, she wrote that her grandparents—Richard Howell and James Kempe—had "served it in battle." Both of her grandfathers joined the military during the Revolutionary War. While Kempe was from Virginia, Howell hailed from New Jersey, a state that is not "southern." When Varina argues that her grandparents "served" the South, she exposes the fact that before the Civil War, the "South" did not exist outside of the concept of the Union. To Varina, her grandfathers' service was to the nation, which in turn meant that they had "served" the South. Varina's memory of the past placed the South firmly within the confines of the Union, and therefore undermined the Lost Cause myth of a separate South.⁹

In Varina Davis to Mary Kimbrough, November 12, 1894, JD Papers, LOC. Varina wrote that she envisioned Beauvoir becoming a "Mt. Vernon" of the Confederacy, a quiet retreat kept "in remembrance of [Jefferson]." This desire became a definitive condition of any potential sale, and Varina noted that she would "take less for it than we could get in order to have it thus kept."

9. Varina Davis to Mary Kimbrough, November 18, 1894, JD Papers, LOC. In the letter, she wrote, "Now...as to the Southern people thinking I do not love the South..."

Varina's interpretations of the Confederacy, however, conflicted directly with those promoted by groups like the UDC. Instead of a quiet remembrance of Jefferson's sacrifices, the UDC wanted Beauvoir to serve as a monument to the present-minded Lost Cause. The UDC administered care to veterans at Beauvoir but generally wanted nothing to do with Varina and her interpretations of the past. The ten-year struggle to sell the house was the culmination of the years of contempt between Varina and Lost Cause organizations, stemming from their fundamental disagreements about the Confederacy and the Civil War.

The UDC did not want to participate in Varina's attempt to memorialize Jefferson's sacrifices because their created past did not mesh with the idea that the Davises had made sacrifices. The tragedy in Varina's history of the Civil War was that she and Jefferson had been in the wrong place at the wrong time. As discussed in Chapter II, on the eve of secession, the Davises were dedicated members of the Union who did not believe that secession was yet necessary. In the 1890s, the UDC's Lost Cause created a contrasting vision of the past that completely erased the possibility of the Davises being unionists. Instead of a unified country, the United States had always consisted of a "North" and a "South" that needed to split apart. In this fictional past, people from "the South" did not lose anything by joining the Confederacy. The Confederacy was a natural

How could they think that after all the sacrifices I have made for the South, born, and bred in it, and indissolubly connected with it, indeed feeling daily the weight of our enemies against us because of our devotion to it, my grandparents having served it in battle and with their means as far as was in their power, how could they suppose I did not love it. If anything could have alienated me it would be such a suggestion on their part. My husband burned up the fortune of our children: 1,800 bales weighing 400 lbs. a piece at the time cotton was nearly \$1, a pound, and I approved of the act to serve the Confederacy."

attempt to create a political state out of the already existing unique entity called the “South.” What Confederates lost was blood on the battlefield and property during the war. Suggesting that the simple act of joining the Confederacy was a sacrificial act discredited the entire premise of the Lost Cause. If the UDC’s myth of an enduring South were true, there would be no reason for the First Lady of the Confederacy to use the term “sacrifice.” Varina’s memory and her intended memorialization at the abandoned Beauvoir house would undermine the UDC’s created past.

Further, the UDC did not see Beauvoir as a natural memorial to anything simply because the conquered president lived there. Jefferson’s status as “defeated ex-President” did not fit within the scope of the “Confederate victory” ethos that drove the organization. The UDC’s Lost Cause focused on the military and ignored the legislative and executive existence of the Confederacy as a nation-state. Any focus on these short-lived elements would immediately highlight the Confederacy’s defeat, because they ceased to exist at the end of the Civil War. Additionally, the Lost Cause attempted to erase the debates that had been critical to the Confederacy’s economic and political directions. Jefferson’s *Rise and Fall of the Confederate Government* was an attempt to explain and document the history that the attention to the military supplanted. Defeat also terminated the Confederate military in organized form, but the soldiers lived on as reminders of the war. While the legislature and executive branch of the Confederate States of America were long-forgotten relics, the UDC advanced a version of history that focused on the military by caring for aging veterans.

By the time the SCV purchased Beauvoir in 1902, the UDC as a national organization had already adopted what Karen Cox calls “Confederate Progressivism.”

Initially, the Daughters focused almost exclusively on building monuments. Because the UDC's Lost Cause activism was very present-minded, however, 1890s progressivism influenced their mission. In his seminal study on southern progressivism, Dewey Grantham argued that local governments in the South often avoided welfare for fear that it would encourage idleness. A major exception to this rule was the benevolent care for Confederate veterans. Southern progressivism, he argued, had to reconcile progress and the traditions of the past. Although most progressive activity in the South came from churches and private organizations, state governments engaged in caring for indigent Confederate veterans because they were symbols of the "tradition" that they wanted to emulate. Cox builds on Grantham's assertions by placing the UDC at the center of the push to provide governmental assistance to Confederates and their descendants. They lobbied state governments to gain support for veterans' homes and often administered the homes themselves.¹⁰

The UDC did not care for Confederate veterans simply out of genuine interest in their wellbeing. By supporting and caring for "Johnny Reb" at soldiers' homes, the Daughters essentially built a different kind of monument. Caring for the veterans involved turning them into what R.B. Rosenberg calls "living monuments to the South's

10. Dewey W. Grantham, *Southern Progressivism: The Reconciliation of Progress and Tradition* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1983), 217-222; and Karen Cox, *Dixie's Daughters: The United Daughters of the Confederacy and the Preservation of Confederate Culture* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2003), 74-75. Grantham writes that although state governments recognized the need for public welfare, local officials in charge of dispensing the funds "were generally indifferent if not hostile to the expenditure of public funds....The dominant commercial-civic elite in most southern cities during this period regarded municipal expenditures for welfare as a threat to personal initiative" (217).

most sacred virtues of honor and chivalry.”¹¹ These virtues, of course, were creations of the Lost Cause. The veterans themselves served as important examples of the created past that the UDC and other groups promoted. Instead of simply caring for the veterans, Lost Cause groups promoted a social agenda through their work at Confederate soldiers’ homes. Poor veterans served as shining examples of how poor whites should act in the present. They mythologized Johnny Reb, turning him into a model for any citizen. He was a loyal soldier that was obedient to his superiors—a message meant for poor southern whites amidst present-day upheaval and social reforms. The UDC used their mythologized vision of the Confederate generation as a present-day guide for non-elite whites in the New South to follow.¹²

As will be shown, the animosity between Varina and the UDC affected the entire course of the Beauvoir sale. At many points, Varina attempted to force her vision on to the other actors involved at the site. The UDC responded to Varina’s desire to control Beauvoir by seeking to discredit her and her allies. As they jockeyed for position after the completion of the sale, the UDC resorted to personal attacks, concealed the true nature of the sale, and proposed that they were responsible for the successful purchase. The UDC

11. R.B. Rosenberg, *Living Monuments: Confederate Soldiers’ Homes in the New South* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1993), 3.

12. Rosenberg, *Living Monuments*, 3-12; Cox, *Dixie’s Daughters*, 73-92. Cox describes an episode from the 1910 UDC Convention in which Caroline Plane proposed that the Daughters open a house specifically for older women—the women who had “made the Confederate soldier what he was.” Plane also noted that there appeared to be a “callous attitude towards aged women among us” (80). The convention was highly critical of the proposal, which Cox believes was due to the elite nature of Plane’s language. However, Plane’s observation that the Daughters were generally callous towards the older generation of women demonstrates their narrow focus on the Lost Cause. The Daughters ignored any person or proposal that suggesting something outside of their normal purview.

did these things so that they could convince the SCV to put them in charge of the property. At Beauvoir, the UDC proved how far it would go in order to control the narrative of the Civil War. Attacking the former First Lady of the Confederacy may seem like an unlikely move for the most prominent Confederate memorial organization to make, yet the Daughters did just that. In the end, Varina was largely unsuccessful in battling the UDC over the management of her own property. Through the UDC's efforts, the Lost Cause had replaced the experiences of people like Varina—who had lived in the antebellum period and Civil War—as the accepted narrative of the Civil War.

Selling Beauvoir

In order to examine the running battle between Varina and the UDC, it is necessary to understand the basic chronology of the sale. When Varina and Winnie moved away from Beauvoir in 1890, the uninhabited house became a financial burden. In her correspondence, Varina contemplated selling the home, but insisted that she would only sell it for memorial purposes. In 1893, an unnamed entrepreneur offered Varina \$90,000 for all of her beachfront property. Although this sum of money would have solved their financial problems, the man planned to clear the land and build a large resort, so Varina declined the offer.

On October 2, 1893, a massive hurricane struck Louisiana and Mississippi, killing over 2,000 people and leaving devastating damage in its wake. Beauvoir, which Varina could not afford to maintain, sustained massive damage. In Mississippi, Varina's old neighbor and friend Mary Kimbrough (hereafter referred to as Kimbrough) witnessed the

wreckage first-hand and described the damage in the *Macon Beacon*.¹³ Kimbrough published her account of the damages in the *Beacon* in an attempt to obtain donations for repairs. Kimbrough's primary interest was establishing a home for Confederate veterans at Beauvoir. She knew that Varina wanted to sell and believed that she could help accommodate Varina's desires. Shortly after the hurricane, Kimbrough established the Beauvoir Home Memorial Association to help raise funds for the preservation of the home. As time went by, Varina's desire to establish a "Mount Vernon of the Confederacy" became a full-fledged requirement for purchasing the house. Privately, Varina expressed deep gratitude at Kimbrough's handling of the situation and encouraged her to continue her efforts.¹⁴

Between 1894 and 1898, Varina continued to turn down offers that did not propose to honor her vision. Although no suitors offered to purchase the house under Varina's conditions, Kimbrough and Varina believed that they could find a suitable owner. In 1899, the first major incident with the Daughters involving Beauvoir occurred. At the Saturday morning session of the UDC general convention in Richmond, the Daughters voted to endorse a plan to purchase Beauvoir "as a home for the soldiers and

13. "Jefferson Davis' Old Home," *Macon Beacon* (Mississippi), October 20, 1893, *Chronicling America*. Kimbrough wrote: "The yard...is a tangled mess of briars and weeds and broken tree tops, hurled together in wild confusion...lightning struck the house, tearing away a part of the slate roof and demolishing the chimney. The rain has poured in, greatly damaging the interior, marring furniture and destroying treasured works of art, the collection of years. Things are going from bad to worse at an alarming rate."

14. Varina Davis to Mary Kimbrough, October 16, 1894, JD Papers, LOC. Varina wrote, "I thank you more than words can express for your desire to serve us, and your delicately worded effort to do so. I cannot and will not make my needy condition public, but if the maintenance, or rather repairs of Beauvoir were taken off our shoulders we should be much more at ease."

sailors of the Confederate States.” In the plan, two Richmond men would purchase the home, raising money through donations, while the UDC would have “no responsibility” upon them. The minutes note that after “considerable discussion” the convention endorsed the plan and went to other business. Later in the session, the Daughters even extended a vote of thanks to the man who brought the resolution to their attention. When the Daughters returned for their evening session, however, the very first item they considered was a motion to reconsider their pledge to support the purchase of Beauvoir. According to the *Richmond Dispatch*, the Daughters questioned the feasibility of the plan. Several leading Daughters criticized the men for bringing the plan forward, with Mrs. Norman V. Randolph noting that “as a Virginian, knowing Virginians, I would not endorse any such scheme as those two men presented.” In the end, the convention voted to unanimously rescind their offer to support the purchase of Beauvoir.¹⁵

After the UDC declined to participate in the sale, Varina and Kimbrough sought help in other places. By 1902, a number of Mississippi legislators had expressed interest in purchasing Beauvoir to be a state-run home for veterans. As the 1902 legislative session began, Varina made plans to visit Mississippi to sell her land to the state. She and Kimbrough, along with several newspapers, believed that the legislature would agree to

15. United Daughters of the Confederacy, *Minutes of the Sixth Annual Meeting*, (Nashville, Tenn: Press of Foster & West, Printers, 1900): 77-85, accessed August 6, 2015, *Internet Archive*, <https://archive.org/details/MinutesOfTheSixthAnnualMeeting>; and “They Do Not Endorse,” *Richmond Dispatch*, November 12, 1899, *Chronicling America*.

purchase the house during her February trip. When Varina visited the legislature on February 15, several newspapers reported that she offered Beauvoir for \$10,000.¹⁶

Contrastingly, Varina publicly insisted that the sale was not the reason she came to Mississippi. Although the purpose of Varina's trip was to sell, she needed the public to believe that it was an ordinary visit, to avoid potential negative press. Some southerners had not forgiven her for living in the North, and the press often viewed her return trips cynically. Varina felt it best to state that she came to Mississippi to visit her friends, and that the legislature's decision did not influence her desire to come home.¹⁷ To her friends, however, Varina told the truth.¹⁸

Despite the implied reason for Varina's visit, the Mississippi legislature declined to purchase Beauvoir. On March 8, Varina wrote to Kimbrough to console her and tell her not to "worry over Beauvoir not being sold to the State."¹⁹ After eight years, the two women were accustomed to rejection, but the legislature's failure was even more

16. "Mrs. Jeff. Davis," *Biloxi Daily Herald* (Mississippi), February 13, 1902, USM; "Mrs. Davis to Visit Capitol," *Macon Beacon* (Mississippi), February 15, 1902, *Chronicling America*; "Some Small Paragraphs," *Greenville Times* (Mississippi), February 15, 1902, *Chronicling America*; and "Mrs. Jefferson Davis Coming," *Vicksburg Evening Post* (Mississippi), February 14, 1902, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, Jackson, Mississippi (hereafter cited as MDAH. Newspapers are available on microfilm and indexed chronologically within each newspaper).

17. "Mrs. Davis Honored," *Daily Clarion-Ledger* (Jackson, Mississippi), February 15, 1902, MDAH. The *Clarion-Ledger* reported that "she is not here on a business trip to sell Beauvoir, as has been reported in some of the papers, and will not discuss the matter with any member of the legislature."

18. Varina Davis to A. McC. Kimbrough, March 4, 1902, JD Papers, LOC. She wrote, "I do hope before we go to Beauvoir the Legislature will decide the question of the purchase, yes or no."

19. Varina Davis to Mary Kimbrough, March 8, 1902, JD Papers, LOC.

disappointing. Many felt that Mississippi's lack of a publicly funded soldiers' home brought shame upon the state. That fact that the legislature did not act dealt a serious blow to Varina and Kimbrough's desires for the home.²⁰

The legislature's failure, however, inspired another potential suitor to enter the picture. Governor Longino, a longtime supporter of the plan to build a soldiers' home on Varina's land, recommended to his friend W.E. Daniel that the SCV buy Beauvoir. At a March meeting, the SCV resolved to purchase the mansion and surrounding land. They thanked Governor Longino for his recommendation and asked the press for help in soliciting donations. The *Daily Clarion-Ledger* noted that the "meeting was by far the most enthusiastic ever held by the Jeff. Davis camp [of the SCV], and it will result in an awakening of much interest in their work."²¹ Everyone involved, it seems, was optimistic that raising \$10,000 to pay Varina for the house would be quick and easy work.

For her part, Varina was happy that the Sons resolved to buy the house. She had the Judge write a deed to the property, which mandated that the Sons "preserve [Beauvoir] as a perpetual memorial, sacred to the memory of Jefferson Davis, the only

20. Rosenberg, *Living Monuments*, 69-71; "To All Mississippians," *Greenville Times* (Mississippi), April 5, 1902, *Chronicling America*; and "A Yazoo Veteran," *The Yazoo Sentinel* (Mississippi), April 3, 1902, *Chronicling America*. Rosenberg writes that Mississippi was among the last ex-Confederate states to open a publicly supported soldiers' home. The *Times* noted that they had "urged the Legislature while in session to purchase the home," and that "their failure to do it we feel was a blot against the state...[that] should cause us all to hang our heads in shame." The *Sentinel* reprinted a letter from Mr. Geo. T. Stewart originally sent to the *New Orleans Times-Democrat*. Stewart implored the residents of Mississippi to support the sale of Beauvoir. He wrote that participating should invoke "pain and pleasure to every southerner. Pain to know that forty-eight heroes of the Lost Cause are permitted to remain unnoticed and uncared for in poor houses by a once proud state; pleasure to know that you have taken up their cause."

21. "Was a Rousing Meeting," *Daily Clarion-Ledger* (Jackson, Mississippi), March 29, 1902, MDAH.

President of the Confederate States of America, and to his family and the ‘Lost Cause.’”²² However, she was not as optimistic as others were about the Sons’ fundraising abilities. She advised the Judge to “either send the deeds back or put them in a fireproof place,” because she feared that the sale might fall through if the deeds were destroyed.²³ In a later letter, Varina wrote, “I fear the people are finding it hard to raise the \$10,000, as the subscriptions seem to come in very slowly.”²⁴ Varina worried that the SCV’s offer would end in disappointment, as the previous bids had.

In October of 1902, Varina’s worries turned into reality at the SCV state convention. The Sons had promised to raise the \$10,000 by the start of their annual meeting. They planned to incorporate the formal transfer of the deed in the program of the convention.²⁵ On October 15, 1902, the *Clarion-Ledger* reported that the Sons had only raised \$8,550 by the first day of their meeting. However, the paper expressed confidence in the idea that “the remainder will be furnished and the transfer take place with proper ceremony at the session tomorrow.”²⁶ The next day, the Judge attended the convention, ready to transfer the deed if the Sons paid the full amount. At the final

22. Deed to Beauvoir, October 16, 1906, Jefferson Davis Presidential Library, Beauvoir, Mississippi (hereafter cited as JD Library, Beauvoir).

23. Varina Davis to A. McC. Kimbrough, March 19, 1902, JD Papers, LOC.

24. Varina Davis to A. McC. Kimbrough, April 23, 1902, JD Papers, LOC.

25. “The Sons of Veterans,” *Daily Clarion-Ledger* (Jackson, Mississippi), October 11, 1902, MDAH. On the eve of the convention, the *Daily Clarion-Ledger* noted that the meeting was “in the nature of a celebration of the completion of the work of raising a fund to purchase Beauvoir... The deed of transfer of the property has been finally approved by Mrs. Davis, and will be turned over to the Sons of Veterans with appropriate ceremony.”

26. *Daily Clarion-Ledger* (Jackson, MS), October 15, 1902, MDAH.

session, the Sons refused to borrow the remaining money necessary for the purchase. Acting on the specific instructions of Varina, the Judge did not transfer the deed, which seemed to anger the convention. As a response, L.P. Yerger—whose wife was a longtime member of the Beauvoir Home Memorial Association [BHMA]—stood to give a “vigorous defense” of Varina. The *Macon Beacon* wrote, “Much to the disappointment of many delegates, the purchase of Beauvoir was not consummated before the adjournment of the Sons of Veterans last week.”²⁷

When the Sons failed to purchase Beauvoir at their October meeting, Varina feared that the sale would never occur. As time went by, she became increasingly anxious that a fire would destroy the deeds and the sale would fall through. Her apprehension increased when a close friend’s house burned down in January of 1903. In response, she wrote the Judge, “It has occurred to me that for two reasons, I had best give the titles to Beauvoir, to the Sons and take my chances for the remains of the money due at their convenience.”²⁸ The “two reasons” she mentioned were her fear that the sale would somehow fall through and her desire to allow the Sons to start moving veterans on to the property as soon as possible. With Varina’s consent, the SCV immediately began to build dormitories on the land to house the aging Confederates.

Although her primary motivation at Beauvoir was establishing a memorial to Jefferson, she deeply cared about the veterans, as well. She wrote that the veterans were the reason that she granted permission to open the soldiers’ home without actually selling

27. “Purchase of Beauvoir Not Consummated,” *Macon Beacon* (Mississippi), October 25, 1902, *Chronicling America*.

28. Varina Davis to A. McC. Kimbrough, January 19, 1903, JD Papers, LOC.

the home, saying “I am glad to feel that the dear old veterans can at last see the end of the poor house experience. I cannot sleep if I awake in the night and remember that they are there.”²⁹ Although Varina had finally agreed to let the veterans move to Beauvoir, her troubles were not nearly finished. The first Confederate veterans moved on to the property in December 1903. Despite this, Varina would not transfer the final deed to the Sons until she received full payment. Over the next three years, intense conflicts—mostly arising out of Varina and the UDC’s differences in interpretation and motivation—would delay the final sale. At several points throughout the process, the UDC attempted to control or sabotage the sale. Led by Lizzie George Henderson, the Mississippi chapter of the UDC made it perfectly clear that they did not want anything to do with Varina. After the Sons agreed to purchase the house, however, the UDC became increasingly involved in the day-to-day operations of the soldiers’ home, much to the chagrin of Varina and the Kimbroughs.

“They Do Not Know Anything About Me”: The Battle over Beauvoir

The Daughters’ sudden interest in the home—and their direct conflicts with Varina from 1903 until her death in 1906—demonstrate how the mission of the UDC differed from Varina’s desire to memorialize the past. They were not interested in helping Varina memorialize Jefferson or the actual history of the Confederacy. They understood that Varina’s memory of the Confederacy and the antebellum period directly conflicted with their political agenda in the present. As a result, they stayed behind the scenes while the legislature and the SCV worked out the details of the purchase. The Daughters only

29. Varina Davis to A. McC. Kimbrough, February 7, 1903, Kimbrough Family Papers, MDAH.

asserted themselves into the management of the soldiers' home after the SCV owned the house. The complications involved in the Beauvoir sale are indicative of a larger struggle between what Varina represented and the UDC's created past.

At Beauvoir, Varina wanted to establish a memorial that utilized her memory, not the UDC's Lost Cause. Throughout the sale process and the early years of the soldiers' home, the Mississippi UDC attempted to subvert Varina's authority. The money required to buy the site did not cause the conflicts—the Mississippi UDC never offered to purchase Beauvoir from Varina. Instead, they were the result of the drastically different and incompatible histories the two parties tried to construct. The sale was contentious because it was the climax of their long struggle over the right to control the Civil War narrative.

When Governor Longino endorsed the idea of the legislature purchasing Beauvoir in early 1902, it appears that the Daughters attempted to convince the Legislature otherwise. Longino—a longtime supporter of Varina's effort to sell—had previously conflicted with the Daughters on the issue of when to lay the cornerstone of the new capitol building in Jackson. When confronted with the UDC's request, Longino reportedly replied, "I don't want to see it. The Commission would like to please the ladies but the business interests of the state must be considered. I am tired of this rot."³⁰ Mere months later when Longino endorsed the sale, he opposed the UDC's desires again.

30. "Contorted Words," *The Pascagoula Democrat-Star* (Mississippi), May 3, 1901, *Chronicling America*. The Mississippi Legislature had recently approved a new capitol building, and the Mississippi UDC wanted the state to have a lavish ceremony on June 3rd (Jefferson Davis's birthday—a Confederate holiday in the Lost Cause) to lay the cornerstone. Governor Longino, however, apparently wanted to begin construction immediately, not at the mercy of the UDC's ceremonial desires.

When the Mississippi legislature failed to purchase Beauvoir, the UDC only enjoyed a momentary relief, because W.E. Daniel immediately began to explore the possibility of the SCV owning the home.

While Varina and Kimbrough tried to sell Beauvoir, the Mississippi UDC used its influence to attempt to stop the sale. Although the UDC wanted to establish a soldiers' home, their disdain for Varina seems to have motivated them to oppose the plan. On March 21, 1902, Daniel wrote to the Judge, informing him of a letter from Lizzie George Henderson. Daniel worried that Henderson might try to block the sale. He asked for the Judge's advice, because he felt that the SCV was the last option to purchase the house for a soldiers' home. With the hostility from Henderson in mind, he wrote, "upon our weak shoulders a heavy burden now rests, which I hope no one will try and bear down...all we ask is that those who do not approve let alone, as this is to a certain extent a private movement, nothing asked of the state, but an appeal to its private citizenship."³¹

Despite the fact that it was indeed a private movement, Henderson and the UDC understood that in attempting to raise funds, the SCV would appeal to the Lost Cause sensibilities of Mississippians. In doing so, they would connect Varina and her version of history with the need to care for veterans in the present. Henderson and the Daughters would have opposed this arrangement because they wanted to memorialize their version of the Lost Cause, and had already shown that they were unwilling to cooperate with Varina. If this were not a problem, the Daughters could have offered to buy the house themselves and collaborated with Varina in the memorialization at the site. However, this

31. W.E. Daniel to A. McC. Kimbrough, March 21, 1902, Kimbrough Family Papers, MDAH.

was never an option because of the animosity between Varina and the UDC. A souvenir booklet written in 1921 recalled, “no aid came from the Mississippi division of the U.D.C. as an organization,” mainly because of “Mrs. Davis living in the North.”³²

As soon as it became apparent that the SCV would purchase Beauvoir in spite of Henderson’s opposition, the UDC changed their tactics. While Henderson did not want to work with Varina in any capacity, she began to lobby for the UDC to control the soldiers’ home aspect of Beauvoir. This way, the UDC would avoid working with Varina in the “memorial” portions and would simply administer the soldiers’ home.³³ Judging from their actions, it appears that the UDC would have preferred that the soldiers’ home be located somewhere else. Once it became clear that the Sons were going to purchase Beauvoir, however, they had no choice but to push it as the location for the soldiers’ home. If they had not, they would have excluded themselves from the administration, which would have severely undermined their mission of Confederate Progressivism and their authority as Lost Cause advocates. The need to operate the soldiers’ home at Beauvoir easily outweighed Henderson’s desires to avoid Varina.

32. Wilbur Moore Jones, *Historic Beauvoir: Souvenir Booklet of Beauvoir-On-The-Gulf* (Hattiesburg, Miss: Hattiesburg American Commercial Printing, 1921), 94, JD Library, Beauvoir.

33. J.P. Caldwell to “Dear Sister,” March 23, 1902, Jefferson Davis Presidential Library, Beauvoir, Mississippi. J.P. Caldwell, a lawyer from Mississippi City (in present-day Gulfport), wrote the earliest reference to the UDC’s change of heart about Beauvoir. In March 1902, the Judge hired Caldwell to write an abstract of past deeds to Beauvoir to help him write the new deed for the sale. Caldwell wrote to his sister, explaining his work on the Beauvoir abstract, “I think that Beauvoir will be made a soldiers’ home, under the joint auspices of the ‘Sons of Veterans’ and the ‘Daughters of the Confederacy.’”

Despite the UDC's sudden reversal, the animosity between Varina and the UDC did not end. In fact, the Daughters' attempt to control the home exacerbated their already strenuous relationship with Varina. Although Henderson had apparently tried to stop Daniel from purchasing Beauvoir, it seemed that the Sons wanted to involve the Daughters at the soldiers' home. In May 1902, the Sons announced to the press that they were incorporating so that they could solicit contributions. In the statement Attorney General McClurg wrote, "Consensus of opinion now seems to be that the Sons shall go ahead, buy the property, pay for it and see that they get good title, and then fraternally turn it over to the Daughters for them to care and manage."³⁴

Although the SCV may not have known it, their plan to turn over the house to the Mississippi UDC was not "fraternal" to Varina and her allies. While the Sons seemed to forget about Henderson and the UDC's recent transgressions, Varina and her allies did not. The Daughters had been attempting to block the sale for years, and Varina did not want them involved at all. Although Varina opposed the Daughters' participation because of their history of antagonism, her disapproval also indicates the idea that Beauvoir was Varina's last chance to create a proper memorial to Jefferson. The Daughters had proven that if the Sons allowed them to control the memorial aspects of the home, they would not honor Varina's desires. Upon learning that the Daughters intended to control the House, Varina immediately wrote to the Judge to express her opposition. "I am satisfied that unless you can get an invitation to me to express an opinion of what should be done as to the custody of Beauvoir House, it will go into hands which have hitherto been hostile to the purchase of veneration of the house," she wrote. Varina wanted the house to

34. *Macon Beacon* (Mississippi), May 24, 1902, *Chronicling America*.

pass to her allies, Kimbrough and Susie Yerger, the two most prominent figures of the BHMA. Later in the letter, she spoke even more directly, writing, “If the Beauvoir Memorial Society does not act, I fear the place will be handed over to the Daughters and an adroit woman may afterwards work her will with it all.”³⁵

Throughout the sale process, Varina consistently rebuked the Daughters’ attempts to challenge her. On May 10, Varina wrote the Judge in response to a circular of unknown origin that insisted that Varina’s name should not be memorialized at Beauvoir. She explained that the only names she wanted at the site were Jefferson and Winnie’s, and because she was confident that people would remember her for her service to Jefferson, she wrote, “I do not care in the least if anyone mentions me at all.”³⁶ In disavowing her right to be memorialized at the site, however, Varina did not concede her authority to control the memorialization. In the May 24 letter, she reinforced her demand that Beauvoir be a memorial to Jefferson, writing, “I do not want any memorials of any other family except mine in the home.”³⁷ Varina clearly understood that if the UDC controlled the house, they would not only control the soldiers’ home, but also the commemorative narrative.

Although Varina ardently opposed the UDC’s attempt to gain control, she also understood how difficult it would be to completely exclude them from Beauvoir. Since

35. Varina Davis to A. McC. Kimbrough, May 24, 1902, Kimbrough Family Papers, MDAH.

36. Varina Davis to A. McC. Kimbrough, May 10, 1902, Kimbrough Family Papers, MDAH.

37. Varina Davis to A. McC. Kimbrough, May 24, 1902, Kimbrough Family Papers, MDAH.

their inception in 1894, Varina had been battling with the Daughters in various capacities. In these previous encounters, she had learned not to underestimate their willingness to resort to mudslinging or their ability to manipulate public opinion. By 1902, Varina understood that the UDC was a powerful organization.³⁸ She also feared that the SCV would defer to the Daughter's wishes before her own. The organizations' "fraternal" bond was the reason that the SCV wanted to give Beauvoir to the UDC, and it meant that the Daughters had significant influence with the Sons. She believed that Henderson was much more powerful with the Sons than she was. Motivated by this fear, Varina wrote to the Judge that she did "not want any George [Henderson's maiden name] in the Memorial names at the home" and speculated about why Henderson did not like her.³⁹ To convince

38. Varina Davis to Mary and A. McC. Kimbrough, July 8, 1902, JD Papers, LOC. Varina's conflict with the Richmond UDC over the rhetorical significance of a memorial arch demonstrates the change in Varina and the UDC's relationship. In the past, the UDC had at least consulted with Varina about the memorialization of her own family, but in this instance, the Richmond UDC did not ask her for an opinion. She wrote, "That dreadful arch business has tormented my soul... and destroyed the regard of the ladies for me... I could not pretend to admire or want it, however, the Richmond papers gave me an old fashioned setting down and repeated a good many things the ladies were said to have uttered about me. Of course, these things hurt me greatly and I was kept in a stew all the time." However, she "gave way" and agreed that the Daughters could build the arch if it was clearly "memorial." She protested the location, as she felt that a busy intersection with a trolley running underneath the arch was inappropriate. Although she gave in to the Daughters, she told the Kimbroughs, "I hope it may never be built, this I say strictly between us."

39. Varina Davis to A. McC. Kimbrough, October 10, 1902, JD Papers, LOC. Immediately after saying that she hoped the Sons would pick Kimbrough and Yerger, Varina wrote, "I never wakened up to the cause of the George [Henderson's maiden name] enmity until I remembered that Mr. Jos. E. Davis' [Jefferson's brother] grandchildren had him [General J.Z. George, Henderson's father] for their attorney in our suit for Briarfield and I suppose they told all kinds of falsehoods to him, stories as untrue as they were spiteful and false, about my husband, but Genl. G. knew him and there is no excuse for the vilification of my poor ill used husband, who never did a dishonest or

the SCV that her plan was superior, she would need to assert her authority over the UDC. That Varina was unwilling to force the Sons to capitulate to her suggestions shows her awareness of the fact that the Daughters' influence had surpassed her own.

Knowing the challenge that lay ahead, Varina proposed a compromise to the Judge: "Suppose you suggest that the President of each chapter in the state shall serve and have a vote with the Beauvoir Society and thus box the compass of dissent from the Daughters."⁴⁰ This compromise would allow Varina and her allies in the BHMA to control both the soldiers' home and the commemorative aspects of Beauvoir, while also incorporating the Daughters. However, the compromise was contingent on several factors that would be difficult if not impossible to achieve. First, Varina would have to convince the SCV that her plan was better than simply giving the UDC control of the house. To do this, she would have to be assertive enough to force the Sons to agree with her, without jeopardizing the sale itself. Second, the Daughters would have to agree to the plan, or at least keep their objections quiet.

Varina found herself in a complex position in the summer of 1902. She desperately wanted the SCV to choose the women of the BHMA to lead the administration of Beauvoir. However, she also felt that the sale was not secure enough for her to make absolute demands of the Sons. At any moment, she believed that the SCV could rescind their offer to purchase Beauvoir. She did not want her disagreements with the UDC to push the Sons to such an action. When the Judge asked her to clarify her

ungenerous thing to one of his own blood still less to outsiders. I do not want any George in the Memorial names at the Home."

40. Varina Davis to A. McC. Kimbrough, May 24, 1902, Kimbrough Family Papers, MDAH.

stipulations in August 1902, she wrote, “The only two I wish to make is that no other name than those of my children and my husband shall be perpetuated there. And the other is a request that the ladies of the Beauvoir home chapter shall have charge of it perpetually under the Sons who are the owners.”⁴¹ Despite this statement, Varina’s fear that the sale would fall through prevented her from the actions that would have been necessary to convince the Sons to adopt her plan.

By the time of the SCV’s general meeting in October Varina had proven that she would not fight for her interests at Beauvoir. On the eve of their meeting, when tensions were running high, Varina wrote the Kimbroughs to tell them that although she had “asked as a favor to me that the Sons will give it [Beauvoir] in charge to the to the Beauvoir Home Association,” she “did not dare name” Kimbrough and Yerger as the primary officers. She assured them that she wanted Kimbrough and Yerger in charge, and that she hoped the Sons would choose them.⁴²

Although Varina appeared afraid to challenge the Sons, she did not prevent the women of the BHMA from promoting their shared interest. For her part, Kimbrough understood that Varina needed her allies in charge of the home. On Saturday, October 4, the BHMA met in Biloxi to discuss their plans. The meeting, at Kimbrough’s proposal, elected to send two delegates to the SCV convention to “aid Mrs. Kimbrough in securing

41. Varina Davis to A. McC. Kimbrough, August 21, 1902, JD Papers, LOC.

42. Varina Davis to A. McC. Kimbrough, October 10, 1902, JD Papers, LOC.; Varina Davis to Mary Kimbrough, October 15, 1902, JD Papers, LOC.

an understanding with the sons as to the disposition of the memorial department of this estate.”⁴³

The October meeting of the Mississippi division of the SCV promised to be the climax of several hugely important aspects of the Beauvoir sale. First, it was supposed to be a celebratory occasion. Everyone expected to celebrate the Sons’ successful fundraising. When the Sons failed to raise the money and refused to borrow the rest, the press noted that many of the delegates left the convention disappointed in their failure. Second, the BHMA and the UDC had each sent delegates to the convention, presumably with the intention of arguing that their organization would provide the best leadership at Beauvoir. In order to avoid a potential controversy, the Sons elected not to grant the floor to any women’s organizations. The convention ended with more questions about Beauvoir’s future than answers.⁴⁴

When the BHMA failed to convince the Sons at their state convention, they necessarily rejected Varina’s proposed compromise. The SCV did not want to put the UDC under the authority of another, much smaller organization. Although Varina still wanted to prevent the Daughters from controlling the commemorative aspects of Beauvoir, there was little hope that they would not be involved in some capacity after the Sons snubbed the BHMA. Under Varina’s plan, the UDC would have had to submit

43. “Biloxi Auxiliary of the Beauvoir Soldiers’ Home Association,” *Biloxi Daily Herald* (Mississippi), October 10, 1902, Cook Library, University of Southern Mississippi, Hattiesburg, Mississippi.

44. *Daily Clarion-Ledger* (Jackson, Mississippi), October 16, 1902, MDAH. In a short section about the SCV convention, the paper noted that a spirited debate followed an amendment that would have granted the UDC and BHMA the floor. After the debate, the amendment was defeated by a vote of 32-26.

themselves to her authority. However, the BHMA's failure meant Varina's allies had to reassess their tactics moving forward.

At a meeting of the BHMA on October 25, Mitty Theobald, who had attended the convention as one of the two delegates elected, gave a damning account of what had occurred in Jackson. After the SCV failed to recognize them at the convention, she said that she "had been forced to the conclusion that the Memorial Association was as yet very weak, and in fact found that the Sons of Veterans had no knowledge of such an organization."⁴⁵ In response, she recommended that the BHMA immediately dissolve and form a chapter of the UDC. Theobald's suggestion—on the surface—is a dramatic reversal that seems uncharacteristic for a group that directly opposed the UDC. However, it also emphasizes the dynamic that existed between the Sons and the Daughters. Even with Varina Davis as a supporter, the SCV could effectively ignore the BHMA and pretend that it did not exist. If the women of the BHMA joined the UDC, however, they would have instant credibility with the Sons. On October 29, the BHMA met in a special meeting where they approved the measure to dissolve and organized as a chapter of the UDC.⁴⁶ Instead of the BHMA administering Beauvoir, the newly formed Biloxi-Beauvoir Chapter of the UDC hoped they would be able to participate as representatives of Varina's interests.⁴⁷

45. "Report Meeting A.B.H.M.A. Oct. 25, 1902," UDC Biloxi-Beauvoir Chapter Records, MDAH.

46. M.E. Theobald, "History of the Beauvoir Chapter of the UDC for the year beginning October 1902, ending October 1903," UDC Biloxi-Beauvoir Chapter Records, MDAH.

While Varina's proposed compromise fell apart and the Sons' decision still loomed, the Mississippi UDC repeatedly attempted to discredit her. On several occasions, Henderson publicly challenged Varina's commemorative authority by suggesting ideas that violated the terms of the deed, which Varina had explicitly written to prevent others from changing the narrative at Beauvoir. As Varina and her allies scrambled to come up with a plan to gain control of the house, Henderson and the UDC openly flaunted the strength of their connection with the Sons. Although Varina had been careful not to underestimate the Daughters, their power had grown since the 1890s, and she found herself completely unprepared for their coming battles.

As the BHMA dissolved and reorganized as a chapter of the UDC, Henderson challenged perhaps the most non-negotiable aspect of the sale—the name of the house. In the deed, Varina specifically required the Sons to name the home “‘Beauvoir,’ the Jefferson Davis Memorial Home.”⁴⁸ After the Sons fell a little over \$1,000 short of the purchase price, however, Henderson reported that she knew a potential donor that had one condition: name the house the “Dorsey-Davis Home.” The proposal—which clearly violated the terms of the deed—was a shocking personal insult to Varina. Sarah Ellis

47. Historians have not fully examined the relationship between the UDC and the SCV as organizations. Gaines Foster (*Ghosts of the Confederacy: Defeat, the Lost Cause, and the Emergence of the New South, 1865 to 1913* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987)) writes that the SCV “never became an important group” (197). In Karen Cox's treatment of the UDC, the Sons serve as a contrast to the Daughters, who are dedicated to serving the Lost Cause at all costs. The Sons, on the other hand, seem apathetic to anything but their business interests. Cox portrays the members of SCV as “New Men”—exactly the kind of men that drive the UDC to preserve “Confederate culture.” Despite this, Cox shows that the UDC and SCV had a close working relationship. Her description of their joint efforts to create state archives in the early twentieth century demonstrates that the two organizations often worked together in Lost Cause enterprises.

48. Deed to Beauvoir, October 16, 1906, JD Library, Beauvoir.

Dorsey was Beauvoir's owner before the Davises. In 1877, she invited Jefferson to live in a cottage on the land so that he could focus on writing *Rise and Fall of the Confederate Government*. Jefferson agreed and moved to Beauvoir, where he lived in the library cottage. Varina was still living in England at the time, so Jefferson took Dorsey as his amanuensis. This unusual arrangement—a married man living alone in a widow's house—became the subject rumors of sexual promiscuity. Varina disliked Dorsey and never truly accepted the idea of living in her home. When she returned from Europe, she refused to come to Beauvoir for several months, and instead chose to stay in Memphis with her daughter. By 1879, Jefferson had agreed to purchase Beauvoir from Dorsey for \$5,500. However, Dorsey became ill and decided to leave Beauvoir to Jefferson in her will. Varina reluctantly agreed to live at Beauvoir, but never truly forgave Dorsey for the awkward position that earlier rumors had placed her in.⁴⁹

The personal nature of the attack suggests that the animosity between the UDC and Varina was about more than who would get to control Beauvoir from an administrative standpoint. It was an attack on Varina's very identity that recalled everything from the Davises' exile in Europe to the marital troubles that plagued them. The suggestion to name Beauvoir the "Dorsey-Davis Home" was an attempt to discredit Varina even more than the UDC had in previous encounters.

49. For more information on the previous history of Beauvoir, the transfer of the house from Dorsey to Jefferson, and Varina's uneasiness with the living situation, see: Joan Cashin, *First Lady of the Confederacy: Varina Davis's Civil War* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 2006); and Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *The House of Percy: Honor, Melancholy, and Imagination in a Southern Family* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 159-169.

Varina's response to the "Dorsey-Davis" controversy was swift and pointed. If the Sons accepted the idea, she wrote that she would cancel the deal. She understood that the attack was personal and that the Daughters meant to publicly humiliate her. She wrote to the Judge, exclaiming that the "insolvent proposition" came from a "born idiot." Further, she knew that Henderson was at least complicit in the proposal. She desperately wrote, "The only way I can see for us to frustrate Mrs. Henderson in her efforts to control those dear young women who have fought her underhanded efforts to defeat the purchase for years is for me to be appointed President of the B.H. Committee." In other words, Varina believed that the only way to outflank the Daughters was to insist that she herself would oversee Beauvoir. While this plan may have been the only way to prevent the Daughters from controlling the home, Varina knew that it was impossible. Her health and age alone probably would have prevented her from accepting the position, without even entertaining the Daughters' response to such a suggestion. Despite this, Varina felt that leading Beauvoir herself was the only option that prevented the UDC from controlling it. The mere suggestion illustrates how dire Varina felt that the situation had become.⁵⁰

Another of the UDC's attempts to discredit Varina and undermine her authority came in November of 1902. While Varina and her allies claimed that the Mississippi UDC had actively opposed the sale and tried to block it, Henderson presented a different story at the UDC convention in New Orleans. She addressed the convention, promising to give "the true history" of the Beauvoir sale. However, her account distorted the facts by making the UDC the driving force. She wrote, "We owe our plaudits, first and foremost,

50. Varina Davis to A. McC. Kimbrough, November 6, 1902, JD Papers, LOC; and Varina Davis to A. McC. Kimbrough, October 31, 1902, JD Papers, LOC.

to the Mississippi Division U.D.C., for their long and continuous effort to arouse the people to the shame of neglecting our poverty-stricken soldiers.” She even made painstaking effort to erase the role that Kimbrough—and by extension, Varina herself—played in the sale. She claimed that she wrote to Governor Longino and asked him if any other people had given him the idea for the sale:

Because I want to give credit to whom credit is due, I wrote to Governor Longino and asked if he were not the author of his recommendation that the State buy Beauvoir for the Home, or had some other person suggested it to him. He wrote that he had no recollection of ever having heard it suggested by another, and that he himself had entertained it for years.⁵¹

This ahistorical account of the sale supplanted the fact that Kimbrough was in fact responsible for bringing Beauvoir to the Governor’s and the legislature’s attention. Kimbrough would have had a legitimate argument that she should lead the administration simply because of her connection to Varina and her tireless efforts to establish the home.

Importantly, Henderson’s account also made Varina into a completely passive agent in the sale. Varina’s only appearance in the narrative is when Longino learned “through a member of the [UDC] Chapter in Jackson the sum Mrs. Davis would take for the Home.” In this account, Varina appears detached from the situation, which would ostensibly give her no reason to contest anything related to the sale or the management of the home. With the Sons still undecided as to who would administer Beauvoir, Henderson’s purpose was clearly to undermine both Kimbrough’s legitimacy and Varina’s right to voice an opinion in the matter. For her plan to work, Henderson needed the press to accept and report her version of the story as true. She needed people to

51. *Minutes of the Ninth Annual Convention of the United Daughters of the Confederacy* (Nashville, Tenn: Press of Foster & Webb, Printers, 1903), 52-53.

believe that Varina's complaints were not pertinent because of her supposed indifference. Henderson successfully changed the narrative, as newspapers around the country reported that the UDC was responsible for the sale.⁵²

When Varina decided to transfer the deed to the Sons in February 1903, she insisted to her friends that she was still fighting for them to be in charge at Beauvoir. Despite her promises, she remained hesitant to directly combat the Daughters. She told the Judge that she planned to be present at the official transfer of the deed, at which time she would "very plainly" express her wish that Kimbrough and Yerger lead Beauvoir.⁵³ However, her efforts on her trip to Beauvoir apparently did not convince the Sons, nor did they impress Kimbrough and Yerger. On March 4, from Biloxi, Varina wrote Kimbrough to restate her gratitude for Kimbrough's "eight years of unremitting effort" at Beauvoir.⁵⁴ Kimbrough, it seems, felt slighted by Varina's consistent failure to force the Sons into accepting her desires.

52. Ibid.; "Mrs. Jefferson Davis' Memorial Home Dedicated by Daughters of Confederacy," *Bisbee Daily Review* (Bisbee, Arizona), December 2, 1903, *Chronicling America*; "Purchase of Beauvoir," *The Indianapolis Journal* (Indiana), November 23, 1902, *Chronicling America*; and "United Daughters of the Confederacy," *Richmond Dispatch* (Virginia), November 14, 1902, *Chronicling America*.

53. Varina Davis to A. McC. Kimbrough, February 7, 1903, Kimbrough Family Papers, MDAH; and Varina Davis to "Dear Friend," February 8, 1903, JD Papers, LOC. The day after she promised the Judge she would express her desires to the Sons, she wrote to a "Dear friend" and exclaimed, "My heart is set on the right women getting control of the home."

54. Varina Davis to Mary Kimbrough, March 4, 1904, JD Papers, LOC. Varina's tone in the letter implies that Kimbrough was upset that Varina had not fulfilled her promise to demand that the Sons place Kimbrough and Yerger in charge at Beauvoir.

By November 1903, the Sons had officially decided that the UDC would control the home. However, they did allow the Biloxi-Beauvoir Chapter—made up of former members of the BHMA, including Kimbrough and Yerger—to elect one member to the Beauvoir Board of Directors. Despite this concession, Kimbrough and Yerger felt that Varina had betrayed them by not supporting their shared interests and combatting the Daughters. Varina felt that she had done everything she could to convince the Sons to choose her friends. Although Kimbrough and Yerger disagreed, the UDC’s influence was simply too powerful for Varina to overcome.⁵⁵

Even after officially transferring the deed and allowing the soldier’s home to open at Beauvoir, peace still evaded Varina. By 1903, the UDC had effectively won the battle over who had the right to control Beauvoir, and they set out to administer the home as a part of their mission of Confederate Progressivism. Whenever Varina’s conditions conflicted with the UDC’s mission, controversy ensued. On two separate occasions, Varina attempted to intervene in the UDC’s management of Beauvoir. The first was the aforementioned attempt to keep the Sons from “desecrating” the house by tearing out a wall to create a mess hall for the Veterans. The second incident involved the naming of

55. Varina Davis to A. McC. Kimbrough, November 24, 1903, JD Papers, LOC. In response to their outrage, Varina claimed that her illnesses had kept her from supporting her allies, and that she would have done “anything short of killing myself” to help Kimbrough and Yerger “take the place which they are so richly entitled.” Yerger had apparently written to Varina and asked “Are you ashamed of us?” to which Varina replied: “Mrs. Yerger has wounded me sorely by holding me responsible for the disappointment the ladies have sustained...of which I am innocent, and she added the question which I did not answer because it was so sharp and offensive I could not...I could not see how such a question could find a place in her mind still less in her letter, so long as she felt a particle of esteem or respect for me.”

the veterans barracks on the grounds. In each of these episodes, Varina attempted to reclaim her authority over the narrative from the UDC.

Varina specifically required Jefferson to be the only Confederate memorialized at Beauvoir because of her desire to keep the narrative focused on him. Even though the UDC knew this, they suggested naming the two barracks after Confederate generals. The mere proposal was in clear violation of Varina's rules, so she might have opposed the idea regardless of whose names the Daughters tried to commemorate. However, the Daughters proposed naming the barrack buildings after generals P.G.T. Beauregard and Joseph E. Johnston. To anyone familiar with the history of the Confederate war, the proposal to commemorate these two generals at a site dedicated to Jefferson Davis was ludicrous. Both men had been notoriously critical of Jefferson's leadership both during and after the Civil War.⁵⁶ Varina was incensed that the Daughters would make such a proposal, knowing the troubled history between the three men. Her response, however, demonstrates that she knew that the UDC had eclipsed her power. She wrote to the Judge, asking for his advice:

I am inclined to the policy of letting people who wish to do so name rooms of the barrack buildings after noted generals, but not to have General J.E. Johnston's

56. William C. Davis, *Jefferson Davis: The Man and His Hour* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1991), 356-70; Thomas Harry Williams, *P.G.T. Beauregard: Napoleon in Gray* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1955); T. Michael Parrish, "Jeff. Davis Rules: General Beauregard and the Sanctity of Civilian Authority in the Confederacy," in *Jefferson Davis's Generals*, ed. Gabor S. Borritt (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 46-64; and Craig L. Symonds, "A Fatal Relationship: Davis and Johnston at War," in *Jefferson Davis's Generals*, ed. Gabor S. Borritt (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 3-26. Much of the animosity between Jefferson and Johnston and Beauregard was over Davis's leadership during the Confederacy.

name there, nor do I wish Genl. Beauregard's name either, but would not make a point upon anyone but Johnston's name.⁵⁷

Varina had hoped to establish a memorial to Jefferson that would not include the names of any other Confederates. By the time the UDC officially took over the house in 1903, she understood that her ideal was not possible. She hoped to make only small concessions, but Beauregard and Johnston were a different story. The Daughters chose them as a direct affront to Varina. As such, the proposal makes clear the difference between what the Daughters and Varina wanted to do at Beauvoir. The UDC wanted to use the literal bodies of veterans as monuments to the military heroism of the Lost Cause. By connecting two of the Confederacy's most controversial generals with the veterans, the UDC would advance the military focus of the Lost Cause narrative of the Civil War. Varina, on the other hand, wanted to memorialize Jefferson and the political direction of the Confederacy—an element that the Lost Cause completely ignored. She wanted Beauvoir to be different from the countless other sites that memorialized the supposed moral superiority of the Confederate military.

After the Daughters officially took over control of the soldiers' home at Beauvoir, their battles with Varina became much less frequent. Varina was happy that the veterans had moved on to the property, and did not feel as though she could affect changes in its management. Aside from the naming incident and the controversy over her comments about veterans and the main house, Varina shied away from direct conflict with the Sons and the Daughters. In fact, the initial conflicts appear to have convinced Varina to move on from the Beauvoir sale entirely. The UDC and SCV gladly obliged her, as they felt

57. Varina Davis to A. McC. Kimbrough, November 9, 1903, JD Papers, LOC.

that the former First Lady was an unnecessary complication to their management.

Unfortunately, Varina was in desperate need of the remaining money that the SCV owed her, so she could not stay away for long. In September 1904, she wrote the Judge and exclaimed, “I need the money now, that the Sons owe me, and hope they will try and pay me this autumn,” adding, “I do so long for some one to tell me about Beauvoir, just how it is being administered—what have they done?”⁵⁸

Varina had stopped asking about Beauvoir largely because she wanted to avoid contact with the Daughters. In June 1905, she wrote to Kimbrough and speculated at length about the enmity that Henderson displayed towards her. She wrote that she did not believe that the problems arose from her father general J.Z. George, as he had been a faithful colleague of Jefferson’s and had even given Varina money after Jefferson’s death. Still, she referred to Henderson and the Daughters as those “who malign me.” She wrote:

As to Mrs. Henderson and the other daughters, I have seen them and said a few civil words, but no more. If they dislike me they have not been provoked to such a feeling and must do as they like. They do not know anything about me or I about them of which I would desire to speak. Do not worry about the people who malign me....I do not care unless I have wronged them, and I never certainly said or did one wrong thing to them in my life.⁵⁹

Varina remained resentful of the Daughters until her death in 1906. Towards Kimbrough, by contrast, she expressed an almost motherly love. Varina constantly reminded her younger companion of her integral role in the sale, and that the Daughters could never truly claim to have initiated the soldiers’ home at Beauvoir. Even though

58. Varina Davis to A. McC. Kimbrough, September 1, 1904, JD Papers, LOC.

59. Varina Davis to Mary Kimbrough, June 1905, JD Papers, LOC.

their relationship had rough patches at times, Kimbrough remained dedicated to Varina's image and her desires at Beauvoir until her own death in 1930.⁶⁰

Varina's financial woes set the stage for one final conflict with the SCV and UDC. For several months, Varina filled her correspondence with the Kimbroughs with complaints about the Sons' delaying their final payment. In July 1905, the Sons sent Varina the final \$500 installment, nearly three years after they had raised the first \$8,550 of the total cost. In her letter to the Judge, Varina implied that she was not going to write the Sons herself, for she asked the Judge to thank the Sons on her behalf. She also noted, "The money due me was a private contribution" and asked if "the Sons of Veterans will put that sum to the credit of the Veterans?"⁶¹ Although she was relieved to have received the total sum, she obviously resented the Sons for their nonchalance in paying her.

Even with the full \$10,000 transferred from the Sons to Varina, the troubles between them did not end. In their three-year relationship with Varina, the Sons had learned that her reputation was fragile. They could force her to act against her interests because they knew that she could not stand up to them or the Daughters. The final battle

60. Varina Davis to Mary Kimbrough, June 13, 1905, JD Papers, LOC. Varina's relationship with Kimbrough was strained at times. Varina's failure to convince the SCV that Kimbrough and Yerger should lead Beauvoir was the primary example of this. The second major episode between the two allies came when Varina wrote a letter at the behest of Henderson in October 1905. Henderson wanted Varina to provide a statement for the 1905 UDC convention about Mississippi being left off a monument. Kimbrough apparently felt betrayed by Varina's decision to write a statement for Henderson, as it legitimized Henderson. Varina defended herself by writing, "I did not choose to be indifferent about this matter," but reaffirming her knowledge of Kimbrough's dedication to her (Varina Davis to Mary Kimbrough, October 1, 1905, JD Papers, LOC). Kimbrough noted several times that she and Henderson were not in social accord with one another (See Varina Davis to Mary Kimbrough, February 17, 1902, JD Papers, LOC).

61. Varina Davis to A. McC. Kimbrough, July 11, 1905, JD Papers, LOC.

between Varina and Lost Cause organizations took place because of this. The Sons claimed that Varina had sold them 87 acres of land, while Varina believed that she had only sold 50 acres. In this dispute, the Sons were guilty of deception at least. An SCV representative (Calvin Wells) told Varina that the Judge had sent them approved the 87 acre deed. However, the Judge claimed that he had not sent anything to the Sons and had definitely not approved of the current deed. The SCV's duplicity confused Varina, who wrote, "I cannot understand the Sons," and swore that she would not sign the deed until the Judge advised her to do so.⁶²

Much to Varina's chagrin, the deed controversy stretched into 1906. She felt enormous pressure to sign the document because she knew that her refusal to do so—even though she had legitimate cause—would destroy her public image. Varina believed that the Sons had her trapped. In January, she wrote to the Judge, forcefully telling him that she could not demur any longer. She noted that any public knowledge of her delays would "expose" her "to animadversion and to ridicule."⁶³ Despite this, the Judge apparently did not agree that Varina should sign, so she delayed once more. Later in the year, the Sons actually threatened to take legal action. Both parties would have understood the gravity of such a threat, and Varina knew that her image could not survive a public battle. In September, she wrote that she had decided to sign the deed, as she "could not stand the aspersions that my refusal to give my land which was never given in

62. Varina Davis to A. McC. Kimbrough, September 5, 1905, JD Papers, LOC; Varina Davis to A. McC. Kimbrough, September 14, 1905, JD Papers, LOC; and Varina Davis to A. McC. Kimbrough, October 6, 1905, JD Papers, LOC.

63. Varina Davis to A. McC. Kimbrough, January 7, 1906, JD Papers, LOC.

the sale would bring upon me unjustly.” The Sons clearly understood that Varina would have no choice but to sign over the extra land. Varina believed that Attorney General McClurg—who had originally proposed the idea of the UDC taking over Beauvoir—was behind the threat to take legal action, as “the matter troubles Mr. Wells greatly.”⁶⁴

After a long and contentious fight to sell Beauvoir to be a soldiers’ home and a proper memorial to her husband, Varina transferred the final copy of the deed to the SCV on October 6, 1906. Her battles over interpretation signified a changing of the guard in Civil War memory. At Beauvoir, Varina had desperately attempted to hold on to power as a representative of the antebellum period and the costs of breaking up a Union they had otherwise cherished. The Lost Cause organizations, led by Henderson and the UDC, proved to be adversaries that Varina could not easily defeat. When Varina transferred the deed on October 6, she effectively lost all of the power she had fought to keep at Beauvoir. She could not even defend her position against the Sons’ dubious attempt to claim more land than she agreed to. Her spirit conquered, Varina passed away peacefully on the night of October 10, just four days after she accepted defeat at Beauvoir.

64. Varina Davis to A. McC. Kimbrough, January 7, 1906, JD Papers, LOC; Varina Davis to A. McC. Kimbrough, August 18, 1906, JD Papers, LOC; and Varina Davis to A. McC. Kimbrough, September 4, 1906, JD Papers, LOC.

EPILOGUE: Varina Gets the Final Word

When Varina wrote her ante-mortem statement in 1894, her troubles with southerners were only just beginning. In composing the document, she explained, “the abuse or criticism showered upon me in every quarter of my native state is so unreasonable and undeserved...that I feel it due to myself to plainly state the whole truth, which I have hitherto withheld because I did not wish to blame Mississippi.”¹ At the time, Varina had only encountered the wrath of Mississippians over where she lived and buried her husband. By October 1906, however, she had much bigger problems. Instead of simply angering residents of her native state, she had repeatedly antagonized the most powerful group of Lost Cause advocates—the United Daughters of the Confederacy.

At some point in the years of contention with the Daughters, Varina and the Kimbroughs came to view the ante-mortem statement as a response to her *southern* critics. In 1899 and again in 1905, she reminded her companions that she intended the statement to be published after her death. She wrote that the document was “in the nature of a death bed document and justifies me.”² During this period, she was embroiled in the immensely frustrating process to sell Beauvoir. She endured nearly constant attacks from the Daughters and generally did not strike back publicly. After her death, the Daughters would not be able to trouble her any longer. Instead of publishing it while she was still alive, the posthumous statement allowed her to get the final word.

1. Varina Davis to Judge Allen McCaskill Kimbrough, October 16, 1894, Jefferson Davis Papers, 1795-1913, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. (Hereafter cited as JD Papers, LOC).

2. Varina Davis to Mary Kimbrough, October 1, 1905, JD Papers, LOC.

With Varina's wishes in mind, Mary Kimbrough attended the Daughters' 1906 annual meeting, which was conveniently held in Gulfport, Mississippi. By her own account, Kimbrough initially did not plan to read the document at the convention. She told the *Houston Post* (about two months afterwards), "I carried this letter with me with the sole intention of submitting it to some prominent members of the United Daughters of the Confederacy whom I knew would be there." However, after arriving at the convention she "heard of many unkind criticisms of Mrs. Davis." She explained:

After showing the statement to several Daughters, who had ever been loyal and devoted friends of Mrs. Davis, they urged me to have it read before the convention, agreeing with me that no better time nor appropriate audience could be found for the reception of 'Our Mother's Message.'

Kimbrough evidently agreed, and on the motion of one of the "devoted friends," Varina's ante-mortem statement reached the ears of the entire UDC convention.³

Judging from the official UDC minutes, the document had no impact on the convention. The minutes plainly state that, "a letter from Mrs. Jefferson Davis to Judge Kimbrough was read to the convention by Mrs. Rowe, of Mississippi. On motion the convention received the letter without discussion."⁴ Although the official minutes suggest otherwise, the statement engendered excitement. After all, the First Lady of the Confederacy had just attacked the UDC from beyond the grave.

Despite the UDC's nonchalance in its official record, Varina's statement appears to have had the desired effect. Several editors around the country reported on the

3. "No Publication of Mrs. Davis' Letter Because of the Criticism it Evoked," *Houston Post*, December 1, 1906, *Chronicling America*.

4. United Daughters of the Confederacy, *Minutes of the Thirteenth Annual Convention of the United Daughters of the Confederacy* (Opeilka, AL: Post Publishing Company, 1907), accessed through Google Books, September 1, 2015.

pandemonium that Mrs. Rowe caused by reading the letter. The *New Iberia Enterprise* wrote that although the statement had been composed many years earlier, “somehow or other the existence of the communication does not appear to have been known outside of the family of Judge Kimbrough prior to Mrs. Davis’ death, but it burst upon the Daughters of the Confederacy like a bomb.” The editor continued, “it goes without saying that the communication was decidedly, painfully unpleasant. . . . Indeed, the letter shocked all those who heard it, and it is not saying too much to describe the Daughters as being stunned for a few seconds.”⁵ The *Alexandria Gazette*’s editor wrote that Mrs. Randolph—a prominent Daughter from Richmond—“said the letter of Mrs. Davis was harsh in its condemnation of Mississippi,” and that she believed that “Mrs. Davis might not have been in her sound mind when writing the letter.”⁶ The *New York Tribune* called the letter “objectionable” and wrote, “Its reading was received by the Daughters’ convention in silence, but the delegates were open in their condemnation of the contents of the missive.”⁷

The Daughters were understandably outraged at Varina’s final strike. According to the *Tribune*, “A woman of Greenville, Miss., who is a well known Daughter of the Confederacy, is preparing a reply to the charges of Mrs. Davis.”⁸ While the *Tribune* did

5. “Davis Letter Causes a Stir,” *New Iberia Enterprise* (Louisiana), November 24, 1906, *Chronicling America*.

6. “Mrs. Davis’ Letter,” *Alexandria Gazette* (Virginia), November 22, 1906, *Chronicling America*.

7. “Mississippi Aroused,” *New York Tribune*, November 21, 1906, *Chronicling America*.

8. *Ibid.*

not divulge the name, the most prominent Daughter from Greenville was Lizzie George Henderson, the primary antagonist in the Beauvoir sale. From the extant sources, it is impossible to know who among the Daughters planned to pen their official response. If a perfect candidate to attack Varina one last time existed, however, it would have been Henderson.

Despite the initial shock over the ante-mortem statement, it did not accomplish anything with a lasting impact. The Daughters never published the public response, and Kimbrough only gave one interview about the situation. She refused to publish the letter at that time, demurring by saying, “I am not yet ready to give this ante-mortem statement to the public, as there are many letters bearing upon it which I wish to have published with it.” She told the *Post* that she felt that once she had published the ante-mortem statement with Varina’s letters, “I feel that all unkind comment will cease and all misunderstanding between the fair-minded people of the South and Varina Jefferson Davis will vanish into thin air.” However, she never released the promised volume of Varina Davis letters. The dramatic revelation of the ante-mortem statement, it seemed, had not produced any enduring difference in Varina’s relationship with the South.⁹

The anti-climactic conclusion to the drama of the ante-mortem statement reflects the fact that Varina’s death ended her status as a threat to the UDC’s Lost Cause. She attempted to take one last shot at the Daughters, but it did not hit home. Although it appeared as though Henderson was preparing an official response, the Daughters never publicly commented on the ante-mortem statement. This was most likely because they

9. “No Publication of Mrs. Davis’ Letter Because of the Criticism it Evoked,” *Houston Post*, December 1, 1906, *Chronicling America*.

did not have to. Varina's statement had been an embarrassment to all involved, but she was not around to push the issue any longer. In their previous battles, Varina had challenged the UDC and refused to back down. On October 10, 1906, however, the former First Lady died and took her memories to the grave with her. In death, she no longer posed a threat to the Lost Cause and the narratives that the Daughters so heavily relied on to carry out their mission.

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