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**University of Memphis Libraries
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Jefferson Davis collection

Title: Jefferson Davis collection

Collection No: MSS.190

Extent: 0.25 cubic feet

Inclusive Dates: 1867-1874

Abstract: The collection comprises correspondence from former Confederate President Jefferson Davis to friends and acquaintances in the post-Civil War period, many written while he was resident in Memphis, Tennessee.

Processed by: Gerald Chaudron, 2018.

Access: Open to all researchers.

Language: English

Preferred Citation: Jefferson Davis collection, Special Collections Department, University Libraries, University of Memphis.

Publication date: March 2018

Biographical information

Jefferson Finis Davis (1808-1889) was a soldier, U.S. representative and senator from Mississippi, U.S. Secretary of War, 1853-1857, and President of the Confederate States of America, 1861-1865. Imprisoned in May 1865, Davis was released on bail two years later and travelled to Canada, Europe and Cuba in search of employment. On his return to the United States, Davis lived in Memphis and in 1869 became president of the Carolina Life Insurance Company at an annual salary of \$12,000, plus travel expenses, and resided at the Peabody Hotel. The Panic of 1873 affected the company and Davis resigned when it merged with another firm over his objections.

In 1877, Davis was saved from financial distress by Mrs. Sarah Anne Ellis Dorsey, a wealthy widow who owned a large house called “Beauvoir” near Biloxi, Mississippi. She offered Davis the use of a cottage on her property for a modest fee. After her death from cancer in July 1879, Davis, who acted as her executor, was the principal heir to her estate. His claim to the Brierfield estate in Mississippi that he had owned with his brother Joseph was upheld in 1877 but he did not live there. Davis employed his son-in-law, Joel Addison Hayes, Jr. (1848-1919), to manage the property. After Hayes moved to Colorado for health reasons in 1884, Davis was left to supervise Brierfield from the Gulf Coast and it was during a visit to the property in November 1889 that he caught a cold that developed into bronchitis. He died in New Orleans on December 6.

Scope and contents

The collection comprises correspondence written by Jefferson Davis, both originals and copies, to friends and acquaintances between 1867 and 1874 when he was living mainly in Memphis. The correspondents include Alexander Mosby Clayton, Charles J. Helm and Louise A. Whistler Helm, and Dr. Alfred A. Blandy.

Provenance

The copies of the Davis-Helm letters were donated by Millicent Helm Chapman of Louisville, Kentucky, the great-granddaughter of Charles and Louise Helm, in 1981.

The copy of the Davis-Blandy letter was provided by Joanne Moore of Frenchmen’s Bayou, Arkansas, after the original was deacidified by the Special Collections Department, in 1989.

The Davis-Clayton letters were donated by Merrill and Betty Vanderloo of Dubuque, Iowa, in 1996. Clayton was an ancestor of Mrs. Vanderloo.

Related materials

MSS.10. Jefferson Davis-Joel Addison Hayes, Jr., family papers

Subject terms

Blandy, Alfred A.

Clayton, Alexander M., 1801-1889.

Davis, Jefferson, 1808-1889.

Helm, Charles J.

Inventory

Box 1

Folder

- 1 Davis-Clayton letters, 1869-1873. Five letters from Jefferson Davis in Memphis, Tennessee, and London, England, to Alexander Mosby Clayton of Holly Springs, Mississippi, in which he rejects an effort by his friends to raise an endowment for him and discusses his work for the Carolina Insurance Company. **See the Appendix for transcriptions of the letters.**
Alexander Mosby Clayton (1801-1889) was born in Campbell County, Virginia, and died near Lamar, Benton County, Mississippi. He migrated first to Arkansas, where he served on the Territorial Supreme Court in 1832, then to Mississippi where he served as a state court judge from 1842 to 1852. In 1853, he served as United States consul in Havana, Cuba. He represented the state in the Provisional Congress of the Confederate States from February to May 1861. He resigned and was appointed as a Confederate District Court Judge for the balance of the year. After the war he again served as a state court judge from 1866 to 1869.
- 2 Davis-Helm letters, 1867-1874 (copies). Thirteen letters from Jefferson Davis to Colonel Charles J. Helm in Canada, and, after his death, to his widow, Louise A. Whistler Helm. Davis had served under Louise Helm's father, Colonel William Whistler. Helm (1817-1868) served in the Mexican War and was elected to Congress. In 1853 he became commercial agent on the Danish West Indies island of St. Thomas, and consul general in Havana, Cuba, in 1858. At the outbreak of the Civil War, he resigned in support of the Confederacy, and Davis appointed him a special agent to Cuba. At the end of the war, he went to Canada. His widow returned to the U.S. and died in Detroit in 1884.
- 3 Letter: Jefferson Davis, Memphis, Tenn., to Dr. Alfred A. Blandy, London, England,

1870 January 7 (copy). Davis discusses his return to the United States, employment with the insurance company, politics and the economy. After reaching New Orleans, he surveyed the desolation of his plantation: "From the wreck of my property it was impossible to realize any thing immediately, and very little if any thing ultimately. So feeling like Death in the conversation with Dr. Hornbrook, the necessity for doing something for my bread, I accepted the best offer which was made to me and am President of a Life Insurance Co. which has its parent office at this place. Never having been what is termed "a business man" there is much to learn and more to become accustomed to." He then offers some reflections on the effects of Reconstruction: "The condition of the country is improving in a material aspect, but of its political condition the less said the better. You will have seen the action in the case of Georgia and that suffices to show you how complete the revolution is. To call this an Union of States is a mockery, only equalled by calling it a constitutional republic. Yesterday they had here an election for Mayor, the Negroes were paraded and marched to the polls to vote as ordered, but being in a minority they behaved quietly. The Mayor elect was the nominee of the Democratic party & is said to be worthy of the position. This is a fine town, and the Confederate sentiment controls as well in business as in society. It is the largest interior cotton market and if there was enough of banking capital would have direct trade through Norfolk to England." Alfred Addison Blandy (circa 1824-1895) was a dentist and physician who married Oscella L. Harris from Ohio and moved to London in 1861. Davis was the godfather of their daughter Anne Varina Jefferson Davis Blandy.

Appendix. Transcriptions of Davis-Clayton letters, 1869-1873.

1. Jefferson Davis, London, England, to Alexander M. Clayton, Holly Springs, Miss., 1869 September 16.

[page 1] London England
16th Sept 1869

Hon. A.M. Clayton
Dear Friend

Your kind letter of the 15th Ult. was sent to me by Mr. Gilliatt, it was but one more added to the many acts which make me your very grateful debtor. You justly regarded it unnecessary to express the motives of your considerate attention to my probable wants, and you will I am sure readily comprehend the feeling which had governed me in uniformly declining to receive personal contributions. Were I to concede the justice of your proposition, it would still be impossible for me to agree that a few of my nearest friends should be charged with what you term a duty of the people ~ ~.

[page 2] I have returned the check to the Mr. Gilliatt and he promised to send notice to Mr. Barker that it was cancelled

It is my purpose to sail from South-hampton for Baltimore on the 25th Inst. and I hope to see you

this fall in our beloved Mississippi. Gov. Harris sent to me a proposition from Memphis, in which the President of the Carolina life insurance Co. invites me to establish a branch of that institution at some place to be agreed on. The salary offered is sufficiently good & I have agreed to have the proposed conference. To you I say confidentially that though it is necessary for me to do something for a support, it is essential that it should be consistent with self respect and also with whatever of the good name of our people may be in my keeping and in some sense thus representative.

[page 3] I do not know the officers of the Company neither am I informed as to the means and management of the corporation. So I would be glad to have your opinion upon the matter before I see the President which may be before you and I meet. Will you therefore write to me at Baltimore, care of Mr. John S. Gillings

I have felt that it was due to truth and the brave men who so nobly struggled to maintain the rights of the South, that I should make some contribution to the history of our secession and the War consequent upon it. There are some events of which I have special information, to make that information into a narrative there is need for facts and papers which it will be most possible to obtain at home. The most of my letters and messages as President of the Confederacy I have, and that is the only record I possess. As soon as it [page 4] is possible for me to get an abiding place, I propose to commence the collection of material and begin the work. Offers have been made by publishers which promise a tempting pecuniary reward; but though that is an important consideration, the duty of doing justice to the cause is the more important, and for that, there must be a delay which by exhausting expectation will no doubt greatly diminish the probable receipts from the sale of such a work.

When you write to Mr. Barker please to present the course I have felt it necessary to adopt in such manner as will assure him of my sincere thanks. He will find the best evidence in the fact that he and my long trusted and most valued friend are in the like position- Please give my kindest remembrance to Mrs Clayton and your Daughter and believe me very truly your friend

Jefferson Davis

**2. Jefferson Davis, Peabody Hotel, Memphis, Tenn., to Alexander M. Clayton, 1869
November 23.**

[page 1] Peabody Hotel
23d Nov. 1869

Dear Friend

It was with sincere regret that I learned from your letter of your ill health. My purpose was to have gone to see you to-day, but the affairs of the office with which I am connected render it needful for me to remain until the end of this week. In the early part of the coming week I hope to visit you

I have followed your advice in regard to the checks you enclosed. [page 2] I need not express to you my sense of obligation for all your kindness. The salary of the position I now hold will suffice for the plain mode in which it is most agreeable to me to live, and you will know how to appreciate my unwillingness that any further action should be taken in regard to the plan of an endowment.

I have not made any arrangement for a residence and think it will probably be better in view of

the uncertain duration of my stay here, the election being of annual recurrence, that I should rent a house [page 3] rather than buy one

The citizens here have been very cordial in their reception of me, and it is to me doubly gratifying both as an expression of personal good will and a manifestation of their regard for the cause with which they identify me.

Please present my best wishes to Mrs. & Miss Clayton and believe me ever faithfully your's
Jefferson Davis

Hon. A. M. Clayton
Dovecote

3. Jefferson Davis, Memphis, Tenn., to Alexander M. Clayton, 1870 April 15.

[page 1] Memphis, Tenn.

15th April 1870

Hon. A. M Clayton

Dear Sir, Accept my thanks for your letter of the 12th Inst. and for the pamphlet which was received before the letter. I have looked through the part of it which more especially bore on myself and had as was my opinion of Walker his mendacity and depravity surprises me. Few men knew as well as himself the utter falsehood of his statement that I was a repudiator; and few men should have been as much restrained by the recollection of services rendered by me, as he. In 1848, Mr. Robins and myself regarding the decision of the people against the Union Bank-bonds as final, thought that [page 2] the feeling among the tax payers was such as would make it possible, authority being previously given by the Bond-holders, to obtain from voluntary payments given for certificates of discharge from further responsibility enough money to pay the greater part if not the whole of the claim for & on account of the Union bonds.

Walker was then Secty of the Tresy. and would not cooperate with us. I think his reason was political dread of the "repudiators," who had special hostility to me because of a letter written against the "Briscoe bill" and which he knew had well nigh defeated my nomination for Congress, McNutt leading the opposition. Yet he writing for foreigners places McNutt and myself in association. He garbles the letter written in 1849 to repel assault on Missi and treats as "advocating" repudiation which was then a thing of the past.

[page 3] So in regard to the Arkansas bonds, he conceals the fact that as one of the committee charged with the bequest of Smithson, I was not willing to have the fund endangered by an injudicious loan which the Govt. had made of the money, and insisted on holding the Treasury responsible for the money deposited in it. The miserable creature then and long afterwards, was in the habit of calling on me in all his troubles. Did you notice how the ingrate assails Missi for slaveholding- but he was too mean and false to be noticed at any time, and I must apologize for having written so much about him now, when he has ceased from troubling.

This is the "Holy week" of the Episcopal Church and I wish the Ladies would come here for Easter Sunday. [page 4] I am very happy to learn that Miss Clara has been benefitted by the soft weather of Spring, and fervently hope she may continue to improve.

With cordial regard to Mrs. and Miss Clayton I am as ever truly your friend
Jefferson Davis

4. Jefferson Davis, Memphis, Tenn., to Alexander M. Clayton, 1873 May 8.

[page 1] Memphis, Tenn.
8th May 1873

Hon A. M. Clayton

My dear Sir.

Mr. Robertson the Trustee called to day and said that there was no other assignment of the stock of S. Tate than that which was made on the books of the Co. That it was to secure him, Robertson, as the security of Tate and that he did not know the date of the Assignment, but that the Secty could fill the blank from the Co's. Books. At my suggestion he signed as Trustee and sole beneficiary. I hope the Secty. will regard this as sufficient. It was the best we could get. He made some remarks which suggested a concealed purpose in the assignment, such [page 2] as pecuniary liability of Mr. Tate in Alabama. He also agreed that the transfer by delivery was sufficient and the requirement of the Secty unnecessary.

Accept my sincere sympathy for your recent loss, in which Mrs. Davis fully unites.

As ever truly your friend
Jefferson Davis

Mr. Tate repaid the eighty dollars for the two shares not delivered.

J.D.

5. Jefferson Davis, Memphis, Tenn., to Alexander M. Clayton, 1873 August 28.

[page 1] Memphis
28th Aug. 73

Hon. A M Clayton.

My dear Sir,

During my absence on a mission from the Board of Directors of the Carolina Ins. Co. to negotiate for relief from embarrassment to meet promptly the heavy losses by death of Policy holders, my associates without waiting to hear from me, indeed while I was on the road, became panic stricken and sold out the Company to the Southern Life of Memphis.

I was about to effect a most desirable arrangement and would probably have completed it in a fortnight from the time of my departure.

On my return I found the arrange [page 2] ment so loosely conducted and so disadvantageous in its terms, that I refused to be responsible for it, and resigned as President of the Co. As next to the largest stockholder, the matter was a serious loss to me pecuniarily; but the most objectionable feature in the case, was the failure, as I regard it, to perform the duty and fulfil the obligation of the trustees to the widows and orphans of deceased policy holders. There seemed to be no practicable remedy when I returned, after an absence of sixteen days, and it only remained for me to state my objections, and refuse to be the medium of communication to the public, of that which my judgement could not approve. I am very busy in closing up my affairs in order to [page 3] leave and join my family.

Mrs. Davis is now in Canada but will probably leave soon for a more southern climate, but not to return to this place before frost. My own future movements will depend upon the opportunity I may have to make some business engagement elsewhere. So that I cannot now say where I shall

hereafter reside.

The telegraph brings tidings of the nomination of the Carpet bagger Ames for governor.

Dear Mississippi I grieve for her, and despair of seeing her redeemed from Yankee & Negro rule.

Please present me most cordially to Mrs. Clayton, and believe me ever truly your friend

Jefferson Davis

[page 4] Jefferson Davis

August 29 '73