

Julian Dickinson Paper on the Capture of Jefferson Davis

The Capture of Jefferson Davis Article 1889

THE CAPTURE OF JEFFERSON DAVIS
PRESIDENT
CONFEDERATE STATES OF AMERICA

THE CAPTURE OF JEFFERSON DAVIS
A PAPER

Read Before Michigan Commandery of the
MILITARY ORDER

of the

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By Companion

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United States Volunteers

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The Capture of Jefferson Davis

The Fourth Michigan Volunteer Cavalry was organized, mustered, mounted, armed and equipped at the city of Detroit, in August and September, 1862, under the command of a superb veteran officer, Col. Robert H. G. Minty, and in October, 1862, joined the Army of the Cumberland in the field. In December 1864, the regiment joined "The Cavalry Corps, Military Division of the "Mississippi," assembled at Gravelly Springs, Alabama, under the command of Major-General James H. Wilson, preparatory to a campaign, ordered by Gen. Grant, "To capture and destroy the rebel armies and resources in Alabama and Georgia." On the 22d day of March, 1865, Wilson's command, comprising a force of 13,000 cavalry, crossed the Tennessee River, and sweeping with marvellous [sic] energy southward through Alabama, routed the rebel cavalry under Lieut.-Gen. Forrest, took by assault the fortified city of Selma and captured the entire rebel force except Gen. Forrest. Crossing the Alabama River at Selma, on our pontoon bridges, the command marched to Montgomery, Alabama, entering that city without opposition; thence to Columbus and Macon. The city of Columbus is situated on the Chatahoocha [sic] River and was not only extensively and strongly fortified but well equipped and garrisoned for defense. The forts on the Alabama side of the river were flanked and the

city was captured by brilliant charges of our Cavalry. On the 21st of April our successful campaign closed, and the Fourth Michigan Cavalry established a pleasant encampment near Macon, Georgia. Our communications with the North and with our armies under Grant and Sherman were not then fully opened, and we were not definitely informed of events which had transpired at Washington, at Richmond, and in the Carolinas. However, on April 1st, 1865, the memorable battle of Five Forks had been fought, and on the next day the outer defenses of Petersburg carried, leaving open to Danville, Va., the only way of escape for the Confederate government at Richmond.

Jefferson Davis availed himself of that situation, and in the night of April 2d, accompanied by members of his cabinet and others belonging to the rebel government, fled to Danville, where, temporarily, a new capital of the Confederate States was established. But the surrender of Gen. Lee at Appomatox [sic], rendering Danville untenable, they moved on to Greensboro, N. C., where Mr. Davis met his generals, Breckenridge, Johnson and Bauregard [sic]. The Confederate government, not finding a secure resting place at Greensboro, moved to Charlotte, N. C., where the news of Johnston's surrender to Sherman overtook the fugitives and the rebel chieftain, accompanied by his cabinet and staff, left Charlotte under escort of a large cavalry force. On the march the members of the rebel cabinet, except P. M. Gen. Reagan, separated from their chief.

In the meantime, Major-Gen. Wilson, at Macon, ascertained the flight of the fugitives from Charlotte, and that they were moving in a southerly direction with a cavalry escort towards the trans-Mississippi department and he received orders to intercept them. Col. Eggleston was directed to watch the country in all directions from Atlanta, Georgia; Brigadier-General A. J. Alexander to scout the country northward to Dalton, and to detach an officer and 26 men to obtain definite information of Davis' [sic] movements. Lieut. Yoeman of the 1st Ohio Cavalry, was detailed to command that detachment and moved out; they succeeded in coming up with and it is said even joined Davis and his party whom he found under escort of Debrill's and Ferguson's divisions of rebel cavalry, but failed of a favorable opportunity to carry off the rebel chief, and at Washington, Georgia, lost sight of the entire party. Lieut. Yoeman became convinced, however, that the fugitives were trying to reach the gulf, and he sent couriers with that information to Gen. Alexander, who transmitted the information to Gen. Wilson, who promptly directed certain detachments to watch the crossings of the Ocmulgee river, which runs in a south-easterly direction from Macon, Ga. Gen. Croxton was ordered to select the best regiment of his, the first, division, to scout in the direction of Jeffersonville and Dublin, Georgia, on the Oconee River; the 1st Wisconsin Cavalry, under the command of Lieut.-Col. Harnden, was selected for that expedition; Gen. Minty, commanding the second division of the Cavalry Corps, was directed to select his best regiment and sent it south-

easterly along the western bank of the Ocmulgee, to watch all the crossings between Hawkinsville and the mouth of the Ohoope River. Gen. Minty selected his own regiment, the Fourth Michigan Cavalry, commanded by Lieut.-Col. Benjamin D. Pritchard. [I am indebted to Maj-Gen. J. H. Wilson's report to the War Dept. dated Jan. 17th, 1867, for the facts relating to his information, orders and operations, preceding the capture of Davis, as published on pp. 779-780, Harper's History of the Rebellion.]

That was the occasion on the morning of the 7th of May, 1865, of our bugle call "to arms" and the awakening of our camp to further warlike events. The order from Gen. Minty directed the Fourth Michigan" [sic] to move down the Ocmulgee River and take possession of all its ferries below Hawkinsville, to picket the river as far as the strength of the regiment would permit, and scout through the country on both sides of the river, for the purpose of capturing Jeff Davis and his party and any other government parties who might be escaping in that direction.

The Fourth Michigan left camp on the morning of May 7th and marched in a south-easterly direction. The exhilaration of such a march at such a time was delightful. It was the charming season of the year; the balmy breezes of that sunny clime wafting to us freely the fragrance of the magnolia which abounded in the glades and forests on every hand. The scenery was inviting and unmarked by any of the war's devastations [sic]. We were in new fields of observation and new prospects were dawning upon us.

Though the purpose of the expedition had not been disclosed to any of our troopers, it became apparent before the termination the first day's march, that many of them had grasped some knowledge of its purpose; it created some excitement among the men and occasioned remarks relative to the object of our pursuit, which threatened to render the success of the expedition promlematical [sic]. On the evening of the seventh we went into bivouac for the night on a beautiful plantation near Hawkinsville. Our headquarters occupied the porch of the plantation dwelling, a fortunate situation for us, for a thunder storm broke over us that night, the lightning spreading havoc in the camp. On the eighth we resumed the march. About noon near Abbeville, Georgia, Lieut.-Col. Harnden, of the First Wisconsin Cavalry, came up unexpectedly [sic] to the head of our marching column, and informed Col. Pritchard that his regiment was then moving on a road running west from Abbeville, in pursuit of a train of ambulances and wagons, which was reported to contain the family of Jeff Davis. He stated to Col. Pritchard substantially that he did not know whether Mr. Davis was with the train, but calculated that he would be likely to join it somewhere. Col. Harnden rode away to join his command before we reached Abbeville. The Fourth Michigan proceeded two miles beyond Abbeville and on the march we met in the road an aged colored man with a broken down vehicle, which he was vainly endeavoring to restore to service. Col. Pritchard availed himself of the

usual privilege to interview the colored man, and learned from him, that during the preceding night a body of mounted men crossed at one of the ferries of the Ocmulgee, near Abbeville, Ga.: that all the men had fine horses and equipments [sic] and that they paid for their ferriage, in gold coin, and departed westward during the night. This information led to a successful scouting expedition, which was thereupon immediately organized. Col. Pritchard moved his command into camp, and directed me to make a detail for a detachment, comprising the best mounted portion of the regiment. I gathered 128 men and 7 officers. Col. Pritchard took command of the detail and permitted me to accompany him. The larger portion of the regiment was left in camp under command of Capt. John C. Hathaway, with orders to picket the ferries and fords of the Ocmulgee River, and send out scouting parties in various directions, with a view to making captures designed in our general order.

Our detachment proceeded down the river road for about 12 miles, to a place called Wilcox's Mill. It was nearly sunset when we reached there, and halted for supper and forage. Thence at night fall we struck out into a desolate pine forest, through which we could scarcely distinguish any road or pathway; but tracing the way cautiously toward Irwinville, Georgia, succeeded in reaching that place about one o'clock in the night when our column halted. Irwinville was then a place of half a dozen dwellings - a sort of four corners in the wilderness. We awakened most all of the inhabitants by rude rapping at the doors of their dwellings; but they would not venture from their thresholds, and everyone seemed reluctant to give any information. For a while we were at a loss to know what to do next. Many of our troopers, wearied by the night march, dismounted and laid down on the ground for repose. Suddenly, the stillness of the night was broken by the hallooming of one at a distance towards the woods back of a neighboring dwelling. I started in the direction indicated, to ascertain what it meant, and met two of our troopers with a lady whom they had taken from the fence in rear of her dwelling, where she had been hallooming to some one, evidently afar off. In her company was a slave whom I directed the men to bring to Col. Pritchard, a proceeding stoutly resisted by the lady, who claimed him as the only one left to her, and begged us piteously not to take him away. But he was included in President Lincoln's proclamation of freedom and he seemed very willing to go with us. Being questioned by Col. Pritchard, he stated there had been several mounted men to the house during the afternoon, from a camp near the village, to purchase forage and provisions, and the camp lay about a mile and half out on the Abbeville road. Placing the freedman in advance for guide, and directing the utmost silence to be preserved in the column, we moved out on the Abbeville road. The night was dark, but clear and very quiet. We marched the distance of about a mile when we halted and made the necessary arrangements for the capture of the camp when the light was deemed sufficient to enable us to discern its situation. A detail of 25 men, under command of Lieut. Purinton, was sent to make a circuit of the camp and get into

position on the road beyond, to station pickets, and take precautions for preventing the escape of the occupants in that direction, awaiting our advance and capture of the camp.

We rested until the first appearance of the dawn of the morning of the 10th. The order was then quietly given to mount, and placing a small force under command of Capt. Charles T. Hudson, as an advance guard, with directions to charge forward upon the camp, our column moved in support. The charge was uninterrupted by any picket or camp guards, and we speedily entered and enveloped the camp by a surprise so complete that no one seemed to have been disturbed. The advance guard moved directly and quickly through the camp toward Lieut. Purinton's picket. Our main column halted for a minute in the road before entering the camp. On the right of the road, in line, facing a clearing or parade, stood three wall tents; beyond the clearing there was, what appeared to me to be, a swampy thicket; on our left, in the woods, at some distance from the road, was a miscellaneous collection of tents and ambulances. The extent of the camp could not, however, be distinctly seen from our position. At this moment some of our men appeared to be straggling from the column and Col. Pritchard directed my attention to it and to the care of the camp, and as he moved forward with the column through the camp I rode out and took a position by the roadside until the column passed me. I then rode across the parade, in front of the wall tents, on the right of the road. I saw no one about the tents and there was nothing indicating who occupied them, until, as I passed the tents and started to move into the road beyond, I saw a man partially dressed, emerging from a "shelter tent." I at once rode up to him and enquired what force was there in camp. He looked at me seemingly bewildered. Not hearing him reply to me, I repeated the question, and while lingering for a response, I was suddenly startled by a familiar voice calling. I turned and saw Andrew Bee, our "headquarter cook" who was standing close to the front of one of the wall tents and pointing to three persons in female attire, who, arm in arm, were moving rapidly across the clearing towards the thicket. Andrew called to me "Adjutant, there goes a man dressed in woman's clothes." The person indicated was quite apparent, and I rode at once toward the party, ordering them to halt, repeating the order rapidly, they seeming not to hear, or not inclined to obey, until I rode directly across their pathway, when they halted. At that moment Corporal Munger, of Company C, came riding up from the thicket, and taking a stand in the rear of the party brought his carbine to a position for firing upon the man dressed in woman's clothes, at the same time applying to him an appellation that was in vogue among the troopers as a designation of "Jeff. Davis." I ordered the corporal not to fire, there being no perceptible resistance. The person in disguise was Jefferson Davis, and his companions were Mrs. Davis and her colored waiting maid. The scene thus presented was rendered pathetic by the cries of Davis' [sic] family at the tents and by the heroic conduct of Mrs. Davis who placed her arms around the drooping head of her

husband, as if to protect him from threatened peril, she made no other appeal to us. Davis had on for disguise a black shawl drawn closely around his head and shoulders, through the folds of which I could see his gray hairs. He wore on his person a woman's long, black dress, which completely concealed his figure, excepting his spurred boot heels. The dress was undoubtedly Mrs. Davis' [sic] traveling dress which she afterwards wore on her return march to Macon. At the time of the capture she was attired in her mourning gown and a black shawl covering her head and stately form, while her waiting maid was completely attired in black. Glancing from this party before me, and around the position, I was startled by the presence of several rebel officers who in the meantime quietly came upon the scene. The positions they had taken clearly indicated they were interested in the movement of their chief. I ordered Davis and his party to retire to their tents and then moved toward the rebel officers in question, requesting them also to retire. I was promptly obeyed. I directed Corporal Munger to guard Mr. Davis and his party in their tents, and to take two men who came up with him for that purpose. I then rode forward to report to Col. Pritchard the episode that had taken place. In the meantime spirited firing had commenced, and the usual evidences of an engagement with an enemy appeared in the direction our column had advanced. As I passed Davis' [sic] tent, in going to the front, Mrs. Davis called to me, and I dismounted to hear her request. She asked what we were going to do with Mr. Davis and whether herself and family would be permitted to go along with him. I informed her that I could not tell what would be done with any of them until I had reported to my commanding officer. She then very earnestly said that we must not interfere with Mr. Davis as he was a very desperate man and would hurt some of us. She further requested that I would see to certain things that she had in the wagon, and I promised to attend to that. As I moved into the road I met one of our officers from the front with something from the wagon, in the shape of a canteen of most excellent fluid, of which he freely offered me a share. I met Col. Pritchard just returning from an unfortunate conflict with the 1st Wisconsin Cavalry, that regiment having come upon our pickets and mistaking them for an enemy, retired and formed for a battle, which forced our column to form in line and skirmish with them, in the belief that we had met a force of the enemy. Col. Pritchard brought the engagement [sic] to a close by dashing into the lines of the 1st Wisconsin and notifying them of the mistake.

The fact was that the 1st Wisconsin and the 4th Michigan expected to find a desperate force of the enemy; the 1st Wisconsin, however, was marching without any knowledge of the locality of the camp, and without any expectation of finding it at that time, having been in bivouac most of the night, a few miles from our picket.

I reported to Col. Pritchard the capture of Jeff. Davis in his attempt to escape from the camp in female attire, and that I had put him under guard. In the meantime Mr. Davis

put on his male attire - a suit of gray - and came out of his tent. When he saw Col. Pritchard he shouted out some inquiry, which he followed up with the old familiar charge, "You are vandals, thieves and robbers." He evidently had worked himself into a rage, for when I went to him soon after, getting the names of the prisoners, he refused my request for his name, and I was obliged to receive it from his wife, who spoke up proudly, in answer to my repeated question, "his name is Jefferson Davis, sir."

The captured party consisted of Jefferson Davis, accompanied [sic] by Mrs. Davis and their three children; John H. Regan, Postmaster General; Col. Johnston, A. D. C.; Col. Burton N. Harrison, Private secretary, and Col. F. R. Lubbock, A. D. C., of Jeff. Davis' [sic] staff; Major V. R. Maurin, of the Richmond Battery of Light Artillery; Capt. George V. Moody, Mollison's Light Artillery; Lieut. Hathaway, 14th Ky. Infantry; privates W. W. Monroe and F. Messick, 14th Ky.; privates Sanders, Ingraham, Wilbury, Baker, Smith, Heath and Alliston, of the 2d Ky. Cavalry; privates J. H. Taylor and A. W. Brady, Co. E. 15th Miss., private J. W. Furley, 13th Tenn., all of the late Confederate States army, and midshipman Howell of the Confederate navy, Miss Howell, a sister of Mrs. Davis, accompanied [sic] her. There were two colored women and one colored man, servants of the Davis family; of the three children of Mr. Davis' [sic] family the youngest was a babe and quite a favorite in our command; the oldest child was a little girl about ten years of age, and the other child was a boy of about seven or eight years. There was also with the party a little colored lad about the same age as young Davis, and the two created considerable amusement for us by their wrestling exercises. Burton N. Harrison, the Private Secretary, was the gentleman of whom I sought so diligently to elicit information immediately preceding the capture. There was not the slightest show of any resistance on the part of any of the captured party, and they were all kindly treated by their captors. That their wagons and tents were searched thoroughly, I have no doubt. Lieut. James Vernor obtained a trophy of Davis' [sic] wardrobe, a dressing gown, which he exhibits, but whether Davis wore it as part of this garments at the capture is not known. It might possibly have been worn under his disguise. Their horses were all taken by our men and considerable sums of money in gold were captured. The gold was taken, as I understood from Col. Johnston at the time, in the holsters of the rebel officers, where it had been carried for safety and convenience. Who captured the gold is somewhat of a mystery to this day. At the camp, immediately after the capture, Col. Pritchard was informed that one of our men, a Tennessean named James H. Lynch, was possessed of most of the coin and the Colonel searched him but found none of the gold; afterwards it is well known that Lynch distributed several pieces to some of his officers. It is certain that the coin was never equally distributed.

In preparing for the return march their horses were all returned to the prisoners and Mr. and Mrs. Davis and family were allowed the use of the ambulances, which they occupied most of the time on our return March.

On the 12th of May, returning, we met Major Robert Burns, A. A. G. of Minty's staff, from headquarters at Macon, who brought to us President Johnson's proclamation, offering rewards for the capture of Jeff. Davis and other fugitives. The proclamation was the first intelligence we received of the assassination [sic] of our Present Abraham Lincoln, and the reward, I have now in my possession the copy of the proclamation which was handed to me at that time. It was issued on the 2d day of May, 1865, was published to the Cavalry Corps, M. D. M. at Macon, on the 8th day of May, 1865, and reached our command, as I have said, on the 12th day of May. Mr. Davis was securely guarded during our return march. Perhaps his guard was more strict than it would have been had he not given notice that he would make his escape if possible.

Before reaching Macon, Col. Pritchard received orders to make a detail from his regiment in readiness to take his prisoners to Washington, and after we reached camp, he proceeded [sic] upon that service and conveyed Jeff. Davis to Fortress Monroe.

The Secretary of War directed Col. Pritchard at Washington to obtain the disguise worn by Jeff. Davis at his capture, and Capt. Charles T. Hudson undertook to procure it from Mrs. Davis. In his account of the affair, Capt. Hudson has related in a letter to Major-General J. H. Wilson, that Mrs. Davis stated to him that she attired Mr. Davis in her own dress, and she surrendered a certain garment which Col. Pritchard afterward described in his report to the Secretary of War as a "waterproof cloak or dress." Though I did not examine the texture of the dress worn by Davis at the capture, and cannot say whether it was waterproof or not, it was beyond all question a "woman's dress," and precisely like the dress usually worn by Mrs. Davis after the capture during our march back to Macon. I am very sure that not any gentleman's garment that could be described as a waterproof cloak was found or seen in the possession of Davis at his capture, or while on the march to Macon.

Burton N. Harrison, Jeff. Davis' [sic] private Secretary, in his paper in "The Century," November 1886, on this subject, states that Davis was not disguised at all, and that he wore a waterproof cloak which he usually wore on the march; and by further statements seeks to discredit other witnesses present at the capture by assuring the public only one of our troopers was present there, the one who accosted him, and that he and Mrs. Davis and that one trooper, were the only persons who saw Davis at his capture; when the fact is, that while Davis was standing in his disguise in my presence, three of our troopers saw him, besides Andrew Bee, who pointed to Davis as "a man dressed in

woman's clothes;" and there was present not more than two rods from the disguised [sic] figure, Capt. Moody and within about four rods from him, Col. Lubbock and other Confederate Army officers, who doubtless saw what took place.

My record of the event was made at the time in the line of my duty, and I then correctly and officially reported the fact of the disguise to my commanding officers.

Detroit, Jan'y [sic] 9, 1889.

Julian G. Dickinson,
Late Adj't [sic], 4th Mich, Cav., and Brevet Capt. U. S. Vol.

I am deeply indebted to Mr. Julian Dickinson of Detroit, Mich., son of Capt. Julian G. Dickinson, for permission to use this booklet which tells of the capture of Jefferson Davis, president of the Confederate States of America.

Mr. Dickinson said that there are only two of these books in existence [sic]. One is owned by him and the other is in the library of Lincoln Memorial University, Harrogate, Tennessee.

Only two hundred copies of this booklet have been printed, and they will be given to libraries throughout the United States.

WILLIAM F. DYER
Smithville, Tenn.
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