

INTRODUCTION TO AN INTERVIEW OF GEORGE REIFSNYDER, COLUMBIA CIVIL WAR SOLDIER, ONE OF THE JEFFERSON DAVIS' GUARDS

George A. Turner

The Confederate President Jefferson Davis fled Richmond on April 3, 1865, just before the city fell to Union troops. When General Lee surrendered at Appomattox Courthouse on April 9, Davis and his entourage moved further into the deep south through the Carolinas and Georgia as a band of hunted refugees, hoping to escape the blue coated pursuers. However, their dream of freedom would be short lived when Union troops captured them on May 10, 1865, at Irwinsville, Georgia. Taken to Savannah, Georgia, Davis and several other Confederate officials boarded the *Clyde* and were sent north to be held in prisons. When the ship dropped anchor off Hampton Roads, Virginia, on May 19, some of the Confederate officials were transferred to ships which took them to prisons at Fort Delaware near Philadelphia and Fort Warren in the Boston harbor.

Military officials delayed three days before taking Davis to Fort Monroe. Sometimes called the "Gibraltar of the Chesapeake," it was at the tip of the York Peninsula between the mouths of two rivers, James and York. Here, the government kept him imprisoned for almost two years. Initially, his incarceration was rather harsh, confined to a cell in the fort's casemate, placed in irons, under constant guard, and kept incommunicado for three months. The New York *Herald* described his confinement as being ". . . in a living tomb," and "Napoleon at St. Helena was [not] subjected to greater surveillance." Besides being the leader of the Confederacy and seen as committing treason, there were government officials in Washington who suspected that he was part of the conspiracy to assassinate President Lincoln.

In the summer of 1866, the government removed Davis from his basement like cell and gave him more comfortable quarters in Carroll Hall, a commodious house at the fort. By this time the government allowed him to receive visitors. Finally, Washington decided to discharge the former Confederate president; a federal court in Richmond on May 11, 1867, accepted a writ of *habeas corpus* from his attorneys and released him on a \$100,000 bail. Following the advice of several legal experts, the federal government finally concluded not to try Davis. He lived as a free man for another twenty-two years before he died at New Orleans, age eighty-two on December 9, 1889.

The following article appeared in *The Morning Press*, October 18, 1905, which reported an interview with George W. Reifsnnyder, one of Jefferson Davis' guards at Fort Monroe. He told of his experiences of guarding the famous prisoner, and claimed there was a plot to kill him.

Reifsnnyder, born in New Castle, Schuylkill County, worked as a clerk when at the age of fifteen he enlisted in Company D, Third Pennsylvania Heavy Artillery as a private on February 2, 1864. He served for one year and nine months before being mustered out of

service on November 9, 1865. After the war he moved to Catawissa and worked in the mercantile business. For several years he was the proprietor of the Susquehanna House in Catawissa, after which he ran a drug store until his death on July 28, 1908. His grave is in the Catawissa Greenwood Cemetery on Third Street. Reifsnyder was an active member of the Hoagland G.A.R. Post and was one of the leaders in getting the Civil War monument erected at the Union Cemetery in Catawissa in 1891, the first Civil War monument in Columbia County.

Interestingly, there were at least three other men from Columbia County, John Oman, Robert Oman, and Hudd Johnson who guarded Davis. According to George S. Lee of Bloomsburg, a Civil War sergeant in Battery F, Second Pennsylvania Heavy Artillery, one of these three stole Davis' breakfast and ate it.

COLUMBIA CO. SOLDIER TELLS OF PLOT HATCHED TO KILL "JEFF." DAVIS

*Contrary to Frequent Statements,
Confederacy's President was So Well
Treated That His Guards Becoming
Enraged, Had Planned to Take His Life.*

That Jefferson Davis, president of the Confederacy, was well treated when he was held a prisoner by the Union at Fortress Monroe, frequent statements in recent months to the contrary notwithstanding, and that he was so much better treated than the Federal soldiers who were guarding him that a plot was hatched by soldiers of the Union army, who were compelled to stand up under what they considered a great wrong, by which Davis was to be seized and hanged is the gist of an interview given a PRESS reporter by George W. Reifsnyder of Catawissa, who for a time was a guard of Davis, while he was imprisoned in the fort. In the interview Mr. Reifsnyder tells only of what he knows and of what he saw. His statements will go a long ways toward controverting many of the stories that have recently appeared, and which it is averred that Mr. Davis was inhumanely treated.

Stood Guard First Night

"I was in Company D, Third Pennsylvania Heavy Artillery, and we were stationed at Fortress Monroe when Jefferson Davis was brought there a prisoner," said Mr. Reifsnyder. "Upon his arrival there he was placed in a double casemate that faced Hampton Roads. Surrounding the fort there was a moat. Beyond the moat there was a water battery to protect the fort. In Mr. Davis' cell was a couch and a rustic chair with a back that permitted him to recline, the extent of the furniture.

"It was my fortune to be assigned to guard duty in Mr. Davis' cell the first night he was a prisoner. I remember the time distinctly, although I was then but seventeen years of age. There is no doubt that Mr. Davis as well as Mitchel and Clay were well guarded, for strict was the care that had been taken that it required 54 men a day to guard each of the prisoners, eighteen men being stationed at various points to make their guard perfectly

safe, each man standing guard eight hours out of the day. All this was after Lee had surrendered, and to be compelled to stand guard over Jefferson Davis with the war practically over and all the men eager to get home, was almost more than we fellows could bear, for we were young then, and looked at things differently than we do now.

"Now I appreciate that the courteous treatment which was accorded Mr. Davis was the only kind to accord him; that his position as President of the Confederacy alone should have entitled him to respect, but at seventeen Jeff. Davis was a different personage to us.

Was Treated Courteously

"From what I myself know I would state without any hesitation that Mr. Davis could not have been treated more courteously. I remember our orders as though it were only yesterday that we were not allowed to move when standing guard in Mr. Davis' cell while he was sleeping. Think of the torture which this brought to us. Awakened from a sound sleep ourselves to mount guard in his room, for there was a guard in his room all the time that he was in the fort, with the others stationed outside, an officer of the day being divided only by a huge iron door, to whom all Mr. Davis' requests were communicated, you can easily imagine how much suffering it cost us soldiers to remain perfectly still for two hours under such circumstances while Mr. Davis slept. I remember distinctly that my instructions were not to do anything that would agitate Mr. Davis; to hold no conversation with him; to answer no questions and not to disturb him in any way

"I remember that upon one occasion he made an effort to converse with me, but I quickly told him that my orders were not to hold any conversation with him; that those were my orders from the officer of the day handed down by General [Nelson Applleton] Miles, the general commanding.

Food Of The Choicest

"What was his food? Why, sir, it was of the choicest, and it was that more than anything else that led to the plot to hang him, which I have never seen mentioned in print since the war, but which at the time was a well determined plot, that was nipped in the bud. Mr Davis was served with the choicest of all the market afforded and it was the sight of all that being carried into him that so aroused we soldiers who were forced to eat nothing but pork and beans. I can see yet the huge waiter upon which were the daintiest of dishes, served piping hot, with the decanters and the spotless linen, being carried into Mr. Davis, while we were forced to remain on regulation fare, poor at best, and awful when you thought that if it were not for being compelled to stay there to guard a man whom you held responsible for many of your woes, you might be back home again. 'Look there what he is getting, while we have to eat this stuff?' was a frequent comment, and it was his spirit of rebellion among the soldiers that led to the plot to have Davis.

PLOT TO HANG DAVIS

"There were fifty or more in the plot. Just with whom it started I do not remember, but I was let into the secret. Fortunately for us, the plot was discovered and being summoned before the officers the men were told that if they attempted any such work all the men would be sent to Dry Tortugas, the National prison in Florida for conscripts and criminals. When the plot was discovered the arrangements were being made to take Mr. Davis out by force and hang him. The boys were young then and I dare say all who are living look at it differently now.

"Mr. Davis, as I remember him, was a big, raw-boned man, probably six feet in height and well built. If I am not mistaken he wore a goatee at that time. He was in a sullen mood all the time that I stood guard in his cell, but he was suffering with erysipelas at the time and this of itself would have been sufficient to have caused him to feel badly to say nothing of his imprisonment. He had a prominent nose and it was very much irritating because of the disease and was slightly peeling off at the time.

Illustrates Courtesy Shown

"An incident that well illustrates the attention that was paid him and the respect manifested is stamped upon my memory. Mr. Davis had a fine meerschaum pipe, with a long stem that was his constant companion and which I had my eyes on. I wanted it for a souvenir of my standing guard in his cell. For a long time I debated the question with myself, but finally realized orders to show courtesy to Mr. Davis were so rigid that I would be harshly dealt with if the theft was placed on me, and I knew that if Mr. Davis reported the matter, as undoubtedly would, it would rest with one of the three who had stood guard in his cell that day. All this time Mr. Davis was lying on the couch asleep, but I finally stole over to his coat and cut a button from it, which I kept as a souvenir until it was lost.

"At the time I stood guard in his cell he was not handcuffed, but I understand that later handcuffs were placed on him as a matter of precaution. While the casemate in which he was confined was cheerless, yet he was soon removed to Carroll Hall, at the fort, where he had much more commodious quarters, more like a large parlor, and where he was able to have a more satisfactory attendance of the physicians."

Mr. Reifsnyder was fourteen years of age when he first sought to enter the army. It was at the time of the first invasion of Lee, and he ran off to Harrisburg. They wouldn't have him then, but the men tossed him in a blanket and sent him home on a canal boat. He next went out in '63 and in '64 he joined the Third Pennsylvania Artillery. He was attached to General Ord's headquarters in front of Richmond and when that city fell he marched into the city at 3 o'clock in the morning when it was yet burning. After he was relieved from the irksome guard duty at Fortress Monroe he served as guard on the mail boat *Adalaide*, running from Baltimore to Norfolk.

Such is a story of the treatment accorded Mr. Davis by one who knows if any one does.

1 John Mitchel, editor of a Richmond newspaper, was released from Fort Monroe in early October, 1865.

2 Clement C. Clay was an Alabamian in the U.S. Senate, the Confederate Senate, and sent by Davis to Canada with hope of opening peace talks with the Lincoln administration. He was arrested at the same time with Davis and imprisoned on the suspicion of having some kind of involvement in the Lincoln assassination. The government never brought him to trial and finally released him from Fort Monroe on April 17, 1866.