



The White House of the Confederacy

Front of Jefferson Davis' Richmond home, the White House. (Valentine Museum, Richmond)

by Eleanor S. Brockenbrough

Director, Museum of the Confederacy, Richmond, VA.

One would imagine a great deal of information about the White House of the Confederacy had been compiled over these last years since the story of the house first began. Certainly, the house deserves such a well-documented past. However, there are few records and few references leaving still a mystery for someone to work on for a long time.

It all began in May 29, 1816, when Dr. John Brockenbrought bought his first lot for \$ 10,000 at the corner of 12th Street and what was then K Street later to become Clay Street. A little over a year later, on May 3d, 1817, Dr. Brockenbrought bought a second lot on the corner of K Street and 13 Street, thus rounding out a good size plot for his house. On January 1st, 1818, for \$ 7,000 he insured his property which consisted then of a dwelling, brick with inverted slate roof, two and half stories high, and a kitchen building which was brick with a wooden roof. At this time, there was no third story.

The architect was Robert Mills who designed also the Wickham-Valentine House, the Monumental Church, and the Washington Monument in Washington. Years later, in its present state, the house was described as having an Ionic columnar porch at the front with a great portico in the rear with four clusters of two Doric columns each, distinguished though heavy of proportion. The side elevation of the House has a single and double arrangement of windows and an inset wall, which latter feature (though perhaps open to question architecturally) is not without effect. While the "ventilator" at the top of the house is perhaps most useful than beautiful, the interior, while good, is in no way remarkable, except for the sense of solidity, strength, and well-proportioned spaces, which it gives another Mill's trademark.

On March 4, 1844, Dr. Brockenbrought sold the house for \$ 20,000 to James N. Morson. The property consisted then of a dwelling two stories besides basement, contiguous to two brick buildings covered with slate and a gardeners house brick with wool. Mr. Morson owned the house just a short time but added three more buildings including the carriage house or stable in the middle of Clay Street.

On December 28, 1845, the property was sold to James A. Seddon for \$ 25,000. Mr. Seddon was the first cousin of Mr. Morson and later became Secretary of War in the Confederate Cabinet. On July 7, 1857, the property was sold to Mr. Lewis D. Crenshaw who added the third floor, made changes in the basement and installed gas. The property included the stable and enclosures on Clay Street with the understanding that they be removed when the City improved the street. An architectural comment about the addition observed: *“The present top heavy effect is due to a later rebuilding of the upper floor of the house shortly before the Civil War, in which the old roof was removed and an extra story added, thus ruining the proportions Mills had created. You remember, of course, that Robert Mills liked symmetry and originally everything on the house balanced. There are even fake doors inside to correct what would have been an uneven effect in the wall space. There is one in the parlor to the left of the fireplace and one in the withdrawing room just behind the china case. There were no windows in the rest wall until 1870 which explains the imbalance and the solidity and strength of the whole structure”*.

On June 11, 1861, the house was sold for the last time to the City of Richmond for \$ 35,000. The City agreed to *“take such furniture as may be selected by the President”*, the estimated cost of the furniture then being \$ 7,895. And so, finally, the house became the house of the President of the Confederacy. The Davises liked the house and found it suitable and functional. Mrs. Davis described it briefly in her memoirs. We have, thus, very little direct information about the house when it served as the *White House of the Confederacy*.

The *Richmond Dispatch* describes it this way: *“The entrance hall was elliptical with two niches. The library, 11’3 ”, had a marble mantel and served as an anteroom and as private office. The dining room was 22’ by 29’ with windows opening on a terrace. (It was there that Mrs. Davis had her fortnightly levees). There was also a parlor and a withdrawing room, 22’ square. The piazza measured 12’ by 67’ and there was a winding stair to the right of the front hall. This shows, perhaps, the literal male spatial impressions of a house”*.

Mrs. Davis is a little more descriptive in her impressions. Then she decorated the rooms and left her mark on the interior. In 1885, Admiral Porter in his book *Incidents and Anecdotes of the Civil War*, reported that *“the refined taste of his wife was apparent and marked everything about the apartments”*.

Varina Davis wrote in her memoirs that there is *“ ... an old fashioned garden and large airy rooms ”* and that *“ the mansion stood on the brow of a steep and very high hill”*. *“The house is very large, but the rooms are comparatively few, as some of them are over 40’ square. The ceilings are high, the windows are wide, and the well staircases turn in easy curves toward the airy rooms above. The Carrara marble mantels were the delight of our children. One was a splendid favorite with them, on which the whole pilaster was covered by two lovely figures of Hebe and Diana, on either side in bold relief, with commendatory taste. The little boys, Jefferson and Joë, climbed up to the lips of these pretty ladies and showered kisses on them. The amtablature was Apollo in his chariot in basso relief. Another was a charming conception of Cupid and Psyche, with Guido’s Aurora ...”*. *“ The upper story was*

occupied by the staff and housekeeper. There was no secret chamber in the mansion. Mr. Davis was not in the third story of the mansion more than three or four times in all the years we lived there and then he was there because I had gone for quiet and illness”.

In a letter, July 12, 1894, to Mrs. Ann Grant, Varina Davis wrote that the middle room of the second floor was used as Mr. Davis’ private office. *“No one was received there except particular friends, the generals, the Senators and members of Congress and people having such claims ”.* She continued *“No spies were received there nor were secret messages ever sent from that room, for every missive sent from there I wrote at Mr. Davis’ dictation (...) Dispatches were dropped through the slotted window between Mr. Davis’ office and hall which was for ventilation purposes. On one side of the office was our room and on the other the nursery. Above the stairs were the aides’ rooms”.* She referred to the large dining room, center parlor, drawing room and small room *“used by Mr. Davis as a private reception room and me for the same purpose”.* Mrs. Davis tells us also that the dining table was rosewood with maple overlay on a pedestal reportedly made by Preston Belvin in Richmond.

In the entrance hall there are two black painted statues in the niches, Comedy and Tragedy serving as light fixtures. In the niches on the stairs were two marble statues. From another source, we know that before 1896 the original oak staircase was replaced by a facsimile in iron. The banisters were plain but along the flat ends of the stairs ran a vine of conventionalized flowers and leaves at the base of the stairway supported a pillar with a lamp for illumination. The lamp was later converted to gas. In the basement were a pantry, storerooms, a breakfast room and the children’s dining room.

Outside was a grass blown yard enclosed by a high brick white washed fence. The garden had apple, pear and cherry trees as well as flowers, and the pavement and the eight steps were shaded by three thick trees. The house looked out on a ravine with a stream running through it and meadow with cattle feeding upon it and woods. From the C and O tracks to the West, the house could be clearly seen. On the top of the house was a ventilator, and a flag pole was erected on the top of that. This ventilator-cupola was enlarged in 1870. Three other miscellaneous items about are that the floors were of hard pine, there were inside shutters to all the windows, and that there was a white rug on the floor in the library.

Confederate Senator Wigfall of Texas described the White House of the Confederacy as a “modest villa” standing in a small garden, and in January 1863, the *Edinburg Magazine* in an article entitled “A month’s visit to the Confederate Headquarters ” makes this interesting observation: *“The President’s house was called the Gray House in contradiction to the White House”.* Isabel Ross confirms this description in her book *First Lady of the South*. The house was graceful, three storied; the walls were brick covered with gray stucco, and the house was sometime called the *Gray House*.

After the Davies left the house, it was used by Union military authorities until September 1870. President Lincoln walked with his son Todd from the James River to the house and is said to have sat in the Victorian armchair, used in so many photographs by Mathew Brady. But for the influence of the City of Richmond, the property would have been turned over to the Freedman’s Bureau for use as a normal school. Instead, the house and kitchen became the Central School and the entrance hall held an organ. The two-story kitchen building held the primary grades.

For twenty years the house served as a school, during this time, windows were cut in the west hall and a portion of the garden was replaced by wooden pickets. In 1890 plans were made to tear down Central School and replace it with a new building but the Confederate Memorial Literary Society was formed for the purpose of saving and preserving the former Confederate White House. City Council formally presented the property to the Society on June 3, 1894, the 86th anniversary of Jefferson Davis' birth. So after a long and varied odyssey, the house became a museum and library and was opened to the public on February 22, 1896, the 34th anniversary of Davis' inauguration. Varina Davis later gave a reception in the old familiar rooms. As Varina herself wrote, "*It was a dear old house*". Here people lived, hoped and suffered as in a troubled dream. Finally, the house had come home.

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