



VOICES FROM HISTORY: THE CARBUNCLE CHRISTMAS - PUBLISHED 12/28/2018

By Pat Schley, DDMF Researcher

The year 1864, for the Davis family, was one that brought sadness, anxiety and hope regarding an end to the war, now in its 3rd year. On May 26, 1864, Sarah Davis' younger brother, John Adam Walker, died of mercurial fever[1], at the age of 43. On September 11th, Sarah Davis' beloved mother, Lucy Adam Walker, died at the age of 83. In late September or very early October, David Davis developed a carbuncle on the back of his neck which would threaten his life. It would prevent him from returning to Washington DC for the fall and spring sessions of the US Supreme Court, and would prevent him from taking part in the re-election of President Abraham Lincoln on November 8th. It also prevented him from taking part in the process of appointing the new Chief Justice after Chief Justice Roger Brooke Taney died in October, resulting in the appointment of the new Chief Justice, Salmon P. Chase, in December. David Davis had hoped that Lincoln would appoint his friend, Noah P. Swayne.

After her mother's death in mid-September, Sarah and David traveled back to Lenox to attend her mother's funeral[2]. Sarah stayed behind when Davis returned to Illinois in order to help her sisters and their husbands sort through her parents' things as they prepared the family home for appraisal prior to settling the estate. She was not only anxious that her husband would make it home safely and in good health, but she was also thinking about the myriad things that needed to be done at home before winter set in. As Sarah wrote to her husband,

"You can hardly believe how busy we have been – and how much remains to be done. We find all valuable things well preserved, such linen, blankets &c – many yards of new cloth, both cotton linen and woolen – yarn, candle wick, and many things of value at this time. Every small paper has to be opened as Mother[3] was in the habit of putting away silk – and even money in this way - Some letters we have read and find many things to interest. We found a very original letter from Cousin Mary Adam to Lucy[4] – One letter from

Father[5] written to Mother before his marriage – We have still a drawer full in store – We could linger over these letters had we time –.... . I shall hope to be at home by the time you get through your Court in Chicago-...

If the apples are gathered before I return – please have the best selected for us. I like a variety – some sour ones for pies – and a variety for eating. Would it not be better to have the apples taken directly to the Grocery – and sold. Perhaps Mr Jacobi would like them. Has Con[6] bought any chickens to put in the coop? Would it not be well for him to get two or three dozen and feed them –“ Lenox MA, September 25, 1864 (ALPL) Sarah Davis to David Davis

Whether Davis had had signs that he was not well while he was in Lenox with Sarah, we do not know, but it is evident that she was concerned for his health and about his tendency to push himself too hard:

[I] fear you are exciting yourself too much for your health – Do be very careful – and take things as you feel able to do them – for there is so much sickness that I feel more anxious than I otherwise should... We work steadily daily [on clearing the family home] – and are progressing, tho’ you maybe, would not say so, just to come in and look around... The accumulation of half a Century cannot be overlooked in a moment[7] – We hope to be ready for the appraisal before many days – Lenox MA, September 29, 1864 (ALPL) Sarah Davis to David Davis

Just 2 days after Sarah wrote her admonition to “be careful” of his health, her concern proved to be well-founded:

“An annoying boil on the back of my neck prevent interferences with the pursuits of business or pleasure...” Bloomington, October 1, 1864 David Davis to his brother-in-law, Julius Rockwell

This annoying boil would, within days of this letter, turn into a potentially life-threatening carbuncle[8] which would keep Davis housebound until April 1865. Due to the amount of time it took for a letter to reach its destination, Sarah Davis decided to stay on in Lenox awhile longer to see her mother’s estate settled before she headed back to Bloomington:

“We find the will cannot be proved for a month but some arrangement will be made by which the household goods can be divided... I cant [sic] bear to have you at home without me – but if it seems best to stay I know you will wish me to do it.” Lenox MA, October 2, 1864 (ALPL) Sarah Davis to David Davis

The notation made by David Davis when he received her October 2nd letter shows that he was already ill:

“Lenox Oct 64 while I was sick[9]” Lenox MA, October 2, 1864 (ALPL) Sarah Davis to David Davis

“The Carbuncle is on the back of the neck just at the top of the spine. It is immense. The swelling at one time extending from ear to ear and half way up the head.” Bloomington, IL October 22, 1864 (Williams College) Sarah W. Davis to her sister, Fanny Williams

During this time, Davis was under the watchful eye of his wife, Sarah, as well as a hired woman named Ada Patterson, who acted as nurse to David Davis, and as friend and companion to his wife. Sarah Davis was so fond of Miss Patterson that she gave her wedding when she married Samuel F. Barnum of LeRoy IL, in November 1865.

“Supper is over, and I am alone with my husband, who has just dropped asleep. He is improving, but very weak, and a little thing wearies him... there is a prospect at his being confined for some time. He sits up part of the time – and comes out to the dining room occasionally. To night he is sitting on the lounge watching us – as we pursue our various employments. His face is thin. Ada Patterson has been a kind devoted nurse, and I am very grateful to her. We now have to wash the sore once in two or three hours, ... – and apply clean cloths greased in hogs lard – ... It is now four weeks since the poulticing[10] was begun – that was continued 3 weeks. After washing it at eleven bed time – no more water is applied till morning – but the dressing is kept up through the night...I trust I shall have strength to take care of him. Ada has drest [sic] his neck at night – ... They think I am not able to lose my rest yet – and I confess I don’t urge it – as I get very tired through the day.” Bloomington, IL October 22, 1864 (Williams College) Sarah W. Davis to her sister, Fanny Williams

My good dear brother! ... oh, how he has suffered. He has my heartfelt sympathy, and my earnest prayers that he may speedily be restored to strength and health. Stockbridge MA, October 26, 1864 (ALPL) Fanny Williams to Sarah Davis

November continued to be taken up with the round-the-clock care of the wound left by the carbuncle which had begun in October. Before the advent of antibiotics, scrupulous washing and the frequent change of bandages was the only thing that might effectively fight such a serious infection. By the time December arrived, David Davis was better, but his recovery was moving very slowly. Sarah Davis, writing to her younger sister, Fanny Williams, in Stockbridge MA, updated her sister on Davis’ condition:

“And now for my “good man” – who is still confined to his home – tho able to see and enjoy his friends there. His neck is slow in healing and week after week passes and we hope on. Still the work goes on and by and by I hope he will be well and able to set about business – which he very much wishes. He has borne this trial with great patience – and still is cheerful. His feelings always kind seem to have become still more tender – and with him to feel is to act... A Merry Christmas to you one and all. All send love – Your aff.e Sister

Sarah” Bloomington, IL December 11, 1864 (Williams College) Sarah W. Davis to Fanny Williams

The day after Sarah wrote to her sister, Davis wrote to his brother-in-law, Julius Rockwell, in Pittsfield MA:

“While I was confined to my bed the Dr, in view of the excitability of my brain, directed that no one should see me & that letters ^of business should not be read to me – In consequence, there was a great accumulation of letters & since I have been able to write I have been constantly employed to get in getting up my correspondence – And to tell you the truth I have not been able to do it... Very few physicians can predict with certainty the curing up of a Carbuncle – The disease is arrested & the healing of the sore is the only thing in the way of my complete recovery. – But the healing process (which the Dr says is a work of time) certainly is a slow one –... My case is said to be a severe one, but the Dr says that every thing is going on nicely – Dr Stipp[11] ... told me that I wd not be able to go to Washington before the Christmas – Bloomington, December 12, 1864 (Library of Congress) David Davis to Julius Rockwell

“I am grieved that my dear brother is still on the invalid list, but am thankful that he has such a good and faithful nurse. You won’t let him go to Washington this Winter I hope, for if ever a man needs a wife, it is after a long painful illness.” Stockbridge MA, December 16, 1864 (ALPL) Frances Mary Williams to Sarah Davis

All through December, the usual winter preparation chores of hog slaughtering and the attendant sausage making and rendering of lard still needed to be attended to, which meant that Sarah Davis had to hire extra help. David Davis been ordered by his doctors’ to have no visitors and to take part in no business. Apparently, this lack of usual occupations resulted in a considerably lengthened Christmas list, leaving Sarah and Miss Patterson having to do some extra Christmas shopping and, as a result, Sarah’s Christmas letter to her sister, Fanny Williams, was a bit late:

“I wish you all a “Happy New Year” – and hope you are all well. We had a very busy week here last week. My good man, (who has time now to think) wished to remember so many at Christmas – that he kept Miss Patterson and I running to find what he wanted. I went to town three days with her – and finally she had to go again. This, with the slaughtering of five swine and all the work that followed – which I had on my mind and an oversight a part of it – and the baking to last over Sunday, that the girls [her hired girls]might take the day [off] – about used me up – so that my back is not worth much to day...

To night a Christmas tree is to shed its fruit for the children of the Sabbath School. Sallie is desirous to go – tomorrow night Gottschalk[12] gives a concert. I am anxious to hear him. Do you think I can manage to hold out? Every vessel is full.” Bloomington, December 26, 1864 (ALPL) Sarah Davis to Fanny Williams

After the new year, Davis' recovery continued to be very slow due to the slow healing of the wound on the back of his neck. Month after month, his doctors refused to let him return to Washington DC. To his dismay, he was not able to take part in Lincoln's 2nd inauguration on March 4th, 1865. and would prevent him from taking part in the process of appointing of the new Chief Justice after Chief Justice Roger Brooke Taney died in October. Finally, in April, Davis was cleared by his doctors to travel to Chicago for his spring circuit there in April 1865. Notations in David Davis' diary, made while he was in Chicago, make it clear that his neck was still causing him considerable pain. It was only the assassination of Abraham Lincoln on April 14th, which caused him to return to Washington DC at all that spring. Despite the fact that he was not yet well, Davis traveled immediately to Washington DC when he received a telegram from Lincoln's eldest son, Robert Todd Lincoln. He boarded the funeral train, but then left it in Baltimore. From there, he traveled back to Washington DC to begin working on Mr. Lincoln's estate.

[1] This may refer to mercury poisoning. John A. Walker suffered from arthritis, sometimes referred to as "rheumatic arthritis", and was likely in much pain. If he had been treated with a very common medicine of the time called calomel (mercurous chloride, now mainly used as a fungicide or pesticide), he may have been suffering from mercury poisoning. Mercury was also used at this time as a treatment for yellow fever.

[2] Lucy Adam Walker (1781-Sept. 11, 1864)

[3] Lucy Adam Walker, who had just died on September 11 1864, two weeks before this was written.

[4] Lucy Forbes Walker [Mrs. Julius] Rockwell

[5] William Perrin Walker

[6] Former hired man who was married in early 1862.

[7] William Perrin and Lucy Adam Walker were married on 29 January 1807 and lived in the house on Walker St. in Lenox MA until Judge Walker's death in November 1858. Lucy Walker continued to live there until her death on 11 September 1864, eighteen days before this letter was written.

[8] A carbuncle is a cluster of boils that form a connected area of infection. Carbuncles often occur on the back of the neck...and can cause a deeper and more severe infection and are more likely to leave a scar. People who have a carbuncle often feel unwell in

general and may experience a fever and chills. Without antibiotics (the standard treatment today) with which to treat Davis, this became a life-threatening situation.

[9] This would have been when David Davis was ill with a carbuncle

[10] A soft moist mass of bread, meal, clay, or other adhesive substance, usually heated, spread on cloth, and applied to warm, moisten, or stimulate an aching or inflamed part of the body. Also called **cataplasm**.

[11] Dr. George W. Stipp

[12] Louis Moreau Gottschalk (May 8, 1829 – December 18, 1869) was an **American** composer and pianist, best known as a virtuoso performer of his own romantic piano music pieces. Though he only lived for forty years, he became the most prominent American composer and pianist of his time... Perhaps his greatest contribution to American music was incorporating the **syncopated rhythmic elements** of **Caribbean** and Latin folk music into his own. As Frederick Starr pointed out, these rhythmic elements "anticipate **ragtime** and jazz by a half century." It could be said that jazz is a progeny, at least in terms of its rhythmic characteristics, of Gottschalk's Latin-influenced compositions. http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Louis_Moreau_Gottschalk