



VOICES FROM HISTORY: SCHOOL DAYS - PUBLISHED 9/11/0218

THE EDUCATION OF GEORGE PERRIN DAVIS

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In 1825, an exceedingly progressive law called the free school law was passed by the Illinois legislature. It provided schools open to all white citizens between the ages of five and 21 that would be free to all, regardless of class. This law briefly put Illinois years ahead of many of the other states at the time. However, it soon was facing opposition, especially from poor people who feared that their children would be educated and therefore unfit for work on the farm. Ironically, this opposition came from the very class that it was designed to help. During the 1826-27 legislative session, the law was gutted when the free school clause was removed and this was inserted: "No person shall hereafter be taxed for the support of any free school in this state unless by his own free will and consent, first had and obtained in writing." It wasn't until 1855 that a true free school law was passed in Illinois.

This meant that David & Sarah Davis were on their own finding a suitable education for their son, George Perrin Davis, who was born in June 1842. George's early education was a mixture of home schooling and attendance at various local schools, often located in empty commercial spaces, private homes, or in churches.

In the spring of 1847, Sarah Davis made a prolonged visit to her home town of Lenox MA, after the death of their 3rd son, Mercer Davis. She took George, who was 4 ½ yrs. old, as well as her hired woman, an African-American woman named Catharine, who was originally from Lenox, with her. David Davis stayed behind as he was scheduled to be a delegate to the Illinois Constitutional Convention that summer.

By the spring of the following year, when George was nearing 6 years old, Sarah was actively seeking a school for George:

“Charlotte Franklin’s school was out and I cannot send our son – He can spell rat and hen –
– “Canaan CT, March 23, 1848 (IHPA) SWD-DD[*]

“George keeps close to me. I shall be very glad if he will go to school and be contented there
– “Canaan CT, April 10, 1848 (IHPA) SWD-DD

“If you dont [sic] send him to school, spend a leisure hour or so every day in teaching him to read & spell - ” Bloomington IL, April 16, 1848 (IHPA) DD-SWD

By May, Sarah and her sisters had exhausted all possibilities and had come to this solution:

“Dont [sic] laugh at me dear – mother proposes to have Nelly Rockwell [Cornelia Livingston Rockwell (1841-1930), niece of Sarah Davis] come down and go to school a few days with George to get him in the habit of going – Lenox MA, May 1, 1848 (IHPA) SWD-DD

The plan worked well despite some parental concern about George being willing to continue in school when Nelly Rockwell returned home to Pittsfield: *“George goes to school with Nelly Rockwell but whether he will lie to go alone remains to be seen.”* Lenox MA, May 19, 1848 (IHPA) SWD-DD

“I hope George will go to school –...– I know he is a perverse nature – but there is a plenty of good elements about him – The great trouble is – to know what is the proper mode of government to be adopted, with reference to him – He will go to school with Nelly –” Shelbyville IL, May 26, 1848 (IHPA) DD-SWD

They needn’t have worried. By summer, George seems to have settled in well, which pleased both of his parents:

“He is much more gentle since he goes to school, and is quite polite – This morning – I asked him if he would have a cup of coffe [sic] – said he ‘if you please Mother dont ask me every morning – for I always want it when it is on the table’ –” Lenox, MA, June 29, 1848 (IHPA) SWD-DD

“Tell Georgie I am glad that you give such a good account of him. Give him my best love - & say to him that I want him to learn to read to me by the time he returns.” Bloomington IL, July 16, 1848 (IHPA) DD-SWD

Sarah and George returned to Bloomington in the fall of 1848. They were not alone in their search for a proper school for George:

“The old gentleman & his wife [James & Catherine Livingston Allin]...want to send their daughter Ann to school – Mrs Allen [sic] thinks Bloomington affords poor Schools for boys and girls –” Bloomington IL, March 30, 1848 (IHPA) DD-SWD

A quick scan of the Weekly Pantagraph from 1848-1852 reveals that there were schools available. There were 2 academies, the Bloomington Male Academy, headed by Charles N. Dodge, located in the Baptist Church “until a more suitable building can be procured”, which had been operating for “several years past”, and the Bloomington Female Academy, superintended by George W. Minier, which began its first session in September 1848. There were no less than 5 schools run by individuals, who ran them in rented rooms or private homes, or in empty commercial space. There was also an 1852 ad for the M’Clean Book Store, run by C.T. Brush, announcing that they were now “receiving from the East, a large supply of SchoolBooks, which we will sell at reduced prices – “

By late 1852, it was apparent that something better than what Bloomington had to offer was needed:

“ I have kept George out of school some days – as there is no fire in the schoolhouse ... and perhaps it is as well for him to play in the air – I think sitting in a cold room injurious – I hope they may get a stove soon –“ Bloomington IL, October 1852 (IHPA) SWD-DD

By June 1853, Sarah, 11 yr. old George, and 9 mo. old Sarah Worthington “Sallie” Davis, were in Lenox again, this time to enroll George in Mr. Hyde’s School for Boys in Lee MA. Alexander Hyde, the headmaster, was a brother-in-law of Sarah Davis’ elder brother, George Walker. The school, established in 1837 as a boarding school in a wing his home, had a fine reputation and attracted a steady stream of boys over the years, one of whom was, in the fall of 1841 through the spring of 1843, James Roosevelt, later the father of Franklin Delano Roosevelt. George Perrin Davis began at Mr. Hyde’s in November 1853 and stayed until the end of the spring semester 1855, when he returned to home to Bloomington.

There is nothing in the letters to document where George attended school until April of 1857, although there is some thought that he may have attended the Illinois Wesleyan University Preparatory School during that time. On April 18th of that year, David Davis wrote this to his son, who had just begun attending the Beloit Preparatory School at Beloit College in Beloit, Wisconsin:

”I hope, My Dear Son, that you will be studious, many good tempered, obedient and truthful – You cant help making people love you – if you do these things – Be careful of the feelings of others, and do not cultivate selfishness – Your affectionate father David Davis” Urbana IL April 18 1857 (IHPA) DD- GPD

He attended the Beloit Preparatory School until 1860, and then stayed on to do 2 years at Beloit College, until the spring of 1862. In the fall of 1862, he began attending Williams College in Williamstown MA:

“My Dear Son I was much gratified at receiving your letter of the 14th from Williamstown – You will like the place and college both as soon as you get a little familiarized with the people, your fellow students, & the duties of the College – In the reputation which Williams bears throughout the Country, she is not second to either Harvard or Yale – Two years will soon pass away If you avail yourself of all the sources of information and & facilities of instruction to improve yourself, be assured that in after life, these two years will be green spots in your memory – ...” Bloomington IL, September 21, 1862 (AL 21) DD-GPD

George Perrin Davis graduated from Williams College in 1864 and then went on to graduate in 1867 from the Law School of the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor. He then returned home to Bloomington to begin his adult life.

* Key for the correspondent initial used in letter citations:

DD – David Davis SWD – Sarah W. Davis GPD – George Perrin Davis

All letters quoted are in the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library in Springfield IL.