

## A President's New Orleans Funeral

By Charles L. McCain



Jefferson Davis around 1885

In the early morning of Friday, Dec. 6, 1889, fog hung low in the streets of the Crescent City. Our city was quiet; respectable New Oroleanians were in bed. Before retiring, many citizens beseeched the Almighty to save the life of their leader now lying desperately ill at the Payne home on the corner of First and Camp Streets. But their chief was an old man of 81 years, whose life had been filled with travail, and at 12:45 am, surrounded by his family and friends, the first citizen of the South passed away. Immediately a messenger was dispatched to wake Mayor Shakespeare and give him the doleful news. Jefferson Davis was dead.

The stone monument, in front of what is now the Frank G. Strachan home at 1134 First St., tells the tale. "Here, in the home of his friend, Jefferson Davis, First and only President of the Confederate States of America, died on Dec. 6, 1889." Davis, taken ill on an inspection tour of one of his plantations below Vicksburg, had been rushed by steamer to New Orleans and thence to the house on First Street, at that time owned by JU Payne, Davis' friend and cotton factor.

Mayor Shakespeare, after paying a call on the newly-widowed Mrs. Davis, assembled the leading citizens of New Orleans to plan Davis' funeral. This committee of citizens, under the direction of William Preston Johnston, president of Tulane and son of famed Confederate General Albert Sidney Johnston, set the funeral for noon of Wednesday, Dec. 11.

As dawn broke over New Orleans that Friday of Dec. 6, bells began to toll throughout the city and everywhere flags were flown at half staff, excepting on the United States Customs House. The American government would give no recognition to the man who had led the

recently put-down rebellion of the Southern states. At the War Department in Washington, the death of Davis was also ignored. The Department flag was not flown at half staff nor was the oil portrait of Davis draped with black crepe; actions normally taken when a former United States Secretary of War died. According to Hudson Strode's biography of Davis, "by afternoon all the public buildings of New Orleans were draped with crepe. Most of the shops and private homes, too, had hung emblems of mourning on their doors and from their balconies."

At seven in the evening of Dec. 6, a black hearse drawn by white horses transported the body of President Davis from First Street to City Hall, now Gallier Hall, where he was to lay in state until his funeral. The stone columns outside City Hall were shrouded with black cloth and wrapped with ivy. In the council chamber, Davis' body, dressed in a civilian suit of Confederate gray, lay in a copper-lined coffin atop a catafalque supported by marble pedestals. Flanking the catafalque were two 12 lb. howitzers. The upper half of the casket was opened to reveal the face of the dead Confederate President while the lower half was draped with a Confederate battle flag which was inscribed: Fifth Company, Washington Artillery; Shiloh, Farmington, Perryville, Jackson, Murfreesburo, Chickamauga.

At each end of the coffin stood a sentry. One, according to *The New Orleans Picayune*, was "a veteran of one or the other of the great armies which bore the brunt of battle for the South," and the other was a Confederate veteran of New Orleans' own Washington Artillery.

People from all the former states of the Confederacy streamed into New Orleans to pay homage to what *The Picayune* describes as the “cold, dead, precious remains of the leader of the Confederacy.” Indeed the hotels and inns of the Crescent City had been filled to overflowing since the death of Jefferson Davis. It was estimated that 100,000 people viewed the body of the former Confederate President in the almost four days during which he lay in state. This crowd of mourners, according to *The Picayune*, was composed of “persons young and old, male and female, white and colored.” There were representatives from the “Celestial Empire” (Chinese) who stood in the waiting line “with the same uncomplaining equanimity as did classes of superior civilization.” Also present were “large numbers of citizens from Mississippi.”

*The Picayune* offered a chatty description of the day and its events: Dec. 11, the day of the funeral, was “bright and balmy and fragrant with the perfume of flowers.” Householders, in a uniquely New Orleans color scheme, had put out mourning drapery of black and white and purple. Along Canal Street the black crepe “reached from the roofs of the high business buildings almost to the street.” Throughout the city shops, factories, and schools closed and there was “a grand outpouring of the masses to do honor to the departed leader.” Lafayette Square, in front of City Hall, was “thronged with people” and the streets along the cortege route were “crowded with spectators.”

At noon Davis’ casket, draped with a silk Confederate flag, was brought onto the portico of City Hall. Atop the casket was a sheaf of wheat, a badge of the Army of Northern Virginia, and the sword Davis had worn when he commanded Mississippi troops in the Mexican War of 1848. Clergymen prayed over the body amidst “the deep intonation of the cannon, the clanging of the bells.” Father Hubert, a former Catholic chaplain of the Confederate Army, called on the Lord to help the Southern people “from whom thou hast taken one who was to us a chief, a leader. . .” When this part of the service was completed, eight soldiers carried the casket down the steps of City Hall and placed it on a caisson drawn by six black horses with silver trimmed harnesses. After leaving City Hall the funeral procession, which took an hour and 20 minutes to pass a given point, proceeded up “St. Charles Avenue to Calliope and from Calliope moved onto Camp, thence to Chartes to St. Louis to Royal to Canal to the cemetery,” rather like a carnival parade. During the time the cortege was moving toward Metairie Cemetery “one battery at the head of Canal Street and another at the corner of Caliborne and Canal Streets were firing minute guns.” It was traditional in the 19th century to fire cannon every minute during the funeral of a prominent leader. But in New Orleans, where life has its own unique rhythm, the minute guns only fired every three minutes.



The last night's vigil - Council Chamber, City Hall, New Orleans.

The funeral procession was divided into six divisions with no private carriages being allowed in the parade. The cortege was led by ranks of New Orleans police “uniformed and drilled” under the command of Superintendent David C. Hennessy, who was to be murdered a year hence.

The First Division consisted of numerous bands and squads of soldiers including the Volunteer Southrons of Vicksburg, the Louisiana Field Artillery, and the Alabama State Artillery of Mobile who had “brought their gun with them, but were unable to produce it in the parade owing to the lack of horses.” Behind these cannonless artillerymen marched other units, including the famous Washington Artillery and the Italian Sharpshooters of New Orleans who made a “stalwart appearance in dark blue blouses trimmed with red and their peculiar round hats with dark plumes.” After these natty riflemen came the representatives of the Almighty, taking up 12 carriages, and 48 honorary pallbearers including 14 former Confederate generals. The elaborately decorated caisson carrying Davis’ body came next, followed by eight carriages of the Davis family including Mrs. Davis, who “was attired in heavy mourning, which covered her entirely: not even her hand was exposed.”

The Second Division was led by a brass band and included hundreds of veterans from the Confederate Armies and 15 forlorn Union Army veterans. And bringing up the rear of the Second Division were 45 delegates of the Ladies Confederate Monumental Association.



The funeral procession en route to Metairie Cemetery.

Eight Southern governors headed the Third Division followed by various judges, justices, tax collectors, state engineers, members of the state Board of Health, state senators and representatives, members of the Chamber of Commerce, Assistant Postmaster Henry Renshaw, Mayor Shakspeare, and the other city officials.

“Benevolent Organizations in Uniform” composed the Fourth Division. These included such groups as the Odd Fellows and the First Louisiana Battalion of the Uniformed Rank of Knights of Pythias. This group surely stole the show, attired as they were in black Prince Albert coats decked with silver buttons and red and gold trimmings. Members of this elect body of men also wore white helmets and carried swords.

Behind these most elegantly attired gentlemen marched the Fifth Division, partially composed of the faculty and students of Tulane, some high school students, and the British shipmasters then present in the port who “had a new British flag, purchased by them for the occasion.” Also marching were “Typographical Union No. 17” and members of the Screwmen’s Benevolent Association, not all of whom could march owing to “the pressure of work on the levee.” Other groups followed, including the Young Men’s Gymnastic Club and last of all, composing the Sixth Division, came the companies of the New Orleans Fire Department.

The watching crowd “much admired” the soldiers who were the “flower of Southern troops.” These soldiers impressed the people with their “manly bearing” and “accurate marching.”

It took three hours for the head of the procession to reach Metairie Cemetery, “the prettiest cemetery in the South,” and it was not until four o’clock that the body of Jefferson Davis reached the burial site. Davis was buried in the tomb of the Army of Northern Virginia, “beneath the marble monument of the lamented Confederate leader, Stonewall Jackson.” The burial mound, covered with floral tributes, was “surrounded by imposing tombs of wealthy people of New Orleans.”

When the casket reached the tomb, the funeral service was read, a hymn sung, and the doleful notes of taps were sounded. Before the body was taken into the crypt, the Episcopal Bishop of Louisiana (Davis had been an Episcopalian) added this tribute: “we here consign the body of Jefferson Davis, a servant of his state and country and a soldier in their armies; sometime member of Congress, Senator from Mississippi, and Secretary of War of the United States (1853-1857); the first and only President of the Confederate States of America; born in Kentucky on the third day of June, 1808, died in Louisiana on the sixth day of December, 1889, and buried here by the reverent hands of his people.”

Soldiers then took the casket into the crypt while a battery of the Louisiana Field Artillery fired three volleys saying “the good-bye of fire.”

In 1893, believing it more proper that he rest in his former capitol, Davis’ family had the former president reburied in the Hollywood Cemetery of Richmond, Virginia.

“The man and the hour have met” was said of Davis upon his inauguration as President of the Confederacy. But the Union Armies prevented him from serving out his six-year term and the man and his hour met in the City of New Orleans.



Metairie Cemetery, New Orleans, Louisiana

## Twilight at Beauvoir

In his search for some peace and contentment during his twilight years, Jefferson Davis accepted the invitation of a friend to visit Beauvoir on the Mississippi Gulf Coast. At the beautiful ante-bellum mansion, the first and only president of the Confederacy found the solace he was seeking. He was so smitten with Beauvoir, which means “beautiful view,” that he later purchased the property.

The last 12 years of Davis’ life were spent at Beauvoir, where his time was devoted to writing his famous two-volume history, *The Rise and Fall of the Confederate Government and Short History of the Confederate States of America*.

Following Jefferson Davis’ death and burial in New Orleans, his beloved home on US Highway 90 between Gulfport and Biloxi, Mississippi, became the Jefferson Davis Memorial Home for Confederate Soldiers and Sailors, their wives and widows. The Confederate Home was phased out in 1941, after which the buildings and grounds were opened to the public.

Today Beauvoir depicts the life and times of Jefferson Davis. The original furnishings and possessions of the Davis family were collected and have been restored to impart authenticity to the property.

On the grounds of the estate is also the Confederate Museum, housed in a building that was constructed in 1924 as a hospital for indigent Confederate veterans.

Beauvoir is open to the public daily from 9 am to 5 pm.



Beauvoir in February 2010

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