



Jefferson Davis: Ex-President of the Confederate States of America

Varina Davis

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An excerpt from CHAPTER XX. VISIT OF CALHOUN, 1845:

Mr. John C. Calhoun had always been such a strict constructionist of the Constitution that encroachment, in defiance of the restrictions imposed upon the appropriation by Congress of money to improve one State or harbor at the expense of the rest, had been with him a constant cause of excited debate whenever such propositions were urged. About this time the effort had been renewed to obtain grants for the improvement of the different harbors on the Lakes, and especially that of Chicago, which was just then beginning to be built up into a city. On this subject there was a good deal of feeling between the Southern and Southwestern States.

Before attending a commercial convention in Cincinnati, Mr. Calhoun had in some measure changed his views, and in a speech in his journey through the West and South (before the convention at Cincinnati) he justified the appropriation for the Lakes, and suggested one for the Mississippi River, because they were all "inland seas." Great was the confusion of his allies and adherents throughout the Democratic party: they looked upon the proposition as class legislation, not justified by the Constitution, and a latitudinarian construction of this instrument by him was as though Moses had altered the Commandments. In this state of feeling he drew nigh to Vicksburg in his tour, and my husband was invited to welcome him.

Mr. Davis had known Mr. Calhoun with some degree of intimacy since 1836, and received his cadet's warrant from him. Strongly opposed to internal improvements by the General Government, Mr. Davis meant to be very circumspect in what he said, and also to avoid having to write out the speech for the reporters afterward. He pondered and dictated it to me, and the delivery was to consume half an hour. The "inland seas" were gracefully left to take care of their own shores, and the speech, as written, had an amount of pretty imagery and lofty rhetoric in it, that, to my girlish taste, was as wonderful as it was charming. It had the usual stanzas of poetry, and the ship of state tossing, as it does for all young orators, on a stormy sea, while the statesman addressed took its bearings and brought it "safe into port!" The speech was, at last, clearly written out in my best hand, and the pages numbered. It was my glorious privilege to be permitted to perpetuate such eloquence! We then prepared our house for a long absence, and commenced our journey to Washington, taking with us our niece, Miss Mary Bradford.

We reached Vicksburg in the afternoon of the night that was to bring Mr. Calhoun to us. A numerous company of elegant people, who had come in from forty miles around Vicksburg, were gathered in a public hall. Dr. William M. Gwinn and his handsome young wife were there, and numbers I did not know. The boat was delayed and the guest of the evening did not arrive until the large assemblage were tired out. Then, after rustlings, cranings of necks, and whispered remonstrances at the delay, the door opened, and the committee, escorting Mr. Calhoun, entered.

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