

Sarah Davis (1814–1879)

Sarah Woodruff Walker Davis was born on September 4, 1814 in Lenox, Massachusetts. She was one of nine children born to William Perrin Walker and Lucy Adam Walker. William Walker was an important man being a probate judge for Berkshire County, and the family had many significant social and family connections.

Sarah attended Hartford Female Seminary in Hartford, Connecticut where Catherine and Harriet Beecher taught. This school, founded in 1823 by Catherine Beecher, was one of the first major educational institutions for women in the United States. It was created as a way to challenge women's intellectual abilities and also to educate them so they could better educate and instill morals in their children at home.¹

Nevertheless, Sarah quit school and returned home to Lenox where she met David Davis. Davis, a young student at New Haven Law School, worked in the law office of Henry Bishop, a prominent local lawyer. Through his work in Bishop's office Davis met Sarah's father. And through him, he met Sarah. The friendship soon grew into love and in 1835 David asked William Walker for permission to marry his daughter. Sarah's father denied his request so David set out for Illinois in the hopes of making a name for himself. After working in Pekin, Illinois he purchased Jesse Fell's law practice in Bloomington, IL in 1836, built a home, and began to establish himself as a lawyer here. After making a modest fortune he once again approached Sarah's father for permission to marry Sarah. This time her father consented and David and Sarah were married on October 30, 1838.

Following their marriage, Sarah and David returned to Bloomington in early 1839. In October, 1843 the Davis family moved to a farm which David had acquired from its owner, Jesse Fell, as part of a settlement of a loan Fell owed Davis and Davis' law partner, Wells Colton. The farm was situated in the midst of a 190 acre tract of land located on the eastern edge of town on the prairie. It also had several gardens, livestock, a farm house, and other structures on it. The new owners named the estate "Clover Lawn."

Sarah and David had seven children. In May, 1840 during David's unsuccessful campaign as a Whig Party nominee for State Senator in Illinois, Sarah lost their first child. Consequently, she grew very ill and returned to her family in Lenox for nine months to recover. She returned to Bloomington and in June, 1842 and gave birth to a healthy son, George Perrin. After George, Sarah had five more children: Mercer, Lucy, Sarah (called Sallie), Frances Mary, and an unnamed daughter. Unfortunately, only George and Sallie survived to adulthood.²

Although Sarah disliked politics, she supported and nurtured her husband's ambitions and fulfilled her role as a wife and a woman in polite society. In 1844 David was elected to the Illinois legislature. Four years later, he was elected judge of Illinois' Eighth Judicial Circuit where attorney Abraham Lincoln also practiced law. The Circuit consisted of approximately 11,000 square miles, a territory nearly the size of the state of Connecticut.³ Court convened every spring and fall and lasted for three months at a time.

¹ "An American Family: The Beecher Tradition – Catherine Beecher," <http://newman.baruch.cuny.edu/Digital/2001/beecher/catherine.htm>.

² "Sarah Davis (1814-1879)," 9-10.

³ Willard L. King, *Lincoln's Manager: David Davis*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1960), 87.

Sarah and David were apart for much of their marriage while David served on the Circuit and later, on the United States Supreme Court. The couple wrote numerous letters to each other during their long separations. Those letters reflected a deep, mutual affection. On their wedding anniversary in 1870 Sarah wrote to David, "...this is our wedding Anniversary – 32 years to day we were made one – and a kind loving husband you have been to me...I can hardly think of any time when I did not love you – so long has your image filled my heart."⁴ Sarah's letters told of daily activities such as dealing with servants, keeping the house, family illnesses, receiving friends, making visits, handling business concerns, and passing along town news and gossip. David hungered for this correspondence and continually reminded her of how much he looked forward to hearing from her.

Lincoln and Davis became very close friends during their years on the Circuit. Sarah too, grew close to Lincoln. In the fall of 1850 following the death of the Davis's fourth child, Lucy, Sarah and their son George accompanied David on his Circuit tour. Sarah rode with David, while George traveled with Lincoln. Sarah developed a deep respect for Lincoln and frequently asked about him after her return to Bloomington. On December 2, 1850 she reminded David to "Remember me to Mr. Lincoln I esteem him highly."⁵ Lincoln too inquired about Sarah and young George and sent messages to George about "Old Buck," Lincoln's horse that had pulled their buggy. Lincoln was often a guest at the Davis home and became a close friend of the entire family.

David was Lincoln's campaign manager in 1860. When Lincoln was elected President, David accompanied him on the train from Indianapolis, Indiana to Washington, D.C. When Sarah read of a death threat against Lincoln on his journey, she wrote to her husband about her worries for their well being:

I cannot tell you how anxious I have been for you safety – So many plots to injure Mr Lincoln – I earnestly hope he will be preserved from all his enemies – and that you wil [sic] be soon at home [in] safety – I get quite nervous when I read of the troubles and dangers of the present time – and shall not cease to be anxious for you safety till I see you return.⁶

Sarah's worry stemmed from the strong Southern resentment surrounding Lincoln's election.

On August 27, 1862 Lincoln appointed David to the U.S. Supreme Court. Sarah chose to remain in Bloomington while her husband served in Washington. She kept up social appearances with friends and associates. Sarah also took care of David's Bloomington affairs and kept him apprised of all that occurred in town during his absences.

Just two short years after Davis took the bench, President Abraham Lincoln was fatally shot on April 14, 1865 and died the next day. Sarah and David had known Lincoln for 30 years and had never failed to respect him. Sarah's letter to George and Sallie just days after Lincoln's death reflected her heartache:

⁴ "Sarah Davis," 10.

⁵ Letter from Sarah Davis to David Davis, December 2, 1850.

⁶ Letter from Sarah Davis to David Davis, March 1, 1861.

*I have felt rather worn for a day or two – and the dreadful news from Washington has not steadied my nerves. We can hardly realize that it is true, so suddenly it has fallen on our ears. Robert Lincoln telegraphed your father yesterday to come on at once and look after the affairs of his father, and to night he expects to start for Washington – and may be gone some days. I feel reluctant to have him go, and yet cannot refuse the family of Mr. Lincoln in this hour of trial and anguish. [...] I am constantly reminded of the bloody scenes of the French Revolution – and feel that we are again plunged in a sea of darkness just as we thought the day was breaking. May God in Mercy remove the clouds that surround us.*⁷

Lincoln's murder deeply wounded the Davis family. After the assassination, Robert Todd Lincoln telegraphed David to come to Washington D.C. at once to look after Lincoln's affairs.⁸ Lincoln had died "intestate," which meant that he did not have a will. The court in Illinois appointed David as the administrator of Lincoln's estate.⁹

While David worked in Washington, Sarah supervised the construction of their new mansion. To reflect their increasing wealth and status in Bloomington, the farm house, which came with the initial land purchase, no longer met their needs. David hired well-known architect Alfred Piquenard to design the home, a three-story structure with 36 rooms. Piquenard, partnered with Chicago architect John C. Cochrane, also designed Bloomington's third courthouse and the Illinois State Capital Building in Springfield.¹⁰

Sarah made most of the decisions about the mansion's interior struggling between decorating decisions and the rising costs. She was able to rationalize the choices she made and kept David updated through her letters. Sarah wrote to David on one occasion about painting the walls stating that "The expense of this work will be considerable, but if it can be washed as Mr. Becker says to look fresh - and will last as long as he says - I think we shall not regret it."¹¹ The home offered many modern conveniences including indoor plumbing, hot and cold running water, a central furnace, and gas lighting. Sarah incorporated her floral passion in the decorative scheme which included an ornamental garden in the front yard and plants throughout the house.

At the start of the project, the mansion was estimated to cost approximately \$30,000, but after its completion in 1872, the cost had risen to \$75,000. David normally would have had little patience for spending twice as much as he had planned but his commitment to the project and his high regard for his wife led him to accept the price increase.

Once the work finished, Sarah employed full-time, live-in domestic servants, usually two women and one man. The servants had their own bedrooms which were much more luxurious than those of other servants working in Bloomington. Although the servant quarters remained separate from the rest of the house, Sarah often treated her servants as family. She nursed them when they were sick, gave them small gifts of food, clothing, and money; and even helped them to entertain their guests.

⁷ Letter from Sarah Davis to her children, April 16, 1865.

⁸ Letter from Sarah Davis to her children, April 16, 1865.

⁹ Letter of Administration for the estate of Abraham Lincoln, June, 14, 1865.

¹⁰ State of Illinois, "Welcome to the Illinois State Capitol," http://www.cyberdriveillinois.com/publications/pdf_publications/com18.pdf.

¹¹ "Sarah Davis," 11.

On March 4, 1877 Davis resigned his seat on the Supreme Court to take his seat as a U.S. Senator. Two years later, in the summer of 1879, Sarah suddenly grew ill. Her primary complaint was a “valvular derangement of the heart.”¹² To recover, she travelled to the “fresh air” of the east coast. Once there however her condition worsened. Sadly, on November 9, 1879 at the age of 65 she died surrounded by her family at her sister’s home in Stockbridge, MA. A preliminary funeral took place in Stockbridge before her body returned to Bloomington.

On November 13, Sarah’s remains arrived in Bloomington and were placed in the front west parlor of Clover Lawn.¹³ The next day services in honor of Sarah were held at the First Presbyterian Church where she regularly attended.¹⁴ Her funeral took place on November 15 at the mansion. Sarah’s cousin, Reverend W.G. Pierce of Champaign, conducted the service with the help of Reverend John Maclean, former pastor of Bloomington’s First Presbyterian Church, and Reverend J.W. Dinmore of Bloomington’s Second Presbyterian Church.¹⁵ Among the estimated 1,500 mourners was Adlai Stevenson I and Robert T. Lincoln.¹⁶ Following the funeral a procession of 80 carriages wound its way from the Davis home to Evergreen Memorial Cemetery where she was laid to rest in the Davis family plot.¹⁷

By: Anthony Bowman, 2009

¹² “In Peaceful Rest,” *Bloomington Pantagraph*, November 11, 1879, p. 4, col. 5.

¹³ “Funeral Preparations for the Burial of Mrs. Sarah W. Davis,” *Bloomington Pantagraph*, November 14, 1879, p. 4, col. 5.

¹⁴ “The Inevitable Hour,” *Bloomington Pantagraph*, November 17, 1879, p. 4, cols. 5 & 6.

¹⁵ “Funeral Preparations”; “The Dead,” *Bloomington Pantagraph*, November 15, 1879, p. 4, col. 5.

¹⁶ “The Dead”; “The Inevitable Hour.”

¹⁷ “The Inevitable Hour.”