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CHAPLAIN NICHOLAS A. DAVIS
MAN OF ACTION AND ACCOMPLISHMENT

by S.B. Bedinger

On the portice of the imposing First Presbyterian Church in Jacksonville, Texas, there is an official Texas State Marker. It states:

Born in Alabama in 1824. Entered Presbyterian ministry. Moved to Texas 1857. Farmed and preached. At start of Civil War joined 4th Texas Infantry and went with troops to Virginia. As a Confederate Chaplain had same pay and rations as private and no status privileges. Duties included religious services, lessons, counseling, funerals, baptism, sick visits, removal of wounded and dead from battle fields. Handled mail with special attention for men who could not read and write. Worked to get better troupe (sic) living conditions. Established hospital wards. Because newspapers gave Virginians credit for Texas boy's victories, published 1863 in Richmond his "Campaign from Texas to Maryland". A Houston editor gave homefolk news few soldiers could tell. After War returned to farming, building churches and preaching over the state. For many years was a Trinity University trustee. Established the first commercial orchard at Jacksonville and started the development which makes the area foremost in Texas fruit growing. Pioneered use of insecticides, better farming methods and new machinery.

Died in 1894 in San Antonio.

Davis, a man of remarkable talent and ability, achieved success in many fields of endeavor. He was born in Limestone County in northern Alabama, not far from Huntsville, on August 8, 1824. His father, Nathaniel, served in both houses of the state legislature from 1840-1851.

The family was active in church affairs and Nicholas Davis became a member of the Cumberland Presbyterian Church at Shoalford, Alabama while quite young. When about twenty years of age he experienced the call to the gospel ministry and was received as a candidate by the Tennessee Presbytery. Davis studied theology under the guidance of the Reverend Robert Donnell and received a license to preach. Before his ordination, the young minister taught school in Benton, Alabama, and preached on Sunday. Later he followed the full-time ministry in several northern Alabama communities, including Talladega, Gadsden, Gaylesville, and White Plains.

Nicholas married Nancy Isabella Worthington on November 2, 1852, and with his wife and two small daughters, Eleanora and Nancy, moved to Texas in November 1857. The family made their home at Bastrop where Davis continued to serve the Cumberland Presbyterian Church. A son, Nathaniel, was born there in 1858. Mrs. Davis died before the beginning of the American Civil War.

Following Davis' departure for military service in 1861, his widowed

sister, Louisa Davis Bullard, managed the Davis household in Bastrop. She cared for the Davis' daughters and her own son and daughter. Six slaves, ranging in age from four to twenty-three, were a part of the family. In addition to a home in town, Davis also owned land which he referred to as his ranch.

In the secession convention in Austin on January 28, 1861, Texas delegates voted 168 to seven to withdraw from the Union. Texas was admitted to the Confederacy in March 1861, and Davis was numbered among the early volunteers for service in Virginia. Four companies were quickly organized and reported for service. Others would soon follow, and Texas would be well represented in General Robert E. Lee's army. This group of fighting men, of whom Davis was a part, was destined to distinguish itself on the field of battle as a part of a remarkable fighting force known as Hood's Texas Brigade.

While camped on Buffalo Bayou, these four companies were joined by sixteen other units. The camp was located in an unhealthy, disagreeable region, and many of the men became ill. Much kindness was shown to them by citizens in the neighborhood and in nearby Houston.

On August 16, 1861, the first detachment of troops broke camp at Harrisburg and were transported to Houston on cars. Five companies were quartered in a large warehouse. The next morning they started for Beaumont.

After arriving at Beaumont they embarked on the steamer Florelida, and arrived at Niblett's Bluff on August 17, where they were placed under the command of General Earl Van Dorn, Commander of the Department of Texas. From this point the journey to Virginia had to be made by land. Arriving at Richmond on September 12, and stationed at Camp Rocketts, they were joined by seven more companies of Texas volunteers on September 16.

Before long the Texans were moved to a location three miles out of the city where they were organized into regiments in a camp called Camp Texas. Drill was begun as the officers and men prepared for combat. John Bell Hood, a Kentuckian who claimed Texas as his home, was appointed colonel of the Fourth Infantry Regiment, and Nicholas A. Davis became its chaplain.

On November 7, 1861, the Texans learned of their new assignment to the vicinity of the Potomac. According to Davis, "it was rumored that the enemy were making demonstrations on the Maryland shore, as if they intended a crossing. Here at the mouth of Aquia Creek we first witnessed the firing of those tremendous engines of death - the batteries were shooting at Federal Schooners on the Potomac. On the 12th a telegram from Gen. Louis T. Wigfall directed the men to move forward the next morning to Dumfries." Davis' diary continues, "Supposing the boys might get into a fuss by moving toward Yankeedom, I procured a rifle and 40 rounds

in my cartridge box and a six shooter with 50 rounds and took up the line of march with the boys. — We moved 18 miles during the night — as luck would have it, the signs for a fight had disappeared.”²

The Fourth Regiment camped for the winter on Powel’s Run. Davis mentions there was “much rain, sleet, snow and mud.” Here they met with the First Texas Regiment, commanded by Colonel Hugh McLeod, and three regiments, the First, Fourth, and Fifth, were organized into the Texas Brigade under General Louis T. Wigfall. Later the Eighteenth Georgia and Hampton’s Legion from South Carolina were added to the command.

In his journal Davis wrote of his early days in Virginia: “While at Richmond we had Divine Services regularly on the Sabbath, and each night when circumstances would permit. But after removing to the Potomac, for want of a comfortable place for meeting, our opportunities were lessened. For awhile the weather was so unpleasant we had the privilege of preaching only when the Sabbath was suitable for outdoor services.”³

On March 8, 1862, Colonel Hood addressed the Fourth Texas Regiment, saying in part: “You are now leaving your comfortable winter quarters to enter upon a stirring campaign — a campaign which will be filled with blood and fraught with the destinies of our young Confederacy. Its success or failure rests upon the soldiers of the South. — I feel no hesitancy in predicting that you, at least, will discharge your duties, and when the struggle does come, that proud banner you bear, placed by the hand of beauty in the keeping of the brave, will ever be found in the thickest of the fray. Fellow soldiers — Texans — let us stand or fall together. I have done.”⁴

A few days later on March 11 Colonel Hood was promoted to the rank of brigadier general and Lieutenant Colonel Marshall became colonel of the Fourth Texas Regiment. The brigade thus came to be known as the famous Hood’s Texas Brigade.

General Hood was a deeply religious man, and he had a warm feeling for Davis. Hood was baptized by the fighting Episcopal bishop, General Leonidas Polk, at Dalton, Georgia, in May 1864.

Davis speaks of the terrors of conflict during the Battle of Seven Pines, May 31, 1862: “The wounded were being brought in all night; quite a number reached the field infirmary before dark — I spent the greater portion of the night assisting to dress and alleviate suffering. The engagement was renewed at daylight June 1. The enemy had been reinforced during the night, but were repulsed. At 10:00 o’clock firing ceased, leaving the Confederates in possession of all their positions and batteries except one, several hundred prisoners, a large quantity of camp equipage, small arms, ammunition, etc.”⁵

On one occasion Davis met Generals Robert E. Lee and Joseph E. Johnston and President Jefferson Davis riding at speed, and going not

only upon the field, but directly under fire. Davis complained bitterly about the treatment accorded wounded Texans. Following the Battle of Gaines Farm, he wrote in his diary that hospitals were understaffed and short of medical supplies. "Some of the surgeons did their duty and some of their wards were under the circumstances well kept. But this was not the case with all — no not one half. — Crowded unsanitary conditions. Wounded soldiers from Hood's Brigade for the most part were placed in the Chimborazo Hospital, the worst of the lot."⁶ Davis made his complaints to the newspapers in Richmond and Houston. He praised the ladies of Richmond who "were seen through all the day hovering round these scenes of suffering; like convoys of ministering angels on errands of love. And they would not only come and bring such things as make the sick man glad, but would see that his sheets and clothes were changed — then with their soups, meats, cakes and teas, appease the hunger and revive the drooping spirits with well flavored wines and cordials, and talk with words of sweetness of one's mother and home."⁷

Following the Confederate's second decisive victory at Manassas (Bull Run), Chaplain Davis expressed himself as being unconcerned as to the influence it might have abroad, and that the South should look, not to other nations for help, but to the One who made the nations. Davis was fiercely loyal to the Southern cause and institutions. As a chaplain, he did not hold the rank of an officer. The Confederate Congressional Act concerning the status of chaplains stated, "Chaplains in the army be, and they are hereby, allowed the same rations as privates."⁸ Individual performance and character determined the chaplain's acceptance by the officers of his regiment and brigade. Davis was a man of high principles, and combined with his concern for the men and their needs, he earned the genuine liking and respect of both officers and men. While officially he was chaplain of the Fourth Texas Infantry Regiment, C.S.A., he came to be known by many as the Chaplain of Hood's Texas Brigade.

Davis was described as a fine looking man in his new chaplain's uniform. After receiving his first pay, he visited a tailor to be measured for coat, pants, and vest. He also acquired a pair of boots and a flannel shirt and two pairs of flannel drawers at a total cost of \$45.50, all at his own expense. The Richmond Enquirer published a letter from a minister describing the splendid appearance of Davis in this manner, "I observed a chaplain (Rev. Nicholas A. Davis of Texas) in uniform yesterday, which uniform I admired above anything I have yet seen. A suit of black clothing stait breasted, with one row of brass buttons, and simple pointed cuff with small olive branch about six inches long, running up the sleeve. We learned it was made by C. Wendlinger, No. 146 Main St. No stripes on pants."⁹

There is no doubt that many chaplains found it difficult to get by on the monthly salary of \$50. Davis, in addition to the home in Bastrop, owned land, and the returns from his stock farm seems to have brought

in sufficient income for his families' needs in Texas.

Baptisms, attention shown the sick and wounded, funeral services, and preaching services when possible, were all a part of the chaplain's schedule. Davis' reputation as a preacher soon became well-known. He mentioned in his diary that a number of citizens joined in the services. When activity would permit, as many as 200 or more sometimes would be present for a single service. And although he was a Cumberland Presbyterian minister, Davis "immersed Charles Barhan of Captain Martin's camp".¹⁰

Davis often admonished the men concerning their responsibilities as representatives of the Lone Star State, as seen from his diary: "Read the 121 Psalm - talked about 20 ms., good order and attention. My object was to show importance of an upright walk and especially to the young men, that they hereafter be judged by their conduct in camp. They are representatives of Texas and should keep an eye to the honor of our state. And they should remember that they are the Repre. of a Christian nation, and if they would have God to preserve their 'going out & their coming in' they should 'look to the hill wherest cometh our help'. I feel to enjoy a great deal of comforts of the religion of the Lord Jesus Christ notwithstanding I am in the midst [of] very wicked and vulgarly profane men. O my God, in life or death I am thine."¹¹

Davis' admiration for General Hood was expressed in his diary: "I am proud to report that Hood has been made a Major General, and the president has ordered the desired number of Texans; and a messenger has gone to bring them forward. We will hail their coming with pleasure, and promise them a leader, one of the best officers in the Confederacy, who has never been incapacitated for a single moment from commanding his men by intemperance; nor been absent from the post of duty twenty four hours, from the time he took command of the 4th (Tex. reg.) (Oct. 1, 1861) up to present time December 25, 1862."¹²

Davis reported in his diary: "In the earlier part of the campaign, the sick and wounded suffered much for the want of efficient surgeons, nurses, medicines and hospital room and appliances generally, Many of them (surgeons) — had never dressed a gun shot wound. This was frequently — more our misfortune, than a fault on their part. There are now scores of young men, who had never begun the practice of medicine, much better practical surgeons than any of the surgeons, in whose hands the knife was placed, except a comparatively small number. And while the young men have been thus qualifying themselves, the older ones have been making more than equal advancement."¹³

Davis also pointed out improvements in all various appliances, more room, and while the supply medicine was yet limited, "the nurses have acquired skill and aptness in their duties, which in a great measure lessens the annoyance and pain of the sufferers. The Rules and Regulations have

also been systematized and adapted to the comfort of the patients, as well as the convenience of their friends, who come to look after and do offices of kindness for them.”¹⁴

In a letter to the editor of the *Whig*, November 5, 1862, Chaplain Davis called attention to many of the men being without shoes. He called for assistance requiring at least 100 pairs of shoes, and 500 pairs of sox for the men from Texas. He wrote, “We are from the far south and cold is severe to us. — Those disposed to contribute will please forward their mite to the depot of the Young Men’s Christian Association, or the depot of 4th Texas Regiment, on 15th Street, between Main and Cary, over Ratcliffs and it will be forwarded immediately.”¹⁵ Generous contributions followed this appeal.

Services of worship were held for the men whenever feasible, but under battle conditions spiritual ministrations were difficult. Because of the confusion that accompanied the setting up of a new camp, there often were no “divine services.” Cold weather and rain at times canceled meetings.

In the conclusion of his journal, Davis wrote, “Too much cannot be said in praise of that noble, self-sacrificing devotion, which has been exhibited for the cause of Southern Liberty in your past history. And I am proud to say, that notwithstanding all the trials and hardships, privations and sufferings, you have been called to endure, that the same uncompromising, living patriotism burns as warmly in your bosoms today, as when you first left the quiet walks of civil life, and entered the army of your country. — We ask you to look back over the history of our national career, for the last twelve months. We have been defeated in several engagements, it is true, but it was in a branch of service in which we never have had but little power. We have lost our little fleet, and some of our seaports. But how many victories crown your arms by land? — We ask you now, to look at the army, which is the pride of our nation, and the admiration of the world. It is well trained and well armed, and stands in proud defiance of the mustering legions of the North. Less than twenty thousand of whom, but a few days ago, defeated the whole of the enemies’ Grand Army at Fredericksburg, themselves being the confessors. — And you are also aware of the fact, that while you are determined to be free, you never can be conquered. May the living God preserve you from the pestilence that rides upon the winds, and shield your heads in the day of battle.”¹⁶

Davis returned to Texas before the end of the war and on February 7, 1865, he married Mrs. Eliza E. Coley Radford, the widow of Robert W. Radford. The Radfords, after migrating to Texas from Georgia, acquired large land holdings in Sabine County. Shortly after the marriage the Davis family moved to property known as the Old John Smith (the original grantee) Plantation that included more than 2000 acres in Sabine County. It was a part of the Radford estate. Davis continued to preach

in the area. The family moved to Milam in the same county before the 1870 census. The Davis household included fourteen persons, white and black. In addition to the two daughters by his first marriage, there were Mary Eliza, aged three, and the two-year old twins, John Hood and Franklin Coley. Davis' sister, Mrs. Bullard, had died, and her daughter had married. A seventeen-year old nephew, Draper, remained a part of the household. There were two laborers, one white and one Negro, and four Negro servants. The Davis family moved from Milam to Rusk in Cherokee County shortly after the census of 1870, where Davis became a prominent citizen. The family continued to own land in Sabine County. As late as 1881, tax receipts showed 3503 acres in four tracts.

The minister's love for the land led to his establishment of peach orchards and nurseries at Rusk. Later he established the first commercial orchard at Jacksonville, and pioneered better farming methods. He was public spirited, and one of his interests led to the establishment of the Rusk Transportation Company. The purpose of the organization was to obtain a railroad for Rusk. His journal states how the first railway missed Rusk: "On May 2, 1872, the incorporators secured a charter for the Rusk Transportation Co. to build and operate a first class tram railway or horse car road from any point on the I. and G.N. to Rusk."¹⁷

The Rusk Transportation Company named Nicholas A. Davis president and financial agent. Another prominent Rusk citizen, S.B. Barron, was named secretary. Lieutenant Barron had distinguished himself as a soldier of the Confederacy. Later he wrote *The Lone Star Defenders*.¹⁸ Like Davis, Barron was a native of northern Alabama. He came to Texas with his widowed sister and her child in 1859. In 1860 he was living in Rusk; early in 1861, he joined a company of volunteers in Rusk named the Lone Star Defenders. Frank M. Taylor was elected captain of the group. These men gained fame as an important part of Ross' Brigade.

The first tram line contributed by the transportation company ran from Rusk to Reynolds, the nearest point on the I. and G.N. Railroad about three miles west of Jacksonville, and regular trips began on May 25, 1875. A Texas Historical Marker on F.M. 347 near Jacksonville tells the story:

OLD RUSK TRAMWAY
(Road bed visible behind Marker)

Equipped with pine rails that warped out of shape and a speed often exceeded by mule wagons. The Rusk Tram began operations in 1875. By passed 2 years later by another railroad, local citizens rejoiced over the \$47,500 tram. Rolling stock consisted of an aged street car, three flat cars and a steam engine - "The Cherokee". Passengers usually had to help replace train on tracks before it reached the end of the 16 mile line: Jacksonville. In 1879 the tram was sold for \$90. However it had fostered growth by helping attract Cotton Belt Railroad, iron works, and state prison.

(1970)

Records indicate that for some years prior to 1870 the Cumberland Presbyterians were active in Rusk. An old newspaper account stated, "Church services were held each Sabbath at candle lighting."¹⁹ After his arrival in Rusk, Davis was one of the ministers who served this congregation. Farming and other ventures did not cause him to neglect his ministerial responsibilities. From Rusk he traveled to Jacksonville, Larissa, and other communities nearby to preach. In 1877 he was involved in a train accident and suffered a broken hip. This curtailed his activities for several weeks.

In 1879 the Davis family moved to Jacksonville where he built a new church while continuing to preach at Larissa and Rusk. The Jacksonville Church was known as the New Hope congregation, and the minister contributed generously from his own funds to the building cost. Within a few years it became a strong and influential church.

In the mid-1880s, on crutches as a result of his broken hip and suffering from heart trouble, Nicholas Davis continued to go about preaching and ministering to the people. Always interested in higher education, he served for approximately twenty years on the Board of Trustees of Trinity University. This institution had been founded in 1869 by the Cumberland Presbyterian Church in Tehuacana, Texas.

L.T. Shaver, in *Among the Worthies* in a chapter concerning "John L. Terrell, a Masonic Leader," describes the University at Tehuacana in this manner: "Trinity University at Tehuacana, one of the highest class institutions of learning in the state, was selected as the school for his [John L. Terrell's] advanced study. None excelled him in scholarship under the rigid discipline of the exacting professors."²⁰

The guidance and counsel of the Reverend Davis was sought by the young ministers, and his qualities of leadership were recognized in the church's courts. He was at all times aggressive and trustworthy. A man of vision, he lived in the present, and following the Civil War, he refused to allow discussion of it in the home with his children. He died on November 19, 1894, while visiting his daughter, Mrs. Floyd McGown, in San Antonio.

Dr. L.A. Johnson's tribute to Nicholas A. Davis well reflects the life and character of this admirable and dedicated pioneer minister and former chaplain:

"In his personal character he was pure hearted, thoroughly devout and trustful in God; he was clear headed and courageous, he never lost the courage of his convictions in any presence. He was progressive. Youth is proverbially the age of expansion and aspiration, yet though his body became enfeebled and his head silvered with the frost of years, he never became old in heart; he always lived in the present, and the future which to him was full of happy realizations of the noblest ideals of life. He was aggressive; he would fight for the right as he saw it on any field, and he always went in to conquer. In friendships, he was

strong and enduring; he grasped his friends to him with hoods of steel. It is safe to say he never lost a warm personal friend who was worthy of his esteem."²¹

NOTES

¹Donald E. Everett, *Chaplain Davis and Hood's Texas Brigade: Being an Expanded Edition of the Rev. Nicholas A. Davis' The Campaign from Texas to Maryland with the Battle of Fredricksburg* (Richmond, 1863, San Antonio, 1962), pp. 47-48.

²Davis, *Campaign*, p. 48.

³Davis, *Campaign*, p. 52.

⁴Davis, *Campaign*, p. 52-53.

⁵Davis, *Campaign*, p. 67.

⁶Davis, *Campaign*, p. 103-104.

⁷Davis, *Campaign*, p. 105.

⁸Davis, *Campaign*, p. 9.

⁹Davis, *Campaign*, p. 7-8.

¹⁰Davis, *Campaign*, p. 3.

¹¹Davis, *Campaign*, p. 2-3.

¹²Davis, *Campaign*, p. 155.

¹³Davis, *Campaign*, p. 175.

¹⁴Davis, *Campaign*, p. 175.

¹⁵Richard M. McMurry, *John Bell Hood and the War of Southern Independence* (Lexington, 1982), p. 63; Davis, *Campaign*, p. 178.

¹⁶Davis, *Campaign*, p. 181-185.

¹⁷Hattie Joplin Roach, *The Hills of Cherokee, Historical Sketches of Life in Cherokee County (Texas)* (Rusk, 1952), pp. 70-71.

¹⁸S.B. Barron, *The Lone Star Defenders* (New York, 1908), p. 23.

¹⁹Roach, *Hills*, p. 48.

²⁰L.T. Shaver, *Among the Worthies, John L. Terrell, A Masonic Leader* (Waco, 1937), p. 4.

²¹Davis, *Campaign*, pp. 24-25.