

These notes are in preparation for the several chapters featuring Jefferson Davis in Part III of the novel.

1. Jefferson Davis was born in 1808, which means he was of age 52-56 approximately during the Civil War.
2. Though Jefferson's father apparently had some slaves (or began to acquire them) during Davis's boyhood, Jefferson says nothing about plantation life in his memoirs (recorded by his wife, Varina). He was sent from Mississippi to a boarding school in Kentucky at about age 10, and most of his memories from then onward are of his experiences at school or enroute to school (such as when he stayed at the home of Andrew Jackson). The schools he attended included Kentucky Catholic School (also called Saint Thomas College though it was a grade school and high school) and Transylvania University (a college in Lexington, Kentucky).
3. By all accounts, Jefferson was a diligent, dutiful, and capable student, liked by his fellow students and teachers (except one). He was not known for meanness or superciliousness of any kind. He was temperate in his habits in his teens and young manhood. He was never described as profane or immoral, or as given to overindulgence.
4. There can be no doubt, though, in so far as an accusation of privilege could be made, that Jefferson's cohorts in school included individuals who would later be prominent in American political and military life, including David Atchison, George Jones, and S.W. Downs, later to be the United States senators from Missouri, Iowa, and Louisiana, respectively.
5. Jefferson was nominated for and accepted at West Point, an example of such influence at work, but once at West Point Jefferson again distinguished himself by diligence, scholarliness, and most markedly by amiability and civility.
6. A fellow cadet's description of Jefferson: "Jefferson Davis was distinguished at this time by his manly bearing, his high-toned and lofty character. His figure was very soldier-like and rather robust; his step springy..."
7. For the decade after his graduation from West Point, Jefferson was a lieutenant in the U.S. Army Infantry, serving first at Fort Crawford, in Prairie Du Chien, Wisconsin, and thereafter in other locations in the Upper Midwest. The area was then the American frontier, sparsely populated and with many conflicts between white settlers and Indians. Jefferson's primary activity, to begin with, was leading details sent upriver from Fort Crawford to select and cut logs that were floated downriver and used in improving the fort.
8. A betrothal at age 28 changed the course of Jefferson's life. To spare his bride the vicissitudes of a soldier's life, he resigned his commission and returned to Mississippi, where his elder brother, Joseph, a wealthy lawyer and planter, had a plantation called "The Hurricane" (because of a storm that had occurred there). Joseph allowed his younger brother to lease an undeveloped area on his plantation (called "Brierfield" because of the thick briars that covered it). Jefferson moved there with his new wife determined to turn the land into a successful plantation.
9. Jefferson suffered a calamity at this time, however, as he and his wife both contracted cholera. He recovered but she succumbed to it and died after only six months as his wife.

10. Jefferson then entered into a period of life marked by personal grief and indirection. He lived for a while in Havana, Cuba, and then eventually traveled to Washington, D.C., where he lived for a year before returning to Mississippi.
11. Once again Jefferson took up management of his Brierfield plantation. He became interested in agriculture and developed a method of drilling holes into which the cotton seeds were planted. The plantation soon became profitable under his management.
12. At the time Jefferson went to Cuba, he had one slave, James Pemberton, who was also his close friend. Pemberton became supervisor as new slaves were added, bringing the number of slaves on Brierfield by the start of the Civil War to more than a hundred.
13. In the period between his two marriages, when Jefferson was between the ages, approximately, of 29 and 36, Davis had a close relationship with Joseph, involving many hours spent in intellectual discussions in his brother's library. Their interests centered on political topics that would come to the fore during the lead up to the secession, including the Federalist Papers and the proper interpretation of the Constitution. Joseph Davis had what he regarded as an enlightened view of how to manage his slaves, providing each family with a cabin with a fireplace and allowing disputes to be settled by trials of peers. Each family had adjacent to the family cabin a garden area and an area to keep its own animals. The slaves were allowed to take grain freely from the grain house for themselves and to feed their animals. Slaves who could make an income on their own through some industry just as raising and selling animals were allowed to pay rent and forego field work. They were also allowed to loan money from the plantation to develop their enterprises, with a debt repayment structure such as would have been applicable for any bank loan. One servant (Ben Montgomery), who had developed a business with his sons, was allowed to educate himself and teach his sons to read, write, and do arithmetic. This was at a time when educating slaves was illegal in many Southern states.
14. During these same years, while Joseph went North each summer with his family to escape the humid, hot Mississippi climate, Jefferson stayed at Brierfield to manage his and his brother's plantations. For months, during this time, his only associates were the slaves. He was said to greatly enjoy their company and to be amused by their language and folk wisdom. He often walked through the slave quarters and enjoyed interacting with the children, who followed him and crowded around him. He was concerned for the health of the slaves and personally attended to anyone who became sick. His closest friend continued to be James Pemberton, with whom he had a formal, respectful interaction.
15. Jefferson was never accused of improprieties with his female slaves. He and his brother never used corporal punishment. Jefferson's second wife, Varina, wrote that corporal punishment and even elevated voices were seldom required on the Davis plantations because of the good feeling between the Davis brothers and the slaves.
16. The Davis brothers, in general, according to Varina, were soft-spoken, polite, and formal in their interactions with other people of a like social status. They were given to discussing intellectual topics using a carefully reasoned analytical

- approach. They argued without insult or anger, using a gentle satire at times to bring out what they considered to be an unreasonable position raised against their own arguments. Their wit could become mildly cutting in the form of humor directed against their adversary. Both brothers, Varina said, were utterly consistent and sincere in their convictions, and so convinced of their own arguments that they did not really entertain the idea that their opinions could be wrong. For this reason, Varina said, Jefferson had been characterized by some as “domineering.”
17. Jefferson, in his address accepting the presidency of the Confederate States of America, began his speech with the theme concept that the South had entered into the compact of the Constitution as Sovereign States, and had the right to withdraw as such if they regarded that the compact had been broken. He emphasized that the Confederate states did not desire war and wished to enter into a peaceful understanding with their former union partners.
  18. After Jefferson Davis later was selected as President of the Confederacy, he signed into law the legislation that would allow slaves to receive patent protection for their inventions. This was because the slave Ben Montgomery, who had branched off into a private business of his own, taking advantage of Joseph Davis’s acceptance of free enterprise in this slaves, had developed a type of steamboat waterwheel that could be adjusted to operate in shallow water and had sought a patent for it and been denied owing to his not being a citizen, per the court’s decision.
  19. From Wikipedia: Joseph Davis allowed captive Africans on his plantation to retain money earned commercially, so long as they paid him for the labor they would have done as farmworkers. Thus, Montgomery was able to accumulate wealth, run a business, and create a personal library.
  20. From Wikipedia: Varina Davis, in her 1890 memoir of her husband, explained how a boy named Jim Limber came to live with the Davis family. Her account is in a footnote for a passage recounting how her young sons hung out with a Richmond boy gang called the “Hill Cats”: “A little free negro boy whom we had rescued from one of his own color, who had beaten him terribly, lived from that time {early 1864} with us. Mr. Davis, notwithstanding his absorbing cares, went to the Mayor’s office and had his free papers registered to insure Jim against getting into the power of the oppressor again. Jim Limber, which he said was his name in his every-day clothes, who became Jeems Henry Brooks in his best suit on Sunday, was a fearless ally of the Hill cats.” Another entry: The former President recounted the event in an 1875 letter. Davis described Jim as “a little negro orphan who she [Mrs. Davis] had in pity rescued from the ill treatment of a negro woman in Richmond who claimed that the boy’s mother had left him to her.” Rather than give him over to a Federal officer they judged untrustworthy, the Davises placed him in the care of an old army friend, Gen. Rufus Saxton. Varina elaborated on the incident in another footnote in her memoir: “[W]e learned that our old friend, General Saxton, was there [at the Hilton Head], and my husband thought we might ask the favor of him to look after our little protégé Jim’s education, in order that he might not fall under the degrading influence of Captain Hudson. A note was written to General Saxton and the poor little boy was

given to the officers of the tugboat for the General, who kindly took charge of him. Believing that he was going on board to see something and return, he quietly went, but as soon as he found he was going to leave us he fought like a little tiger and was thus engaged the last we saw of him. I hope he has been successful in the world for he was a fine boy, notwithstanding all that had been done to mar his childhood. Some years ago we saw in a Massachusetts paper that he would bear to his grave the marks of the stripes inflicted upon him by us. We felt sure he had not said this, for the affection was mutual between us, and we had never punished him.”

Elizabeth Hyde Botume, a Boston woman who came south to teach the freedmen on the South Carolina sea islands, recalled him as “about seven years old, but small for his age; he was a very light mulatto, with brown curly hair, thick lips, and a defiant nose.” Botume also recalled that Mrs. Davis sent Jim Limber to Gen. Saxton with a note, “written with pencil on the blank leaf of a book. I quote from memory. She said:—‘I send this boy to you, General Saxton, and beg you to take good care of him. His mother was a free colored woman in Richmond. She died when he was an infant, leaving him to the care of a friend, who was cruel and neglectful of him. One day Mrs. Davis and her children went to the house and found the woman beating the little fellow, who was then only two years old [sic]. So she took him home with her, intending to find a good place for him. But he was so bright and playful, her own children were unwilling to give him up. Then she decided to keep him until he was old enough to learn a trade. ‘That was five [sic] years ago, and he has shared our fortunes and misfortunes until the present time. But we can do nothing more for him, I send him to you, General Saxton, as you were a friend of our earlier and better times. You will find him affectionate and tractable. I beg you to be kind to him.’ That was the gist of her note.”

Jim Limber joined the Sea Islands freedmen’s colony. “As he as the constant companion and playmate of Mrs. Davis’ children, he considered himself as one of them,” Botume wrote, “adopting their views and sharing their prejudices. President Davis was to him the one great man in the world. Mrs. Davis had given him the kindly care of a mother, and he had for her the loving devotion of a child.”

He apparently developed a similar bond with his new “new protectors,” the Saxtons. They soon found it necessary to transfer him to care of the teachers, who took him north for schooling. “Finally,” Botume wrote, Jim “drifted” into the home of a northern woman, who “placed him where he was well-trained in all ways, having the advantage of school, as well as a good practical education, until he was old enough to support himself.”

Although flawed in some details, Botumes’s recollection seems to substantiate Varina Davis’ telling term, “protégé,” as the most accurate description of Jim Limber’s status. The Davises clearly assumed responsibility for him and there was obviously affection between him and his sponsors. It is less likely that he was “adopted” in any meaningful sense. The evidence suggests that he was a member of the Davis family in the same way that slaves, servants, and other dependents were members of white families—with real mutual responsibility and affection.

The story of Jim Limber's association with the Davis family provides a window onto the nature of paternalism in the 19th-century race relations. New evidence may turn up to provide answers to the many questions about the story that have so far eluded historians.

21. Jefferson did not seek or desire the office of presidency of the Confederate states. He accepted it reluctantly.
22. Jefferson first defended slavery in the U.S. Senate in the debate of the 30th Congress on the Oregon territory. The question being debated was whether a slave holder could bring his slave "property" to a non-slave territory (as Oregon would become). Davis argued that slaves had been regarded as property and accepted as such before the original confederation pact had been agreed to by the colonies. He referred to specific clauses of the Constitution (the "commerce clause") in which slavery as property was explicitly or implicitly mentioned. Davis said nothing in the Constitution gave the federal union of the states or a majority of states as against the minority the right to superimpose or add a new exclusion that would deny the citizens of slave holding states the same rights to slaves as to any other kind of property. Davis also referred to the sections of the Federalist Papers where these issues were discussed.
23. In this same speech, Jefferson also reacts to the condemnation of the North against slavery. He says if it is a sin, it is the sin of the South and the North need not worry about it. He also contrasts the slaves of the South against the free blacks of the North. The slaves of the South are content, he says, and well fed, healthy, and well sheltered. The free blacks of the North, he says, are mired down with arguments and conflicts between them, are anxious for the necessities of life, and fill the Northern jails because of their inability to get by in the alien Northern culture.