

Winnie Davis: A Civil War “Romeo and Juliet” story

The birth of President Jefferson Davis’s and his wife Varina’s youngest child, Varina Anne called “Winnie,” occurred on June 27, 1864. The “War Between the States,” as it was known in the South, was moving inevitably toward its conclusion.

Yet, at that time, because Gen. Robert E. Lee’s army was holding its own against Lt. Gen. Ulysses S. Grant’s forces, Confederate soldiers viewed Winnie’s birth at the White House in Richmond as a good omen. This symbolism would lead to a worshipful love affair between the Southern people and this child.

In her biography of “Winnie Davis: Daughter of the Lost Cause,” Heath Hardage Lee relates a tale of hope, love and tragedy that surrounds this child who would become an attractive young woman destined to be ensnared in the paradox of the Old and New South.

Several years after the war ended, Winnie’s parents wanted her to be well-educated and to acquire “systematic habits,” and decided to place their teenaged daughter in a boarding school in Germany. The shy youngster was traumatized and lonely in this environment; but, always desiring to please, studied diligently—excelling artistically in painting, music, and writing.

When Jefferson and Varina, whose ancestors had emigrated from Wales to Delaware before moving on to Mississippi, brought their daughter home from Europe at age 18, she was described as “tall, slender, fair-haired with grey eyes of peculiar beauty.” She would often accompany her father, the ex-Confederate president, on tours throughout “Dixie” attending veterans’ reunions and the unveiling of Confederate monuments.

It was during one of these events that Georgia governor John B. Gordon, a former Confederate general, introduced her to the assembled group as “Daughter of the Confederacy.” Her hold over the emotions of the defeated Rebel soldiers turned her into a female symbol of the “Lost Cause,” recognized as such in both the South and the North.

Eventually traveling on her own to New York, she became a favorite of Kate Pulitzer whose husband Joseph was the wealthy owner of the New York *World*. The Pulitzers helped Winnie launch a literary career writing articles for the newspaper.

On a trip to Syracuse, Winnie met Alfred “Fred” Wilkinson, a young Harvard-educated lawyer whose grandfather was a well-known abolitionist—anathema to the people of the South. This was, however, “a classic case of love at first sight.”

After Winnie returned to her parent's home at Beauvoir in Mississippi, Fred pursued her and asked her father for her hand in marriage. Resistant at first, Davis finally agreed to their betrothal, and Varina half-heartedly concurred.

When an announcement of Winnie's and Fred's engagement was made public, a hue and cry by former Confederates resounded across the South. Though the Civil War had ended over 20 years earlier, resultant animosities died hard. Marriage of the symbol of their beliefs to a Northerner was totally unacceptable.

Winnie began to wilt under the strain of the role she had assimilated as "Daughter of the Confederacy," and her love for a Northerner with abolitionist antecedents—a formula for disaster.

Jefferson and Varina sent Winnie on a trip with the Pulitzers to Paris so she could regain her waning health. Fred soon followed to lay claim to his future wife, but by then Winnie's ardor for him had cooled.

Meanwhile, Jefferson Davis passed away, and Varina, overly possessive of her youngest daughter, created barriers to the prospective marriage. Winnie was torn between the love of her life, and her perceived responsibility as a symbol of redemption for many Southerners who had suffered defeat yet clung tenaciously to the past.

Fred was prepared to give Winnie all the room she needed and would wait until she was ready. They went on a vacation together in Italy, but Fred eventually returned to Syracuse.

Upon Winnie's return to Beauvoir, Varina filled her with negative stories about Fred, his business, and his family, thereby poisoning Winnie's feelings about her fiancé. Varina helped author a heart-rending tale similar to William Shakespeare's "Romeo and Juliet."

Varina summoned Fred from Syracuse to Beauvoir, and accused him of concealing information from her about his financial status. Fred was on trial for something he had not done, yet the die was cast for Winnie decided to break their engagement.

Winnie continued as the idol of Confederate veterans, but later became quite ill and died at the tender age of 34. Broken-hearted Fred never married, and suffered a nervous breakdown which led to his death—a final casualty of a war long past.

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