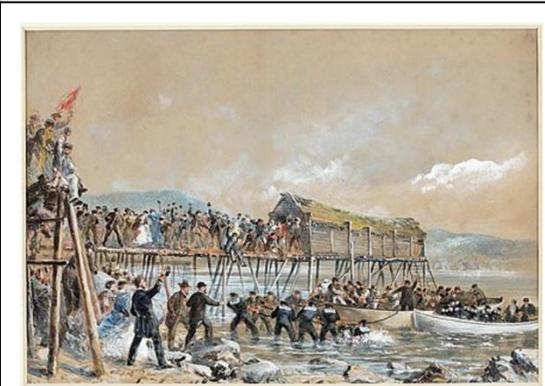


## August 16, 1858: The First Transatlantic Telegraph Cable

Norman Dasinger, Jr., Blue & Gray Dispatch  
September 6, 2021



Landing of the transatlantic telegraph cable of 1858 at Heart's Content, Newfoundland, by Robert Charles Dudley, 1866

“Glory to God in the highest:  
On Earth, Peace, Good Will  
Towards Men.”

That was the first official communication via telegraph, sent from England to Newfoundland on August 16, 1858.

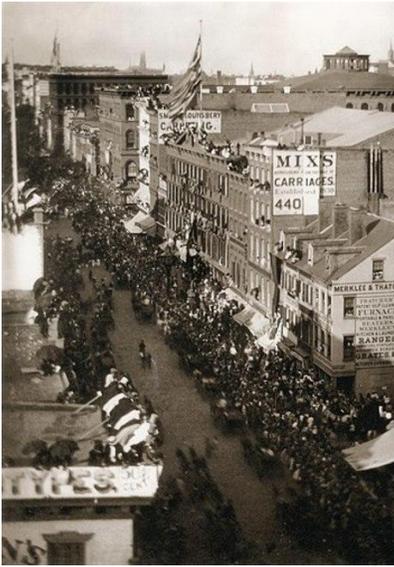
In return came a congratulatory message from Queen Victoria to U.S. President James Buchanan, received at his summer residence in the Bedford Springs Hotel, Bedford, Pennsylvania. Her message was

98 words and took sixteen hours to send using electric current. Normally, in 1858, it took 10 days, by ship, for a message to travel between England and the United States.

The President replied, hoping that the cable “may serve to perpetuate peace and amity between the Government of England and the Republic of the United States.”

This historic exchange eventually would lead to everything we now consider modern communication: such as cell phones, satellites, and the internet.

This new contemporary system of communication consisted of seven copper wires, each weighing 107 pounds per nautical mile, covered with three coats of gutta-percha (a thermoplastic filling), causing the overall weight to increase to 261 pounds per nautical mile. The cable also was wound with tarred hemp, over a sheath of 18 strands, each of seven iron wires, laid in a close helix. Altogether, the cable weighed 1.1 tons per nautical mile but was relatively flexible and could withstand tension.



*Celebration parade on Broadway, September 1, 1858*

The project began in 1854 when Cyrus Field conceived the idea and secured a charter to lay a line across the floor of the Atlantic Ocean. Following several botched attempts, by August 1858, using a combination of American and British ships, the cable had been successfully laid, stretching nearly 2,000 miles.

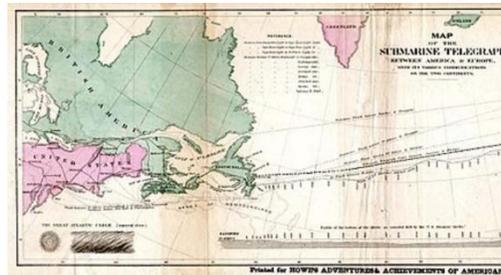
Although it never was in service for public use, this 1858 line communicated two intercontinental events. First, the collision between the Cunard Line ships, *Europa* and *Arabia*, was reported via the cable on August 17. Second, the British government used the wire to countermand an order for two regiments in Canada to embark

for England. A total of 732 messages were passed before the cable failed.

By September 1858, after several days of progressive deterioration of the insulation due to tension on the line, the cable failed altogether.

In 1866, the British ship *Great Eastern* succeeded in laying a permanent and much improved transatlantic telegraph wire.

Today, the Canadian Museum of History has an original section of the cable used in the momentous 1858 transmission.



*Map of the 1858 cable route* | from <http://atlantic-cable.com/Maps/index.htm>

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### **Ken Burns's 'Civil War' PBS Series is 30 — Does it Still Measure Up?**



*Library of Congress*

Gary W. Gallagher,  
HistoryNet  
June 2021

### **How does the iconic PBS series measure up three decades on?**

Ken Burns' documentary on the Civil War has reached a larger audience and generated more interest in the subject than any book, theatrical film, or other influence in the past 50 years. First broadcast on PBS stations in 1990 and frequently re-aired ever since, it also appeared in a digitally restored 25th anniversary version with additional material of various kinds. Most viewers have responded positively to the series, though they often disagree about such things as Burns' relative treatment of the Union and the Confederacy, the degree to which he highlighted slavery as a cause of secession, and whether he glorified war by emphasizing the bravery and devotion of common soldiers on both sides.

Academic historians have focused much of their criticism on whether Burns spent inordinate time on military campaigns and thereby obscured more important social, political, and cultural issues—especially those related to

African Americans, slavery, and emancipation. In the chronological procession of battles and generals, many academics have argued, viewers probably missed the broader context within which the armies contended for supremacy. Agreeing with others who voiced unhappiness with Burns' "conception of the Civil War as a history of war," one scholar quoted with thinly disguised sarcasm the filmmaker's statement that "'only' 40 percent of the eleven hours depicted battles." More recently, another academic claimed, with obvious disapprobation, that Burns adopted a "general focus" for the series that relied on a perception of the conflict centered "almost solely on military history."

I think Burns strikes a reasonable balance between military and nonmilitary coverage. In teaching my own lecture course on the Civil War at Penn State University and then the University of Virginia for more than 30 years, I allocated about 40 percent of my time to military affairs. It is important to remember that Burns' subject was a mammoth *war* that unfolded over four years. Avoiding chronological narrative and muting the role of armies would render the

experience of 1861-65 less intelligible to nonspecialists. In fact, any documentary about the Civil War that failed to place military events at least close to center stage would itself be open to charges of distortion.

How sound, however, is Burns' treatment of military matters? Many parts of *The Civil War* betray a curious ignorance of modern scholarship. For example, the first episode stresses the North's industrial capacity and vast pool of manpower and concludes that "the odds against a Southern victory were long." True as far as it goes, this approach overlooks important Confederate advantages that evened the initial balance sheet. Burns' appraisal of resources drapes a mantle of hopelessness over the Confederate resistance, echoing Lost Cause writers who attributed Confederate defeat to the enemy's material strength and larger population.

Other passages reinforce the initial image of badly outnumbered Confederates, as when Burns describes Robert E. Lee's Army of Northern Virginia on June 26, 1862, as a "tiny force" facing a juggernaut in George B. McClellan's Army of the Potomac. The ensuing Seven

Days Battles assume the character of an underdog Rebel force vanquishing a much larger opponent—a conception at odds with the facts. By the end of June, Lee commanded approximately 90,000 soldiers in the largest army ever fielded by the Confederacy. Far from a mismatch, the Seven Days featured roughly equal antagonists fighting on Confederate home ground.

The most obvious shortcoming of Burns' military coverage concerns geographical imbalance. His war is preeminently a struggle between the famous armies that operated in the Eastern Theater. As I have written in earlier Insight columns, I believe that events in the East, for a number of reasons, did overshadow those beyond the Appalachians. But other scholars dispute the primacy of the Eastern Theater—something largely absent from Burns' series.

*The Civil War* reinforces the common misconception that Gettysburg towered over all other campaigns. Burns lavishes nearly 45 minutes on Lee's invasion of Pennsylvania versus fewer than 11 on the maneuvering and combat between December 1862 and July 1863 that settled Vicksburg's

fate. Treatment of other operations reflects the same bias. Lee's march into Maryland and the Battle of Antietam receive 25 minutes, equivalent movements into Kentucky by Confederate forces under Braxton Bragg and Edmund Kirby Smith only fleeting attention. Similarly, Burns allocates a 12-minute section to Lee's battle at Fredericksburg in December 1862, while the clash at Murfreesboro, a much bloodier Western counterpart fought two and a half weeks later, winks past viewers in less than a minute.

The Trans-Mississippi Theater fares worst of all. Burns disregards Pea Ridge and Wilson's Creek (except for mentioning casualties at the latter), battles that helped decide the fate of Missouri. Viewers also learn nothing about Nathaniel P. Banks' Federal advance up the Red River in the spring of 1864, Confederate General Sterling Price's raid into Missouri later that year, and other noteworthy, though not decisive, military events farther west of the Mississippi.

Robert E. Lee, Ulysses S. Grant, and William Tecumseh Sherman rightly dominate Burns' cast of generals, yet nowhere does the series take

up questions about Lee's generalship that have inspired vigorous debate over many decades. And the Union's military effort in the West belongs almost exclusively to Grant and Sherman. John Frémont, Don Carlos Buell, and William Rosecrans all held important Western commands but play only the smallest of bit parts. The most obvious omission concerns Henry Halleck, whom Burns casts briefly as a jealous administrator hoping to push Grant aside after Shiloh. On the Confederate side, viewers might infer that Nathan Bedford Forrest—a favorite of talking head Shelby Foote—ranked as the most important officer in the West. His appearances in the series, quite remarkably, outnumber those of Braxton Bragg, Albert Sidney Johnston, Joseph E. Johnston, P. G. T. Beauregard, and others who led Southern armies during major campaigns.

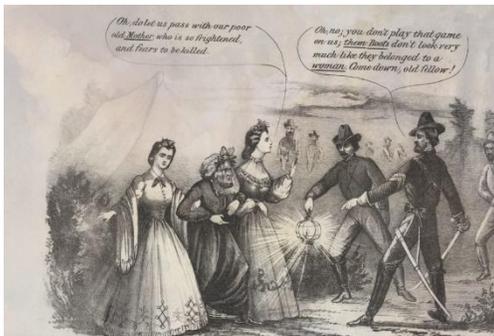
Also absent from the documentary is a well-developed sense of how profoundly military affairs affected, and were affected by, politics, the process of emancipation, and other aspects of the conflict. Too often, campaigns and battles seem to occur in isolation—something impossible in a

contest between two democratic republics at war.

I applaud Burns for applying his narrative gifts to a monumental and potentially controversial subject. My disappointment stems from a sense of missed opportunity. The filmmaker chose to maneuver comfortably along well-trodden paths, serving up military campaigns and leaders in familiar interpretive garb and never really challenging his viewers.

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### **Uncloaking the Jeff Davis Myth**



*Chronicle/Alamy Stock Photo*

Richard H.  
Holloway, Historynet March,  
2021

### **The defeated Confederate president's dramatic capture—in fact and fiction**

After a long trip from New

Orleans in mid-July 1865, former Confederate Lt. Gen. Richard Taylor walked into a jail cell at Fort Monroe, Va., where its occupant, Jefferson Davis, welcomed him with a silent handshake. Taylor had earlier been in Washington, D.C., where he met with President Andrew Johnson, as well as numerous congressmen and generals, to obtain permission to make contact with Davis, the imprisoned former president of the dissolved Confederate States of America and also Taylor's brother-in-law. At the time of the meeting with Johnson, a standing order prohibited ex-Confederates from entering the nation's capital—a restriction spurred by rumors circulating throughout the city that another presidential assassination plot was in the works. But Taylor, son of former President Zachary Taylor, knew how to finesse politicians and soon managed to persuade his way into seeing Davis.

Until Taylor arranged to speak with Davis, the latter was forbidden to have any visitors, including family members. President Johnson had been very hands-on early during Davis' incarceration, permitting only guards inside his cell, so Taylor's unannounced appearance was

quite welcome. “This is kind,” exclaimed the “pallid, worn, gray, bent, [and] feeble” Davis, “but no more than I expected of you.” The two men began discussing the condition of the war-torn South, with Davis asking whether he was being blamed for the Confederate defeat. Taylor confirmed Davis’ conjecture but surmised that the assaults on Davis’ character were coming from people now eager to curry favor with the federal government.



*A reward poster for Jefferson Davis, dated one day before his capture. The children in this postwar photo were with their parents during their escape. (Gilder Lehrman Collection/Bridgeman Image)*

Although Davis and Taylor spent the entire day catching up, neither left a record or mention about the plethora of drawings and articles

currently circulating among the Northern press perpetuating the claim that the former president had been captured in Irwinville, Ga., on May 10, 1865, wearing women’s clothing. The opportunity to depict the former Confederate president in stories and engravings as having been captured in women’s clothing—humiliation based on hearsay and unverified accounts—proved irresistible to much of the print media. President Abraham Lincoln had received similarly rough treatment throughout the war, regularly lampooned in particular by Confederate-sympathetic media in Britain such as *Southern Punch* and the *Southern Illustrated News*.

From the time the Confederate capital had fallen and Davis fled south from Richmond with his entourage on April 2, he had naturally been the target of ridicule for countless Northern newspapers, quick to publish any nugget of news about the Confederate president’s desperate attempt to escape capture and, in doing so, likely racing ahead of established fact to please their readers.

In early May, Davis and his supporters crossed into

Georgia, where he was reunited with his wife, Varina, who had fled Richmond separately. Varina's guard was led by Captain George Moody, former commander of the Madison Light Artillery (Madison "Tips" or Tipperarys), who was on his way home to Louisiana. Moody, Varina recalled, was a "very gentlemanly escort" who had volunteered to accompany her "as a friend and protector" and was a neighbor of the Davis family.

The joint Davis wagon train was not aware that parts of two veteran Yankee regiments, the 1st Wisconsin Cavalry and the 4th Michigan Cavalry, were zeroing in on their position after being dispatched by Union Maj. Gen. James H. Wilson. While both units were able to gather similar intelligence, inexplicably Wilson did not direct the commanders to work in conjunction with each other.

The initial intelligence reports, which stated that Davis was accompanied by 600–700 men, prompted Brevet Colonel Henry Harnden, leading the 1st Wisconsin, to inquire of his commander if his allotment of 150 men would be sufficient for the task. Via a

subordinate, Wilson explained it was his opinion that Davis' escort was "greatly demoralized" and "that they would be poorly armed." The commander of the Michigan troopers, Lt. Col. Benjamin D. Pritchard, led a larger force of 459 cavalymen, effectively evening the odds against the suspected number of the soldiers in the escort.

Meanwhile, Davis and his traveling companions were bogged down by heavy storms. The path for wagons in their caravan was constantly blocked by mud and downed trees lying across the road. Eventually, people and animals alike grew so weary that they had to halt. After midnight on May 10, everyone was fast asleep. The officers in command of the escape party failed to send out pickets to guard themselves. Davis had already reduced the size of his military retinue to lessen their chances of being caught.



*Of the Davises' six children, only daughters Margaret and "Winnie" (pictured) survived beyond age 21. Jefferson Jr. (above left) died in 1878, William (above right) in 1872. Son Joseph died in a fall from the Confederate White House in April 1864. (Universal Images Group North America/Alamy Stock Group)*

An hour later, Pritchard and his Michiganders rode into nearby Irwinville. Residents disclosed the location of the Confederate encampment just outside town. The horsemen stealthily made their way to within a few hundred yards of the exhausted presidential party to await dawn. A mile northward, and unbeknown to Pritchard, Harnden's Wisconsin men had obtained virtually the same information about Davis and had ridden north, likewise bivouacking nearby to rest until daylight. Because

Wilson failed to have his men work in conjunction with one another, neither group was aware of the other's presence. According to Harnden, his commander's instructions were "that if there was a fight and Jefferson Davis should get hurt, General Wilson will not feel very bad over it"—setting up a potentially deadly encounter.

As dawn was breaking, the inhabitants of the Davis camp were still fast asleep. Both sets of Union cavalry mounted their steeds about the same time and began moving toward the camp, accidentally encountering each other first. In the morning haze, the two commands saw shadowy mounted figures headed for them and opened fire. Once the smoke cleared and the fog dissipated, two men from the 4th Michigan lay dead and another was wounded. Three men of the 1st Wisconsin were severely injured in the brief fray. Pritchard determined that all of the weapons firing were Spencer repeating carbines, a weapon he presumed only Northern troops would possess, so he loudly called for a ceasefire. He "halloed" to the troops across from him in the smoke-filled woods and received a response of "First Wisconsin," causing great

relief.



*Jefferson and Varina Davis posed in Washington for these quarter-plate tintypes during the tense Secession Winter of 1860-61, shortly before Jefferson left to become Confederate president. (John O'Brien Collection)*

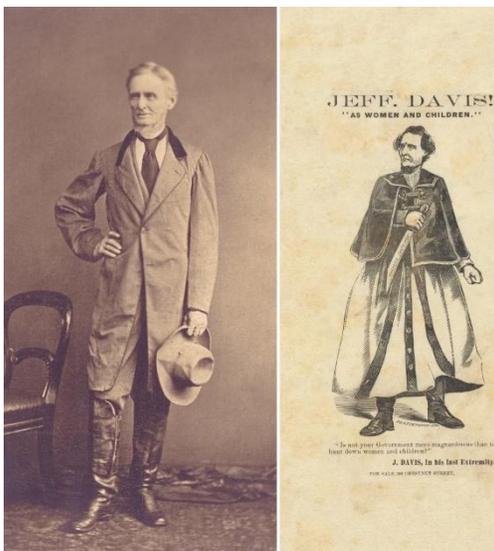
The friendly fire altercation abruptly awoke the Davises. The president stepped outside his tent, thinking the combatants were part of a group of renegade Southerners believed to have been stalking them for more than a day. Davis believed the party would be sympathetic to him, as president, and hoped he could calm them down. He quickly realized his error, recognizing in the growing daylight that the horsemen were Federals. Davis' initial instinct was to defend his family, but that quickly dissipated as an option as his wife begged him to make his

escape.

Recalled Varina: "When [her husband] saw them [Federal cavalymen] deploying a few yards off, he started down to the little stream hoping to meet his servant with his horse and pistols, but knowing he would be recognized, I pleaded with him to let me throw over him a large waterproof raglan [very similar to what Lincoln wore to Ford's Theatre the night of his assassination the previous month] which had often served him in sickness during the summer season as a dressing gown and which I hoped might so cover his person that in the gray of the morning he would not be recognized. As he strode off, I threw over his head a little black shawl which was around my own shoulders, seeing that he could not find his hat. After he started I sent my colored woman after him with a bucket for water, hoping that he would pass unobserved. He attempted no disguise, consented to no subterfuge." Davis' own account of the events was essentially the same as his wife's. Davis remembered that he reached for what he thought was his dark raglan to cover his light gray clothing but picked up Varina's raglan instead.

Several members of their party were nearby when he attempted to escape. (Closest was Moody, a one-time political rival of Davis who, later, in a letter to his wife did not contradict either of the Davises' accounts.) Willing perhaps to fashion any scenario to help her husband get away, Varina did her best to distract a lone approaching Yankee corporal by claiming that only women were in the family tents. As she did so, another member of the group attempted to lead the Federal away.

The corporal, however, noticed two figures moving away from his position and realized one was wearing boots. "Who is that?" he demanded while pointing at the retreating booted figure. Still intent on doing what she could to help her husband escape, Varina replied, "That is my mother." The corporal leveled his pistol as he called for the unidentified individual to halt. Varina began to scream, prompting her husband to stop and throw off his cloak and shawl. Seeing that the soldier still had his gun pointed at Davis, she ran and flung her arms around her husband, frantically yelling for the Union men not to shoot. Her bravery likely saved Davis' life. One of the president's party slipped his own cover over his commander's shoulders after noticing him shivering.



*A sketch of Davis dressed as a woman and carrying a Bowie knife (above right) proved a popular seller. Davis made sure to pose later in the suit he said he was wearing when captured. Virginia Museum of History and Culture; Chronicle/Alamy Stock Photo)*

In short order, all in the Davis party surrendered and then watched as their captors rifled through their personal belongings. Of particular note was the confiscation of Varina's spare hoop skirt and later the discarded shawl and raglan, which were taken, it seemed, for far more nefarious reasons than the simple acquisition of a souvenir. As the two groups made their way toward

Wilson's headquarters in Macon, Ga., the Davis clan was subjected to Yankee cavalymen gaily singing, "We'll Hang Jeff Davis from a Sour Apple Tree," a tune that likely upset the Davises' young offspring.

### **The President's Own Words**

Ten years after his incarceration, Jefferson Davis received a letter and newspaper clipping from his old friend, William Mercer Green, Episcopal bishop of Mississippi. In his reply to his venerable friend, Davis did not mince words concerning the article's author, a man named Charles F. Hudson, who at the time was a captain with the 4th Michigan Cavalry and won a brevet to major for meritorious service in the capture of the former Confederate president. Davis recalled him as a drunken thief. The president explained that the conversations Hudson had with Varina Davis were falsehoods and absurd. Davis said his first view of Hudson was when John Reagan—the former Confederate postmaster general, who was with Davis at the time—pointed him out as the soldier who had stolen his saddle bags. As Davis explained, Hudson's claims "that I was captured in the disguise of a

woman's clothes" was a lie. Hudson reportedly said Varina told him, "she did dress Mr. Davis in her attire and would not deny it." But, Davis retorted, "that attire appears by his own statement to have been a water proof cloak and a shawl; nowhere is the hoop skirt and petticoat and the sun-bonnet, which has been so staple of so many malignant diatribes and pictorials." Davis later wrote: "A short time before day [of his capture] I went to sleep in my travelling dress, grey frock coat and trousers, the latter worn inside heavy cavalry boots, on which remained a pair of conspicuous brass spurs of unusual size...[my wife] entreated me to leave, and to a water proof 'Raglan' which I threw over my shoulders [and] added one of her shawls, as I stepped out of the tent, she followed and put on me one of her shawls." — R.H.H.

Davis had to endure a mounted horseman waving a broadside in his face that turned out to be a wanted poster announcing a \$100,000 reward for his capture. The broadside falsely accused Davis of being complicit in Lincoln's April 14 assassination.

Before the prisoners arrived

at his headquarters, Wilson fired off a dispatch to Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton announcing Davis' capture. In the text of the report was a statement that Davis had "hastily put on one of Mrs. Davis' dresses" in his aborted escape attempt. It also inaccurately claimed that Davis brandished a Bowie knife at the corporal on the scene. Subsequent information was shared with the public by Maj. Gen. Henry W. Halleck who stated, "If Jeff Davis was captured in his wife's clothes, I respectfully suggest that he be sent north in the same habiliments."

It was Stanton who passed along the dubious attire story to *The New York Times*, which on May 14 would print a large headline, "Davis Taken." Erroneous subheads followed: "His Wife, Sister and Brother Secured" [Davis' sister and brother were not with him]; "Cowardly Behavior of the Head of Southern Chivalry"; "He Put on His Wife's Petticoats and Tries to Sneak Into the Woods"; and "Not Having Changed His Boots, the Brogans Betray Him."

A follow-up report by Wilson made no mention of Davis being in women's clothing, or even in disguise. Even

Harnden, who was on the scene, admitted: "As to the story which became widely prevalent at the time, that Davis had on a hoop-skirt, and was disguised as a woman, I know but very little of it; but think it grew out of the remark of the soldier, that, when he stopped him, he had his wife's shawl on him."



*Men often wore plain shawls during the Civil War era, as illustrated in the left image. In the confusion, however, Varina threw her feminine paisley decorated shawl, at right, on Davis' shoulders. (Dana B. Shoaf collection; Beauvoir)*

The architect of the fabrication that Davis was wearing women's clothing was apparently Lieutenant Julian Dickinson, adjutant of the 4th Michigan. In 1899, Dickinson was speaking to a group of historians when he elaborated, "Davis had on for disguise a black shawl drawn closely around his head and shoulders, through the folds of which I could see his gray hairs. He wore on his person a woman's long black dress, which completely concealed

his figure, excepting his spurred boot heels. The dress was undoubtedly Mrs. Davis' traveling dress, which she afterward wore on her return march to Macon." This account differs from the corporal claiming to be the sole captor of Davis.

It seems highly unlikely Davis would have had time to don one of his wife's dresses in the scramble to escape the Yankees. If the horsemen arriving out of the fog were Confederates as Davis first believed, the possibility he would have greeted them in women's attire strains credulity. The list of dubious scenarios combined with Harnden's and Wilson's reluctance to support them certainly leaves many suspect conclusions. In addition, 4th Michigan trooper Joseph Odren was a direct witness to Davis' capture yet neglected ever to mention anything about the president being in feminine clothing, despite ample opportunity to do so.

Stanton surely wasn't disappointed to find the story of Davis being captured while wearing his wife's garments end up being reported in numerous newspapers across the country. In addition, hundreds of demeaning drawings and lithographs portraying Davis in female

clothing would continue to circulate, further spreading the fabrication. Although it took a few years, all of the captors were finally able to split the ample reward for Davis' apprehension. The victor of any confrontation almost always gets the last word, and in this instance it is certainly no different. Unfortunately for Davis, it was a fictional account.

*Richard H. Holloway works for the Louisiana Department of Culture, Recreation, and Tourism and is president of the Civil War Round Table of Central Louisiana.*

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