

## *Reconstructing the Life of a Colored Woman: The Pocket Diaries of Emilie F. Davis*<sup>1</sup>

*Thursday, January 1, 1863: To day has bin a memorable day and i thank God I have bin sperd [spared] to see it. The day was religously observed, all the churches were open. We had quite a Jubilee in the evens. I went to Joness to a Party, had a very Blessest time.*<sup>2</sup>

On January 1, 1863, the day the Emancipation Proclamation, which freed all slaves in Confederate states under federal control, went into effect, Emlie F. Davis, a twenty-one-year-old freeborn black woman, sat in her room in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, pulled out her pocket diary, and proceeded to write about her feelings and activities. From January 1, 1863, to December 31, 1865, Davis recorded her private thoughts, hopes, concerns, and fears, as well as gossip, news, and information about local and national events in three leather-bound pocket diaries, which are currently housed at the Historical Society of Pennsylvania.<sup>3</sup> Through her simple act of recording her daily experiences, Davis has left us with a much-needed lens through which to glimpse the everyday experiences of a free black woman in Philadelphia during the Civil War.

Emlie Davis was born on February 18 in either 1841 or 1842 and was raised in the lower section of Philadelphia's Seventh Ward, near the shipyards. By the age of twenty, Davis lived in the upper section of the Seventh Ward, either in an established boardinghouse or a private home that took in borders. Her home was within walking distance of the Institute for Colored Youth, where she took evening classes, and of her

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<sup>1</sup> In the 1860 US census and at the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Emlie Davis's name is spelled "Emilie"; in the 1863 *Report of the Ladies Union Association of Philadelphia*, her name is spelled "Emily"; but, in the front of her 1863 pocket diary where she writes her name in ink and in cursive, she spells it "Emlie." Thus far, I have been unable to locate a birth certificate to confirm the spelling of her name; therefore, I have elected to use her own spelling of her name. In the title of this article, I have used the spelling used in the 1860 census and preferred by the Historical Society of Pennsylvania for cross-referencing purposes.

<sup>2</sup> Emilie Davis Diaries, 1863–65, Historical Society of Pennsylvania. Punctuation has been added; spelling has not been altered, except that the beginnings of sentences have been capitalized.

<sup>3</sup> The diaries are also available online in the Historical Society of Pennsylvania's digital archive, <http://digitallibrary.hsp.org/> and also at <http://www.libraries.psu.edu/psul/digital/davisdiaries.html>.

THURSDAY, JANUARY 1, 1863.  
 To day has been a memorable  
 day and I thank God how his  
 spirit to see it today the way  
 religiously observed all the  
 churches were open we had  
 quite a number in the evening  
 I went to Jones to a party have  
 a very pleasant time  
 Beautiful day of the day  
 was up and spent part  
 of the day reading and  
 here Nellie had an engage-  
 ment and had to go home  
 I stayed home a few  
 minutes the girls were  
 SATURDAY 3  
 all there here I went  
 this morning busy  
 all day reading and  
 his well her to see me  
 I went down home to  
 see if father had come  
 and was among my when

First page of Emlie Davis's 1863 diary, Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

church, First African Presbyterian, located at the corner of Seventh and Shippen (now Bainbridge) streets. Davis worked both as a seamstress, making dresses for women in her community, and as a short-term live-in domestic for two families.

Davis's pocket diaries are small, approximately three to five inches in length—small enough to fit under her pillow, in her pocket, or in her tote bag. Each volume has nearly one hundred sheets: there are three days per page and a section of blank pages at the end of each book. Davis's entries were typically short—three to five sentences—and were written in ink or pencil. She wrote in cursive, and her penmanship consisted of small slanted letters. Davis did not waste any space on the page, filling every inch of it by crowding the words together, writing smaller at the bottom of the page, writing into the creases, and sometimes writing words on top of each other. Her text is illegible in many places, particularly on the days when she wrote in pencil.

Davis rarely discussed any event or activity in detail. On most days, she began by recording the weather. Her entries contain frequent disparaging and humorous comments about her family, friends, and church members, suggesting that she viewed her pocket diary as a private space in which to record her personal emotions. Nevertheless, from her daily pocket-diary snapshots, we gain a rare insight into life in Philadelphia's nineteenth-century free black community.

Davis witnessed and recorded many historic events that happened throughout the city, including the day on July 31, 1863, when the city drafted black men in the Seventh Ward into the United States Colored Troops. Emlie was spending the summer working as a live-in domestic for the Harris family outside of the city, but she kept up-to-date on events nonetheless. Her brother, Alfred, whose wife, Mary, was expecting their first child, did not want to serve. "To day is the eventful day they begin to Draft in the Seventh Ward. Alfred and E[lijah] J [Emlie's uncle] are both Drafted. Mary is quite worried, i hope he will not have to go. Elijah is over the age," Emlie wrote. A month and a half later, she reported, "I had a letter [from] EJ to informing me that Alfred had gone to Cannada. I am very sorry. Mary is still quite sick."<sup>4</sup>

In her diaries, Davis also recorded how she learned of President Abraham Lincoln's assassination, and she described the experience and her feelings as she viewed his funeral procession. On the day when

<sup>4</sup> July 31 and Sept. 14, 1863.

Lincoln was assassinated, Davis was at a meeting of the Ladies Union Association, an organization of black women who worked on behalf of sick and wounded colored soldiers. "Very sad news was received this morning of the murder of the President," she wrote. "The City is in Deep mourning."<sup>5</sup> A week later she wrote about viewing his funeral procession. "Lovely morning. To [day] is a day long to be remembered. I have bin very busy all morning. The President comes in town this afternoon. I went out about 3 in the afternoon. It was the grandest funeral i ever saw. The Coffin and hearse was beutiful."<sup>6</sup> During the days surrounding Lincoln's assassination and burial, Davis recorded her activities as well as those of her friends and the members of the community around her. Because Davis attended lectures given by Frederick Douglass, listened to the preaching of Rev. Jonathan Gibbs, and was actively involved in both her church and her ladies group, she must have understood on both the personal and the political levels what Lincoln's assassination meant to black people.

Davis came of age during a time of antislavery activism and resistance within the free black community, and during that time, black women were beginning to find and claim their voices. For three years, Emlie F. Davis wrote in her pocket diary every day, briefly detailing her feelings and experiences on the days when black men were drafted, when Confederate soldiers invaded Gettysburg, when General Robert E. Lee surrendered, when President Lincoln was assassinated, and when the Thirteenth Amendment was ratified. Amid her thoughts about the momentous political events of the day, Davis included references to her own personal joys and pains, including her father's ongoing illness, her pastor's very public and messy divorce, her trips in and around the city, and the deaths of friends, church members, her sister-in-law, her nephew, and finally, her brother. For the first two years, Davis's diaries provide an insider's view of free black life in Philadelphia and allow us to watch as the young Emlie Davis discovers her own voice. After Lincoln's assassination, and after Davis's brother dies while serving in the United States Colored Troops, Emlie fills her diary with thoughts about the impact of the war and the high cost of freedom to Philadelphia's free black men and women.

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<sup>5</sup> Apr. 15, 1865.

<sup>6</sup> Apr. 22, 1865.