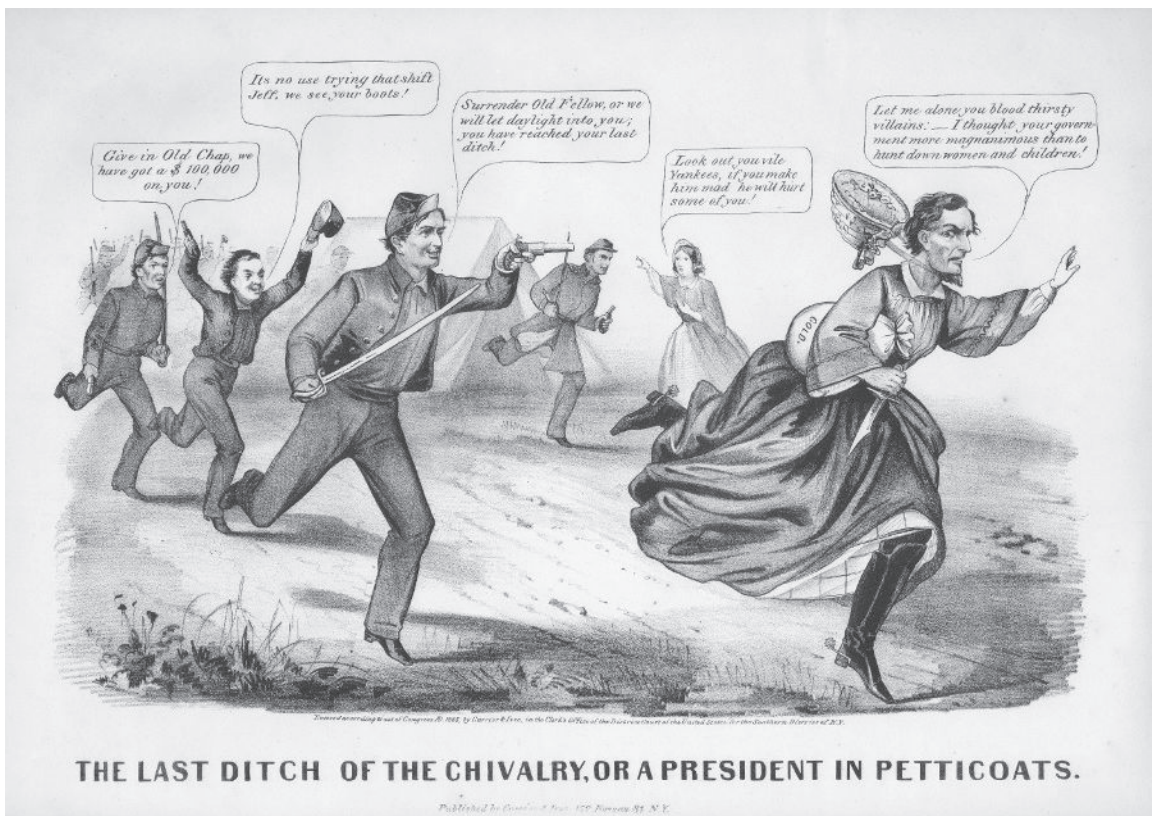


Visit the Saugatuck-Douglas History Museum • 735 Park Street, Saugatuck • At Mt. Baldhead Park • Free Admission • 269-857-7900 • Hours listed on page 2.

Visit the Old School House History Center, Back-in-Time Pathway and Lifeboat Exhibit • 130 Center Street, Douglas • Free Admission • 269-857-5751 • Hours listed on page 2.

ALLEGAN COUNTY SOLDIERS CAPTURE JEFFERSON DAVIS



A satirical political cartoon designed to humiliate the Confederate president

LOCAL BOYS HELP TO APPREHEND CONFEDERATE PRESIDENT

In the late afternoon on May 9, 1865, a company of soldiers arrived in the small farming town of Abbeville, Georgia. Their leader, a heavily bearded man with piercing eyes, told locals they were part of a Confederate rear guard, left behind to “fight the Yankees” straggling home after the official end of hostilities at Appomattox. They had taken a wrong turn and lost track of the Confederate wagon train, which contained important documents and \$500,000 in gold and silver. Most importantly, the wagon train also sheltered Jefferson Davis, the Confederate President, along with other officials who fled Richmond in the final days of the war.

Abbeville locals told the man that the wagon train camped the previous night on the Abbeville Road, then crossed the river toward Irwinville. With

this information in hand, the Confederate guard set out on the same trail, enlisting a local African American as their guide.

But these were not Confederates, as they had so convincingly claimed. Their leader was Colonel Benjamin D. Pritchard, a Union officer from Allegan County and leader of the Fourth Michigan Cavalry. Their mission was not to join the wagon train, but conquer it --- and capture Jefferson Davis once and for all.

The unit navigated rough terrain for thirty miles, until they reached a camp in Irwinville at 1 a.m. As the Confederate runaways slept peacefully, Colonel Pritchard sent 25 men to surround the camp, while a dismounted group of sentries were placed around the tents and wagons to prevent escape. The Confederates continued

to slumber until a Wisconsin regiment also searching for Davis approached the camp. In the darkness, they mistook the Michigan Cavalry for rebels, and a brief firefight ensued. Two Michigan boys died and another two were wounded in the friendly fire, rousing Davis out of his sleep --- but by then, it was too late.

The next series of events have been controversial for decades. Confederate First Lady Varina Davis asked the soldiers if her mother could go to the nearby river for water. Jefferson Davis then exited the tent, tin pail in hand, wearing his wife’s sleeveless raincoat and shawl. Historians have fiercely debated why Davis wore his wife’s clothing. Was he disguising himself to make an escape attempt? Colonel Pritchard claimed exactly that in an 1889 interview. Later

that year, Varina Davis wrote that the morning was bitterly cold, and she draped the shawl over her husband to protect his health, as Jefferson was prone to chill. If Davis was actually going for water, she may have feared that a war-weary Union soldier would shoot Jefferson on sight.

Whatever his motive, soldiers halted the President immediately when they saw his boots under the raincoat. No water would go in his pail.

“Is there a man among you?” Davis asked the soldiers in disgust.

“Yes, I am one,” one of the soldiers replied. “And if you move, I’ll blow your brains out.”

Colonel Pritchard arrived a few moments later. “Are you in command, sir?” Davis inquired. Pritchard told him he was. “I suppose you think it is bravery to hunt down women and children, but I consider it vandalism and theft,” Davis declared.

“Whom do I have the honor to speak to?” Pritchard asked, though he may have known the answer.

“You may call me whatever you have the mind to,” Davis replied evasively. Pritchard declared that he would call him Jeff Davis.

Several men from Allegan County witnessed this tense scene, including Corporal William Oliver, a 25 year-old Saugatuck farmer, and Sergeant Benjamin K. Colf, an 18 year-old farmer’s son from Manlius Township. A few others from Saugatuck were part of Pritchard’s guard. They guarded a band of thirty Confederates, including Davis, three colonels, two lieutenants, a major, Varina Davis, four children, and Varina’s sister.

The following day, a detail of 22 men began escorting the captured wagon train to Hampton, Virginia, where they would turn in their Confederate prisoners. As they departed, a soldier from Company C named James Lynch discovered a fine horse already bridled and sad-

dled. Knowing it belonged to Jefferson Davis, Lynch mounted the horse, while Davis’s party rode in an ambulance.

As the party traveled toward Macon, Georgia, they stopped at noon for lunch, and the soldiers looted Davis’s food rations. As Davis stared on helplessly, Lynch reportedly began to taunt him on horseback. “Mr. Davis, you had better give me this horse; you will not be needing him anymore.”

“How dare you insult the President that way!” Varina Davis shrieked.

“President?” Lynch replied. “What is he President of?” It was a sobering summation of all Davis had lost.

To add salt to the wound, Northern newspapers had a field day with reports that Davis wore his wife’s shawl. The most partisan editors remained convinced that Davis donned the feminine attire in a desperate escape attempt. Their cartoons depicted Davis in an array of imagined disguises, from the simple shawl to a full hoop skirt, as Michigan soldiers captured the emasculated Confederate.

Once the soldiers reached Savannah, Georgia, they boarded the steamer William P. Clyde to Fort Monroe, an encampment in Virginia. The soldiers deposited Jefferson Davis in the fort, where he would remain imprisoned for two years, a defeated leader of a failed revolution.



Benjamin D. Pritchard

TOWN “INVADED” BY ARTIST TYPES

In the days of the first European settlers, the Saugatuck-Douglas area was little more than a fur trading post on the banks of the Kalamazoo River. But soon entrepreneurs built saw mills to harvest the rich forests, and built ports to ship the lumber to growing urban centers like Chicago. When lumbermen thoroughly cleared the forests, farmers took over,

many of whom planted fruit orchards. By the 1890s, steamships regularly transported fruit and wood products to the cities, and brought back an important new commodity on the return trip: city folk, eager to escape the noise, crowding and pollution of urban life.

To those visitors, the Saugatuck area looked like a

paradise: green, quiet and untainted. Among these visitors were artists attracted to the rustic towns, sweeping dunes, and unparalleled opportunity to paint *plein air* (“in the open air”) like the Impressionist painters of Europe. Before the Impressionists, serious painting was done in a studio. *Plein air* painting was done outside, directly observing the way sunlight lit the subject.

Soon, summer art colonies sprang up around the community. The forerunner of today’s Ox-Bow School of Art held its first classes in 1910 and purchased its present location in 1920. Numerous

other art schools and studios opened their doors, including the studio of Cora Bliss Taylor. Taylor fell in love with Saugatuck during her honeymoon, and started an art school that aimed, according to its brochure, “to provide an artistic environment for the student who desires to maintain his originality while gaining essential knowledge.” Cora Bliss Taylor devoted her life to art education, and taught her last student when she was 89!

Today, the Saugatuck-Douglas area justly promotes itself as the “Art Coast of Michigan.” The fur traders, saw mills and steamships have

all faded away, but the artistic legacy remains.



Cora Bliss Taylor at her easel

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