



## Educator Resource

# White House of the Confederacy

Dates & Eras	The Civil War, Post-War
Grades	5-12
Themes	Leaders, Politics, Slavery, Homefront
Standards	VS.1, VS.7, VS.8, USI.9, VUS.6, VUS.7, USI I.3

### History Overview

The White House of the Confederacy is a historic mansion located on the corner of 12th and Clay Street in the city of Richmond. During the four years of the American Civil War, this house was the official residence of Jefferson Davis, the President of the Confederate States of America. It was generally referred to as the “Executive Mansion,” the “President’s Mansion (or house),” or “Jeff Davis’s house” in newspaper accounts of the period. It was also called “The Gray House” because of its color. The White House was in a neighborhood considered socially and politically prominent at that time, and provided a beautiful view of the city and surrounding countryside.

The mansion was built in 1818 for the family of Dr. John C. Brockenbrough, the second president of the Bank of Virginia. In 1857, the house served as the home of the family of a local

mill owner named Lewis D. Crenshaw. Crenshaw renovated and decorated the house in the way that it appeared when the Davis family moved in in 1861. It is in this style that the house has been preserved today.

The White House of the Confederacy served as the social center of the Confederacy, and was the official residence of Jefferson Davis' family. His wife, Varina Davis entertained family and friends and held receptions for the city of Richmond. The house also served as the unofficial command center of the Confederacy, even though Jefferson Davis' office was located nearby on Bank Street. Davis received numerous heads of state as guests in the house and sometimes held conferences with his generals and cabinet, while his family slept upstairs. He worked at his home office more and more as he faced health issues in the later years of the war.

The house was [run by a large staff](#), who lived in the White House and surrounding buildings along with the Davis family. Records show that the Davises had at least 20 enslaved workers during their four year stay in Richmond, who were either owned by the family or hired from other Richmond slave holders. This included coachmen, nurses, maids, a cook, housekeeper, confidential servant, groomsman and several household staff. Several of the [enslaved workers seized their own freedom](#) during their time at the White House of the Confederacy.

After the war, the house was occupied by the Federal government for five years until 1870, and served as the headquarters for Military District Number One, which encompassed all of Virginia. From 1870-1890, the mansion was turned into a Public School, the Richmond Central School, and it served over 600 students for 20 years. Since then, the house has been a museum.

## **Artifacts**

### **1. Varina Davis' letter to her mother in June of 1861:**

*"I am very much better since we came to Richmond in every way. The place is a most beautiful one, but it is very hilly... They have taken a very fine house for me. I send you a poor plan, only to show you the style. It is a very nice place, but the woman (Mrs. Crenshaw) seems never to be going to move out of it."*

### **2. Richmond Examiner, January 21, 1864:**

*"Henry, the third servant of President Davis who has run away within three weeks, escaped on Tuesday night, and was still at large last evening. Both the others ran away on a Tuesday. He was a slave of Robert Ford, Esq., and had been in the President's service for only two or three months."*

### **3. Images of the House:**

A. The White House as viewed from Shockoe Valley to the east. Printed in Harper's Weekly, May 12, 1866



B. The White House as seen today from the backyard.



C. The White House dining room on the first floor, with a table covered with maps, papers and pens, depicting the room as it would have looked during a council of war held there through the evening of April 14, 1862



D. Jefferson Davis' home office on the second floor, with a round table used by Davis as a desk in the early part of the war. This room served on several occasions as a conference center for Davis and generals Robert E. Lee and Thomas "Stonewall" Jackson. The long desk seen in the image did not originally belong in this room.



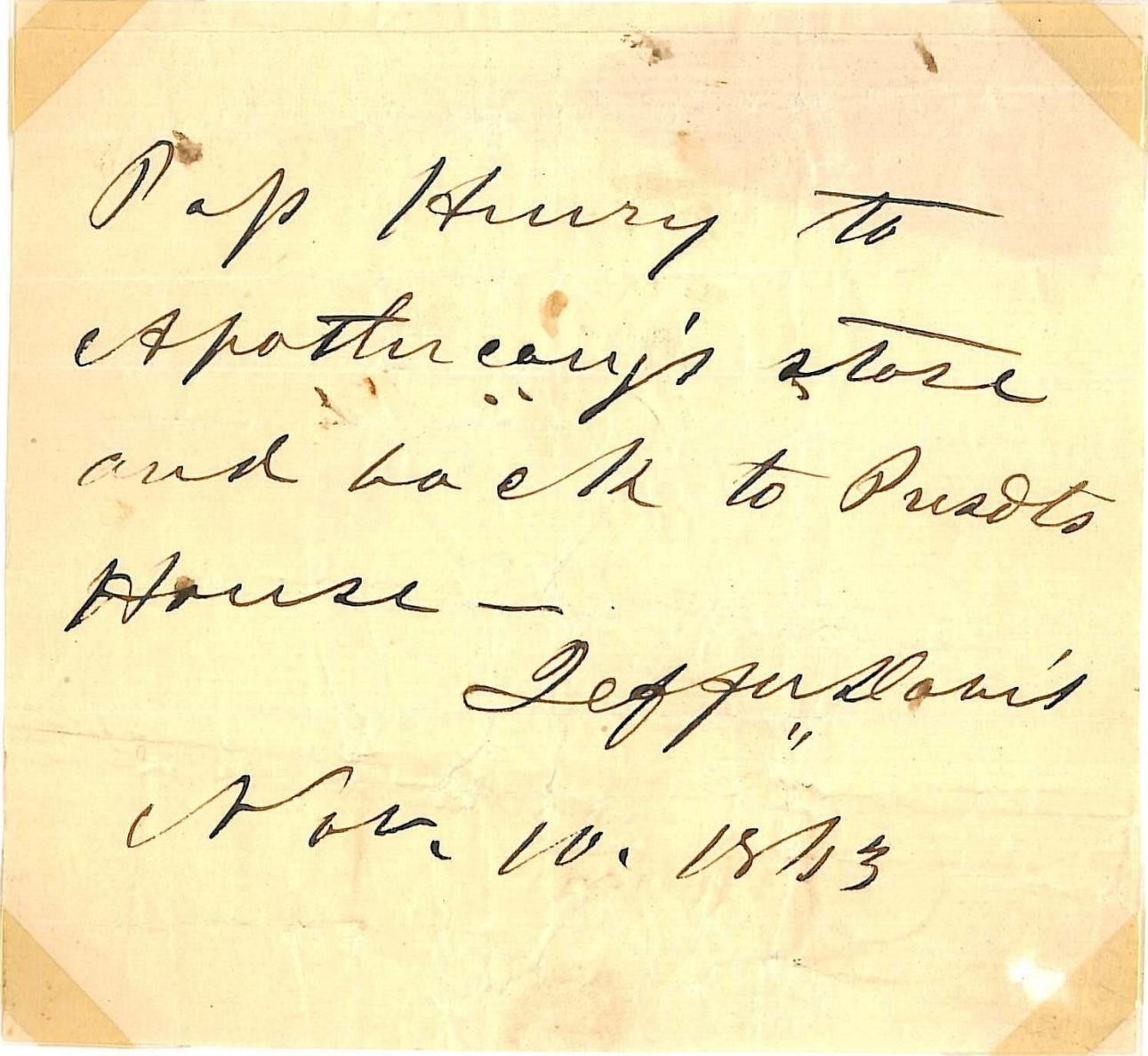
E. Period dolls placed in the nursery on the second floor, where the Davis children lived with their nanny.



F. A note found at the house, transcribed below –

*“Pass Henry to Apothecary’s store and back to Presdt’s House —  
Jefferson Davis*

*Nov. 10, 1863”*



*Pass Henry to  
Apothecary's store  
and back to Presdt's  
House —  
Jefferson Davis  
Nov. 10, 1863*

G. Federal officers photographed on the house portico, April-June 1865.



H. Photograph of Central School students and teachers, 1871-72



First fully organized Public School  
Building at Davis Mansion  
S.T. Pendleton Principal  
1871 to 1894  
Central School Session 1871-72

*S.H. Howard*

*Central School*

## **Suggested Questions**

1. Why do you think the house was called the 'White' House of the Confederacy when it was, in fact, gray in color?
2. Who were the different people living in the mansion when it was the White House of the Confederacy?
3. Why was Richmond chosen as the capital of the Confederacy and the official residence of the Confederate President?

## **Suggested Activities**

1. What were some differences and similarities between the functions of the White House in Washington D.C. and the White House of the Confederacy in 1861? Think about the different names given to the mansions, the people who lived and worked in the buildings etc. and draw a venn diagram highlighting the differences and similarities.

2. The Mansion on 12th and Clay street served different functions over its 103 year history – as a private residence of two wealthy Richmond families, as the White House of the Confederacy, a Federal Military headquarters, a school, and a museum. Currently, the house is preserved to show the time when it was the White House of the Confederacy for 4 years. Why do you think that is? If you had a choice, what state would you like the building to be preserved in? Would you then change the name of this building and call it something different? What would you call it? Write a paragraph explaining your preservation and name choice.

3. Examine artifacts 2. and 3F. What do these artifacts together tell you about Henry? Why do you think Henry needed a pass to go out to the Apothecary store? Who would have needed to see the pass to allow Henry to go? What did Henry do in January, 1864, and why do you think he did that? Discuss your responses with your group.