



The Historical
Society of
Pennsylvania

Collection 3030

**Emilie Davis
Diaries**

1863-1865

3 vols. 0.25 lin. feet

Contact: The Historical Society of Pennsylvania
1300 Locust Street, Philadelphia, PA 19107
Phone: (215) 732-6200 FAX: (215) 732-2680
<http://www.hsp.org>

Processed by: Jon Bozard
Processing Completed: March 2005
Restrictions: None

Emilie Davis
Diaries, 1863-1865
3 vols., 0.25 lin. feet

Collection 3030

Abstract

Emilie Davis was a young African-American woman who lived in Philadelphia during the Civil War. Three diaries, 1863-1865, contain memories of her day-to-day life with mention of some wartime events, including the fall of Vicksburg and draft riots in New York City during 1863. In 1865, she attended a lecture given by Frederick Douglass. She wrote about “colored” troops, the draft, parades, and units marching off to war. Davis witnessed the funeral procession in Philadelphia for Abraham Lincoln and waited with many others to view the president’s body.

Background

Little is known about Emilie Davis. She was born on February 18 in an unknown year and was most likely in her late teens or early twenties when she began her diary in 1863. She seems to have lived alone but occasionally stayed with the family for whom she was working. She was educated, enjoyed reading, and also attended night school. She enjoyed spending time with her friends, attended church regularly, and occasionally went to lectures and concerts. Davis enjoyed music and singing, and eventually learned to play the guitar.

Scope & Content

Emilie Davis’s diaries cover the years 1863 to 1865. She used small pocket diaries to record daily events, and used both pen and pencil to make her entries. Some dates of Civil War battles and important days and holidays are circled in the front of some of the diaries. Her handwriting is clear and easy to read. Although a great deal of information is recorded, typical diary entries are not very detailed. Typical entries recorded the weather, as well.

Daily entries provide a glimpse of the life of a young woman in Philadelphia. Friends and family are mentioned often, and there are many references to a friend named Nellie. She also wrote about attending weddings, funerals, lectures, church fairs, reading, sewing, her first use of a sewing machine, shopping with friends, school, guitar lessons, seeing

parades during the war, and concerns for sick friends and family members. Early in 1863, she wrote about taking care of her sick father, who subsequently moved to Harrisburg. Her subsequent trips to Harrisburg are mentioned throughout the diaries.

As might be expected, most of the news Davis recorded in her diary focused on the Civil War. National events, such as National Fast Day (April 1863), the 1863 New York draft riots, and the 1864 presidential election, are mentioned. In July 1863 she mentioned that people in the Harrisburg area were fleeing that part of the state and moving towards Philadelphia as a result of the Battle of Gettysburg. Emancipation was recorded, as was the fall of Vicksburg and Lincoln's assassination. In April 1865, Davis saw the Philadelphia funeral procession for President Lincoln. She commented that it was the grandest funeral she had ever seen. She was able to see Lincoln's body after waiting in line for two hours and commented that it was well worth the wait.

Although many entries refer to major events, the diaries mainly note Davis's day-to-day activities. She made frequent references to her employment situation. One summer she worked for a Mrs. Powell and traveled to Germantown with her. Entries indicate that she may have also worked for a Mrs. Wister. Sewing seems to have been a particular skill, and one entry mentions finishing a dress at one o'clock in the morning for a wedding the same day. She wrote about her minister, Reverend Gibbs and included her comments on some of his sermons. She mentioned attending church while away from home and her family being the only "colored" people at the church service. She wrote about local events in Philadelphia during the war, including parades, fires, friends getting their draft notices, and visiting the "colored" troops in their camp. In 1865, Davis attended a lecture in Philadelphia given by Frederick Douglass.

Davis expressed her concern for friends that were drafted and sent to war and was especially concerned for her two brothers, both in the military. Her concern grew in 1865, and her fears were realized when her brother Alfred died shortly before Christmas that year. She attended the funeral in Harrisburg and came back to Philadelphia alone on Christmas Day. Some of the longest passages in her diary deal with her concern for her Alfred.

In addition to daily diary entries, Davis also wrote in the memoranda section of each of the diaries. The 1863 diary includes a short poem. It is in these sections that she goes into more detail about some of the events she witnessed; or she writes more about her feelings concerning things that had happened during the year. Emilie ended the memoranda section of her 1865 diary, with the words "All well that ends well."

Alternative Format

None.

Subjects

African American women – Pennsylvania – 19th century
African American women – Social life and customs – 19th century
African Americans – Pennsylvania – 19th century
Single women – Pennsylvania – 19th century
United States – History – Civil War, 1861-1865 – Personal narratives

Davis, Alfred, d. 1865

Davis, Emilie

Lincoln, Abraham, 1809-1865 -- Assassination

Administrative Information

Acquisition information

Purchased, 1999. Accession 991006.5

Preferred citation

Cite as: *Emilie Davis Diaries* (Collection 3030), The Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

Processing note

Processed by volunteer Jon Bozard, June 2004.

City directories, census, and church records were researched, but no record of Emilie Davis was found. She wrote of going to church and mentioned some churches by name, but never stated the name of the church she attended. An investigation of a likely church (using the name of her minister) revealed that pre-1870 records had been destroyed in a fire.