



NEWS RELEASE

For immediate release
Contact: Lauri Cielo
215-732-6200 ext. 233
lcielo@hsp.org

1860s Diary Sheds Light on the Life of a Young Black Woman

**The Historical Society of Pennsylvania Presents:
“Emilie Davis: Her Life, In Her Own Words” on February 18**

Philadelphia, PA (February 6, 2009) — Emilie Davis was a young, free Black woman living in Philadelphia in the 1860s. She kept a diary, recording the commonplace acts of attending church and learning how to sew to the extraordinary events of attending a Frederick Douglass lecture and witnessing President Abraham Lincoln’s funeral cortege travel through the city.

Emilie Davis’s unpublished diary, comprising three volumes from 1863 to 1865, is part of the collection at the Historical Society of Pennsylvania. A local scholar has been studying the diary and plans to share Emilie Davis’s stories with the public at a free event **February 18**. The lecture will begin at 6 p.m. at the Historical Society of Pennsylvania at 1300 Locust Street in Philadelphia. Davis’s diary will be on display.

The guest speaker will be Kaye Wise Whitehead, a doctoral candidate from the University of Maryland. Whitehead said much of the literature about 19th-century Black women focuses on the elite or the enslaved. The Emilie Davis diary is unique because it provides a look at the life of an ordinary, free Black woman in her own words. “The diary is used as a prism through which the lives of ordinary free Black women are illuminated and deconstructed,” Whitehead said. “Within a historical perspective, I recreate the narrative of Emilie’s life and analyze the free Black community where she lived and worked.”

Emilie Davis was most likely in her late teens or early twenties when she began her diary. She was an educated young woman, who enjoyed reading, music and singing, and regularly attended church. Davis wrote about attending weddings, funerals, lectures, church fairs, her first use of a sewing machine, shopping with friends, and concern for sick friends and family members.

Many of Davis’s diary entries focus on the Civil War. She wrote about “colored” troops, the draft, parades, and units marching off to war. She attended a lecture given by Frederick Douglass and witnessed Abraham Lincoln’s funeral procession in Philadelphia.

– more –

On April 22, 1865, Davis wrote: “To[day] is the day long to be remembered. I have bin very busy all morning. The President comes in town his afternoon. I went out about 3 in the afternoon. It was the grandest funeral I ever saw. The coffin and hearse was beautiful.”

On April 23, 1865, Davis wrote: “This morning [I] went down to see the President but could not for the crowd. Mr. Roberson spoke for us in the afternoon, Very interesting sermon, after church, Vincent and I tried to get to see the President. I got to see him after waiting four hours and a half. It was actually a sight worth seeing.”

In addition to the February 18 event, the diary will be featured in the historical society’s “200 Years of Lincoln” exhibit, which opened February 3 and continues through May 1. The exhibit displays Lincoln images, documents, and ephemera from the society’s collection, including an excerpt from Davis’s diary and other firsthand accounts relating to Lincoln. For more information about the exhibit, visit www.hsp.org.

Media is invited to attend the February 18 event. The attached images depict the exterior of the Emilie Davis diary, an inside page, and a photograph of the guest speaker, Kaye Wise Whitehead. Images can be credited: Courtesy of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania. Kaye Wise Whitehead is available for interviews, and can be reached at (917) 716-8739.

For more information, contact the society’s Coordinator of Communications, Lauri Cielo, at (215) 732-6200 ext. 233 or lcielo@hsp.org.

About the Historical Society of Pennsylvania

Founded in 1824 in Philadelphia, the Historical Society of Pennsylvania (www.hsp.org) collects and shares the stories of Pennsylvania. It is home to some 600,000 printed items and more than 21 million manuscript and graphic items. Its unparalleled collections encompass more than 300 years of America’s history—from its 17th-century origins to the contributions of its most recent immigrants. The society’s remarkable holdings together with its educational programming make it one of the nation’s most important special collections libraries: a center of historical documentation and study, education, and engagement.

###