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2017-12

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### Original Publication Citation

Kenneth L. Alford, "John E. Davis (William H. Norman) – A Galvanized Yankee in Utah," *Mormon Historical Studies* 18, no. 2 (Fall 2017): 1–19.

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### BYU ScholarsArchive Citation

Alford, Kenneth L. Ph.D., "John E. Davis (William H. Norman) – A Galvanized Yankee in Utah" (2017). *Faculty Publications*. 2056.  
<https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/facpub/2056>

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*Confederate soldier William H. Norman changed his name to John Eugene Davis after deserting the Union Army in 1865. This picture was taken about 1870. Courtesy of Robert L. Davis.*

# John E. Davis (William H. Norman)— A Galvanized Yankee in Utah

*Kenneth L. Alford*

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William H. Norman served as a Confederate soldier in Georgia infantry regiments during the Civil War. When he died in the small town of Annabella, Utah, on May 18, 1935, no one mourned his passing. No funeral was held. No obituary was printed, and no tombstone bears his name.

On the other hand, after John Eugene Davis, a Confederate infantry veteran also from Georgia, died in Annabella, Utah, on the same day, his passing was widely noted. After living in Annabella for fifty-four years, he knew everyone in town, and everyone knew him. His death was mourned by family, friends, and, indeed, the entire town. His obituary praised his innate kindness and shared a few of his Civil War exploits. He received a large church funeral, during which all of the speakers “spoke with high esteem of ‘Uncle’ John, as he was affectionately known, and with respect for his family.”<sup>1</sup> Members of the local American Legion post attended his funeral to honor his service as a Civil War veteran, and he was buried with honors in the Annabella cemetery.

At the time of his death, no one knew the secret John E. Davis carried with him to his grave. It would take several decades before his family pieced together the clues and discovered that John Eugene Davis and William H. Norman were the same person. By that time, four generations and many descendants bore the surname Davis instead of Norman.

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1. “Funeral Held at Annabella for Civil War Veteran,” *The Richfield Reaper*, May 23, 1935, 5.

William H. Norman did such a good job hiding his original identity that his wife, children, grandchildren, neighbors, and associates had no idea who he really was. For seventy of his ninety years, he lived under the assumed name of John Eugene Davis. By the end of his life, his Davis persona must have become more real than his early Norman identity.

### Early Life History

John E. Davis was born William H. Norman in Bibb County, Georgia, on April 23, 1845.<sup>2</sup> According to a short life history he wrote in his own hand just one year prior to his death, his father died when he was twelve years old. His mother died two years later. His father was a slaveholder who “owned a plantation of several hundred acres, where cotton and corn were grown,” but he “was addicted to drinking and gambling, and lost almost all of his property before he died.”<sup>3</sup> The death of Norman’s mother affected him more than the loss of his father. He told his children many times how he “could hardly quit crying because he loved her so much.” He explained that following his mother’s death, “us children had to live with my grandmother, my father’s mother, Elizabeth Jones Davis.”<sup>4</sup> While the basic dates and places of his childhood story were correct, the names were not. John E. Davis was William H. Norman, and Elizabeth Jones Davis was Elizabeth Jones Norman.

Norman did not live with his grandmother very long. The secession crisis soon arose as a result of Abraham Lincoln’s election to the presidency in November 1860. Following the example of South Carolina, Georgia seceded on January 19, 1861.<sup>5</sup> Pressure on Georgia’s young men to enlist “was incessant and ubiquitous.” According to one local history, “the commonwealth

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2. The earliest documentary evidence of William H. Norman’s birth is the 1850 U.S. Census, Bibb County, Georgia, s.v. “William H. Norman,” digital image, Ancestry.com. In this census, he is listed as a five-year-old male on page 49 of schedule 1. He also appears in 1860 U.S. Census, East Macon, Bibb County, Georgia.

3. John E. Davis, “The Life and Travels of John E. Davis,” which appears in an ironically named family history written by family member Carol D. Harden: *Our Davis Beginnings: The Life Stories of John Eugene Davis and Martha Rosetta Barney Davis* (Salt Lake City: printed by the author, 1987), 2. A copy of John E. Davis’s original, handwritten autobiography—as well as a transcript—appears in Harden’s work. Nowhere in his brief autobiography does “Davis” discuss his Union military service, desertion, or name change. Original spelling and punctuation retained. Copy in the author’s possession.

4. “Life and Travels of John E. Davis,” 1.

5. The Georgia Secession Ordinance was adopted by a vote of 208 to 89. See Charles Edgeworth Jones, *Georgia in the War: 1861–1865* (n.p.: Historian Camp, 1909), 12.

was one vast recruiting camp. The roll of the drum and the stirring notes of the fife resounded from mountain to seaboard. . . . It was a wild time—a continuous day of fevered enthusiasm. The war spirit boomed like a storm. The rivalry to enlist was universal and unquenchable.”<sup>6</sup> Norman enlisted as a sixteen-year-old private in Company C of Villepigue’s Independent Battalion of the Georgia Volunteers on July 22, 1861.<sup>7</sup> He later wrote that he enlisted because he “wanted to be loyal to the South.”<sup>8</sup> One young Georgia recruit observed that “this being a strictly agricultural country, the men and officers knew more about farming than about military tactics,” a situation that certainly applied to young Norman.<sup>9</sup> He was initially assigned as a flag bearer and drummer but soon joined the ranks as an infantry rifleman.<sup>10</sup>

Norman was discharged on March 18, 1862, at Macon, Georgia, after eight months of service. One month later, on April 14, after a short visit home, he was pressured into reenlisting for the duration of the war.<sup>11</sup> As he explained in his brief autobiography: “After the expiration of that [first

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6. I. W. Avery, *The History of the State of Georgia from 1850 to 1881, Embracing the Three Important Epochs: The Decade before the War of 1861–5; the War; the Period of Reconstruction, with Portraits of the Leading Men of This Era* (New York: Brown and Derby, 1881), 191.

7. Villepigue’s regiment was named after Colonel John B. Villepigue. See *List of Field Officers, Regiments and Battalions in the Confederate States Army 1861–1865* (Macon, GA: The J. W. Burke Company, 1912), 127. William H. Norman’s National Archives Compiled Military Service Record (CMSR) contains several 1862 and 1863 Confederate company muster rolls listing him as a private in Company E, First Confederate Regiment, Georgia Volunteers. An explanatory note on the muster roll states: “The 1st (also known as Larey’s and as Villepigue’s) Battalion Georgia Volunteers was organized with five companies, A to E, by G[eneral] O[rders] No. 19, Hdqrs. Troops C[onfederate] S[tates], dated April 16, 1861. It was increased to a regiment in October, 1861, and known as the Georgia and Mississippi Regiment, but it was official recognized by the A[djutant] & I[nspecto]r G[enerals] O[ffice] as the 36th Georgia Regiment. This designation was changed to the 1st Regiment Confederate Infantry by S[pecial] O[rder] No. 25, A.&I.G.O., dated January 31, 1862.” See also Janet B. Hewett, ed., *The Roster of Confederate Soldiers 1861–1865* (Wilmington, NC: Broadfoot Publishing Company, 1996), 11:535.

8. Harden, *Our Davis Beginnings*, 4.

9. I. Hermann, *Memoirs of a Veteran Who Served as a Private in the 60’s in the War between the States; Personal Incidents, Experiences and Observations* (Atlanta, GA: Byrd Printing Company, 1911), 19.

10. “Life and Travels of John E. Davis,” 2.

11. William H. Norman Enlistment Record, March 7, 1862, M-226, roll 45, Washington, DC: National Archives and Records Administration. This record was signed by F. L. Hixon, first lieutenant and company commander.

enlistment] term I was told that I would have to re-enlist—so I re-enlisted.”<sup>12</sup> Many years later in a letter to a granddaughter, he reflected that that was the last “I saw of my brother and three sisters.”<sup>13</sup>

After experiencing a dreadful pounding of artillery for three successive days and nights in Florida, Norman was transferred to Mobile, Alabama. After a recuperative period that lasted only three months, he was transferred to the Army of the Tennessee in northern Georgia under command of General Joseph E. Johnston. This, he commented, was where the real fighting commenced. General Johnston was generally beloved by his soldiers, and Norman shared that sentiment. He observed that “Gen. Johnston was a very careful man. He always let the other side do the fighting. He would fall back and build trenches rather than run his army in on trenches.”<sup>14</sup>

After a series of defeats in Georgia, which placed General William Tecumseh Sherman’s Union forces in a position to attack Atlanta, Confederate president Jefferson Davis relieved General Johnston of command on July 17, 1864. General John B. Hood, who had previously complained to Davis about Johnston’s lack of aggressiveness, was placed in command of the Army of Tennessee. Hood fared no better against Sherman than Johnston had. Following the loss of Atlanta in September 1864, Hood turned his army north in an effort to disrupt Union supply lines in Tennessee.<sup>15</sup>

John E. Davis entertained his children with stories of narrow escapes during his military service, such as when a coffee pot “was shot from his hand.” He contracted measles at Franklin, Tennessee, and was placed in an old barn to recover. Shortly after he was moved, the barn was destroyed by artillery fire. According to family records, another day “he was behind a big forked tree firing his gun at the enemy when a larger fellow came and pushed him away. It wasn’t long until that fellow was killed so he took his place again and he was pushed away again and that fellow was killed. By that time father figured that place was unlucky so he stayed away from it and he saw a third man shot from there.” During one battle, he was assigned

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12. “Life and Travels of John E. Davis,” 1.

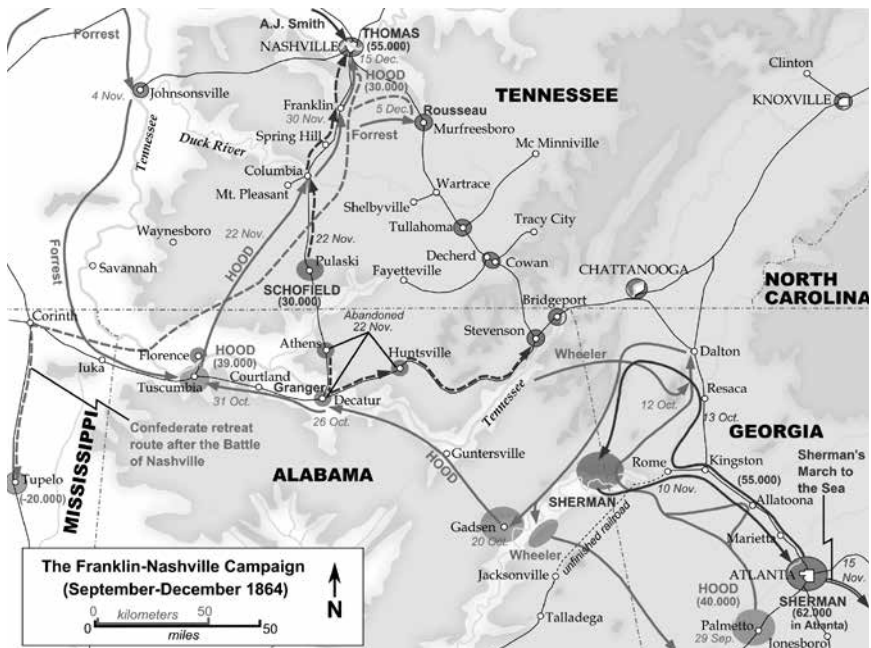
13. Harden, *Our Davis Beginnings*, 2.

14. “Life and Travels of John E. Davis,” 1. See also “Compiled Service Records of Confederate Soldiers Who Served in Organizations from the State of Georgia,” Washington, DC: National Archives and Records Administration, 1955, William H. Norman, July–August and September–October 1861.

15. James M. McPherson, ed., *The Atlas of the Civil War* (New York: MacMillan, 1994), 172–79, 194–97.

to work in his regiment's powder house "to keep the men supplied with ammunition. The time came for another man to relieve him and a few minutes after the change, the powder house was blown up by a blast from the enemy lines." And on another occasion, while on guard duty, "he had been without sleep for many hours and when he settled down to the quiet routine of this duty, he could not stay awake and fell asleep at his post. The penalty for going to sleep while on guard was death, but his gun dropped to the floor and awakened him just as the officer in charge was starting up the steps to check [on him]."<sup>16</sup>

General Hood's Franklin–Nashville Campaign in Tennessee (which lasted from September to December 1864) ended in a Confederate defeat.



The extended Franklin-Nashville Campaign, which lasted four months and covered hundreds of miles, ended in a Union victory. William H. Norman was captured south of Nashville, Tennessee, on December 16, 1864.

16. Harden, *Our Davis Beginnings*, 2–3. Despite the fact that John E. Davis lived under a false identity much of his life, there is no reason to disbelieve the Civil War experiences he related to family members. Yes, John told one big lie (and it was a doozy), but the several elected and appointed positions of trust he held throughout his life support the conclusion that he was widely viewed as a trustworthy individual.

As Norman summarized, “The first thing that Gen. Hood done was to get most all of the Army captured.”<sup>17</sup> After taking heavy casualties at the Battle of Franklin in late November, Hood’s thirty thousand soldiers faced off against fifty-five thousand soldiers from the Union Army of the Cumberland under the command of Major General George H. Thomas. On December 2, Hood’s Army of Tennessee “took position in front of Nashville” four miles south of the city, and the two armies skirmished and jockeyed for position over the next several days. The *War of the Rebellion Official Records* report that on December 10, 1864, William H. Norman’s regiment, the First Georgia Volunteers, was assigned as part of Major General Benjamin F. Cheatham’s Army Corps.<sup>18</sup> Cheatham’s forces were assigned on the right flank southeast of Nashville. Battle reports from December 7 through December 14 note, “All quiet in front,” “No fighting of importance,” “Nothing new on our line,” “No change to report,” and “No change in the lines.”<sup>19</sup>

The quiet was shattered on the morning of December 15. According to Confederate reports, the “enemy attacked both of our flanks this morning about the same time, and was repulsed with heavy loss on our right, but toward evening he succeeded in driving in our infantry outposts on the left” and pushed Hood’s forces south. In an effort to shore up their defenses, Cheatham’s corps was transferred from the right flank to the left as the situation continued to deteriorate for the Southern forces. Confederate soldiers, including William Norman, must have been tempted to flee, but Norman chose not to join the two thousand of his fellow soldiers who deserted during that campaign.<sup>20</sup> As historian Ella Lonn astutely observed, “The fires of patriotism burn more brightly at the outbreak of war than towards its close,” but Norman chose to be true to his enlistment oath.<sup>21</sup>

According to one Confederate account, on the following day, December 16, a “general attack was commenced early this morning on our

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17. “Life and Travels of John E. Davis,” 1.

18. “No. 233. Organization of the Army of Tennessee, Commanded by General John B. Hood, C. S. Army, December 10, 1864,” in *War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, 128 vols. (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1880–1901), series 1, vol. 45, part 1, 664–75 [hereafter cited as O.R.].

19. “No. 234. Journal of the Army of Tennessee,” O.R., 672; “No. 235. Itinerary of the Army of Tennessee,” O.R., 675.

20. “Report of Maj. Gen. George H. Thomas, U.S. Army, Commanding Department of the Cumberland,” January 20, 1865, O.R., 46.

21. Ella Lonn, *Desertion during the Civil War* (Gloucester, MA: The American Historical Association, 1928), v.



entire line, and all the enemy's assaults [were] repulsed, with heavy loss, till 3.30 p.m., when our line suddenly gave way to the left of the center"—where Cheatham's corps was positioned—"causing in a few moments our lines to give way at all points, our troops retreating rapidly and in some confusion down the Franklin pike."<sup>22</sup> The Army of Tennessee retreated to Mississippi but ceased to be an effective fighting force. The Battle of Nashville was the last major conflict in the western theater of the war. Hood resigned his command shortly after the battle. Southern soldiers captured their frustration in a song sung to the tune of "The Yellow Rose of Texas":

So now I'm marching southward,  
My heart is full of woe;  
I'm going back to Georgia  
To see my Uncle Joe.  
You may talk about your Beauregard  
And sing of General Lee,  
But the gallant Hood of Texas  
Played hell in Tennessee.<sup>23</sup>

General Thomas reported that on December 15–16, his forces captured 4,462 Confederate prisoners of war. William Norman was among them. He was captured south of Nashville on Friday, December 16, 1864, and held in a Louisville, Kentucky, military prison for a few days. He was transferred to Camp Douglas in Illinois five days after he was captured and arrived at Chicago on Christmas Eve.<sup>24</sup> Camp Douglas, the prisoner-of-war camp where Norman was incarcerated, was about four miles southeast of downtown Chicago. Built in September 1861, the site now boasts the Illinois Institute of Technology and was formerly Comiskey Park, the home of the Chicago White Sox from 1910 through 1990.<sup>25</sup> In the early Civil War years, such

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22. "No. 234. Journal of the Army of Tennessee," *O.R.*, 673.

23. Shelby Foote, *The Civil War: A Narrative—Red River to Appomattox* (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), 710.

24. W. H. Norman, "Roll of Prisoners of War, Camp Douglas, Ill.," Washington, DC: National Archives and Records Administration, January 1865. A December 19, 1864, roll indicates that he was captured "near Nashville" on December 16, 1864. A December 26, 1864, roll records that he was transferred from a Louisville, Kentucky, military prison to Chicago's Camp Douglas on December 21, 1864.

25. Mike Wright, *What They Didn't Teach You about the Civil War* (New York: Presidio Press, 1996), 166. Camp Douglas, Illinois—the prisoner-of-war camp for captured Confederates—should not be confused with Camp Douglas, Utah Territory, which



*This woodcut was labeled in the April 5, 1862, issue of Harper's Weekly as "Rebel prisoners at Camp Douglas, Illinois."*

prisoner-of-war camps were “merely holding areas where men waited to be exchanged for . . . prisoners held by the other side.” However, in 1863, “the prisoner exchange system broke down, causing prison camps to become permanent areas of incarceration, where growing numbers of men had no hope of release until the end of the war.” Life in prison camps, for both Union and Confederate prisoners, was generally filthy and horrible. According to one account, “soldiers were seldom issued new clothing, and often starved due to meager food allowances.”<sup>26</sup>

Conditions at Camp Douglas were particularly vile. Built on low ground, the camp flooded “with every rain. During most of the winter months, when it wasn’t frozen, the compound was a sea of mud.”<sup>27</sup> By 1863, “the mortality

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was established in late 1862 when Colonel Patrick E. Connor arrived in Utah with several regiments of California Volunteers. For information about Camp Douglas, Utah Territory, see Kenneth L. Alford and William P. MacKinnon, “What’s in a Name? The Establishment of Camp Douglas,” in *Civil War Saints*, ed. Kenneth L. Alford (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Religious Studies Center and Deseret Book Company, 2012), 161–81.

26. “The Galvanized Yankees,” *The Museum Gazette* (Washington, DC: National Park Service, 1992), 1.

27. Lonnie R. Speer, *Portals to Hell: Military Prisons of the Civil War* (Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 1997), 71. “Our prison pen was like a cattle-yard,” complained Henry Morton Stanley, Company E, 6th Arkansas, who would later become a journalist and utter

rate at Camp Douglas had climbed to 10 percent a month, more than would be reached by any other Civil War prison . . . typhoid fever and pneumonia were the top two killers.” Scurvy, measles, mumps, and chronic diarrhea also killed many in the overcrowded prison.<sup>28</sup> Norman told his family that “conditions in the prison were so bad and the food was so scarce that some of the men climbed the walls and were shot rather than live in the mud and squalor there. Each man had only a blanket and a nap sack to protect him from the cold.”<sup>29</sup>

As Confederate prisoners of war suffered their confinement in misery, the U.S. War Department grew increasingly displeased with the mounting costs of maintaining its burgeoning system of prison camps. A clever solution was proposed by War Department officials: prisoners were offered the opportunity to renounce their Confederate military service “to save themselves from the horrors of prison life,” take an oath of allegiance to the United States, and enlist in the army. Seven U.S. Volunteer regiments were recruited from within the Union prisons. Soldiers who signed up were called “galvanized Yankees,” a reference to metal that has a thin layer of zinc placed over steel to protect it from rusting, “but underneath the coating the steel is unchanged.” And just like galvanized steel, most of those butternut soldiers were “still ‘Good old Rebels,’ or ‘Billy Yanks,’ underneath their adopted uniforms.”<sup>30</sup>

After a relatively short period of confinement, nineteen-year-old William Norman accepted the Union government’s offer and became a galvanized Yankee. His January 1865 prisoner-of-war roll includes a notation that he “claims to have been loyal. Was conscripted. Was captured & desires to take the oath of allegiance to the U.S. & become a loyal citizen.”<sup>31</sup> He was mustered into the Sixth U.S. Volunteers Regiment on March 25, 1865.<sup>32</sup>

Many of the newly minted Union soldiers, possibly including William Norman, must have entertained the thought of switching back to their former Confederate gray the first time they came into contact with Southern

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the famous phrase ‘Doctor Livingstone, I presume’ on his search through Africa. ‘We were soon in a fair state of rotting while yet alive.’” *Site of Camp Douglas*, 5, quoted in Speer, *Portals to Hell*, 72–73.

28. Speer, *Portals to Hell*, 135, 182.

29. Harden, *Our Davis Beginnings*, 3.

30. “Galvanized Yankees,” 1.

31. William H. Norman, “Roll of Prisoners of War, Camp Douglas, Ill.,” Washington, DC: National Archives and Records Administration, January 1865. Roll not dated.

32. William H. Norman, “Roll of Prisoners of War, Camp Douglas, Ill.,” Washington DC: National Archives and Records Administration, March 25, 1865.

(Confederate.)  
       |        |        Ga.

W. N. Norman  
Pri. Co. E, 1 Regt Ga. Inf

Appears on a  
**Roll of Prisoners of War**  
at Camp Douglas, Ill., applying for oath of alle-  
giance, January —, 1865.

Roll not dated \*

Where captured Nashville, Tenn.  
When captured Dec. 16, 1864.  
Remarks: Claims to have been  
loyal. Was conscripted.  
Was captured & desires  
to take the oath of alle-  
giance to the U.S. & be-  
come a loyal citizen.

\*Indorsement shows: "Rec'd (O. C. G. P.) Jan'y 28, '65."

Number of roll:  
**237** sheet 5 J. B. David  
(639b) Copyist.

1865 Union prisoner-of-war roll from Camp Douglas, Illinois. Courtesy of U.S. National Archives.

soldiers. Union officers who oversaw their enlistment also recognized that possibility, so like other galvanized Yankee regiments, the Sixth U.S. Volunteers were given assignments in the West to keep the trails open and provide settlers with protection against attacks from Native Americans.<sup>33</sup>

## Name Change

Just two weeks after William H. Norman became a galvanized Yankee, General Robert E. Lee surrendered the Army of Northern Virginia to General Ulysses S. Grant at Appomattox Court House in Virginia. During the next ten weeks, all of the other major Southern commanders likewise surrendered. The Civil War was over, but Norman's Union military obligation was not. Perhaps because he had been placed in an unfamiliar work environment by a government who had extended his military service beyond the end of the war or possibly because he heard that the last Confederate prisoners left Camp Douglas, Illinois, during July,<sup>34</sup> William H. Norman deserted Company E, Sixth U.S. Volunteers on 3 August 1865.<sup>35</sup> Either at that time or presumably shortly thereafter, he changed his name to John Eugene Davis in order to hide what he had done.<sup>36</sup>

Desertion was a continuing problem throughout the Civil War and after. No one knows exactly how many Union and Confederate soldiers deserted, but the U.S. provost marshal General James Fry estimated that approximately 200,000 Union soldiers deserted between 1863 and 1865—an average of over 5,000 per month.<sup>37</sup> Other estimates suggest that as many as 104,000 Confederate and 287,000 Union soldiers—approximately 10 percent of the uniformed forces—deserted.<sup>38</sup> The longer the war dragged on, the more

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33. See Dee Brown, *The Galvanized Yankees* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1963).

34. Speer, *Portals to Hell*, 304.

35. Lillian Henderson, comp., *Roster of the Confederate Soldiers of Georgia 1861–1865* (Hapeville, GA: Longina & Porter, 1959–1964), 1:26. Henderson was director of the Confederate Pension and Record Department. Though Norman's desertion date is listed, no primary record source is referenced.

36. Though the exact date of William H. Norman's name change to John Eugene Davis is unknown, it certainly occurred prior to 1870. The 1870 U.S. Census for Lander County, Nevada (South Reese River Valley District), includes the following entry: "J. E. Davis, 24, farm hand, born in Georgia." See Harden, *Our Davis Beginnings*, 17.

37. Robert Fantina, *Desertion and the American Soldier, 1776–2006* (n.p.: Algora Publishing, 2006), 65, 70.

38. Spencer C. Tucker, ed., *American Civil War: The Definitive Encyclopedia and Document Collection* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2013), 520.

soldiers chose to desert. There were so many deserters that an 1861 Union bounty policy that paid thirty dollars for the arrest and delivery of a deserter was reduced after a few months to just five dollars in order to conserve treasury funds.<sup>39</sup> During the war over 80,000 Union deserters were returned to military service, often at gunpoint.<sup>40</sup> On March 3, President Lincoln signed the Enrollment Act of 1863, which authorized the first federal military draft and required by-name accountability records for all deserters.<sup>41</sup>

Norman, now John E. Davis, had good reason to hide his true identity. The maximum penalty for desertion was death, and while many soldiers had their death sentences commuted, several hundred deserters were executed during the Civil War. Deserters who were not executed faced the very real possibility of receiving lesser punishments that included flogging, heavy fines, or imprisonment—sometimes in solitary confinement. Deserters could also be subjected “to humiliations such as having their heads shaved or half shaved or being forced to wear boards with the word ‘Coward.’ Another more brutal punishment was bucking, in which an individual was bound in a contorted position perhaps for days. Others were hung by their wrists. Some men were also branded with the letter ‘D’ on the cheek.”<sup>42</sup>

As a deserter, returning to his former life in Georgia was not an option for William Norman. The risk of being identified and arrested was too great. Many of his southern neighbors would also likely resent the fact that he abandoned the Confederacy and enlisted in the U.S. Army. He recorded in his personal history that “when the war was over I came West and when I was twenty years old I started to Calif[ornia].”<sup>43</sup> Davis family members recall their father and grandfather telling them that he “came to Utah with some of the Mormon pioneers, driving oxen on the way.”<sup>44</sup> The Salt Lake City *Deseret News* reported on August 16, 1866, that a “John Davis” arrived in the city as part of Captain Thomas E. Ricks’s wagon train, which may

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39. Fantina, *Desertion and the American Soldier*, 81.

40. Wright, *What They Didn't Teach You about the Civil War*, 178.

41. Wright, *What They Didn't Teach You about the Civil War*, 65. The Enrollment Act of 1863 was a contributing factor to the New York draft riots in July 1863. See, for example, Barnet Schecter, *The Devil's Own Work: The Civil War Draft Riots and the Fight to Reconstruct America* (New York: Walker Publishing Company, 2005).

42. Tucker, *American Civil War*, 520.

43. Harden, *Our Davis Beginnings*, 1.

44. Harden, *Our Davis Beginnings*, 4.

document his arrival.<sup>45</sup> Davis lived several years in Utah Territory and then moved to the mining community of Pioche, Nevada, where he was paid five dollars a day to haul water, an excellent wage at that time.

While living in Pioche, he attended a dance one evening at a local Mormon church where he met Rosetta Barney, a fifteen-year-old Mormon girl from St. George, Utah, who was visiting her half-sister. John was a handsome man with a full black beard and wavy hair, and he quickly won Rosetta's heart. Rosetta's parents were upset, though, when they heard that she wanted to marry a non-Mormon, and they sent her older brother, Hyrum, to bring her back to Utah. When Hyrum met John, he liked him and, against his



*Golden wedding anniversary photo of John E. and Rosetta Davis, December 2, 1925, taken in front of their Annabella, Utah, home. Courtesy of Robert L. Davis.*

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45. "List of Names of Incoming Passenger Trains," *Deseret News*, August 16, 1866, 289.

parent's wishes, encouraged him to marry his sister. Thirty-year-old John and Rosetta, now sixteen, were married in Pioche by a local Catholic priest on December 2, 1875. After a year and a half of marriage, John accepted his wife's faith and was baptized into the Latter-day Saint church on May 12, 1877. Their marriage was solemnized—"sealed" in Mormon terminology—in the recently dedicated Mormon temple at St. George, Utah, on January 25, 1878. The vital records are incomplete, but it appears their first child, a son, was born later that year and died shortly after birth. They named him John Eugene Davis—Rosetta believing that he was named after her husband. In 1880, John and Rosetta moved to Annabella in Sevier County, Utah Territory, where they would live, with the exception of only a few months, for the rest of their lives. During the course of the next several years, they had eight additional children, four daughters and four sons—six of whom survived them.<sup>46</sup>

Following his Mormon baptism, John E. Davis remained active in his new religion for life and served in numerous volunteer church positions. In October 1887, he received a call from Wilford Woodruff (then the president of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints) to serve as an unpaid, full-time missionary in the Southern States Mission, leaving Rosetta and his growing family in Utah. His missionary labors took him to northern Georgia, but he did not make any known attempts to visit his former home. Little money and limited time to travel provided him with a convenient excuse not to visit. Perhaps he felt that it might have raised too many questions if someone had recognized him there. Because of financial difficulties and his children's poor health, he cut his mission short and returned to Utah one year later to care for his family.

In 1904, John was elected as a justice of the peace and served continuously for the next thirty years, retiring from that position at the age of eighty-nine. He started a commercial poultry business and received a government contract to carry the mail between neighboring towns.<sup>47</sup>

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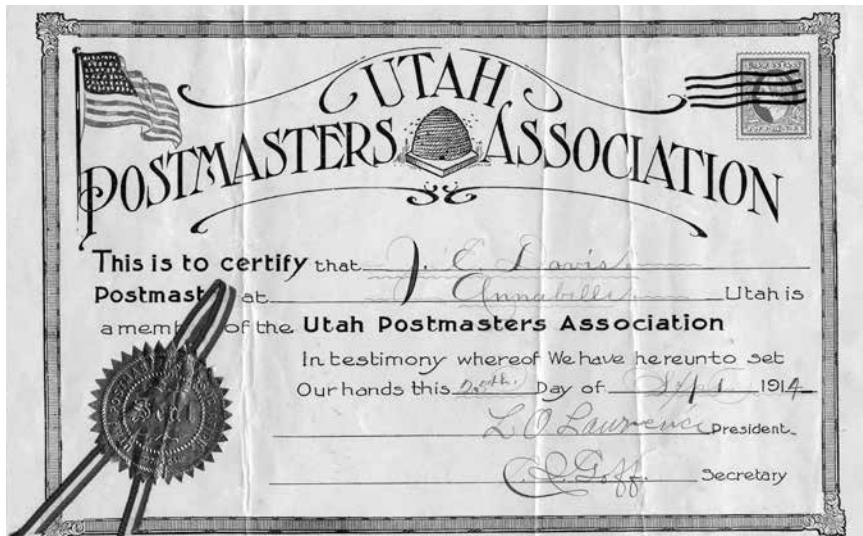
46. Harden, *Our Davis Beginnings*, 4–6.

47. When John was about seventy years old, he purchased a Model T Ford with kerosene headlamps to better deliver the mail. One evening, while returning to Annabella, he approached the narrow bridge over the Sevier River at the same time a farmer was driving some of his cows across. He "tried to stop the car, got excited and put his foot on the clutch pedal instead of on the brake. This gave the car more power and it hit one of the cows, knocking her down. The front wheels ran over her and the car balanced atop the cow, with the back wheels spinning in the air. The poor cow was frightened and made a lot of noise but was not injured." A few neighbors helped John lift the car off of the cow, and he drove home. In 1922, when he was in his late seventies, the Sevier River near Annabella flooded. The narrow river swelled to several





John E. Davis (William H. Norman) in front of the Annabella, Utah, post office. Courtesy of Robert L. Davis.



John E. Davis served as the postmaster in Annabella, Utah, for many decades. Courtesy of Robert L. Davis.

times its normal width. Some of the local “townspeople went down to the river to watch him cross over the flooded area.” He removed his shoes and socks and waded across the river so he could walk to the next town to deliver the mail. Harden, *Our Davis Beginnings*, 7.

Rosetta died in November 1932. Amazingly, throughout fifty-seven years of marriage, there is no indication that Rosetta knew anything about her husband's desertion from the army or his assumed identity. Three years later, family and friends planned a party for John's ninetieth birthday. The night before his birthday, John became ill and did not attend. He died at home, as John E. Davis, less than one month later.

### **Popularity of Assumed Identities**

Today it is difficult to understand how anyone could change their identity so easily and essentially begin life anew. The numerous paper and electronic records of the present age—birth certificates, social security numbers, drivers licenses, fingerprint records, credit cards, tax records, and a myriad of other documents—make it difficult to leave a former life entirely behind. To assume a new persona in the modern world generally requires assistance from the government or criminal enterprise, but that was not the case in the nineteenth century. All that was required was selecting a new name and changing one's locale, as William H. Norman did.

Assumed identities were commonplace during the Civil War. Boys too young to join the army often enlisted under an assumed name. Criminals, known as "bounty jumpers," would enlist, desert, change their name, and enlist again somewhere else—pocketing multiple recruitment bonuses along the way. There were even some instances of women assuming a masculine name and successfully enlisting in the military.<sup>48</sup> So common, in fact, was the practice of living under an assumed name that a popular ditty of the time asked:

Say, what was your name in the States?  
Was it Thompson or Johnson or Bates?  
Did you murder your wife and fly for your life?  
Say, what was your name in the States?<sup>49</sup>

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48. See, for example, DeAnne Blanton, "Women Soldiers of the Civil War," *Prologue Magazine* 25 (Spring 1993): 1, <http://www.archives.gov/publications/prologue/1993/spring/women-in-the-civil-war-1.html>; and Robert Widener, "The Boys War: Too Young to Die or Fight," *VFW Magazine*, September 2012, [http://digitaledition.qwinc.com/article/The\\_Boys\\_War%3A\\_Too\\_Young\\_To\\_Die\\_Or\\_Fight/1135329/120990/article.html](http://digitaledition.qwinc.com/article/The_Boys_War%3A_Too_Young_To_Die_Or_Fight/1135329/120990/article.html). Salt Lake City's *Deseret News* reported on September 21, 1864, that "the official records of the military authorities show that upward of one hundred and fifty female recruits have been discovered."

49. Louis A. Garavaglia and Charles G. Worman, *Firearms of the American West, 1802–1865* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1984), 221.

Living as a Civil War deserter in Utah Territory meant that John Davis could have been arrested and prosecuted at any time. The reality, though, was that John lived in a small town that was rarely visited by federal officials. Additionally, since he served as the local justice of the peace and therefore was an officer of the court, there would have been little cause for suspicion or investigation. Federal concerns in Utah during the decades following the Civil War focused more on anti-Mormon polygamy raids and prosecution than on bringing a relatively few Civil War deserters to justice. A monogamist and respected citizen, John would have attracted little attention from federal officials. As a result, he was able to live his life out of sight and out of trouble.

### **Discovering the Secret**

So, how was William H. Norman's secret finally discovered? His hidden past began to slowly reveal itself in 1948 when a family member, Vivian Davis, became interested in family history research. Her family was living in Macon, Georgia, at the time, and she wanted to find the homes where John E. Davis had lived prior to the Civil War and possibly, along the way, meet some distant relatives. She became confused, though, when numerous visits to county record offices revealed no members of John E. Davis's family living in Bibb County prior to the Civil War. Likewise, census records provided no Davis family information whatsoever. Further inquiries with local residents and newspaper ads requesting information about her family also yielded no results.

The first piece of the puzzle fell into place on November 11, 1964, during a visit Vivian made to the Utah Genealogical Society in Salt Lake City. While looking for information about another family line, Vivian found some old Annabella, Utah, church records. On one of the records, she found the following handwritten note: "To be baptized for in the Temple hereafter — James N. Davis and his wife Martha Jones, my father and mother, Borne Bibb county, Ga; also James S. Norman, Martha Dailey Norman . . ." The note had been written shortly after the turn of the century by John Eugene Davis, who was serving as the clerk for his church congregation. It struck Vivian as strange that two couples with the same first names had been included in the list, but she took no further action.<sup>50</sup>

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50. Robert L. Davis (grandson of John Eugene Davis), interview by Kenneth L. Alford, October 12, 2011. Records in possession of the Davis family.

*To be Baptized for in the Temple here for*  
*James N Davis & his Wife*  
*Martha Jones my Father &*  
*Mother's Bonned Aunt Coyle*  
  
*also for W Norman*  
*Martha Dally Norman*  
*also Thomas Ruth*  
*Nancy Ruth*  
*Henry Jones*  
*John Dally*  
*John A Nelson all the above*  
*did live in Georgia*

*This handwritten note on the back of an LDS church report helped unlock the fact that John E. Davis and William H. Norman were actually the same person. Courtesy of Robert L. Davis.*

During the years that followed, Vivian acted on her curiosity, and she was able to decipher the remainder of the mystery from numerous clues she found scattered in Mormon temple records, Georgia county records, U.S. census records, and Civil War military service records.<sup>51</sup> Though there is no single document showing when or where the suspected name change took place, there is enough circumstantial and documentary evidence to remove all reasonable doubt. Facts shared by John E. Davis about his early life meshed perfectly with the life of William H. Norman. All of the puzzle pieces fit neatly together, creating a story in which William H. Norman became John Eugene Davis near the time he deserted from the Union army in August 1865. In a conversation with the author, a direct descendent of Davis revealed that recent DNA testing has confirmed that descendants of John E. Davis are related to Norman families residing in Macon County, Georgia.

51. Harden, *Our Davis Beginnings*, 14–17. Subsequent comparisons between Confederate military records and Mormon temple records revealed another connection between William H. Norman and John E. Davis. Mormon temple records at Manti, Utah, reveal that in addition to the family and friends previously mentioned, John E. Davis also requested that vicarious temple work be completed for a George A. Smith. William H. Norman was enlisted in the Confederate Army by Captain George A. Smith, who was killed at Franklin, Tennessee, on November 30, 1864. Smith was a lieutenant colonel at the time of his battlefield death. See Hewett, *Roster of Confederate Soldiers*, 14:218.

## Summary

By the time John E. Davis arrived in Utah Territory, no one had any idea that he had once been William H. Norman, a galvanized Yankee. The realization that for over seventy years John Eugene Davis refused to share his secret with anyone—even his closest family members, friends, or clergy—may be surprising today, but what he did was neither unusual nor unique in 1865. He buried his past so completely that it was not discovered until many decades after his death through a combination of genealogical and historical research by his descendants.

The only written hint he left of his real identity was his request that vicarious temple work should be completed for his parents. Did he grudgingly include his parents' real names, uncertain that the ordinances would be legitimate if they were completed under false names, or was he trying to leave a clue of his original identity? We will probably never know.

In 1979, after the family's secret had finally been uncovered, Chloe Savage Davis, the wife of one of John Eugene Davis's grandsons, penned the following poem in his memory:

Behind that face with its ready smile  
Did memories linger of another while  
Memories that he could not share  
I wish I knew if they were always there  
...  
Maybe he talked to his flowers each day  
And that is why they bloomed in such a display  
...  
Did they help him hold his secret well  
Of the war and prison, that he could not tell  
...  
And there he stood with his long white beard  
Knowing that his flowers were all that heard  
His story of his younger days and life  
Of terror and misery and toil and strife<sup>52</sup>

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52. Chloe Savage Davis, "Memories of John Eugene Davis," unpublished, September 13, 1979. Copy in the author's possession.

