

# The Life of Colonel James H. Davidson

By

E. H. Davidson

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## Preface

By

Douglas A. Hedin  
Editor, MLHP

Sometime after Colonel Davidson's death in late 1925, his son Ernest prepared an episodic sketch of his father's life, probably for delivery at a memorial service. Here he recounted a few family legends about the Colonel's life, each selected to show an aspect of his remarkable character — his energy, bravery, self-discipline, fidelity to principle and honesty.

The Colonel was a man of action who played many roles well: Civil War officer, newspaper editor, admiralty lawyer, businessman, civic leader, temperance orator, political debater and real estate investor who once owned much of the St. Paul loop.

"The Life of Colonel James H. Davidson" is posted here in its entirety.

A profile of the Colonel appeared in *The History of St. Paul, Minn.*, edited by General Christopher Columbus Andrews, published in 1890. It amounts to a short mid-life autobiography, concentrating on his youth, service during the War of Rebellion and activities in the decades that followed. He was fifty-one when it was published. It is posted in Part 2.

The Colonel's death on December 1, 1925, at age eighty-six, was reported on the front page of the *St. Paul Pioneer Press* the next morning. It forms Part 3.

The Life  
of  
**Colonel James H. Davidson**  
  
  
By  
  
**E. H. Davidson**  
of St. Paul

The copy of Earnest Davidson's manuscript at the Minnesota Historical Society has this notation: "Copied from a typed copy by Colonel Davidson's son, E. H. Davidson of St. Paul, lent the Minnesota Historical Society in February, 1926. Copied by Evelyn Handyside, and collated with the curator of manuscripts."

## COLONEL JAMES H. DAVIDSON.

Colonel Davidson was for so many years a prominent figure in the business and political life of St. Paul, that tonight, while we are thinking about the days when the steamboat was the only method of transportation between St. Paul and the outside world, we can well afford to consider some of the episodes in the Colonel's life. At the height of his career he was so intimately connected with steam-boating on the Mississippi that it would be hard to consider the one without the other.

The life of Colonel Davidson simply demonstrates again what it is possible to do in America by a young man who has the spirit to fight his way from the bottom to the top.

Raised on an Ohio farm, with a full-blooded Irish mother and a father of English and Scotch ancestry, "Ham" Davidson, as he was then known, developed a fighting spirit quite worthy of his namesake, Alexander Hamilton. Fighting was far more prevalent in those days than it is now since it has become so profitable, and young Davidson became the champion of his neighborhood, until one night at singing school, like all champions, he met his match in a left-handed shoemaker, who gave him such an awful fight that thereafter he was satisfied to rest on past laurels. This incident is worthy of consideration because it shows the early development of a characteristic which to the day of his death, made Colonel Davidson an outstanding figure. During his entire lifetime he was always fighting in some cause or other and during the last twenty years of his life he was making a fight against tremendous odds, and always with a smiling face. The enemies of his old age were poverty and total blindness.

Davidson's early history was unusual. In some way he developed a reputation for wildness as a young man that resulted in his being sent to college because his parents found it impossible to handle him satisfactorily at home. He didn't have any bad habits, but he just seemed to be literally "full of the devil", due possibly to his remarkable vitality. During his entire life time, until blindness overcame him, he was blessed with the most remarkable health and vitality; this in spite of the fact that he broke all modern rules of health, according to health magazines. During the war it was quite customary for him to take his entire company out on a cross country run and run down every man in the

company. This must have been a terrific strain, and yet, after the civil war, aside from horse-back riding, he neglected his physical training — in fact at one time got to be very fleshy and overweight. In spite of this abuse, the doctor stated at his death that although the Colonel had been afflicted with hardening of the arteries for some years, that he had never seen such heart action and lungs in any man of his age.

Although the Colonel never drank liquor nor used tobacco in any form, yet in college he seemed to be drawn into a companionship with the wildest youth of his day. It is related that when young Davidson attended a Methodist revival meeting and finally came forward to the prayer rail, those in charge of the meeting were much worried because they supposed that Ham Davidson was coming forward to break up the meeting. He even went so far in his pranks as to simulate drunkenness and assumed a reputation which he never really earned. His religious conversion was complete and thorough, and in his many years of activity he was constantly working, and endeavoring to further the cause of religion — in fact his faith and trust in an All-wise Creator was the one thing that kept him sweet and lovable all through his terrible trial of blindness, when he was absolutely dependent upon others for everything.

Young Davidson early developed a remarkable willpower, which eventually overcame his wildness. At the outbreak of the Civil War he married a young woman of Puritan stock and training. They had not intended to marry so soon, but the outbreak of hostilities decided them to marry at once so that the young wife could follow her husband in his wanderings, and, if it became necessary, act as a nurse in time of need. During the courtship they were going some place in the evening in one of the old fashioned carriages, or hacks, of that day. The driver starting his horses suddenly, and before the young college student had entered, succeeded in throwing Davidson into the midst of an extensive mud-puddle. His fiance was so shocked at his profusion of profanity that she hurriedly alighted from the carriage and informed the young man that until he could comport himself as a gentleman should in her presence, their engagement was broken and he need never call again. The lesson was effective, for to the day of his death, profanity was unknown to him. Those who were close to him for the last fifty years of his life state that they never heard a profane word from the Colonel's lips.

The above experience is the more remarkable when considered in connection with the fact that the Colonel was court-martialed during the war for fighting his brother officers. Some of his messmates made the mistake of twitting the young Ohioan and insinuating that he was a weakling because he would not drink whisky. They soon found to their surprise and sorrow that while he would not drink liquor, he was perfectly willing to fight — hence the court-martial. He would undoubtedly have been discharged from the army as a result, but he was reinstated because of his excellence as an army officer.

Colonel Davidson's fearlessness was shown by an incident which happened while he was stationed near Cumberland Gap. Moonshiners in the mountains were selling liquor to the Union soldiers, resulting in insubordination and unusual lawlessness. In a raid, several of these mountaineers were captured. The commanding officer, not relishing the job of punishing them, arranged to leave camp for a day and made young Davidson officer of the day. At that particular time the river was filled with floating ice. The moonshiners were taken out upon the bridge, ropes fastened about their shoulders, and repeatedly ducked in the icy river, until they reached a point of exhaustion, when further punishment would have been fatal.

They were then released and a bayonet squad appointed to run them out into the brush, and warned that a repetition of their offense would be far more serious. It is needless to say that moonshining, temporarily at least, was broken up.

But it happened that one of the leaders was a noted gunman and had killed several men in mountain feuds. He had the reputation of being a dead shot with the rifle, and openly threatened that he would kill Davidson for his part in the humiliation which had been heaped upon him. Every so often he would ride his horse past Davidson's tent and later on return.

It happened that when Davidson was a small child he had a cross-eyed school teacher whom he used to mimic. One night, the parents having company at the farm house, they took the child out of his trundle bed in order that he might amuse the company by mimicking the school teacher. This he did so successfully that when he awoke in the morning his eyes were permanently crossed. This affliction grew less and less with age, until in about 1890 few people realized that the Colonel was

actually cross-eyed. But at the time of which we speak it was a serious impediment, particularly in the use of his chosen profession, as it was almost impossible for him to shoot.

However, his nerve was unshaken and he stood the strain of having the desperado threatening his life for some time, but he finally reached the point where he made up his mind where he would settle it one way or the other. He arranged to have his horse fully saddled and concealed behind his tent and when the mountaineer next rode by, Davidson mounted his horse and followed.

The two rode to a safe distance from the camp, when the young officer hailed the rifleman and rode up beside him. He informed the mountaineer that he understood that he had threatened to kill him on sight and suggested that they settle it there and then.

The mountaineer explained that he had been in the habit of making moonshine from his boyhood and considered it his right. He referred to the strenuous treatment that he had received in consequence and that he felt it was his duty to kill the man who had humiliated him. Davidson explained the necessity of maintaining order in the army, which was impossible if moonshining was permitted. In consequence, Davidson proposed that they either shoot it out there and then, or shake hands and part as friendly as possible.

The desperado, after thinking the matter over, decided that it would be better to shake hands, although if he had realized what Davidson's cross eyes meant, he would have known that he was perfectly safe. They shook hands and rode away from each other. Davidson afterwards stated that the following five minutes spent in riding straight away from a man-killer who had sworn to kill him on sight, were among the most interesting in his entire lifetime. The young officer was later placed in charge of a small but selected squad of fighters whose duty it was to go out under cover of darkness and gather in the many guerrillas who infested the border states and operated between the Confederate and Union lines, and in that service he had numerous stirring adventures, during all of which he showed the same indomitable will and fighting spirit.

When the war ended, the Colonel was offered a captaincy in the United States army, and although he found himself with a fine healthy young

wife and a little daughter, and with a very large and robust debt made through a bad investment, he refused a meal ticket with the army and at the age of 28 came to St. Paul, the last part of the journey by stagecoach, to start life's battle all over again. How he studied law and was finally admitted; how he worked up in newspaper work until he was one of the editors in the old "Pioneer", was told in the papers at the time of his death. He finally rose to be the general counsel for the St. Louis & St. Paul Packet Company, which controlled at one time all of the steam-boating on the river between St. Paul and St. Louis. This company was owned by Commodore William F. Davidson, who had associated with him his brother Captain P. S. Davidson who made his headquarters at La Crosse.

There is one incident in that connection that is worth mentioning. The bar privileges on the boats were sold to the highest bidders. When young Davidson became the attorney for the Packet Company, being a very strenuous temperance advocate he believed that the sale of liquor on the boats was a losing venture for the company. While it resulted in large apparent profits, law suits and the damage resulting from violence and the injury of passengers was an astonishing loss. At a meeting of the Board of Directors at St. Louis, the colonel went before the Board and advocated the abolition of liquor on the boats. His suggestion almost resulted in a riot. But Commodore Davidson in the mean time had "got religion", as they said in those days, and between the two of them they influenced the Board of Directors to try the experiment. It resulted so profitably for the Packet Company that the bar privilege thereafter ceased to exist.

The work for the Packet Company took Colonel Davidson before every court in the country — before all of the state courts bordering on the river, and quite frequently before all the federal courts, up to the Supreme Court.

From his college days the Colonel had been tremendously interested in elocution and public speaking and he worked at it as assiduously as any opera singer ever worked in the training of his voice. At one time he had memorized over two hundred separate pieces which he used night after night during the war in entertaining various groups of soldiers. When he came to St. Paul he used this ability as a speaker to entertain various audiences during the long winter months when St. Paul was shut off

from communication with the outside world. He became one of the leading temperance lecturers in the Middle West.

There is one side of the Colonel's life that must not be overlooked. When he was made colonel of infantry he was placed in charge of a colored regiment. To the day of his death he was an ardent friend and admirer of the colored race, and he had reason to be, for his elder brother was saved during the war by an old Southern slave. In the years of darkness, after his eyesight totally failed, his colored friends did probably more to make his life brighter and happier, than any others.

Aside from his wonderful fighting spirit, which adversity and even twelve years of total blindness could not overcome, Colonel Davidson was particularly noted for his absolute honesty. In 1889 he had risen to considerable prominence in the business world. The death of Commodore Davidson and the dividing up of their interests, together with other complications that came at that particular time, so seriously embarrassed Colonel Davidson that he made an assignment for the benefit of his creditors. Mr. Joseph Locke was appointed assignee. The Colonel's creditors got together and arranged to have Mr. Locke discharged and the property replaced in the Colonel's hands for sale. This was a rather unusual tribute to a man's integrity, and it is related that he paid his debts in full, but as a result was left without means and was never able to recover from the financial blow, yet to the last his spirit never waivered.

In politics the Colonel was a life-long Republican and made hundreds of speeches in the United States for his party. He only ran for office once, and that for mayor of St. Paul, and then with the endorsement of Organized Labor. In that particular election, the Republicans were casting about for a candidate in the local campaign and the committee approached the Colonel with the proposal that if he ran, he would have the undivided support of the Republicans. While he was considering the matter, the A. P. A., then quite active locally, approached him and offered their endorsement. This the Colonel indignantly refused. Labor then openly endorsed him, and for some reason, possibly because of his indignant refusal of the A. P. A., the Republican committee changed their minds and endorsed another candidate. The whole matter resulted in a bad three-cornered vote and the eventual election of the Democratic candidate.

In the year before his death, Colonel Davidson gave to the world information which he had held in secrecy since the death of Lincoln. It has always been a mystery as to what became of the body of John Wilkes Booth and there have been many and wide-spread rumors to the effect that Booth was not killed. The following is a quotation from the Chicago "Herald-Examiner" of Saturday, February 22, 1925:

"The burial place of Abraham Lincoln's assassin, sixty years a secret, was revealed to The Herald and Examiner yesterday by the only living man who knew.

Colonel James Hamilton Davidson, commander of the 112nd Infantry, was the eighth man. He was in charge at Portsmouth on the night of Booth's burial, and from that night on he kept the secret.

"I thought I ought to tell it — before I go", he said. It's part of the history of this nation and I don't think it ought to be a secret forever. You know I can't read the papers any more — for I've been blind for twelve years — but I hear what is in them, and I learned the other day about the death of Edwin Harper Sampson of Moline, who was one of the seven that disposed of Booth's body. So if anybody was to tell it, it would have to be me.

"Every schoolboy knows about the way Booth, the deluded actor, shot the President in the theater at Washington, how Booth escaped into Virginia, how he was surrounded at Bowling Green, how he refused to surrender, and how Sergeant Boston Corbett killed him with a bullet.

"That's all in the history books, but I don't have to have them read to me, because I was there. And just after the shooting of Booth, a report came to me about a group of men acting mysteriously in the middle of the night around one of the warehouses.

"I didn't have to wait long for my information. The head of the secret service in the army, Col. Baker, came to my office the very next morning and said he wanted to see me in strict privacy.

"This is what he said:

'Last night I brought into port the body of Booth, the man who killed the President. Six of my men carried it on a stretcher to the first warehouse to the north. We took it into the basement, where we dug a grave.

'The body was placed in their and covered with vitriolic acid. Then the grave was filled with limestone and dirt.

'I was not able to get in touch with you last night, but since this is your command I thought you ought to know. Every man of us is pledged to secrecy. Will you promise me never to say a word?'

"That was sixty years ago. There can't be any harm in telling it now. The country ought to know, don't you think?" □

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## 2. Biographical Sketch \*

DAVIDSON, COLONEL J. H. Colonel James Hamilton Davidson was born at Burlington, Lawrence county, O., January 25, 1839. His father, James Davidson, is a native of Pennsylvania, and is of Scotch-Irish ancestry on the paternal side, from his great-grandfather, who is supposed to have come to America in the early part of the eighteenth century. His grandfather's name was John, and his great-grandfather's William, which are common family names and a large connection of Davidsons scattered throughout the country, both north and south. James Davidson, father of the subject of this sketch, came to Lawrence county, O., with his father, John Davidson in 1801, then being a child but a few months old, and is still living in the old homestead. At that early date the country was almost an unbroken wilderness and could only be reached by flat-boats descending the Ohio River. James Davidson

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\* General C. C. Andrews, editor, *History of St. Paul, Minn.* (Pt. Two: Biographical) 29-31 (D. Mason & Co., 1890). His portrait on page 12 is from this book. A few long paragraphs have been divided.

married Mary Frances Combs who was born at Romney, West Virginia, and was of Irish descent.

James H. Davidson was reared to early manhood on a farm in his native county, spending the summers in farm work and in working in an old fashioned carding machine factory, and his winters in attending the district school, where he received a good common school education. In the fall of 1857 he entered the Ohio Wesleyan University, from which he graduated in the classical course in 1861. The rebellion had then broken out and on October 10, 1861, he crossed the Ohio flyer to Catlettsburg, Ky., and enlisted as a private soldier in the Union Army, Company B, Fourteenth Regiment of Kentucky Volunteer Infantry.

Having been lieutenant of a military company in college, and captain of the "Fayette Gray," a militia company, he already had considerable knowledge of tactics and military drill, and so was immediately placed in charge of the drill exercises of Company B, and on November 10th, (only a month after enlistment) he was promoted to the position of first lieutenant of the company. The ensuing fall and winter he served in the valley of the Big Sandy, in the mountains of Eastern Kentucky and West Virginia, and he participated in the battle of Middle Creek, Ky., where the late President Garfield whipped Humphrey Marshall, and won the stars of a brigadier-general, on January 10, 1863. In this engagement Lieutenant Davidson volunteered to lead his company (which he was then commanding) in assaulting the enemy, strongly posted on a high ridge across Middle Creek, under Lieutenant-Colonel Monroe of the Twenty-second Kentucky. The assault was eminently successful, and the colonel still has in his possession a Belgian rifle captured by him from a rebel and presented to him on the field of battle by General Garfield as a war trophy. His promotions were steady and rapid enough to demonstrate his soldierly qualities and ability. June 5, 1862, when but twenty-three years of age, at Cumberland Gap, he was promoted to the captaincy of his company. In 1863, during the summer, at the request of Brigadier-General Speed S. Fry, he was detailed by Adjutant-General Boyle of Kentucky, to drill the officers of new regiments then being organized at Camp Dick Robinson under General Fry. He remained on this duty till December 23, 1863, when he was elected and commissioned major of the Forty-ninth Regiment of Kentucky Volunteer Infantry. In 1864 he was detailed by General S. G. Burbridge, commanding the District of Kentucky, as assistant superintendent of the organization of colored troops in Kentucky, with headquarters at Lexington, Ky. About

this time the secretary of war, requiring the services of regular army officers with their respective commands in the field, dissolved an examining board which had been sitting in Lexington and organized a new board composed of volunteer officers, and by special order designated Colonel Davidson as president of such board. In December, 1864 he was commissioned by President Lincoln, colonel of the One Hundred Twenty-second United States Colored Troops. He continued to hold this rank and to command his regiment in the field from January 1, 1865, till his honorable discharge from service, January 17, 1866, at New Orleans, La.



The earlier years of his service were with the Army of the Ohio and the Army of the Cumberland, until the winter of 1864-5, when he was ordered to take his regiment to the Richmond front and report to the commander

of the Army of the James. After some time in the front of Richmond he was placed in command of the fortified lines around Norfolk and Portsmouth. In the early spring of 1865, under instructions of the war department, he built and organized the depot of Prisoners of War at Newport News, Va., and continued in command of that prison until after the fall of Richmond when he joined the Twenty-fifth Corps under General Godfrey Weitzel at City Point, and proceeded with that corps to Texas in July, 1865. At various times and for brief intervals he was on detached duty as judge advocate, president of examining boards, assistant superintendent of the organization of colored troops, and late in the service was detailed by General Sheridan as an assistant commissioner of the Freedmen's Bureau for Texas. He, however, did not actually enter on duty in the latter capacity as his regiment was consolidated and he mustered out of service in January, 1866.

After his discharge he returned to his old home in Southern Ohio, and spent the summer on the farm, but in September of that year he came to St. Paul with his family, and almost immediately entered the law office of Allis & Williams, as a law student. He was admitted to the bar in the spring of 1867, but did not immediately engage in the practice of law. He was offered and accepted the position of city editor on the *Press*, now *Pioneer Press*, and beheld this position until the spring of 1870. He discharged his editorial duties to the acceptance of his employers, and proved himself a sprightly and versatile writer, becoming well known to the newspaper fraternity of the State, for all of whom he still has the warmest fraternal feelings. He attained a reputation for clearness, force, and reliability as a journalist, which has served him well in his subsequent career.

In the spring of 1870 he retired from journalism to engage in the active practice of the law. For some years he conducted his practice alone, but later he formed a partnership with Henry L. Williams, under the firm name of Williams & Davidson, which was afterwards enlarged by the addition of a third partner under the name of Williams, Davidson & Goodenow, which continued till the close of 1882. During his professional career he was eminently successful and was for a time the general solicitor of the Northwestern Union Packet Company and later of the Keokuk Northern Line Packet Company and several other steamboat corporations. He also became the legal adviser and attorney of the late Commodore William F. Davidson and had charge of his extensive legal business.

During this time he became widely and favorably known as an admiralty lawyer, and was retained on the one side or the other of many of the most important maritime suits on the Mississippi River and its tributaries, and was admitted to practice in nearly all of the States bordering on the Mississippi River, and in the Supreme Court of the United States. He was frequently employed in legal controversies in St. Louis, New Orleans, Milwaukee, Chicago, Madison, Cincinnati and Washington and was unusually successful in the profession, excelling as an advocate.

In the meantime prosperity in his chosen profession had led him to a very general knowledge of real estate, and he invested all his earnings and his credit in real property. His interests in this direction had become so large that at the end of 1882 he determined to devote his whole time and energy to real estate business. About this time he purchased a large summer hotel and springs, (a summer resort) at Palmyra, Wisconsin, which he owned and managed until recently. In 1885 he organized "The Davidson Company," in connection with the late Commodore Davidson, who was interested with him up to the date of his death in 1887, after which time he continued in business on his individual account. He still owns a large amount of property in the city of St. Paul and its suburbs and elsewhere, and is active and aggressive in the development of all the material interests of the city.

He was very active in the organization of the St. Paul Real Estate Board, and was its first secretary. He is a prominent member and a director of the St. Paul Chamber of Commerce; president, director, and the largest stockholder in the Palmyra Manufacturing Company, a Chicago corporation. He is also a director in the St. Paul Bethel Association, and retains his early interest in the Young Men's Christian Association. His large interest in the Palmyra Manufacturing Company, which is developing a new and economical system in the use of steam known as the "Prosser System" compels him to spend considerable time at his office in Chicago and at the factory at Palmyra, Wisconsin. He is quite confident that Mr. Prosser has made some valuable discoveries and, inventions and has backed his judgment by investing largely in the patents and in furnishing capital for the development of the new system. He is also a member of the military order of the Loyal Legion and of the Grand Army of the Republic, and is a Royal Arch Mason. In politics he is a Republican, but in no sense a politician, though he usually takes some part as a campaign speaker in every presidential contest. It is said that he excels as an orator, but since his retirement from the profession of law

it is only on rare occasions that his forensic powers are called into active play.

Colonel Davidson was married at Delaware, O., July 1, 1861, to Miss Abbie Ashley Lamb, who is a native of Heath, Franklin county, Mass. They have but two children, Miss Daisie W. Davidson, their daughter who is traveling and studying in Europe—having spent last winter in Berlin—and their son, Ernest H., is attending the public schools of St. Paul.

Colonel Davidson, like many other young men, came to St. Paul absolutely penniless and had a hard struggle for a few years, but after a varied experience as journalist, lawyer, real estate agent, and general business man, has attained a competency and is now content to enjoy the accumulations of a quarter of a century of hard work and to take life reasonably easy. □



### 3. Obituary

#### ST. PAUL PIONEER PRESS

Wednesday

December 2, 1925

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#### JAMES DAVIDSON, ST. PAUL PIONEER, DIES IN CHICAGO

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Colonel of Civil War Regiment  
Was Romantic Figure in  
Winning the West.

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LOST HIS EYESIGHT  
IN STATE'S SERVICE

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Friends Here Praise Indomitable  
Spirit; Cite Accomplishments of  
Busy Life in Many Fields.

Wires from Chicago told Tuesday night of the passing of one more character who in life had held a leading part in that golden romance of Minnesota's pioneer youth, the Winning of the West.

Tuesday it was Colonel James Hamilton Davidson, for nearly 50 years a resident of St. Paul, who died, messages to relatives said, at his Chicago home, 4502 Lake Park avenue, after a short illness.

Briefly the news dispatches that followed cited the record of accomplishment that had been Colonel Davidson's harvest of a busy life. They could not tell the entire story. It would have taken a large book indeed, old associates of Colonel Davidson's in St. Paul, remarked Tuesday night, to recite the full measure of his achievements here in the days when the city, the state, the whole Northwest indeed, were in the process of their building.

For of few men in Minnesota's history was there so much to tell, old residents who new him best declared Tuesday night. Few men, they said, had done so much, none probably been active in so many varied lines of endeavor as were included in the list of Colonel Davidson's activities.

#### Success at All Undertakings.

Soldier, attorney, editor, orator, financier and builder, all these were occupations, they who knew him recalled Tuesday night, that Colonel Davidson had honored with success.

To attempt much and to achieve in all things tried, this was Colonel Davidson's record, it was said of him Tuesday night, that showed the indomitable character of the man and the type of man he was, the hardy pioneer stock that won the West, but there was still another test, they said, endured with patient fortitude in later life, that proved more truly still the spirit unconquerable he possessed.

For the last 14 years of his life, Colonel Davidson was blind, as affliction caused, physicians said, by overstraining his eyes while chairman of the Minnesota Waterways commission in 1911. Twice he endured surgical treatment, one eye being removed entirely and then, with knowledge that his blindness as incurable, he set about at the age of more than the allotted span of life for man, to carry on without his sight.

### Learns to Use Typewriter at 81.

Daily he worked at his office, attending heavy business affairs that would have oppressed an ordinary man. At 81 he learned, with vision gone, to use a typewriter that he might carry on with more facility his personal correspondence.

Colonel Davidson was born January 25, 1839, at Burlington, Ohio. He was of Scotch descent, but proud always that for centuries his family had been American, the first of the blood settling in the Colonies during the reign of Charles I of England.

His early education he received at the pioneer district school, later attending Ohio Wesleyan University at Delaware, Ohio. During his senior year at that institution the clouds of Civil war were already hovering over the United States. Colonel Davidson and his mates, eager to do their part if the call should come, formed a military company and hired a former West Point man to drill them in the manual of arms.

When Colonel Davidson graduated from the Ohio college in 1861, Fort Sumter had already been fired upon and President Lincoln had called the first contingent of Union troops. The first flush of martial fever was cooling, to be revived later by the Federal catastrophe at Bull Run. Also Davidson had married.

He had no intention of enlisting immediately, he used to tell friends, when one June day in 1861 he crossed the Ohio river to Catlettsburg, Ky., where he found a former classmate named L. T. Moore organizing a regiment of Kentucky volunteers. Moore was long on patriotism but short on knowledge of military technique. Davidson, thanks to the training of the West Point instructor, was versed in the rudiments of drill. He volunteered with the Kentucky regiment, was promoted almost as soon as the organization was mustered into service to first lieutenant and served with distinction throughout the Civil war, being promoted to captain, then to colonel of the One-Hundred and Twenty-second regiment (Negro) and placed in command of fortification about Norfolk and Portsmouth, Va.

### **Declined Permanent Commission.**

In 1866, declining to accept a permanent commission in the standing peace army, Colonel Davidson came to St. Paul. Upon his arrival here he studied law in the office of Allis and Williams and in the following year was admitted to the bar. Before he began practice, however, he was offered the position of city editor of the Pioneer Press by the late Frederick Driscoll, then owner of the paper printed at Bridge Square in what was later the Tivoli theater building, wrecked by the cyclone of 1904.

Colonel Davidson remained as editor four years, retiring then to begin the practice of law. From 1870 to 1896 Colonel Davidson was one of the prominent attorneys in St. Paul. He interested himself also in real estate investments.

During the boom years of the eighties he acquired valuable holdings in what is now the St. Paul loop district. Among them was a half interest in the Union block at Fourth and Cedar streets, where the Athletic club now stands, and all the Robert street frontage from the middle of the present Pioneer building site at Fourth and Robert streets to and including the corner of Robert and Fifth streets.

Always interested in politics, Colonel Davidson removed to Chicago in 1896 to stump the country for William, McKinley and the gold standard against the late William J. Bryan and free silver. Colonel Davidson was assigned by the late Mark Hanna to the state of Kentucky and in Ohio, where, during the campaign of 1896 he met in debate many of the Democratic leaders, including the late Champ Clark of Missouri, routing Clark in forensic battle at Lancaster, Ohio. Following the Republican victory which included the electoral vote of the state of Kentucky, Colonel Davidson was warmly complimented for his work by President McKinley.

### **Practiced Law in Chicago.**

For several years Colonel Davidson remained in Chicago practicing law and appearing upon lecture tours throughout the Central and Western states. He also became interested in international relations, visiting in Mexico at this period and becoming well acquainted personally with President Porforio Diaz as well as thoroughly conversant with the problems of the southern republic. In 1906 he returned to St. Paul,

remaining active, however, in national politics as well as local civic affairs, serving for a time as Minnesota Republican national committeeman.

Colonel Davidson was honored by Democrats as well as Republicans in Minnesota. It was during the administration of Governor John A. Johnson that Colonel Davidson was appointed chairman of the Minnesota Waterways commission. It was on account of the strenuous work with this body to enlighten the people of Minnesota upon the value of their undeveloped waterways that Colonel Davidson's sight failed.

Despite his affliction Colonel Davidson continued taking an active part in affairs, remaining almost daily at his office in the Pioneer building until his final removal in 1921 from his home as 466 Laurel avenue to Chicago where until his death he made his home with a daughter, Mrs. M. D. Chickering.

#### Member of Landmark Lodge.

Colonel Davidson was a member of the Masonic Blue Lodge and of the Ancient Land Mark lodge, being initiated into that organization in 1883. He also took an active part in the affairs of the Minnesota G. A. R.

His daughter, Mrs. Chickering, and his son, Earnest H. Davidson, 550 Summit avenue, managing director of the Citizens' Alliance of Ramsey and Dakota counties, survive. . . .

For many years, ever since he was stricken with blindness, Colonel Davidson had fearlessly contemplated the coming of death. In a letter written to members of the Loyal Legion upon the occasion of the celebration of Lincoln's birthday, which Colonel Davidson was unable to attend, he concluded his communication of regret that he could not be present with a message of farewell.

"In darkness and silence I have abundance of time for reflection and calm judgment," he wrote. "I desire to be fair and just to all men, living and dead. I may never be with you nor write you again in this life, but I want you to know that I am ready to accept my final discharge whenever it pleases the Supreme Commander to deliver it to me. And companions, I assure you I will be as much pleased to receive that discharge as all of us were to receive our honorable discharges at the close of the Civil war. Farewell comrades."

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The next day, the *Pioneer Press* carried the following editorial:

### Colonel Davidson.

People knew him as Colonel Davidson, as J. Ham Davidson, as James H. Davidson and J. H. Davidson and James Hamilton Davidson. At any rate it was highly likely that most people knew him. They knew him for a man of dynamic intellect and immense information. Some knew him also as a pleasing associate, and in his latter days as a venerable good fellow. But this combination, even with the additional attribute of vigor astonishing in one so old, constitutes a poor portrait without mention of his courage.

In youth he leaped to the test of courage afforded by the Civil war. Once, when Dolliver of Iowa could not appear, he was booked as "an unknown from Chicago" to oppose Champ Clark in political debate. And after this discouraging introduction to an audience unfamiliar to him, the result was described by the Ohio State Journal thus: "It is believed here that our friend Clark will never go against this Davidson buzzsaw again." Electricity defeated him when a mechanical invention for moving street cars by steam seemed on the threshold of success, and the reverse merely swung his efforts into other channels. But the truly remarkable demonstration of the quality of his courage came with blindness. This is a catastrophe for youth in the years of greatest adaptability, resource and undiminished stamina. But even at a time of declining strength and at an age when men peacefully accept the privilege of rest, Colonel Davidson rejected this as a catastrophe or as an invitation to repose. He regarded blindness as merely another obstacle to overcome, learned typewriting at 81, strove to attend to business as usual, and, if sight was indispensable to a task or a journey about town, retained others to do his seeing for him. There is good fortune simply in knowing so fine a fortitude.■

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