

## Book Review

### *Flight Into Oblivion*

A. J. Hanna

(1999) Baton Rouge: LSU Press



This book begins with a scene familiar to most Civil War readers: Jefferson Davis is in church in Richmond on April 2, 1865 when he receives a telegram from Robert E. Lee announcing that the Petersburg defenses were being withdrawn making it necessary to evacuate Richmond. Almost immediately Davis and his cabinet started to pack and load documents, the Confederate treasury, and other essentials so that the Confederate government could be transferred elsewhere, presumably Danville. Warehouses containing ammunition, war materiel, and other supplies were set afire and by evening large portions of Richmond were being consumed by out of control conflagrations as Davis and almost all his official party were entrained, headed toward Danville.

Typically this is the opening chapter to describe the retreat and pursuit to Appomattox with relatively little attention paid to the flight of Davis, his cabinet, and the rest of his inner circle. Furthermore history tends to treat the Confederate cabinet members as stick figures, almost as minor supporting characters without any particular strengths or other redeeming attributes. Other than acknowledging that Davis was eventually captured, usually disguised as a woman with a shawl covering his head and shoulders, scant attention is paid to other details about the rest of Davis' retreat or what might have happened to the rest of Davis' retinue.

Hanna's book, written in 1938 (the 1999 edition has an introduction by William C. Davis), corrects many of those oversights by detailing three separate and distinct phases. The first phase follows Davis and most of his retinue, together with baggage wagons and a cavalry escort, as they head south. Although they arrived in fairly good shape at Danville it soon became apparent that

pursuing Federals, mostly cavalry, made it too dangerous to stay very long, a pattern that would be repeated as they continued further south. Hanna is generally sympathetic to those in the retreat but he implies that by this point Davis is losing contact with reality.

Davis believed it was possible to continue to Texas where perhaps the struggle could continue. However it eventually became evident, at least to others with Davis, that the Federals controlled too much territory, were too persistent, and that Southern resistance was dissolving, to allow Davis to escape to Texas as he wanted. And so for various reasons, including ill health, some of the retinue began to depart leaving Davis to be captured at Irwinville, Georgia at dawn May 10, one month after Lee's surrender at Appomattox. At the time of his capture Davis was accompanied by less than a dozen men, including only one cabinet member, Postmaster General John H. Reagan. Breckinridge and Benjamin were on their way to the respective coasts of Florida while the group guarding the President's heavy baggage, private papers, and a considerable amount of the Confederacy's treasury was likewise on its way to Florida.

Much, but not all, of the remainder of Hanna's story relates to the respective escapes by Judah Benjamin, the Confederacy's former Secretary of State, and by John Breckinridge, former Federal Vice-President and candidate for President prior to serving as a Confederate general and late in the war as Confederate Secretary of War. These fugitives, each with a small group of guides and escorts, set upon separate paths from Georgia and toward the Florida waterways. Benjamin's group sailed down the eastern coast of Florida while Breckinridge's group traversed down the western seacoast. Both groups encountered almost unimaginable trials, deprivations, and pitfalls, not the least of which were the possibilities of being captured by roving Federal patrols, groups of pirates, deserters, and swarms of mosquitoes savage enough to almost kill oxen with their vicious bites.

Eventually both groups escaped to Cuba from whence they sailed to England where both Benjamin and Breckinridge are welcomed with open arms. Breckinridge eventually sailed to Canada and once amnesty is declared he returned to his native state of Kentucky where he resumed a practice of law until he died in 1875 at the age of 54.

Judah Benjamin enjoyed an even more remarkable post-bellum career in London where he initially supported himself by writing legal briefs before being granted dispensation to be allowed to practice before the London bar. He was extremely popular to become one of the highest paid lawyers of his day. When he

retired after 17 years of practice his colleagues gave him a “collective farewell” in the Inner Temple Hall. Benjamin died the following year (1884) in Paris.

One important basis for judging a book is to ask how much did the reader learn, and in the instance of *Flight Into Oblivion* the answer is plenty. And so while the story of the flight is compelling, the reader can also learn about a vast range of historical facts, including the characteristics of Florida before railroads from the north enhanced its population growth and development. More importantly we learn that the Richmond’s inner circle included men who were resourceful, audacious, and intelligent. Hanna also provides brief denouements of others who were part of the Confederacy’s leadership, some of whose antebellum activities are described in another article on this website. And of course we learn what happened to all that gold removed from Richmond.

All in all, a very worthwhile, enjoyable read about an overlooked part of our history.