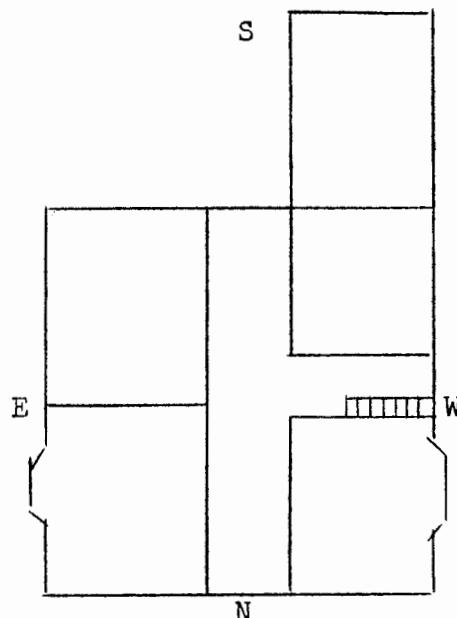


THE JOHN J. DAVIS HOUSE

John J. Davis built in 1874, "twelve years and six children after his marriage, the house for his family. He paid one thousand dollars for his lot, got out his ruler and drew the plans himself; a long hall down the middle; front and back parlor on one side; steep stairs jammed in between the library and the dining room; curved lines not necessary."¹

Mr. E. C. Reed, the contractor, sent Mr. Davis on February 15, 1874, the following estimate:

Lumber and carpenter work	\$3232.87
Foundation	360.00
1725 yd. plastering	690.00
Brick work	1850.00
Painting	300.00
Hardware and nails	125.00
Tin roof and downspouts	460.00
Glass, double strength, best quality	135.00
Excavation	30.00
Cut stone window sills	115.76
1376 lb (of) sashweights	68.80
Sash cord	9.00
3 cast iron chimney caps	10.00
9 fronts and grates	54.00
9 stone hearths	31.50
100 ft. stone pipe for cellar drain	18.00
	<u>\$7589.93</u> ²



"Some houses sit, but 303 Lee Street stood, in the midst of two acres, surrounded by noble trees and taller than they. Clarksburg lies in a cup of the West Virginia hills, but level sites can be found at the east and west ends of the town. Grandfather preferred to be a block from his office and the courthouse, and go straight up in the air."³

Mr. Reed wrote in a letter to Mr. Davis on February 15, 1874: "When you come to think about the size of this house, it is a whale. It will be an honor to any man to live in such a house." The stone foundation would be 42 ft. by 42 ft. and 20 in. thick with 18 in. thick stone foundation walls supporting the interior partitions. Mr. Reed remarked in the letter: "I was fooled in the slope of the ground until I put the level on and find it will take a front wall 5 ft. 10 in. above ground." Since the foundation wall was 9 ft. high in the front and 5 ft. 10 in. high in the back, several good-sized rooms made up "the cellar". Julia Davis, granddaughter of Mr. Davis, recalls the steepness of the ground: "A wall at the foot of the lot kept it from sliding into the street. There were steps at the gate, steps from one terrace to another on the front walk, thirteen steps between wide balustrades sweeping up to the porch."⁴ She remembers that "in order to make the house stand level on its tilted lot, (only) one side of the cellar had windows, and finished rooms with marble-painted cast-iron mantelpieces."⁵

Mr. Reed seemed concerned about the cost of the house: "After making up the estimate I was not satisfied and sat (sic) about to learn the cost of other houses in town: Mr. George Bastable told me the other day that his house cost \$6600; M. W. Smith's house cost \$4000; A. Smith's cost \$3500. So you see that a house of the kind and size is much cheaper than any one built here." Mr. Reed advised a contract with T. S. Spates for the 24 ft-high brick walls (14 ft. ceilings on the first floor) that would stand atop the foundation, for "Col. Spates is the only man I can find that will do it in the manner that you and I understand." And he wound up with the remark: "As George Carter said to Jim Bartlett, 'If you want the hog say so, Uncle Jim'".

Mr. Spates agreed to build walls 12 in. thick (except the partition walls "which are to be nine inches in thickness"⁶ for \$1554.19 (Julia Davis recalls the partition walls as "twelve inches of solid brick, a fact which made it impossible to install central heating later on"⁷). The house would have four interior chimneys with openings to fireplaces which would stand, one to a room, on the hallway side of each of the four rooms on the first and second floors and a kitchen chimney. In a letter dated February 28, 1874, Mr. Reed reported that he had found several ways to save on the costs. He told Mr. Davis: "I know you can have the keys for \$7000."⁸

The mansard roof equipped with dormer windows supplied a third floor to the house. "My dormer windows stared at the courthouse clock over the top of a tall pine tree, and the gutter, a foot wide, ran under them. I had floated paper boats after a rain, and that was the only use I had for it, but when Walter (a visiting cousin) climbed out of my window and stood on it, I climbed after him...Between the dormers the roof sloped dizzily and there was nothing to which I could cling. Fortunately, Grandfather had built the gutter as solidly as the rest of the house...Halfway around Walter climbed to the top of a dormer, then crawled up the slates to the flat square between the chimneys...The crown of the house could be reached from the inside by a ladder and two trap doors..."⁹ When asked about the height of the third floor ceilings, Virginia Davis Hood described them as "full-sized rooms".

Mrs. Hood has a childhood memory of the house, for she was a member of the "Jenny Wren" Club which met on the third floor in the first decade of the twentieth century, when three generations of the Davis family lived in the house, and Miss Emma K. Davis, daughter of John J. Davis, was responsible for the rearing of Julia Davis (Mrs. Charles Healy), the child of John W. Davis. Miss Emma sponsored the club for her niece and other little girls in the neighborhood. The group included Ruth Maxwell Johnson (Mrs. Louis A.). The friends of Julia Davis often entertained themselves sliding down the banisters of the staircase. Mrs. Hood remembers that while they did so, Julia would watch. Then when the fun was over she would say, "My Grandfather does not allow anyone to slide down the banisters."¹⁰ But Julia herself reported that she would forget the policeman role when her boy cousins were visitors and to gain status with them she would "slide down the banisters from the third floor to the first, shizzing around the curves."¹¹ Mrs. Hood recalls (9 ft.) windows that extended to the floor downstairs, double doors between the two parlors. She remembers that call bells with velvet-covered cords were against the walls of each room to be rung to summon servants. The dining room wall had the only door from the house to the kitchen. In the portion of the hallway that ran east and west stood, opposite the staircase, a grandfather clock built by Caleb Davis, an early Clarksburg resident. The Davises kept apples in the bottom of the clock so that the works would not dry out.¹²

"The parlors still seem beautiful in memory, with their rose-colored carpets patterned with medallions in deeper rose, their pale gray walls pannelled in darker gray, each paper panel apportioned to its space, their paper wainscoting, long white lace curtains, and carved Victorian parlor suites, of which some pieces were upholstered in gold and some in red damask. On the white mantels stood china figurines. By early 1900 gas logs had replaced the coal in these rooms and the branched gas chandelier with little figures on it, could be lighted or extinguished by a long apparatus kept behind the door. The hall and stairway wore a brussels carpet in an oriental pattern. Where the soft floors showed they had been painted black, and the windowless walls were covered with a dark paper above a dark dado of imitation leather. In winter it loomed like a tunnel, and even in summer when the double front doors stood open it was too dim and cool to attract flies. The halls were unheated upstairs and down, and shawls were advisable in making the swift passage through them."¹³

The kitchen described by Julia Davis as an afterthought "was tacked on the rear, and the back stairs jutted out by the dining-room door to catch the ankles of the unwary on the long run from coal range to table. These back stairs had been a problem to the amateur architect. It proved necessary to hitch them to the second floor by slicing a circular section out of Aunt Nan's room and installing some extra steps."¹⁴

Grandfather had set ideas: "A home needed no closets, 'holes in which women collect trash'...In each bedroom there stood a wardrobe large enough to play house in, but so constructed that a woman's dress could not hang at full length. One bathroom of uncertain performance was tucked in over the kitchen, where Grandfather could and did ignore it, preferring until his death (March 19, 1916) the tin hat tub which the 'outside man' placed in front of his fire and filled with hot water. He never gave up his coal fire...He also found it better for his eyes to read always by an oil lamp which Aunt Emma filled and trimmed for him."¹⁵ The telephone hung on the wall in the upper back hall: "When Grandfather submitted to the installation of this newfangled contrivance, he took care to place it in the most inaccessible part of the house, where it could not impinge on his life."¹⁶

Dogs, trees, and books were John J. Davis' joys. He accumulated noble breeds of dogs such as Great Danes, Saint Bernards, Newfoundlands, mastiffs. At one time there were thirteen of the monsters on the place. He liked to plant on a grand style: shrubs such as calycanthus bushes on either side of the front porch; magnolia, Japanese honeysuckle, arbor-vitae, rhododendron, bridal wreath, mock-orange near the house; trees--white birch, ginkgo, horse chestnut, poplar, maple, elm, and pine farther away.¹⁷ (Julia Davis does not mention a larch and an Empress tree both still standing in 1972.) He was generous with the use of his library. Anyone in the community was given access, but the visitor could not take the books from the room.¹⁸

The house was a monument to one man.¹⁹ John J. Davis felt that he had set up a permanent refuge for his descendants.²⁰ But "The great trees are fallen, and all the tongues are still that spoke there. The house itself, built to withstand time, has yielded to the rapacious hands of men. In the name of progress it has been razed and with its surroundings made into a parking lot (1958). With all of Grandfather's pessimism, his foreboding, his dire predictions as to the future of the nation and of the human race, he could not have foreseen or imagined anything like that."²¹

FOOTNOTES

- 1 Julia Davis. Legacy of Love. New York, Harcourt, Brace & World, 1961, p. 30.
- 2 John J. Davis Papers. West Virginia University Library.
- 3 Julia Davis, p. 30.
- 4 *ibid.* p. 30.
- 5 *ibid.* p. 89.
- 6 John J. Davis Papers.
- 7 Julia Davis, p. 31.
- 8 John J. Davis Papers.
- 9 Julia Davis, pp. 87-88.
- 10 Virginia Davis Hood, in an interview July 21, 1972.
- 11 Julia Davis, p. 87.
- 12 Hood interview.
- 13 Julia Davis Healy, in a letter August 16, 1972.
- 14 Julia Davis, p. 30.
- 15 *ibid.* p. 30, 31.
- 16 *ibid.* p. 93.
- 17 *ibid.* pp. 91-93.
- 18 Hood interview.
- 19 Julia Davis, p. 122.
- 20 *ibid.* p. 29.
- 21 *ibid.* p. 94.