

Fayette Court House Town's first doctor was 16 years old

Fayette's first town, Fayette Court House Town located on the hill at Five-Points, was only seven years old when Dr. Reuben Davis arrived to begin his practice on December 24, 1828. He was just one month shy of his 17th birthday.

Reuben was the youngest of twelve children of the Rev John Davis, a strict Baptist minister "of some standing". Rev. Davis, one of the earlier settlers of this country, came from England and settled first in Virginia. He later moved his family to Tennessee where Reuben was born. "I was a very feeble child and considered very inferior to my brothers and sisters," wrote Reuben.

In 1818, Rev. Davis purchased land in North Alabama from the government and they moved to the beautiful Russell's Valley (Russellville) when Reuben was 5 years old. The government had recently purchased the land from the Indians and many of them still roamed the dense forest.

When Reuben was twelve, his mother to whom he was passionately devoted died. For a long period of time, Reuben was despondent. After much hesitation and many misgivings Reuben's father decided that Reuben would be allowed to study medicine and he was sent to live with his sister in Hamilton, Mississippi and read medicine with her husband, Dr. George Higgason, a very respected physician. He was 14 years old.

Reuben said even at that age all his desires pointed to the law but "my father held stubbornly to his peculiar theories on that subject. It was very clear to him, he said, that lawyers were wholly given up to the devil even in this world and that it was impossible for any one of them ever to enter the kingdom of heaven." Two of Reuben's older brothers were lawyers in Virginia and Tennessee.

"My father also entertained strong doubts as to the final welfare of medical men in general, but admitted that some few might be saved provided they used their best endeavors not to kill patients, and resisted all temptations to prolong illnesses with a view to pecuniary profit," he wrote.

After two years of vigorous study and apprenticeship Reuben returned to Russellville to practice medicine. His first patients were young men of his own age who he said were either willing to risk their lives in the cause of friendship or were too ignorant of the deadly nature of treatment then in use to be aware of how great the risk really was. "Calomel and laudanum (painkillers), drastic purgatories (laxatives), bleeding and starvation was the rule and it is no wonder few survived to tell the tale."

In the fall of 1828 a pneumonia epidemic prevailed in Russellville. Two older physicians who had practices in Russellville dictated treatment to practitioners. Reuben was called to

treat the ailing son of a prominent man in town. Using the usual remedies, he was convinced the boy was growing worse and rapidly approaching the verge of death. Soon a servant and another son of the man were stricken. Rueben called in one of the senior doctors who told him the treatment was his own and to continue it. In two days the servant was dead. Rueben told the gentleman, "Mr. Harall, I have killed your servant and if you hope to save your boys you had better dismiss Dr. Gray and me at once." He promised to come back the next day as a friend and try a new treatment. He abandoned all the purgatives and bleeding and gave the boys Peruvian bark and whiskey. Both boys recovered.

Soon after that time, he decided to move to Fayette Court House with a life-long friend, B.W. Wilson, who was relocating to Fayette C.H. to begin a law practice. (Wilson had attended college in Knoxville, Tenn. He later married a girl from Tuscaloosa and spent a happy and prosperous life as a lawyer in Fayette Court House.)

Arriving in Fayette C.H. on Christmas Eve, they found a merry crowd. "The village streets were thronged, many of the country people having come to celebrate the holiday. I became acquainted with many of them and began my medical practice on Christmas Day. In a short time I had the good fortune to receive my full share of practice both in town and in the country. But the country was basically healthy and while my practice extended for miles, my income continued to be very small," he wrote.

However, that winter the town of less than 200 people experienced a pneumonia epidemic. Forty-nine people were stricken. Using his new remedy of Peruvian bark and whiskey he lost not one patient.

There was another young lawyer named Glover who had come from Tuscaloosa to settle at Fayette C. H. One Sunday in June Glover invited Reuben to go with him to visit his uncle, Joshua Halbert, who lived about 16 miles away (Newtonville). The Halbert family had recently moved from Tuscaloosa and were known to be refined and elegant people. The family was still in church when they arrived and the young men were standing by the gate when the family drove up. According to Reuben's memoirs there was a bevy of eight or nine young ladies in the family. He asked Glover who the girl was who wore the white frock and big Leghorn hat with roses on it. Glover replied that she was his eldest cousin. Reuben thought she was the most beautiful and fascinating woman he had ever seen and decided before he enter the house that she was to be his wife, if she would have him.

Although Reuben did not cut a dashing figure being a lanky 6'3" and weighing only 130 pounds, he and Mary Halbert married that fall. He was 18 and she was 16 years of age. They were married for 34 happy years before Mary died in 1865 but they never had children.

Reuben continued to get plenty of patients but little money. The desire to practice law continued to grow. He began reading law books studying thoroughly each segment before moving on to the next. He obtained a license to practice law from Judge Lipscomb of Fayette Court House . He decided to move back to Mississippi. After paying all his debts

he and Mary left Fayette C.H. in January of 1832 with three dollars in his pocket and no immediate prospects.

After arriving in Athens, Miss. He immediately began to acquire clients. He and Mary rented a room in the tavern until he could build them a one-room shanty. Reuben became known as a great orator and rarely lost a case. He practiced both criminal and civil law and later moved his practice to Aberdeen, Miss.

From the beginning, he represented his clients with a strong passion for the law and his successes were remarkable. At the age of 22, he was elected district attorney for the 6th Mississippi Judicial District. By the time he turned twenty-six, he had saved \$20,000 dollars from his earnings.

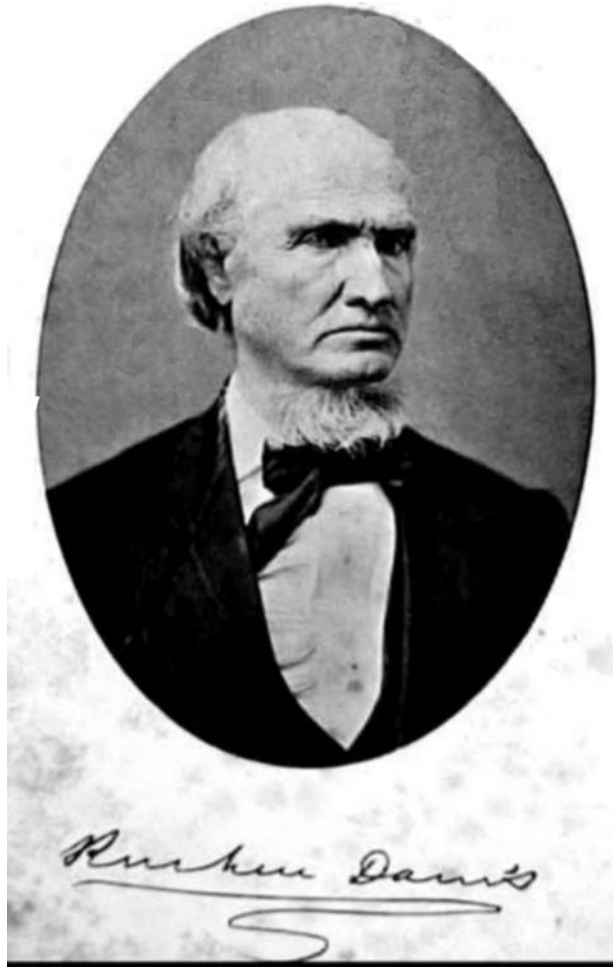
He ran for Congress on the Whig ticket in 1838 but was defeated. Then in 1842 he was appointed judge of the Mississippi high court of appeals, but resigned after four months on the bench.

When the Mexican war broke out, he was elected Colonel of the 2nd Mississippi volunteers. His organization reached the mouth of the Rio Grande on the day of one of the deadliest battles of the war but his troop saw no actual fighting and returned home that same year.

After serving a term as a member of the state legislature (1855-1857), he was elected to Congress as a Democrat and served two terms (1857-1861). He believed that the war between the North and South was inevitable and so strongly defended the Southern position that his opponents called him a fire-eater. He resigned from the Federal Congress in 1861 and became a major-general of Mississippi troops, commanding a brigade, before he was elected to the Congress of the Confederacy. He served in the Confederate legislative body until 1864 when he resigned because of his inability to work harmoniously with President Jefferson Davis. He ran for the governorship of Mississippi in 1863 but his criticism of the Confederate war policy resulted in his defeat by Gen. Charles Clark. He was again defeated for Congress in 1878 as a candidate for the Greenback party.

During most of the last quarter-century of his life, he devoted his energies to the practice of criminal law. He defended more than 200 clients accused of murder, not one who went to the gallows.

Shortly before his death, he completed his life memoirs in a 500-page book entitled "Recollections of Mississippi and Mississippians". He died in 1890 in Huntsville, Ala. while promoting his book. He is buried in the Odd Fellows Cemetery, Aberdeen, Mississippi and his magnificent home in Aberdeen has been restored.



Information for this article was taken from "Recollections of Mississippi and Mississippians" which can be read or downloaded from "Google".