



The Desk of Goldsmith Davis

*made from black walnut and now residing at the
American Wing of the Metropolitan Museum in
New York City*

An Oral History of the Desk

as told to Harriett and Jeanette Bedell, great-great-
granddaughters of Goldsmith Davis.

September 5, 1933

This desk was the property of our great, great-grandfather, Goldsmith Davis, who lived at Selden, *{Note: Goldsmith Davis actually lived in Coram, the Davis House}* Long Island. The following is the oral history of it told us by our mother, as told her by her father, and which she, and afterward, ourselves told every time we showed “the old desk” to friends and those interested in looking at it.

When Goldsmith Davis was a young lad out walking in the woods with his father one Sunday afternoon, they came across a black walnut sapling, which they pulled up and brought home and planted in the front door yard.

The next incident handed down to us of Goldsmith Davis is when he had, presumably, become a man of substance and possessed what British soldiers were out pillaging for in the Long Island countrysides, blankets, hams, silverware, etc. He got wind that these soldiers were in his locality, and hurried his family off to the woods, carrying what valuables they could, but before leaving, they hastily dropped certain articles into the barrels of geese feathers that were standing in the outer kitchen, and where they remained undiscovered. Old granddad must have been a man of courage, for he stayed to guard his home. When “the Britishers” came they overpowered him, took him to the garret, hung him to the rafters, bayoneted him, and left him for dead. When the soldiers had gone the family and his slaves stole back, cut him down from the rafters, and he lived for thirty years after. His bleeding wound left a pool of blood on the garret floor, which was long pointed out as showing the spot where he had been strung up to the rafters by the “Britishers”.

(Note, a more accepted version has the British soldiers or Tories hanging Davis upside down in the well trying to exact military information from him, after they left his wife ran and brought back some neighbors who released Davis).

Probably it was some considerable time after this that he had the black walnut tree cut down, and sent to the saw mill at Patchogue, Long Island, where it was sawed into boards or planks, but where these boards remained for three years, waiting to be sent by sloop to New York, as the Hessian sailors, hired by the British were marauding the seas. (The word “marauding” was always used by our mother in telling this, as it, of course, was used by her father, and we always make a point of saying marauding”, too). In New York it was made into this desk for Goldsmith Davis. His initials, and the year it was made, speak for themselves.

There are two secret drawers in the desk, the location of which only my sister and I know.

To briefly state the generations from Goldsmith Davis down to ourselves: one of his daughters married James Norton, son of Bryant Norton, whose Paul Revere lantern has descended to us. Hence we say, "The daughter of the desk married the son of the lantern". We also have the large silk neckerchief of Goldsmith Davis and the sheep skin bound hymn book of Charity Davis, with its handmade notes.

One of the children of James and "Charry" Norton was Bryant Goldsmith goldsmith davis-deskgoldsmith davis-deskNorton, who was the father of our mother, Mary Esther Norton all as recorded in the Bible of "B.G. Norton".

Our mother was the second wife of Stephen Bedell of Hempstead, Long Island. My sister and I are the only children she ever had, and are only grandchildren of Bryant Goldsmith Norton.

Next remembered in this oral tale, the desk was at Commack, Long Island, in the home of one of the daughters of Goldsmith Davis, Sophira, who married Charles Floyd, once Senator and Surrogate of Suffolk County. Our mother spent part of her childhood with them, and remembered seeing the "will drawers", as "Uncle Floyd" called them, stuffed full of wills drawn by him. These drawers being the two tall, narrow ones, with corrugated fronts, on either aide of the center pigeon hole.

At that time only the lower part of the desk was used by "Judge Floyd", and stood in the large center hail of his house. The upper part was in their garret, and was appropriated by our mother as her doll's play house. She also entertained herself by playing at being a soldier in wearing the army coat, with its epaulettes, etc., of Uncle Floyd, (War of 1812) and delighted in the clanking of his sword on the attic floor as she paraded about.

In the vicinity of those years one of the guests entertained by Uncle Floyd was Daniel Webster, when he was "stumping the Island". No doubt, we always remark in a lowered voice, as a sly guess, perhaps, after partaking of the Judges wines, which he always had on his sideboard, some of the old ink spots on the writing slab of the desk were Daniel Webster's!

Our mother's recollection was that two other prominent personages also wrote at this desk: Dr. Muhlenberg who was a great friend of Uncle Floyds, and General Sickles who sought the hand in marriage of Sarah Floyd, his daughter, a tall, dashing brunette. Her parents would not give their consent, however.

Among the books that came to us from the home of Uncle Floyd was the "Vicar of Wakefield" and in the pigeon holes of the desk, was the old colored print of the family of the Vicar, which leads us to imagine that Goldsmith Davis might have been of the same family as Oliver Goldsmith.

Written September 5th, 1933 by Harriet A. Bedell – I am the other sister mentioned, Jeanette Norton Bedell.

May 16, 1934. This desk at our death to go to the American Wing, Metropolitan Museum, New York City

Signed, Harriet A. Bedell

Jeanette N. Bedell

Source: Longwood's Journey (www.longwood.k12.ny.us/history)