

## NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

*Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions*

*By Ned Hémard*

### **Wedded Bliss**

This tale of romance is one connected with the daughter of Louisiana's only U.S. President. While it's true that Zachary Taylor (November 24, 1784 – July 9, 1850), the nation's 12th president, was born in Virginia and spent his formative years in Kentucky, he was a resident of Louisiana when he received the nomination and later won the election. Known to his men as "Old Rough and Ready," Taylor was a career officer in the U.S. Army, rising to the rank of major general. As such, he became a national hero after his victories in the Mexican War, which paved the way for him to become the only U.S. president-elect to leave from his Louisiana residence *en route* to the White House. He had first been assigned to Baton Rouge for military duty in the 1820s and later lived and owned plantations in Louisiana. Naturally, the state claims him as its own.

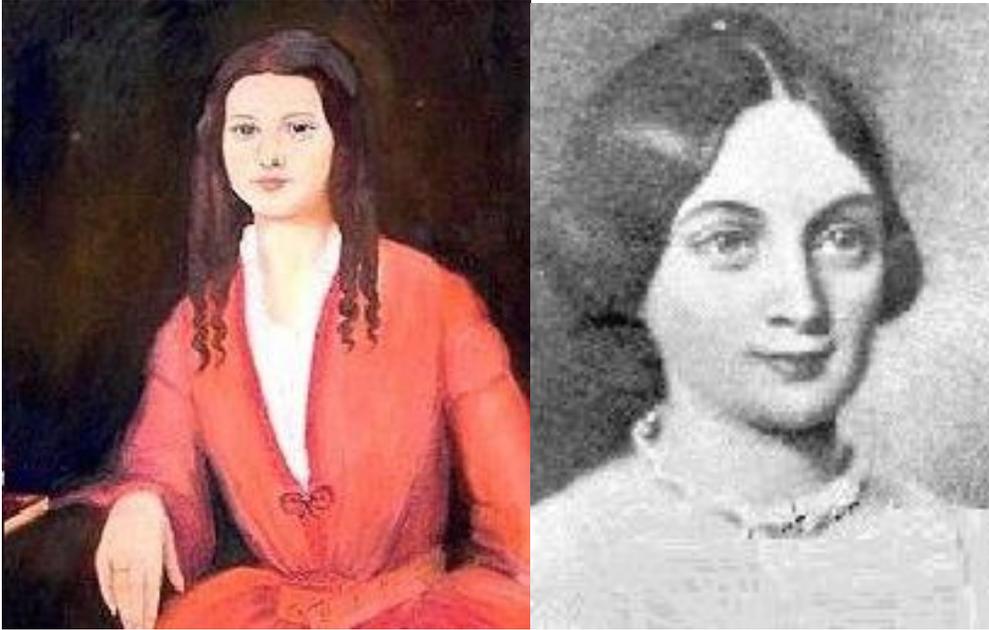
In June 1810, Taylor married Margaret Mackall "Peggy" Smith, with whom he had six children, of which two daughters, Octavia and Margaret, died very young.

As for the rest of the children, Ann Mackall Taylor (1811–1875), married Robert C. Wood, a U.S. Army surgeon.

Sarah Knox Taylor (1814–1835), known as "Knoxie", married then-Lieutenant and future President of the Confederacy Jefferson Davis in 1835. Taylor objected at first to his daughter marrying Davis, perhaps because he did not want her to have the difficult life of a soldier's wife. Tragically, she and her husband contracted malaria upon reaching Louisiana, but it was she who died of the disease only three months after their wedding. Today "Knoxie" remains the only daughter of one American President married to another (although Jefferson Davis was President of the Confederate States of America). Presidential daughter Julie Nixon married David Eisenhower, but he was Ike's grandson, for whom President Eisenhower named the presidential mountain retreat Camp David (previously named Shangri-La by FDR).

On February 26, 1845, in Natchez, Mississippi, Davis married Varina Howell, his second wife and future First Lady of the Confederacy.

Later that same year, and almost ten years after his marriage to "Knoxie", a chance encounter aboard a Mississippi riverboat enabled Davis to repair the rift with General Taylor, a reconciliation that paved the way for his service in the Mexican War as Colonel under Taylor's command. Both men later became U.S. Presidents. Taylor, whose top priority was preserving the Union, died only sixteen months into his term. Jefferson Finis Davis (1808–1889), the 23rd U.S. Secretary of War, was chosen President of the Confederacy after the Southern States broke off from the Union. He died in New Orleans December 6, 1889.



*Sarah Knox "Knoxie" Taylor and her sister, Betty*

As for Zachary Taylor's sobriquet "Old Rough and Ready", Varina Howell Davis wrote that it was not because her husband's first father-in-law was "rough in mind or manner" but that he was "always ready in every emergency and took the rough end of every encounter." Some historians have suggested that his courage (and as historian T. Harry Williams has said, "not giving way to panic") were the "ready" assets that made up for his "rough" understanding of formal military strategy.

Zachary and "Peggy" Taylor's only son, Richard Scott "Dick" Taylor (1826–1879), married Louise Marie Myrthé Bringier in 1851. A successful Confederate General, it is for this "General Taylor" that an Uptown New Orleans street is named.

But this "Blissful" love story concerns Zachary and "Peggy" Taylor's youngest surviving daughter, Elizabeth "Betty" Taylor (1824-1909), who, while still very young, was being courted by two suitors. One was her father's aide-de-camp, Colonel William Wallace Smith Bliss. The other was a young man named Frederick Wise.

Mr. Wise, well-aware of the competition from Colonel Bliss, became pro-active by telling Betty that she should not marry "that ignorant soldier who was a nobody," and marry Wise instead - the "wise" choice.

It must be noted that Bliss was a gifted mathematician and, far from being an "ignorant soldier," was fluent in at least thirteen languages.

Betty's answer to Frederick Wise was clever, memorable and apropos. She drew the words to her reply from the well-known poem by English poet Thomas Gray:

***"Where ignorance is Bliss, t'is folly to be Wise."***

She refused Wise's advances, dumped him as a suitor and married Bliss instead. The ceremony took place December 1848, in Baton Rouge, Louisiana.



*Colonel William Wallace Smith Bliss*

Born in Whitehall, New York, August 17, 1815, William Bliss graduated from the U.S. Military Academy at West Point and served briefly in the infantry in various skirmishes in the years 1833 to 1834. He taught math at West Point until 1840, participated in the United States military occupation of the Republic of Texas and, in the years 1846 through 1847, took part in the Mexican War. Brevetted to Major in May 1846, and to Lieutenant Colonel in February 1847 for gallant and

meritorious service, it is understandable that this heroic and talented officer would become the namesake of Fort Bliss in Texas. On March 8, 1854, the Post of El Paso, Texas, was renamed in honor of this gifted officer. With headquarters in El Paso and an area of about 1,700 square miles in the U.S. states of Texas and New Mexico, Fort Bliss is today the U.S. Army's second-largest military installation behind the adjacent White Sands Missile Range.



Bliss, who served as Chief of Staff to his future father-in-law during his entire service in Texas and Mexico, was renowned for his skills and efficiency as a high-level aide. He had a cheerful personality, and his writing style was simple and elegant.

Colonel Bliss received a Master of Arts degree from Dartmouth College in 1848, the same year as Zachary Taylor's election as President. He and Betty, in addition to being newlyweds, each had new jobs in the nation's capital: Colonel Bliss as private secretary to the President and, since her mother declined the role of presiding over any social events, Elizabeth Taylor Bliss – addressed as "Miss Betty" – as the "official hostess" First Lady for her father in connection with all public functions in the White House. Natural and personable, she was the public face of the Taylor Administration. She even had a popular dance song composed in her honor.

After Zachary Taylor's unexpected death in 1850, Bliss became Adjutant General of the Western Division of the Army, headquartered in New Orleans. He and his wife Betty accompanied her widowed mother to Pascagoula, Mississippi, where Mrs. Taylor died two years later.

## Died:

At East Pascagoula, Miss., on the 14th inst., Mrs. MARGARET TAYLOR, relict of Gen. Zachary Taylor, late President of the United States.

The funeral will take place from No. 169 Royal street, the residence of her son-in-law, Col. Bliss, at 11 o'clock, This Morning. The friends of the family are respectfully invited to attend, without further notice.

*Mrs. Zachary Taylor's funeral, announced in the Picayune, August 17, 1852, to be held at the 169 Royal Street residence of Colonel Bliss*

A year after Mrs. Taylor's death, and only five years after Betty's marriage, Colonel Bliss died in Pascagoula, too, August 5, 1853, after having contracted yellow fever while in New Orleans. He was only 37 years old, and Betty became a widow at the young age of 29. The body of Colonel Bliss was laid to rest in New Orleans at the Girod Street Cemetery.

In 1955, the decaying Girod Cemetery was condemned in order to make way for new construction in the area. A headline appearing in the *Times-Picayune* dated November 11, 1955, announced "COL. BLISS' BODY GOING TO TEXAS - Hero's Remains Exhumed at Girod Cemetery. The paper reported, "The remains of one of America's great war heroes which have lain for 102 years in the Girod st. cemetery here were being readied for a journey to a new resting place," along with "a 20-foot, 25 ton monument at the head of his grave," which was dismantled in New Orleans November 9, 1955. New Orleans military personnel did the actual dismantling work with the assistance of civilian experts.

**COL. BLISS' BODY  
GOING TO TEXAS**

**Hero's Remains Exhumed  
at Girod Cemetery**

*Times-Picayune headline, November 11, 1955*

The Baton Rouge *State-Times* revealed in an article dated November 12, 1955, that Bliss' Italian marble monument was "an elaborate one surrounded by a Greek pillar", which noted that Colonel Bliss was "a finished scholar, an accomplished gentleman and a gallant soldier." In 1953, "soldiers at Fort Bliss, Tex., now an anti-aircraft, artillery and guided missile center, began a campaign to have the body of Bliss reburied in the national cemetery there," the Fort Bliss National Cemetery, with the monument "reproduced in a prominent place on the post in El Paso," all of which was done with all appropriate honor and fanfare. The monument, in its new home, became the centerpiece of LTC William W. S. Bliss Parade Field, near Hinman Hall in Fort Bliss.





*Bliss Monument (left) and reverse side of Bliss gravestone (right)*

On February 11, 1858, Betty married a second time, to Philip Pendleton Dandridge, whose first wife was Caroline Fitzhugh, daughter of Governor Charles Goldsborough of Maryland. The last surviving child of President Zachary Taylor, "Miss Betty" died at Winchester, Virginia, July 25, 1909, at the age of 85. It was an eventful life, and, for at least a short period, a time of Bliss.

## **NED HÉMARD**

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