

Biographical Sketches

Reed Davis (1814–1900) and Helen Wilson (1816–1889)

Reed Davis was born on 17 December 1814 in Arkwright, a newly settled frontier community in western New York. He was the son of Samuel Davis, whose 1805 migration from Princeton, Massachusetts, marked a decisive break from nearly two centuries of Davis family residence in the Boston area—a lineage tracing back to their seventeenth-century immigrant ancestor, Dolor Davis.

Reed grew up in a pioneer setting that nevertheless placed value on education. By his childhood years, Arkwright had established a school, and Reed and his brother, Reuben, became known as prolific letter writers—evidence of either formal schooling or substantial instruction at home. Reed was one of six children, comprising three brothers and two sisters. Two of his siblings, Betsie and Reuben, remained in Arkwright, while the others migrated west, likely settling near Peoria, Illinois, continuing the family's gradual movement toward the interior of the continent.

Migration to Illinois and Early Settlement

By June 1839, Reed Davis joined the continuing westward movement of young men seeking opportunity on the frontier and migrated to St. Charles. Kane County had only recently been opened to settlement following the Black Hawk War of 1832. At the time, the land was unsurveyed frontier—rich with promise, yet marked by risk, uncertainty, and physical hardship for settlers like Reed.

Reed's journey from western New York to northern Illinois would have taken weeks. He likely traveled by a combination of overland roads, canals such as the Erie Canal, and lake or river transport before completing the journey on foot or by wagon. Upon arrival, he encountered a landscape markedly different from the wooded regions of New England and New York. The Illinois prairie stretched outward in rolling grasslands, largely treeless and exposed to wind and weather, broken only by rivers and scattered groves along waterways. It was a landscape that demanded adaptation and endurance.

Because federal land had not yet been offered for sale, Reed could not immediately purchase property. Instead, he claimed a tract of land and began the required process of improvement. To secure future ownership, he had to demonstrate actual residence, building shelter, breaking prairie sod, and making the soil productive.

The work was grueling. Prairie sod was dense and resistant, often requiring repeated passes with a breaking plow. Timber for construction was scarce and had to be hauled from nearby creeks or rivers. Reed constructed a house by December 1839 and moved into it by February 1840, enduring his first Illinois winter on the open prairie. These early months were marked by isolation, physical exhaustion, and reliance on neighboring settlers for mutual aid.

Reed's claim lay adjacent to land later patented by Walter Wilson, a Scottish immigrant who arrived in the area around 1836. In an otherwise sparsely populated region, the proximity of the two families

likely offered both practical support and social connection, fostering relationships that extended beyond mere neighborliness. This closeness soon shaped the course of Reed's personal life as well as his settlement experience.

Marriage and Family Life

On 13 February 1840, Reed married Hellen (Helen) Wilson, daughter of Walter Wilson. Their first child, John Wilson Davis, was born just two months later. The choice of name reflects the close relationship between Reed and his wife's family; John Wilson frequently appears as a witness in Reed's legal documents.

Between 1842 and 1849, Reed and Helen welcomed additional children, including George Henry and Robert Conklin Davis. A daughter, Janet, died in early childhood, a reminder of the persistent fragility of life on the frontier. During these years, Reed also sold portions of his land, transferring acreage to family members and neighbors as his holdings evolved in response to changing family needs.

Land Ownership and Economic Challenges

Because Reed had claimed, improved, and occupied his St. Charles land, he qualified to purchase it from the federal government. He applied for a land patent on 3 June 1842 and received it on 10 July 1844. The patent covered 100.40 acres, purchased for \$135.50, at a rate of \$1.25 per acre.

Despite early progress, farming alone proved insufficient to support a growing family. By 1850, Reed mortgaged his land and left for California during the Gold Rush, leaving Helen to manage the household and their four young sons. Although details of his journey are sparse, Reed returned in 1851, paid off the mortgage, and in late 1852 sold his St. Charles property for \$912. That same year, the family purchased 160 acres in Burlington for \$1,100, marking another phase in their continuing journey.

Life in Burlington

Reed and his family devoted themselves to farming their Burlington property. In 1855, their son Reed Otto Davis was born. By 1860, census records show that Reed had 120 acres of improved land, with the farm valued at \$4,000, including livestock. The population census recorded a personal estate of \$1,200 and real estate valued at \$1,800, suggesting a period of increasing stability following earlier financial strain.

Civil War Years

Just as Reed's efforts in Burlington began to yield a measure of security, the Civil War intervened, disrupting family life and introducing prolonged uncertainty. On 15 September 1861, Reed and Helen's eldest son, John Wilson Davis, enlisted in Company B of the 36th Illinois Infantry. He was wounded in battle and spent several months recovering before he could come home.

While John was away—first in active service and later recovering from his wounds—the household faced mounting challenges. In November 1862, Helen gave birth to their son, Albert Siegel (our ancestor), adding the care of a newborn to an already demanding situation. Only weeks later, in

December, thirteen-year-old Robert Conklin died of diphtheria. Three months after that, fifteen-year-old Charles Walter died on 24 March 1863. These losses occurred in close succession and during a period when Reed and Helen were already managing wartime uncertainty.

John returned home in May 1863, wounded but alive. For a time, the family regained a tentative equilibrium. Reed and Helen worked the farm together, aided by George, and John who likely contributed as his strength gradually returned. Helen still had three young sons to care for—William, Reed Otto, and Albert—and daily life may once again have seemed more predictable.

That stability proved temporary. In the autumn of 1864, Reed volunteered for Union service, reportedly to help meet local enlistment quotas and possibly to spare George from service. Official records list his enlistment date as 14 October 1864, when he was forty-nine years old. Reed served with the 8th Illinois Cavalry Volunteer Regiment. His departure once again left Helen responsible for the household, farm operations, and the care of their children.

Family letters reveal Reed's persistent concern for his family and his longing for home. His service also took a physical toll. On 22 June 1865, he was discharged from a hospital in Virginia due to exposure and rheumatism. By the time Reed returned to Burlington, the war had left its mark on both husband and wife—not only through separation and illness, but through years of cumulative loss and responsibility borne at home.

Later Years and Community Life

Following the war, Reed resumed farming in Burlington. The 1870 census lists him as both a farmer and Justice of the Peace, with a personal estate valued at \$1,600 and real estate valued at \$6,025. By 1880, Reed continued to farm while living with Helen and three of their adult sons, remaining active in both family and community affairs and reflecting the civic roles often assumed by long-settled pioneers.

In these later years, the long journey that had brought Reed from a New York frontier to the Illinois prairie had finally resolved into permanence. The movement and uncertainty that had defined earlier generations gave way to rootedness—land worked, family established, and civic responsibility assumed. What had once been frontier had become home, marking the end point of a lifetime shaped by hard work and family.

Death and Legacy

Helen died on 24 August 1889 in Burlington, Kane County, Illinois, at the farm where she had spent the past thirty-five years. Reed Davis died five months later, on 3 February 1900. Both Reed and Helen lived into their eighties and were buried together at Baker Cemetery in Burlington.