COLLECTION SUMMARY

Creator:
Davis, Benjamin Franklin, 1878-1943

Inclusive Dates:
1898-1914

Scope & Content:

Family correspondence, stamped postal envelopes, newspaper clippings, poems, and a postcard comprise this small collection. Margaret Anita Jennings Davis of Wartrace, Bedford County, wrote most (27) of the letters to her son Benjamin Franklin “Frank” Davis between 1898 and 1899 while he was serving in the First Tennessee Infantry Regiment, U.S.V.

The nature of the correspondence is largely homespun. News of local affairs, garden crops, family illnesses, community deaths, taxes, and weather dots the correspondence. Mrs. Davis reported on area residents price-gouging soldiers by overcharging them for watermelons and pies. She offered motherly guidance including home remedies and directives to be a good boy and pray often. Margaret also warned her son about the evil of gambling. “There are hard-hearted men who will tempt you to play a betting game with them & if they win would kill you if you did not pay” (f. 25).

President McKinley’s secretary replied to Mrs. Davis on November 3, 1898, acknowledging her request that Frank be honorably discharged—even if he had already shipped out for the Philippines (f. 31). Frank’s sister Dora also wrote, enclosing her last letter in a patriotic cover (f. 4). A mimeograph notice to Frank B. Davis regards $20,000 allotted as extra pay to the First, Second, and Third Tennessee Infantry Regiments. Frank’s portion was $12.50.
The family frequently requested souvenirs such as military buttons, sand, sea shells, and even flying fish wings. Dora told Frank, “Don’t go and give your buttons away to those San Francisco girls…. I wush [sic] I was a boy, I’d go to Manilla [sic] or bust.” She then went on to lecture Frank on his spelling—lest a girl think he was uneducated (f. 3).

_Nashville Banner_ clippings accompany several of Mrs. Davis’s letters. The articles report on the First Tennessee’s rail journey from Nashville westward and on various aspects of regimental life at Camp Merritt (San Francisco); Camp Merriam, Presidio (San Francisco); and Manila, Philippine Islands, during the Spanish-American War and Philippine-American War (then called the Philippine Insurrection). Lieutenant Winston Pilcher wrote most of the dispatches. Dora noted that the reporter-officer “fixes up his letters so cute” (f. 3).

The newspaper articles describe Westerners’ wild enthusiasm for the war. Crowds at St. Louis, Pueblo, and Salt Lake City welcomed the regiment with applause and treats such as hot coffee and box lunches. At Colorado Springs a multitude greeted the men with sandwiches and fruit. There, according to a _Banner_ report titled “On Toward the Golden Shore,” as the train pulled into the depot, “a handsome lady rushed up and commenced shaking hands with the soldiers. It was Mrs. Margaret Davis Hayes, the eldest daughter of Jefferson Davis” (f. 7).

The poetry appears to be original to Margaret Davis, who fancied herself a poet. On July 4, 1898, she was inspired to write a few lines of verse in celebration of Frank’s twentieth birthday (f. 9). Another work welcomes the regiment back to Nashville, and one is titled “Prejudice” (f. 36).

The letters and clippings are valuable to scholars and students investigating period home front culture, wartime newspaper reporting, jingoism, and military camp life. Researchers studying regional language and colloquial speech also might find value in these papers. Idiomatic words and phrases such as calaboose (jail); jollificat (fête); common truck (garden vegetables); doing something “up brown” (to great effect); “round-about here” (in the vicinity); and “like such” (similar to) appear frequently. Racial epithets occur in a few letters.

**Physical Description/Extent:**
.25 cubic feet

**Accession/Record Group Number:**
2008-059

**Language:**
English
Administrative/Biographical History

Benjamin Franklin Davis, Jr., was born in Wartrace, Tennessee, on July 4, 1878. His parents were prominent local merchant Benjamin “Ben” Franklin Davis (1846-1881) and Margaret Anita Jennings Davis (1843-1921). The younger Davis, their only son, was called Frank to distinguish him from his father Ben. When Ben died at age 35, Margaret was not only grief-stricken, she was left alone to raise three young children.

Frank was educated at the Brandon Training School in Wartrace and at Draughon’s School of Business in Nashville. When war broke out with Spain in 1898, Frank Davis enlisted as a private in the First Tennessee Infantry Regiment and was assigned to Company G.

The regiment departed Camp Bob Taylor (Centennial Park), Nashville, on June 10, 1898, and journeyed by rail to California. Upon reaching San Francisco a week later, the men were assigned to Camp Merritt before unhealthy conditions forced relocation to Camp Merriam in the Presidio. It was said that any man who survived Camp Merritt could survive anything. In “Gossip from First Tennessee Regiment,” the Banner reported that Camp Merritt killed more men than the Battle of Santiago (Cuba) (f. 16).

The initial excitement of arriving in San Francisco quickly turned to tedium and homesickness as the boys awaited orders. They were restless and eager to make it to the front before the fighting ended. Boredom occasionally resulted in fisticuffs, though the Nashville press played down the flare-ups. San Francisco papers did not; one reported a near-riot caused by the impatient First. On September 14, The San Francisco Call published an illustrated and sensational report of a Nashville soldier committing a cold-blooded murder. Another was court-martialed for striking a negro.

There were also parties, music, dances, and recitations to boost morale. A Banner staff writer reported on these in an article subtitled, “The Boys Losing Their Hearts to the Fair California Damsels” (f. 16). From Camp Merriam, a Corporal Scott announced a “jollificat” for the privates. The Nashville ladies who thought their sweethearts were living a cruel Army life, he advised, should “just drop me a line” (f. 16).
Winston Pilcher and many of the First Tennessee officers were prominent scions of Middle Tennessee society. Pilcher was listed in the Nashville Social Directory. Officers named Benjamin Franklin Cheatham, Jr., James Knox Polk, Reynolds M. Kirby-Smith, and Cave Johnson were reported in the June 17, 1898, issue of The San Francisco Call. Regiment commander Lt. Colonel William Crawford Smith was a Confederate veteran. The Banner observed, “…for the first time in the history of this city the armies of the blue and gray are under one commander and upholding the honor of the same flag” (f. 7).

The first companies embarked from San Francisco for Manila, Philippine Islands, on October 30, 1898. The local Herald reported the deployment orders in a September 28 front-page article. “[The] resounding cheers of the Tennesseans shook the leaves off the gum trees… and cadences of ‘Dixie’ and ‘Yankee Doodle’ clashed in a musical riot.” The First refueled in Hawaii and reached the Philippines after a month-long voyage from San Francisco. Margaret, aware that U.S. troopships stopped in Hawaii for coaling, wrote about “ex Queen Lil” in her letter of July 25, 1898 (f. 13).

Because the Treaty of Paris ended the war on December 10, 1898, the men arrived too late to fight the Spanish. Other troubles were brewing. A Filipino civil war had erupted four years earlier, but the revolutionaries agreed to fight alongside the Americans to defeat Spain. The United States government had lured the insurgents into believing it would grant Philippine independence following an American victory. After the U.S. acquired the Islands, it reneged on its promise to the rebels. Feeling betrayed they began a guerrilla campaign (Philippine-American War) that lasted from 1899 to 1902.

Of the four regiments raised in the state, the First Tennessee was the only one to see overseas combat. It took part in heavy fighting around Manila and at Iloilo, and only one man was killed in action. The heavily-decorated First was the hindmost of the state volunteers to return from the Philippines, but when it was ordered home, nearly three hundred of its soldiers enlisted in the 37th U.S. Army. They were dubbed the “Tennessee Battalion,” and they continued fighting in the Philippines until 1901.

The First Tennessee returned with fanfare to Nashville on November 29, 1899. Following military service (1898-1899), Frank built a professional career at Southern Bell Telephone & Telegraph Company and managed the three small exchanges at Wartrace, Bell Buckle, and Normandy. He married Mary Jane Boyle in 1905 after a whirlwind courtship. The Davises had seven children. Benjamin Franklin Davis, Jr., died in Wartrace on August 22, 1943.
Organization/Arrangement of Materials

Materials are arranged alphabetically by document type, then chronologically.

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Index Terms

Personal Names:
  Davis, Benjamin Franklin, 1878-1943
  Davis, Dora, active 1898-1899
  Davis, Margaret Anita Jennings, active 1898-1904
  Hayes, Margaret Howell Davis, 1855-1909
  Liliuokalani, Queen of Hawaii, 1838-1917
  McKinley, William, 1843-1901
  Pilcher, Winston, active 1898-1899

Corporate Names/Organizations/Government Bodies:
  Nashville Banner
  Southern Bell Telephone and Telegraph Company
  United States. Army. Tennessee Infantry Regiment, 1st (1898-1899)
  Webb School (Bell Buckle, Tenn.)

Subjects:
  Buttons -- Collectors and collecting
  Death -- Social aspects
  Farm produce -- United States
  Gambling -- Religious aspects
  Measles -- Complications
  Medicine, Popular -- Tennessee -- 19th century
  Philippine American War, 1899-1902 -- Journalists
Prejudices -- United States
Shells -- Collection and preservation
Souvenirs (Keepsakes) -- California
Souvenirs (Keepsakes) -- Philippines
Spanish-American War, 1898 -- Journalists
Vegetable gardening -- Southern States

Geographic Names:
Colorado Springs (Colo.) -- Description and travel
Cuba -- History -- Spanish-American War, 1898 -- Sources
Denver (Colo.) -- Description and travel
Hawaii -- History -- Sources
Manila (Philippines) -- History -- Spanish-American War, 1898 -- Sources
Nashville (Tenn.) -- History -- Sources
Nebraska -- Description and travel
Philippines -- History -- Philippine American War, 1899-1902 -- Sources
Pueblo (Colo.) -- Description and travel
San Francisco (Calif.) -- Description and travel
Tennessee -- Climate -- 19th century -- Sources
Tennessee -- Colloquial language -- 19th century -- Sources
Tennessee -- Farm life -- 19th century -- Sources
Tennessee -- Taxation -- 19th century -- Sources
Tennessee -- Weather -- 19th century -- Sources
United States -- History -- Philippine American War, 1899-1902 -- Sources
United States -- History -- Spanish-American War, 1898 -- Sources
Wartrace (Tenn.) -- Social life and customs -- 19th century -- Sources

Document Types:
Clippings (information artifacts)
Envelopes
Form letters
Letters (correspondence)
Poems
Postcards

Acquisition and Appraisal

Provenance and Acquisition:
The papers were donated by Doris Davis LaMar in 2008.
Processing and Administrative Information

Preferred Citation:
Benjamin Franklin Davis Papers, 1898-1914, Tennessee State Library and Archives

Processing Information:
Processing completed by Susan Gordon, September 2015.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Contents/Item Title</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Box</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Correspondence -- Bomar, C. B. (Mrs.), Outgoing, to Cumberland Telephone Company</td>
<td>December 25, 1909</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Correspondence -- Davis, Dora, Outgoing, to Frank B. Davis</td>
<td>May 29, 1898</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Correspondence -- Davis, Dora, Outgoing, to Frank B. Davis</td>
<td>June 26, 1898</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Correspondence -- Davis, Margaret, Outgoing, to Frank B. Davis</td>
<td>March 5, 1899</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Correspondence -- Davis, Margaret, Outgoing, to Frank B. Davis</td>
<td>May 8, 1898</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Correspondence -- Davis, Margaret, Outgoing, to Frank B. Davis</td>
<td>June 9, 1898</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Correspondence -- Davis, Margaret, Outgoing, to Frank B. Davis [with clippings]</td>
<td>June 17, 1898</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Correspondence -- Davis, Margaret, Outgoing, to Frank B. Davis [with clippings]</td>
<td>June 27, 1898</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Correspondence -- Davis, Margaret, Outgoing, to Frank B. Davis</td>
<td>July 4, 1898</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Correspondence -- Davis, Margaret, Outgoing, to Frank B. Davis</td>
<td>July 12, 1898</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Correspondence -- Davis, Margaret, Outgoing, to Frank B. Davis</td>
<td>July 20, 1898</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Correspondence -- Davis, Margaret, Outgoing, to Frank B. Davis</td>
<td>July 24, 1898</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Correspondence -- Davis, Margaret, Outgoing, to Frank B. Davis [with clippings]</td>
<td>[July] 25, 1898</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>13</td>
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<tr>
<td>Correspondence -- Davis, Margaret, Outgoing, to Frank B. Davis</td>
<td>August 1, 1898</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
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<td>Correspondence -- Davis, Margaret, Outgoing, to Frank B. Davis</td>
<td>August 31, 1898</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Correspondence -- Davis, Margaret, Outgoing, to Frank B. Davis [with clippings]</td>
<td>September 12, 1898</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Correspondence -- Davis, Margaret, Outgoing, to Frank B. Davis</td>
<td>September 20, 1898</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Correspondence</td>
<td>Date</td>
<td>Number</td>
<td>Page</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------------------------------------</td>
<td>-----------------------</td>
<td>--------</td>
<td>------</td>
</tr>
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<td>Davis, Margaret, Outgoing, to Frank B.</td>
<td>October 8, 1898</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>18</td>
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<tr>
<td>Davis</td>
<td>November 28, 1898</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>19</td>
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<tr>
<td>Davis</td>
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<td>August 5, 1899</td>
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<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Davis [with clippings]</td>
<td>August 30, 1899</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>28</td>
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<tr>
<td>Davis</td>
<td>November 11, 1904</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>29</td>
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<tr>
<td>Davis</td>
<td>June 12, 1914</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Porter, J. A., Outgoing to Margaret</td>
<td>November 3, 1898</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sinnott, S. L., Outgoing, to Frank B.</td>
<td>February 25, 1902</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Houston House, Outgoing, to Frank B.</td>
<td>September 25, 1909</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unknown, Outgoing, to Frank B.</td>
<td>May 2, 1898</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unknown, Outgoing, to Frank B.</td>
<td>July 9, 1898</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;A Welcome to the First Tennessee&quot; and</td>
<td>November 29, 1899</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Prejudice&quot;</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Postcard</td>
<td>July 2, 1899</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
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</table>