

Diss Debar Remembers Clarksburg, John Brown, and Stonewall Jackson

Joseph Hubert Diss Debar, born March 6, 1820, in Strasbourg, France, emigrated to the United States in 1842.¹ Diss Debar made his way west to Cincinnati. After he had signed on with John Peter Dumas as agent for over 10,000 acres of "Swan lands" located on Cove Creek in Doddridge County, Virginia (W. Va.)² he traveled to Parkersburg in the spring of 1846 to catch a stagecoach for Clarksburg.

Because Doddridge County had been formed from Harrison County one year earlier in 1845, Diss Debar knew that much of the legal work concerning the Swan lands would be done in Clarksburg, the county seat of Harrison County. He had already engaged William A. Harrison of Clarksburg as attorney.

On April 15, 1846, one of "Major Hilderbrand's grimy coaches" driven by Dick Cheaton pulled into Lewisport (West Union) and stopped in front of Ephriam Bee's hotel. When he alighted, Diss Debar sensed that the people in the hotel were interested in his exotic speech and appearance especially his broom-sage mustache which he soon would learn "was the only ornament of the kind flourishing between the Ohio River and the Allegheny Mountains excepting a darker one belonging to a young law student at Clarksburg by the name of Caleb Boggess." After "a smoking hot dinner of boiled ham and greens, mashed potatoes, dried peach pie and store tea", Diss Debar departed for Clarksburg.³

He stopped in Clarksburg at the North Western Hotel on Pike Street kept by James Carder, a structure which, as he saw it, was a large wind-shaken, two-story frame with a long ell and double porches in the rear and ranked second because the other tavern kept by Mr. Bartlett was built of brick and adjoined the courthouse lot. To Mr. Diss Debar: "The denizens of Clarksburg are chiefly of Old Virginia descent, and constitute a somewhat exclusive conservative set with all the traditions and social prejudices, pertaining to an ancient moss grown aristocratic town, such as Clarksburg was reputed to be. With very few exceptions there was but very little actual wealth to back up their pretensions, which were by common consent founded upon antiquity of pedigree and superior culture and manners. Their language was uniformly correct, their conversation refined and their hospitality generous within their means."⁴

In addition to Attorney Harrison, Diss Debar was soon friends with Luther Haymond, to whom he carried, on arriving, a letter of introduction, and with other men in the town. Sometime later Diss Debar sponsored a frog supper at the Carder tavern attended by John S. Duncan, James M. Jackson, Caleb Boggess, Lloyd Moore, U. M. Turner, Robert Johnson, Robert Sommerville, Granville G. Davisson, and Edgar M. Davisson. When the frogs arrived, the landlord refused to relight the fires that at the time had gone out. Diss Debar prepared the frogs in a salad which "with the addition of various liquids [were] immensely enjoyed by the jovial company."

Diss Debar adds an interesting comment as to the aftereffects of the party: "A year or two later my friend Duncan, who had served a term in the State Legislature as a brilliant champion of the right of way for the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad, was again a candidate in competition with Col. Joseph Johnson, later Governor of Virginia. It was the most spirited contest known in that section and decided in favor of Johnson by a majority of one vote magnanimously cast by Duncan for his opponet who on his part failed to vote for Duncan.

"A short time afterwards riding to Randolph County with Judge Edwin S. Duncan I was surprised to learn that it was my French frog supper that had defeated his son's election beyond a doubt. Three of the Judge's rural neighbors, staunch whigs, incensed at John's lack of self respect in feasting on raw frogs, had remained away from the polls where their votes would have given him a decided majority."⁵

In 1848 Diss Debar married Clara Julia Levassor, a daughter of Eugene and Sophia Levassor of Cincinnati who were temporarily living at Parkersburg so that Mr. Levassor could be in touch with his extensive interests in Virginia (W. Va.) lands. Clara died April 23, 1849, at the age of nineteen leaving a son seven weeks old. Her parents took the child with them when they returned to Cincinnati in 1849. Diss Debar named the town he established on the land he managed on Cove's creek in Doddridge County "Saint Clara" in memory of his wife.⁶ He recruited settlers for his land in Cincinnati, Baltimore, and Cumberland from among Austrian and German immigrants in those cities. Diss Debar married Amelia Cain, a native of Gilmer County, on August 3, 1858. He built a manor house near where the store and post office stand in Leopold, W. Va., in 1879. Six children were born to Amelia Diss Debar.⁷

Diss Debar wrote an account of the fun in West Union when men from Wood and Harrison counties came to Doddridge County for court days:

In the happy days I was writing about, gentlemen convened and enjoyed themselves in a cozy and sensible manner that always left a fragrant dew on the pages of memory. Yes, those were truly halcyon days when the hospitable wall in the "Big Tavern" afore mentioned [Ephriam Bee's] echoed the sparkling wit and humor of such sprightly compeers as the Hon. Jas. M. Stephenson of Parkersburg, John Duncan and his brother-in-law Jim Jackson, Col. Augustus J. Smith, Col. Ben Wilson and his cousins, Wm. L. and Ben W. Jackson, Jacob B. Blair, with Charley Lewis, U. M. Turner and Robert Johnson in a quieter background, yet within hearing of the broader jests of Jack Horner and one or two other wags of the same order. True, some good things were abused now and then, as they undoubtedly are now, only perhaps, under a longer cloak. For instance, others besides myself may still remember a case where four or five young gentlemen, all members of a noted family and two of them county prosecutors, were indicted and brought to trial by the father of two of them, who was prosecutor in another county, for sitting up rather late in a garret room by the light of two tallow candles planted in the necks of empty bottles. Yes, Mr. Editor, those bottles were empty, and I would not hesitate to swear to that fact, if required.⁸

Diss Debar sympathized with the abolitionists. He subscribed to Horace Greeley's New York Tribune delivered to the post office in West Union: "The paper had always come to me disguised in a French printed wrapper, and Mrs. Stuart [postal clerk and wife of Attorney Chapman J. Stuart] supposing it to be a French paper, opened it one day to refresh her school-girl acquaintance with that polite tongue. What was her amazement on beholding Horace Greeley's proscribed and felonious abolition sheet? Promptly folding it up again, she handed me the paper on my next call, pointing to the patched-unwrapper with the words: 'I have found out your little secret, but Chap never shall.' The pith of the incident lies in the fact that Chap was just then the Commonwealth or Prosecuting Attorney for the county. To do full justice to this kind friend as I subsequently knew him, I dare say it would have made no difference if he had."⁹

Of course, Diss Debar was in Clarksburg to attend the August 1859 term of the U. S. Court when persons indicted for the crime of abducting slaves from Virginia to Ohio via the "underground railroad" were being tried. Although he did not realize it at the time, Diss Debar met John Brown. This is the account Diss Debar wrote of the encounter:

"Do you see that tall, bearded old codger," said a Clarksburg gentleman, Major James M. Jackson, to me, as I entered the courthouse. "I wish you would sketch him for me. He looks quite a character."

"I'll bet anything he is of your way of thinking," next remarked the Major who knew my free-soil proclivities, but generously forgave them for the sake of my other merits. "He tries to look like a rock, but is as restless as a squirrel. Just watch him changing his hat from one hand to the other. This is the second day I

have seen him here. No doubt an abolitionist, every hair of him, and he has a big crop of it."

Since most readers have at one time seen his effigy, I shall not describe him further than by saying that he was one of those startling figures which once seen are never forgotten. When my sketch was finished I made a duplicate of it for Major Jackson, retaining the original of which the picture in this article is a faithful copy.

Meanwhile the Major, a philosopher and a wit, had endeavored to find out something about the odd-looking stranger, but had only learned that he passed for a cattle buyer. This supposition was not conflicting with the man's seasonable costume, which consisted of a slouchy hat, a faded nankeen vest, a long gray linen duster and mixed jeans trousers.

On the following day the kidnapping case was given to the jury for deliberation. After the adjournment of the Court I got into the saddle to ride about a mile to the residence [600 block of West Pike Street in Clarksburg] of my lawyer, Mr. Wm. A. Harrison who like myself and a quartette of other citizens of Clarksburg and Shinnston, was a subscriber to the tabooed New York Times [New York Tribune].

Halfway out I accidentally overtook the mysterious stranger and, slackening my gait, cordially sympathized with his reflections upon the charm of the landscape and the fertility of the soil. Not accidentally, however, I failed to stop at Lawyer Harrison's, and continued alongside of my new acquaintance.

At last, in response to a particularly suggestive remark of mine upon the varied resources of this section of Virginia, "Yes, indeed!" he ejaculated with a deep-drawn sigh, "as fine a country as the Lord ever made, but", muttering in a solemn undertone, "black with the curse of human bondage!"

I lost no time in intimating to him that he was in congenial company. Yet he did not deem it prudent to directly pursue that delicate theme though he lingered on the verge of it quite significantly while inquiring about the state of the roads, the number of inhabitants, slaves and cattle in certain sections of the country, notably the great Kanawha Valley. I was singularly impressed with his rapidly developing idiosyncracies among which scriptural forms of language and quotations were especially obtrusive. While meditatively dilating upon certain subjects, the pupils of his keen grey eyes would often contract almost to a suggestion of mental aberration, while any repression of his innermost feeling was betrayed by a flash of unusual fire from under those ominous brows.

I learned very little more about my eccentric companion than that he had a farm in the Shenandoah Valley, and was looking out for young stock to winter. The sun was sinking behind the hills and I was going to face about when he reined up his steed, and taking out of a pocket a map of Virginia and Maryland (old edition) said: "Let us alight a moment under this tree, so that I may make some correction on this map by the light of your information." In his penciled tracing out of roads and streams under my direction he did not forget the subterranean route that figured so prominently in the kidnapping trial.

"Something tells me we shall meet again," said he sententiously as we parted with a hearty shake of the hand.

Two months later the whole country was thrilled by the tidings of John Brown's Harper's Ferry raid. Being at Clarksburg again on business soon afterward, and meeting with my friend Major Jackson, I was scarcely surprised when he pulled a pictorial weekly from his pocket and pointed to a well-known face on the title page, "I told you there was something wrong about that old crank," said the Major, "but I never dreamt he was such big game as that. . ."

Here, as in many other Southern places, this sensational drama had not been without a corresponding shock of local excitement. Clarksburg was a moss-grown, aristocratic old town, Virginian to the core, although it sheltered the first new state convention less than two years later. The Tribune copies of the citizens above referred to were taken out of the post office and publicly burned and the subscribers subjected to insults and threats of prosecution. Horace Greeley, the editor, was duly indicted for sending the treasonable sheet into the state, and only the counsel of wiser heads and the fear of ridiculous failure prevented Governor Wise from formally demanding his extradition.

Ten years later, through one of those not unfrequent ironies of fate, the Tribune editor was solemnly invited by the Clarksburg Fair Committee to come there and lecture on what he knew about farming. It was the quondam Prosecuting Attorney for the commonwealth, Colonel Ben Wilson, the same who had penned — though not precisely approved — the indictment above referred to, that was appointed to receive the great ex-criminal and introduce him to the public. But, through unavoidable absence on the Colonel's part, this duty devolved upon young General Nathan Goff...." 10

The business of managing his land caused Diss Debar to travel a wide area in Northwestern Virginia (W. Va.). Facile with words and sketching pencil, he caught innuendoes the average observer might miss. This is what he saw when he observed Thomas Jonathan Jackson on the eve of the War Between the States:

.....I often heard his old neighbors [at Jackson's Mill in Lewis County] remark that "Tom was always an uncommonly well-behaved lad, a gentleman from a boy up," just and kind to everyone, never controversial, but doing his duty right and left, in a devoted, dreamy sort of way.

I never quite appreciated the aptness of the latter adjective until I met our subject for the last time in October 1860 pending the electoral campaign which determined the Civil War. I had made the acquaintance of Lieutenant Tom Jackson when he was presented with a sword of honor in the town of Weston, Lewis County, on his return from the Mexican War. It was to him and to his numerous kinsmen present a proud and memorable occasion, without cloud in sight over the brave young officer's incipient career.

My second meeting with him, quite accidentally, transpired at Parkersburg Mineral Wells, where Colonel Jackson, late of the Virginia Military Institute, was spending a few days for recreation. On this occasion his spirits were visibly depressed and his manner and speech more or less absent and dreamy. These, to me, were signs of an inner life which few of the profane could easily penetrate. Times were excited and the future dark, and the Colonel's countenance was additionally saddened, it was said, by some disagreement with the Government over his treatment in the army. He very frequently was seen on a rustic bench, all by himself, pursuing his paper with profound attention, seldom looking up or around until he was through. One morning a very intelligent Democrat of liberal tendencies, attempted to sound the silent reader upon his individual sentiments in case of a rupture between the North and the South over the question of slavery. Slowly folding up his paper, the Southern patriot replied in a quiet, earnest tone, while his pupils contracted like John Brown's on the Shinnston road: "In that event it may be the duty of some of us to stand for some things we may not implicitly approve. It is inevitably so in conflicts of that kind." And further this Christian soldier sayeth not."¹¹

Diss Debar, active during the war years in the movement to form a new state, ran as a candidate in opposition to Ephriam Bee to represent Doddridge County in the first legislature to meet in Wheeling. Declared the winner, Diss Debar was refused the seat given by the House of Delegates to Bee even though the committee on contested elections had reported that Diss Debar had won by a majority of ten votes. In 1864 Diss Debar was sent to the legislature by an overwhelming majority of Doddridge County votes.

While he was defending his right to a seat in the first legislature, Diss Debar was asked to design a seal for the proposed new state. He explained the seal he sketched with these words: "The designs, obverse and reverse, of the seal are my own original composition. I also suggested the motto Libertas e Fidelitate — liberty out of fidelity — expressing

that West Virginia became free and independent through her loyalty to the Union. --- D. D.' " 12

As a legislator Diss Debar "succeeded in securing the passage of a law providing for the appointment of a Commissioner of Immigration, adopted on March 2, 1864, and the following day Governor Boreman appointed him to that office. His resolution providing for the legislative committee on arts, sciences and general improvements was adopted and he was made Chairman, a committee that is still retained by the House of Delegates. He succeeded in having the school law printed for public distribution, but other measures failed of passage until some years later. Mr. Diss Debar was the father of the movement for the establishment of a Geological Survey in order to make the resources known, a progressive measure that was not adopted until 1897, when such a department was created under the direction of the late Dr. I. C. White."

Diss Debar became publicity agent for the new State of West Virginia. He prepared an eight-page pamphlet, with copies in the English, German, and Swedish languages, to show the advantages of settlement in West Virginia; he wrote thirty letters printed in the New York Tribune and the Wheeling Intelligencer. He wrote The West Virginia Hand Book and Immigrant's Guide which he published at his own expense after the legislature refused funding.

Even though the legislature refused to help financially, Diss Debar organized a display of West Virginia products shown at the World's Universal Exposition at Paris in 1867.

"In 1868 he began the arrangements that resulted in the settlement of the German-Swiss colony at Helvetia, Randolph County, a most successful experiment in transplanting a people from one country to another preserving their habits and customs."

Diss Debar moved from Saint Clara to Parkersburg in 1866 where he lived until 1875, the year he moved to Philadelphia. He continued writing pamphlets and newspaper articles; he worked on the national level to encourage europeans to form settlements in the United States. He died in Philadelphia January 13, 1905.¹³

FOOTNOTES

1. Harrison County, Va. (W. Va.), Court, Documents submitted to West Virginia University Library, West Virginia Collection, Manuscripts and Archives, "Application of Joseph Diss Debar for U. S. Citizenship, September 3, 1847." The application is in Diss Debar's handwriting. His manner of writing figures is confusing. The date September 3, 1847, on which he submitted the application looks to be September 3, 1848, but a clerk of the court noted on the back of the application: "Report made and filed at Fall Term 1847". The date on which he says, in the application, that he emigrated from France to the U. S. looks to be 1840, but he wrote that he was with Charles Dickens on Dickens' 1842 boat trip to the United States. All secondary sources give 1842 as the date Diss Debar arrived in the United States.
2. The West Virginia Heritage Encyclopedia, Vol. 6, p. 1344.
3. Jesse A. Earl, "The Life of Joseph H. Diss Debar and His Reminiscences of Doddridge County, 1883, [1893]", West Virginia History, 28:3, April 1967, pp. 231-2.
4. Henry Haymond, History of Harrison County, p. 263.
5. Ibid., P. 264.
6. The West Virginia Heritage Encyclopedia, Vol. 7, p. 1345.
7. Earl, West Virginia History, 28:3, April 1967, p. 230.
8. Ibid., 238-9.
9. Ibid., p. 236.
10. Joseph Diss Debar, "Two Men, Old John Brown and Stonewall Jackson of World-Wide Fame", Clarksburg Telegram, 1874.
11. Ibid.
12. The West Virginia Heritage Encyclopedia, Vol. 7, p. 1347. Diss Debar placed Libertas e Fidelitate on the reverse of the seal, now no longer in use. He placed Montani Semper Liberi on the obverse of the seal, the side which in 1979 is used as the official seal of the State of West Virginia. Ibid., Vol. 21, p. 4500-02.
13. Ibid., Vol. 7, pp. 1346-49.

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- Haymond, Henry. History of Harrison County W. Va. Acme Publishing Company, Morgantown, W. Va. [c1910]
- The West Virginia Heritage Encyclopedia. Edited and Published by Jim Comstock, Richwood, West Virginia 25 vols., 1976.
- West Virginia University Library, West Virginia Collection, Manuscripts and Archives. Roy Bird Cook Collection. Bound Notebook Series. "Stonewall Jackson Papers," 10 vols. "..... Two Men. Old John Brown and Stonewall Jackson of World-Wide Fame. Some Interesting Reminiscences by a Man Who Knew Both."
- Typescript, 7 p. This is included in the first entry in the Catalogue of the Roy Bird Cook Collection, West Virginia University Library, Morgantown, W. Va., 1964. (Pamphlet) The description there reads: "J. H. Diss Debar's reminiscences of Thomas Jonathan Jackson, and John Brown in Clarksburg."