

DAVID T. DIXON

An excited crowd of nearly 800 onlookers parted as Rachel Dillon staggered from her carriage at the corner of Whittaker and Bay Streets. “Where is my child?” she screamed hysterically. Then she raced through the door and into her husband’s office. Looking across the room, she saw her eighteen-year-old son, Alexander, lying dead in a chair. She sobbed uncontrollably and threw herself into his lifeless embrace.

In an adjoining room, her husband, Alexander’s father, sat calmly smoking a

shot when I wanted to.” Black was born Rachel Verdery, the daughter of Savannah free black Benjamin Verdery and his wife Sarah. Irish immigrants like the Dillons and free blacks like the Verdereys were drawn to the bustling port of Savannah, where labor was usually in high demand.²

By the mid-1850s, Dillon and Rachel were living together openly with seven of their children. Dillon hired Rachel’s brother Joseph and other blacks to help him manage his warehouses. He owned 27 slaves, who worked in various capacities in his burgeoning financial empire.

Despite his close ties with the local black community, Dillon had a reputa-

Georgia’s hardening color line. Census takers, however, continued to list them all as “mulatto.”⁴

The coming of the Civil War presented new opportunities for speculators like Dillon to cash in on shortages of foodstuffs, cotton, and other goods. Dillon professed to support the Union early in the conflict, but it soon became apparent that his sole loyalty was to the almighty dollar, be it in Confederate notes or U.S. greenbacks. Shame held no sway with Dillon when it came to the business of war profiteering. In 1861, he received a commission as a quartermaster in the Confederate army, to keep out of com-

A DASH OF AFRICAN BLOOD: STRADDLING SAVANNAH’S COLOR LINE

cigar as doctors tended to his three gunshot wounds. Witnesses said that David Dillon “seemed not in the least perturbed” by the horrific event that had just transpired. Neighbors who knew Dillon were not surprised by his nonchalance.¹

Born in 1821, David Ruth Dillon was the black sheep of a respectable Irish-American family that had deep roots in nineteenth century Savannah’s bustling merchant community. His reputation for shady business dealings grew nearly as rapidly as his wealth. By the time of his son’s death in October 1872, Dillon was worth nearly a million dollars. Most of this fortune was the result of his shrewd importing of luxury goods, slave trading, and money-lending. Dillon took big risks and often dealt with unsavory characters. As a result, polite Savannah society wanted nothing to do with him.

Dillon distanced himself from his respectable neighbors some time before 1845, when he began an intimate relationship with a mixed-race seamstress named Rachel Black. Dillon claimed that he began sneaking through Rachel’s window at night while still a teen to “take a

tion as a ruthless slave owner. In 1853, for example, he journeyed to Niagara Falls, New York, where he concocted a false murder accusation against his escaped slave, Patrick Sneed, in a failed attempt to bring him back to Georgia.³

As David Dillon rose to become one of the wealthiest men in Georgia, his domestic relations became more and more problematic for his business. Using his political connections to remedy the situation, Dillon managed to see that a bill was introduced into the Georgia Senate in November 1855 to make Rachel and her children full citizens. The bill, which passed in 1857, addressed the obstacles posed by Rachel’s racial background. Her uncertain racial make-up had prohibited her from being a full citizen, capable of inheriting and holding property as Dillon’s wife. But by virtue of the bill, these obstacles were “forever removed,” as the marriage was declared legal.

Thus, Rachel Dillon and her children migrated to the white side of

bat. When the conscript act was passed in April 1862, he shelled out \$3000 to hire a substitute. He was paid more than \$30,000 by the Confederate government for running his steamer *Amazon* between Savannah and Augusta. He often smuggled food and other goods aboard, selling them at inflated prices to the desperate citizens of his state. His warehouses were full of rice, molasses, and other scarce commodities while his poor neighbors starved.

Sherman’s capture of Savannah in the final days of 1864 did little to diminish Dillon’s ambitions or alter his focus on war profiteering. Having run the Federal blockades at will for many months, Dillon deftly switched allegiances by surrendering to Union soldiers. The U.S. government then paid him nearly \$29,000 for transporting cargo during the first half of 1865. This was a mere pittance, compared to the \$30,000 to \$40,000 per week he claimed that he made while running blockades on his own.

After war ended, Dillon had the audacity to file claims with the U.S. gov-

ernment for more than \$144,000 in income he had to forego while moving freight for the U.S. military. He recovered nothing. In 1872, he commenced another series of actions before the Southern Claims Commission, feigning wartime loyalty and asking for reimbursement of \$348,000 for supplies that were allegedly confiscated by Union troops. Dillon's arrival in Washington, D.C., for the depositions became a media circus. The wealthy speculator reportedly delighted the crowd, which had turned out to see him, by performing a double somersault off the hurricane deck of a steamer, landing safely on the wharf. Commissioners and their investigators slogged through more than 1,000 pages of testimony and other documents before they rejected his claims as "preposterous."⁵

Dillon's home life became complicated a few years after the end of the war. He became involved with a young Irish immigrant named Virginia Ehrlich. Now that he had a white romantic interest, he looked for ways to distance himself from his wife and family. The post-war military occupation created hard feelings among whites towards their black neighbors, as the entire social system of the South was turned on its head. In many Southern states, these feelings would eventually result in laws to restrict the rights of people of color, even if they possessed as little as "one drop" of Negro blood. Dillon did not wait for the end of Radical Reconstruction to address his embarrassing problem.

His first move was to ship most of his children off to Europe for schooling, never intending to see them again, "knowing what they were," as he said in a subsequent court case. He began lavishing his paramour with expensive gifts and visiting her openly, in defiance of his lawful wife. When his son Benjamin ransacked the house where Dillon was keeping his concubine, the father reacted by giving his son \$100 and banishing him from the city. Rachel responded by calling on young Virginia Ehrlich herself, only to be chased off by Dillon, who shot blanks at her to scare her away. On another occasion, Miss Ehrlich shot a

ball through Rachel's window. The family's troubles boiled over on October 11, 1872, culminating in the horrific shooting of Alexander Dillon.

The morning of the shooting, Rachel went to her husband's office to discuss domestic matters with him. The conversation turned to their son, Alexander. Dillon was upset at what he saw as Alexander's lack of attention to his work duties, calling him "a damned puppy." The insult incensed Rachel, and after a heated argument, her husband ordered her to return home. Rachel related the story to Alexander, who became visibly upset, calling his father "a disgrace" to the family.

Alexander left the house and met up

pawnbroker for the impecunious people of Savannah. The story of his life is one of romance. He became the lover of a handsome mulatto woman, and took her to live with him as his wife. As the laws of Georgia were not kindly disposed toward these alliances, he applied in 1854 to the Legislature for a special act to make his marriage with the woman legal and give his offspring a legal status. The bill was favorably acted upon, and his several children legitimized. During the war he was a steamboat man, and escaped service, and his son, David

with a friend named Sack, who loaned him a brand new four-chamber Derringer pistol. He then headed to his father's office.

Once Alexander arrived, Dillon began rebuking him for not seeing that a load of hay was properly transported. The young man assured his father that he had done his duty, but Dillon challenged him, saying that the wagon was less than half full. Alexander made no reply, so Dillon commanded him to return home. Alexander replied, "You insulted me by calling me a puppy this morning, and I won't take that from anyone."

The son then drew the pistol and fired three shots at his father. One ball grazed Dillon's scalp, just behind the left ear. The others wounded Dillon in the right arm and right thigh. Witnesses did not agree on what happened next. Some said that Dillon rushed his son after

being wounded and that, in the subsequent struggle, the gun went off, mortally wounding the young man. Others said that Alexander turned the gun on himself. In any case, Alexander Dillon died from a single shot through the heart. The coroner's inquest pronounced his death a suicide.

Once Rachel and the press had been cleared from the office, David Dillon instructed an undertaker to place his dead son in a cheap casket and bury him on his farm five miles outside Savannah. On the burial party's way to the farm, Rachel met them in her carriage. She demanded that they surrender the corpse of her dead son. The driver of the hearse refused and continued on. The mother

followed, stopping briefly to hire a wagon along the way.

Once the hearse had reached the graveyard, the undertaker dropped off a black grave digger named Isaac and the coffin, and returned to the city. Before Isaac could perform his duty, Rachel and some friends managed to take charge of the coffin and started back to town on a different road. After a few miles, they were confronted by deputy sheriff Henry Tow, who ordered Rachel to surrender her son's body so that it could be disposed of in accordance with David Dillon's wishes. The coffin was returned to the farm and buried.

Rachel was not deterred. She and her friends returned to the gravesite around eight in the evening, disinterred her son's corpse, and brought it back to her house at the corner of State and Montgomery Streets, arriving about half past two

...blighted, returning to Savannah in 1880. Mean-
 time Mr. Dillon fell in love with a young woman
 named Virginia Ehrlich, set her up in business as
 a fashionable milliner, and gave her most of his
 time and attention. This raised a row in the family,
 and young David sided with his mother, tried to
 shoot his father, and finally committed suicide
 on account of family troubles and his own
 blighted ambitions.

Saturday morning. She ordered an expensive coffin and laid her son out in it. A large crowd attended the funeral at half past ten on Sunday morning. Alexander Dillon was then laid to rest on the farm of T.J. Walsh on the Middle Ground Road, just outside the city limits.⁶

For five years after the shooting, Rachel and her husband made little attempt to disguise the fact that they were separated. When their youngest child, David, turned 18 years of age in 1877, Rachel filed for divorce and her fair share of Dillon's massive estate. She sued for permanent alimony, arguing that she and her husband were, in fact, married, even though no license had been procured and no ceremony conducted.

Dillon, who twenty years earlier had accomplished the extraordinary feat of legitimizing his union with a mixed race woman and conferring upon her the benefits of full citizenship, now changed his tune. He argued that he had never married Rachel. Since she was a person of African descent with more than 1/8th share of black blood, he maintained, she was incapable of contracting a legal marriage with him, according to the laws of Georgia.

In 1878, Chatham County Superior Court ruled in favor of Rachel in *Dillon vs. Dillon*, ordering David Dillon to pay alimony. The jury concluded that since he had procured an act of the legislature for the express purpose of confirming his wife's whiteness, the marriage was legal. The court emphasized that he and Rachel had been living openly as a married couple for many years, and that this hardly would have been possible in a city like Savannah had their neighbors or the police questioned her racial background.

The court admonished Dillon to not "shun his civil obligations to his family and to society." Society benefits, the judge decreed, "by closing the mouth of any man against repudiating his family when

they come to him for needed support."⁷

Dillon appealed the case to Georgia's Supreme Court, which upheld the lower court ruling. At issue was not whether Rachel had a 1/8th portion of African blood, the justices ruled, but rather the provisions of the 1857 legislative act. "That she was a free white person," the court wrote, "though not affirmed expressly, is implied in the declaration of citizenship; for, at that period, to be a citizen of this state was to be white, white persons only being then members of our body politic." Dillon could not reverse the legal trickery he had accomplished when he and Rachel were cohabitating and was forced to settle with her.⁸

Dillon distributed portions of his property to both wives and then moved with Virginia Ehrlich and their children to New York City in 1880. He died of pneumonia in 1883, leaving a large estate valued at more than \$600,000. In his unusual will, Dillon left portions of his estate to Rachel and Virginia, but reserved large tracts for some of his former slaves. One such beneficiary was Daniel Ruth Dillon, who received 507 acres for being "always a good, honest, faithful" servant. Was Daniel, who was not the son of Rachel, more than merely one of Dillon's many servants?⁹

By the late 1890s, Rachel and her youngest son David had left Savannah. They moved to St. Louis, where David Dillon Jr. became a popular band leader. He married a white Irish immigrant and raised a family in the same household as his elderly mother. When census taker Charles Laur knocked on the Dillon's door on the first day of June 1900, one of his duties was to determine the racial makeup of the occupants. Unlike many of his entries on this particular page, Laur's clear, confident penmanship in the "color or race" column suggests that he did not hesitate. He wrote a bold "W"

next to the name of each member of the household. Thus Rachel's ancestry was fixed at last on the white side of America's racial divide.¹⁰ ■

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Endnotes

1. *Savannah Morning News*, October 12, 1872.
2. *Dillon v Dillon* (1878), 60 Ga. 204.
3. Patrick Sneed in Benjamin Drew, *A North-Side View of Slavery. The Refugee: or the Narratives of Fugitive Slaves in Canada, Related by Themselves* (Boston: J.P. Jewett, 1856), 102-03. *Albany Evening Journal*, September 9, 1853.
4. *Journal of the Senate of the State of Georgia* (Milledgeville: Broughton, Nisbet & Bowers, 1855), 106,141,337. *Journal of the House of Representatives of the State of Georgia* (Milledgeville: Broughton, Nisbet & Bowers, 1856), 381,620. *Ibid*, 1857, 592-95.
5. *43d Congress, 1st Session, House of Representatives, Report No. 520: David R. Dillon: May 12, 1874* (Washington, D.C., U.S. Government Printing Office, 1874). *45th Congress, 2d Session, House of Representatives, Misc. Doc. No. 4: Seventh General Report of the Commissioner of Claims*: December 6, 1877 (Washington, D.C., U.S. Government Printing Office, 1877), 17-41.
6. *Savannah Morning News*, October 14, 1872.
7. *Dillon v. Dillon*, 60 Ga. 204 (1878).
8. *American Law Reports Annotated* (Rochester, New York: The Lawyers Co-Operative Publishing Company, 1920), 83-5.
9. Will of David R. Dillon, October 7, 1881, Chatham County Wills: O:366.
10. 1900 Federal Census, *St Louis Ward 21, St Louis (Independent City), Missouri; Roll: 898; Page: 1A; Enumeration District: 0321; FHL microfilm: 1240898.e*