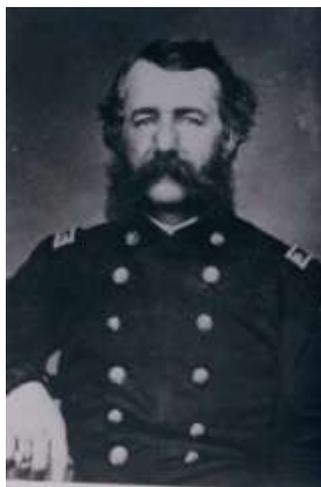


Dr. J.J. Craven & the Origin of the Patchogue Library Association, 1883-1893



Lt. Col. John Joseph Craven, Federal Medical Corps, 1863

Photo courtesy: Massachusetts Commandery, MOLIS and U.S. Army Military History Institute

It was a stroke of good luck that the *first President of the Patchogue Library Association* was a *truly extraordinary individual*. He was someone who loomed large – nationally, internationally, and locally – an inventor, ‘49er, doctor, ranking Civil War physician, veteran, contact of Civil War Presidents, bestselling author, entrepreneur, and holder of 3 U.S. patents. In later life, known as J.J. Craven, this is the true story of the route he took, on his way to becoming one of Patchogue-Medford Library’s key forbears and founders.

Early Life, Adventures & Careers, 1822-1861: Morse, Cables, Gold Rush, Medicine

Born in Newark, NJ (on September 8, 1822), to a poor family, John Joseph Craven was mostly self-educated, and was apprenticed at the tender age of nine (1831), by his parents to a carpenter, David C. Ayers. As a journeyman, with carpenter-millwright John Grigg (1843), he helped construct *Passaic Chemical Works*, and then accepted an offer to stay on, as supervisor of construction and repairs. Working under William Clouch, practical chemist, he quickly developed a strong interest in chemical processes, and in science, generally. Meanwhile, in pursuit of another nearby interest, he married Catherine S. Tichener. When the new-fangled telegraph (first publicly demonstrated in 1844) passed his way (in 1845), he resigned, in order to work for *Samuel F.B. Morse’s* Magnetic Telegraph Company, as Superintendent of Construction. Handed some *gutta percha* (similar to rubber) one day, it struck him that it could be used to coat and insulate telegraph cables passing through water, so that the electric current would not be diffused. This proved a success in his first test. This concept set the stage for not only stream and river, but lake, sea, and *trans-oceanic cables*, world-wide. Yet, when he applied for a patent (compounding things by also filing incorrectly), it was rejected for lack of sufficient originality. (These were mistakes that he would not repeat, later in life.) But, at the time, perhaps feeling cheated of future royalties, to his employer’s gain, he angrily

resigned from Morse's company, and stormed off to Philadelphia. There, he fell in with some well-off, young yahoos, who in 1849 chartered a ship (equipped comfortably, *with a well-stocked library*), to sail around Cape Horn, and join the *California Gold Rush*. Fairly luckless in the gold fields, a chastened Craven was back in New Jersey in 1851, this time taking up *medicine*. In the ensuing decade, he became a respected, locally prominent, and *well-connected physician*. Yet, there seems to have remained within him, a restless spirit of adventure.

Civil War Medical Brigade, Corps, & Theater Commander, 1861-1866: Lincoln, Sherman, Davis, Johnson, Miles



Photos courtesy: **Abraham Lincoln** (Library of Congress), **William T. Sherman** (National Park Service), **Jefferson Davis** (Library of Congress), **Andrew Johnson** (Library of Congress), **Nelson Miles** (Kansas Historical Society)

In 1861, with the outbreak of Civil War, Dr. Craven, though politically a pro-Union Democrat gathered his nerve and gamely called on one of his Manhattan connections, successfully securing a letter of introduction and a personal interview with recently-installed Republican President, *Abraham Lincoln*, who welcomed a show of unity and Democratic allies. Lincoln sent him off to take the civil service test for *brigade surgeon*, that he appears to have passed, and he was initially attached to the brigade commanded by *William Tecumseh Sherman*, quite possibly placing him at First Bull Run. Its casualties would have kept him quite busy. Thereafter, Dr. Craven was periodically reassigned (as initially was Sherman), up and down the Confederate Atlantic coast, rising in rank in campaign after campaign, battle after battle, siege after siege. Civil War surgery was a bloody, brutal, none too sanitary, mind-numbing business, without most of the benefits of modern medicine. Dr. Craven's frequent promotions and brevets (temporary promotions) suggest recognition of strong administrative abilities. He seems to have been much in demand, as he was present at the *amphibious attack on Port Royal, SC* (November 1861), participated in the *Fernandina campaign, FL* (March 1862), in the *battle of Fort Pulaski, GA* (April 1862; which guarded river approaches to Savannah), served at *Hilton Head, SC*, as *Medical Purveyor of the Department of the South*. He was present at the Union naval bombardment of Fort Sumter, SC (February 1863), served as Chief Medical Officer *at the sieges of Charleston* (April and August, 1863), and of *Ft. Wagner, SC* (July, 1863), where a photo was taken of him and his staff, on Morris Island, pretending to perform surgery.



John Joseph Craven (white shirt, bending, near tent pole) and staff, Morris Island, SC, 1863
Photo courtesy: Massachusetts Commandery, MOLIS and U.S. Army Military History Institute

In May 1864, he was promoted to *Chief Medical Officer* (CMO) *XXX Corps* – also known as the Army of the James – situated on Bermuda Hundred, which was applying pressure between Richmond and Petersburg, presenting a constant threat to Lee’s rear communications and supplies, while Grant extended his investment of Petersburg. Then, in January 1865, Dr. Craven was again promoted to *Medical Purveyor, Department of Virginia and North Carolina*, headquartered at *Fortress Monroe* (at the Eastern tip of the York Peninsula). As Petersburg was falling (April 1865), Lt. Col. Craven was present at the Federal assault on *Ft. Gregg*, a desperate Confederate delaying action, that bought Lee the necessary time for his army to escape, beginning its long road to Appomattox. Meanwhile, the Confederate government began its collapse, and initially sluggish flight Southward from Richmond. Few would escape Federal pursuit. Confederate President *Jefferson Davis* overtaken and captured in Georgia, was ordered to be sent to *Fortress Monroe, Va.*, one of the Union’s most secure strongholds. *Brig. Gen. Nelson Miles* had just been reassigned to take charge of the fort, now prison, and roughly handled Davis, on Union Secretary of War, Edwin M. Stanton’s orders. The ex-Confederate President was consigned to a dank prison cell, a converted casemate, with a newly barred window open to the elements, with deliberately spartan amenities, and, again on Stanton’s orders, was to be very closely guarded, and not permitted to sleep. Remember, this was in the wake of Lincoln’s assassination, and “with charity for all” was no longer part of the victor’s perceived equation, esp. to one strongly suspected of having ordered it. Stanton’s instructions required the already ailing prisoner to be chained hands and feet. Miles decided on feet. Despite his weakened state and ill health, an incensed Davis, fought the guards who were struggling to put him in chains, and came out battered and manacled.

Esp. as word had somehow already leaked out to the Union press, of Davis' ill treatment, and was starting to earn startling reproofs and demands for explanations of this even from powerful and influential Republican circles, Stanton decided he'd best moderate his position. Naturally, at this point, it seemed that it might be a good gesture to bring in a physician. Dr. Craven, by default the Fortress' senior medical officer, first examined his new charge on May 24, 1865 (two days after the beating). Dr. Craven had the manacles removed, treated Davis' wounds, counteracted Davis tobacco withdrawal symptoms, and offered the prisoner some kindness. He had, with difficulty to contend with and try to convince his superiors that the chains should be remain permanently, and that Davis' health and perhaps life were being compromised by unhealthy living conditions, and what today might be considered applied psychiatric torture. Eventually, lobbying through successive recommendations in a series of reports, which reached and influenced *President Andrew Johnson*, the latter issued an order for more humane treatment and better living conditions for the celebrated prisoner. Stanton, and fortress officials, esp. *Gen. Miles*, probably found themselves both politically and professionally embarrassed by this turn of events, and seemed unappreciative, resenting Dr. Craven's meddling by going over their heads directly to the President, a breach of protocol. [See also "*When Miles Met Davis*", by Clint Johnson (Cleveland Civil War Roundtable) @ http://clevelandcivilwarroundtable.com/articles/biography/miles_davis.htm]. On the other hand, Andrew Johnson, a Southerner, now cast into Lincoln's larger-than-life shoes, was also facing his share of mounting opposition. Radical Republicans were undoubtedly, esp. given Lincoln's martyrdom (which gave freer rein to their demands to punish the South), angry at this turn of events. The die had been cast in two directions. Dr. Craven seems now to have been viewed as more of a liability than an asset, far too chummy with both the Union's late archenemy, and implicitly, thereby, a security risk; and with Andrew Johnson, for his own good. Craven was unceremoniously *removed from the case* in *December 1865*, and a month later, in *January 1866*, received an *honorable discharge*, cast back into what was probably expected to be harmless obscurity. Their mistake. After each of his meetings with the ex-Confederate President, Dr. Craven had been secretly keeping a meticulous diary of their conversation.

[Incidentally, Jefferson Davis had asked Dr. Craven to send his wife, Varina Howell Davis (who had Gardiner family, L.I. connections), his photograph. That *carte de visite* now resides in the collections of the Museum of the Confederacy, in Richmond, VA.]

Creating an International Stir, 1867-1881: P.O., Prison Life..., Freezers, Patents, Wealth, Fame

Returning to civilian life, Dr. Craven soon found himself appointed *U.S. Postmaster* of his home town, Newark, NJ, by *President Andrew Johnson* (who as a Southerner, trying to pursue Lincoln's policies of moderation, without Lincoln's commanding authority, needed his friends and allies, and recognized one in Craven). In this sinecure, in 1866, Dr. Craven found time to reflect on and convert his diary entries into what would quickly become an international bestseller on two continents. In June 1866, **The Prison Life of Jefferson Davis** burst upon the world, taking the U.S., London, and Paris (as **La Vie de**

Prison de Jefferson Davis, translated by Wallace Jones) by storm. The book built sympathy for Davis' treatment and plight, did something to restore some of Davis stature in the South, and called for Davis' release. Previously, Davis had been fairly universally condemned even in the South, for leading the Confederacy to defeat, and for losing the war. Many of his actions and decisions, and his often inflexible, abrasive manner (one that did not suffer fools gladly), had rather lent itself to the accusation. Many in the North wanted him to be executed. The book recast Davis in a more human and appealing, suffering light, as something as a martyr for a Lost Cause, contributing grist to that myth. It also acted as a catalyst for a major sea change in Northern public opinion, combined with prior news leaks, in helping generate a coalition of powerful, sympathetic influential publishers, politicians, and businessmen, led by *Thaddeus Stevens*, *Horace Greeley*, *Gerrit Smith*, *Cornelius Vanderbilt* (the latter, behind the scenes) and others, who could not be ignored without risking a serious internal political rift among Republicans, and who eventually secured Davis' release, on *May 13, 1867*. Davis, ever combative (even after his release), was infuriated that in 2 years' imprisonment, he had never been charged with anything that he could fight in court, and make the legal case for the legitimacy of secession. Yet, it would be years of Federal court deliberations, before all potential for prosecution of Davis was dropped. Davis would only recover full U.S. citizenship, long after it had ceased to matter, by senatorial resolution, under the Jimmy Carter administration.

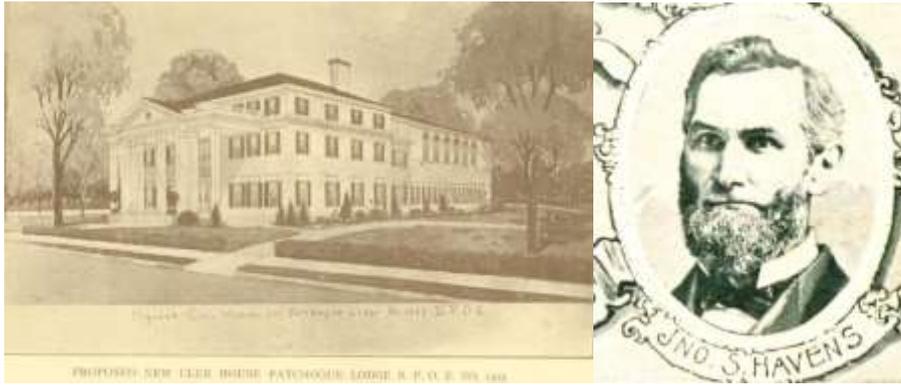
Jefferson Davis would also heavily annotate his own copy of **The Prison Life**, with extensive marginal notes, mercilessly criticizing the factual accuracy of nearly every assertion in Craven's work. He may have resented any portrayal of himself that painted him as weak. But, he would *say* nothing publicly, during his lifetime, as he likely didn't want his newly-burnished image sullied. Where the truth may lie, may be a matter for detailed historical analysis. But, in matters of wounded honor and dignity, un-witnessed private conversations, notes taken after the fact, private agendas, and the desire to put one's best foot forward when presenting oneself to posterity, there will likely always be room for future speculation and questions of accuracy.

Having stirred the pot, established a himself name, John J. Craven, moved to *Jersey City, NJ*, in 1867, and quietly returned to medicine, along with an occasional invention. At the request of the local *Communipaw slaughterhouse*, he preserved them from impending condemnation, by inventing *sanitizing* and *recycling processes* (this time successfully patented, in 1871 and 1872). This was followed a the more far-reaching and lucrative patent for a *refrigerator compartment for use on railroad cars and ships* (1876), which he and his son immediately employed to corner the dressed beef trade with England. The family future was now quite secure.

An Active Retirement, 1881-1893: Village Kingmaker, Tinkerer, Founding President of Patchogue Library Association

By 1881, Dr. Craven was ready to retire comfortably, moving to Patchogue, N.Y., then a lively summer resort, convention center, industrious mill and bayside shipbuilding town, next to (and actually part of) the home of the Blue Point oyster. Patchogue was then

conveniently located at the terminus of the South Side Railroad (later the Southern branch of the Long Island Rail Road). There he purchased the home of *John S. Havens*, then at the corner of Medford Avenue (Route 112) and East Main Street. The *Havens-Craven-Canfield-Tuthill-Elks-USO* house (pictured below, in 1916) was demolished in the 1990's. (Mr. Havens served as Brookhaven Town Supervisor during the Civil War. He also owned a general store, later Shands, presently the Brickhouse Brewery.)



Left: Havens-Craven-Canfield-Tuthill-Elks-USO House (From Patchogue Elks Fair Brochure, 1916)
 Right: John Scudder Havens (Courtesy Long Island Advance)

Dropping medicine in favor of tinkering, the celebrity became instantly active in village civic, social, cultural, educational, and political life. His renown, tact and acumen enabled him to dominate village affairs, to the extent that it was said of him that nothing significant happened in Patchogue without his approval. When, in May 1883, *Rev. S. Fielder Palmer*, of the Congregational Church, then also editor of the *Advance* (local newspaper), was observing village reading habits and canvassing for support, he went to J.J. Craven. Rev. Palmer suggested to him that the village could use a *free library*. Craven responded that it was “...*just the thing*” needed, and to subscribe him for \$25.00. An article soon appeared to this effect in the *Advance*. On **June 18, 1883**, the **initial meeting that founded the Patchogue Library Association, elected officers, and made plans for the development of the library, was held at Dr. Craven's house. At that meeting J.J. Craven was elected its first President, serving until his death, a decade later, on February 9, 1893.** Well-liked, universally mourned, Dr. Craven was buried in Cedar Grove Cemetery. His obituary in the *Patchogue Advance* said of him, that “*He was possessed of a phenomenal memory; and being a wide reader was a mine of information.*” The free library, and later the public library that became Patchogue-Medford Library, was built on this bedrock.

Postscript

John Joseph Craven was succeeded in office for a time by his friend, *Hon. Wilmot Smith* (N.Y.S. Supreme Court judge), whose wife *Elizabeth Mott Smith*, would become the first president of the public library. The first library fell on hard times in the 1890's. Mrs. Smith became president of the Patchogue Chapter of Sorosis, a women's civic, social, cultural organization (founded 1898), and with the backing of her influential organization, championed the library's revival. Between 1899-1900, Sorosis (with

Library board approval) took over the collection, hired the first trained librarian, set it on a firm fiscal foundation, opened a demonstration public library in their offices, lobbied successfully for voter approval of a public library, turned the library collection over to its new board, which included two of its members, and obtained a state charter (December 20, 1900). Mrs. Smith was unanimously elected to the Board. Justice Smith would be the first to approach *Andrew Carnegie* for the funds to create a permanent home for the collection, as a Carnegie Library, in Patchogue. But, that's another story. The library created and guided by the genius of John Joseph Craven became the kernel of the new library, the foundation of the events of 1900, and bedrock for the library that has arisen and grew from these good beginnings. In 2009, the Library received a phone inquiry from Fort Monroe, whose their Medical Facility, which had been named for Dr. Craven, was about to be closed, asking whether our library had any information about him of which we could forward them, to help round out their closing ceremonies. It was a great honor to do so. Below is a selective bibliography of some of the items that pertain to J.J. Craven.

For Further Reading / Viewing

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Craven, John Joseph. **'Fiction Distorting Fact': The Prison Life of Jefferson Davis, Annotated by Jefferson Davis**, ed. by Edward K. Eckert. Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1987. 168 p. Bibliog.: pp. 151-154. Index.

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Kimberly, J.B. **Fortress Monroe**. New York: Albertype Co., 1895.

Palmer, [Rev.] S. Fielder. "Mental and Social Culture." **Patchogue Advance**, no. 37, Sat., May 19. 1883: p. 1.

"T." "The Flame Gone Out – That Burned Low in the Mould – Dr. J.J. Craven's Active Life Ends in Peaceful Sleep." **Patchogue Advance**, February 18, 1893: p. 1. Port. (sketch).

Patchogue-Medford Area Historic Images Photostream [thematic sets of images] @ Flickr.com @ <http://www.flickr.com/photos/pmlib/sets/>

See esp. the sets, **Library History** and **Civil War, 1861-1865**.

Patchogue-Medford Library History [web page] (Patchogue-Medford Library. Celia M. Hastings Local History Room) @ <http://www.pmlib.org/localpatmed>

Contains a number of links relating to John J. Craven, including one to the full text of **Prison Life of Jefferson Davis**, and others amplifying somewhat on his role in the Patchogue Library Association (e.g., saving a board member's life twice: once from lynching, then from attempted suicide), as well as additional material on the Library's history, including a series of library centennial brochures.

U.S. Patent No. 111,910, February 21, 1871, for Treating Blood for the Manufacture Of Fertilizers and Ammoniacal Salts, Issued to John J. Craven. Washington, DC: U.S. Patent Office, 1871.

U.S. Patent No. 131,429, September 17, 1872, for Rendering and Drying Apparatus in the Treatment of Animal Matter, Issued to John J. Craven. Washington, DC: U.S. Patent Office, 1872.

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By Mark H. Rothenberg, Head
Celia M. Hastings Local History Room,
Patchogue-Medford Library
Senior Reference Specialist,
Suffolk Cooperative Library System
1999, rev. & exp. 2010