



## EPISODE 7, 2004: BROOKS' RIDING CROP? LONG ISLAND, NEW YORK

Tukufu: Our first story offers a unique insight into a political attack that polarized the nation. In the 1850s, the country is divided from North to South over one issue: slavery. On May 19<sup>th</sup> 1856, an abolitionist senator from Massachusetts, Charles Sumner, stands up in Congress and gives a two-day speech attacking the pro-slavery movement. When it's over, he's approached by South Carolina representative Preston Brooks. Brooks raises his wooden walking cane into the air and brings it crashing down on Sumner's head. He continues to beat Sumner until he is finally dragged away. Sumner lies on the floor of the house bleeding and badly injured - the victim of the most vicious and bloody act Congress has ever witnessed. Over 141 years later, a man has a riding crop he thinks the future president of the Confederacy, Jefferson Davis, gave Preston Brooks, in support of that attack. William Bonham is the great-great-great-grandson of Brooks, and the crop has been passed down from generation to generation.

William Bonham: The riding crop is actually one of the few gifts Preston Brooks received that the family has kept. I can only imagine it must have come from somebody pretty significant.

Tukufu: This incredibly beautiful handcrafted item was a gift to celebrate a violently cruel act. I'm Tukufu Zuberi, and I've come to Long Island, New York to meet William and check out the crop.

Tukufu: Wow... Well, it's pretty interesting. A little bit worn down here...

William: Mm-hmm

Tukufu: ...but the handle appears to be gold. So do you think this has ever been used?

William: It looks like it has, but I think it's just frayed from age, actually. I believe that it was probably an ornamental piece.

Tukufu: Mm-hmm... so what would you like to know about it?

William: I'm interested in where it really came from. As you can see, there's an inscription on the top that says, "P.S. Brooks from J.E. Davis", "Columbus, Georgia", it says in the middle. What I would like to know is if J.E. Davis is in fact Jefferson Davis, and if this riding crop was given to my ancestor Preston Brooks as a gift of support for the Brooks-Sumner caning affair.

Tukufu: Jefferson Davis. He's a pretty significant historical figure.

William: I'd say so.

Tukufu: But why do you think it would have anything to do with the caning incident?

William: Well, there's an inscription on the handle, as you can see, that reads: "A whip for the horse, a bridle for the ass, and a rod for the fool's back." Proverbs, 26<sup>th</sup> chapter, 3<sup>rd</sup> verse."

Tukufu: Like, "a rod for the fool's back" referring to Sumner?

William: Yeah-- I guess that's that's the interpretation.

[Tukufu laughing]

Tukufu: Do you know if Jefferson Davis actually knew Preston Brooks?



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William: I know that my great-great-great-grandfather, Milledge Bonham, had personal contact with Jefferson Davis during the war. I thought that there might be some connection, but I really don't have any concrete proof. So it's been a real mystery.

Tukufu: I'm gonna do my best, see what I can find out, and get an answer back to you as soon as I can. How about that?

William: Thanks a lot, Tukufu.

Tukufu: William tells me he knows the riding crop's provenance, its chain of custody. So there seems to be no doubt about its authenticity. However, I am troubled by at least a couple of things. One: it says here, "From J.E. Davis". I seem to remember Jefferson Davis' middle initial was an "F". And if you're going to give someone a gift to support their involvement in the caning incident, why give them a riding crop? Why not give them a replacement cane? By the time the caning incident took place in the mid-1850s, the debate about slavery was reaching fever pitch. New territories in the expanding United States lay above the boundary line drawn in the Missouri Compromise of 1820. According to that legislation, no land above the line was supposed to be open to slavery. But in 1854, Congress repealed the ban in order to appease the angry advocates of slavery. The Kansas-Nebraska Act allowed white settlers to decide for themselves whether or not slavery should be permitted in these new territories. This led to two years of guerilla warfare in one of the states - Kansas - and bitter debate in Congress over its future. It was in this climate that Senator Sumner began his impassioned speech in defense of a slave-free Kansas that so infuriated Preston Brooks. I've come to Bronx Community College to meet historian and an expert on the caning incident, Lloyd Benson.

Lloyd: ...in May of 1856, Sumner gets up, and he gives a two-day speech. They loved to talk back then.

Tukufu: Two days!

Lloyd: Two days! Sumner gives frequent, frequent reference to, to the language of a pure woman who has been violated. Kansas is a woman who has been raped, by the slave power. And by a President who stood by and watched it happen. But along the way, he makes a-a side comment- who else helps the president out? And the person that he singles out is Senator Andrew Pickens Butler of South Carolina. This is where it connects to Brooks. Brooks is Butler's cousin. He's a member of Congress. He's in the audience. And he-he hears this insult, and he-he becomes increasingly enraged by it. He walks up to Sumner at his desk. He says, "You have insulted Mr. Butler, who is a relative of mine and, and have insulted the honor of my state." He pulls out a cane, and he hits him about thirty good times, over his head and his back.

Tukufu: Mm-hmm... Pretty savage beating

Lloyd: A savage beating. And, he hits him so hard that the cane shatters, into many different pieces, and Sumner collapses into a bloody heap on the floor of the Senate chamber. He's out of commission for more than two years.

Tukufu: And Brooks?

Lloyd: Brooks, becomes a hero in the South. He goes from being a relatively unknown congressman, to a person tha-that some people in the South talk about as a possible presidential candidate. This becomes one of the four or five most important things leading up to the Civil War, one of the, the really key incidents that helped drive Northerners and Southerners even further apart.

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Tukufu: What will Lloyd make of our riding crop? Could it have been a gift in support of Preston Brooks' actions?

Lloyd: Brooks received many, many gifts, from a variety of different people. He gets silver goblets, loving cups, plaques, and other kinds of artifacts.

Tukufu: So were riding crops ever given as gifts?

Lloyd: It certainly seems consistent with the other kinds of gifts that he received. It wouldn't surprise me that he received a riding crop... not at all.

Tukufu: "A whip for the horse, a bridle for the ass, and a rod for the fool's back." This last phrase is pretty clearly about Sumner. So our crop does seem to be connected to the caning incident. I tell Lloyd, it's one of the few things the family's kept all these years.

Lloyd: If they kept it, it must have had some really important meaning to the Brooks family. Whoever sent this must have been somebody who had some connection with the family or who the family really thought highly of.

Tukufu: Maybe I was wrong. Perhaps the crop was a gift from Jefferson Davis after all. To be certain, I've come to Queens Library to check out their collection of Jefferson Davis' papers. And look at this! A letter from Jefferson Davis to the citizens of Edgefield. That was Preston Brooks' hometown. Davis appears to be turning down an invite to a dinner, one of many the town was holding in Brooks' honor.

Tukufu: But listen to what he says about our guy Brooks. "... a Representative whom I hold in such high regard and esteem." Okay. It goes on. "...who has been the subject of vilification, misrepresentation, and persecution, because he resented a libelous assault upon the reputation of their mother." Okay? Referring to South Carolina. So Davis definitely supported Brook's action. But did he give him a gift? One clue is the reference to Columbus, Georgia, on the crop.

Tukufu: This is a chronology of Jefferson Davis' life. And it says here he was born in Kentucky, and grew up in Mississippi. But... there's no reference to him ever living in Columbus, Georgia, or Georgia at all! And look at the signature on this letter: J. F. Davis, not J. E. Davis. Just as I suspected... there is a problem. In fact, nothing on the crop checks out with what we know about the President of the Confederacy. But if J. E. Davis isn't Jefferson Davis, who is he? To find out, I've come to the place mentioned on the cane- Columbus, Georgia. Historian Ken Thomas is helping me go through census records at the Columbus State University Archives. Columbus sits right on the Georgia-Alabama border, so we're checking census records for both states. There's no J. E. Davis here in 1850. What about 1860? Okay! Here's a J. E. Davis from Russell County, just across the river from Columbus.

Ken: ... So let's look him up.

Tukufu: So... here we go. This microfilm holds all the 1860 census records for Russell County.

Ken: A-ha! John E. Davis.

Tukufu: Yes! So who was he?

Ken: He was 47 years old, he's a merchant and he's born in New York.

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Tukufu: By looking through the town records, we discover that John E. Davis' middle name was "Eayers", and he died in August 19<sup>th</sup> 1864. To confirm it's our guy, we check local newspapers for an obituary.

Ken: "1864, The Daily Columbus Enquirer." Let's take it in the other room and let's have a look. And of course, this paper's 140 years old, and it's held up pretty well.

Tukufu: Well, look at this! On August 21<sup>st</sup> 1864, there's an invitation to John E. Davis' funeral.

Ken: "All members of the Old Columbus guards now in this city, are invited to meet at the Masonic Hall, this morning, in order to attend the funeral of Maj. John E. Davis." The old Columbus Guards, that was a group that formed up here in the 1830s, and um... then they also fought in the Mexican War in the 1840s.

Tukufu: I know the Old Columbus Guard went on to fight for the Confederacy in the Civil War, which suggests that, like Preston Brooks, John Davis supported the slave system. This would explain why Davis sent the crop, but not why Brooks held onto it. What else is there? Now that I know his middle name is "Eayers", I can check out his full name on the Internet. And I get a surprising result: a full page of links to the filibustering movement - private military expeditions that illegally invaded nations that weren't at war with the States. In the 1850s, these expeditions invaded Caribbean countries like Cuba, and Nicaragua, in the hope of turning them into new U.S. slave states. It's a long shot, but could this be how John Davis and Preston Brooks were connected? To find out, I've come to the Columbus Museum, to meet Professor Anthony de la Cova, author of a book on the subject. First, he shows me evidence of John Davis' filibustering.

Anthony: I have a letter here that indicates that he was involved, to a great extent in the filibuster movement. In this letter from a Capt. Gonzales to the future president of the republic of Texas, John E. Davis is recommended as an important filibustering contact in Columbus, Georgia.

Tukufu: So this is our guy, Capt. Davis! This is him. That's pretty good. Okay. Now have you heard of Preston Brooks being part of the filibuster movement?

Anthony: Preston Brooks was not part of the filibuster movement, in the sense that he was publicly identified with it. It was something that they would not publicly admit to, but Preston Brooks definitely sympathized with their cause, and he had relatives, such as Milledge Bonham, that did support the filibusters.

Tukufu: Milledge Bonham? That was William's other great-great-great-grandfather, and Preston Brooks' cousin. So this could be the connection, but I need something more convincing. I've returned to the Columbus State University Archive, where I'm cross-referencing all my collected information to see if there's any other links. According to the U.S. Congress biographical directory, Brooks fought in the Mexican War, in the Palmetto Regiment. I know J. E. Davis fought in that war too. And in this book on the Mexican War, there's a picture of him. But I know he, was in the Old Columbus Guard, so Brooks and Davis served in different regiments. Maybe there's some other military connection between them. This microfilm contains a description of the Mexican War. And here's something that could explain why Preston Brooks kept a riding crop given to him by John E. Davis. I'm heading back to Long Island, to tell William everything I've discovered, starting with the fact that the crop wasn't a gift from Jefferson Davis.

William: It's a little disappointing, because I thought I... sort of thought I had the story wrapped up, but... I'm not a very good History Detective myself. [Both laugh] But...it does make me actually curious as to who it was that gave it to him.

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Tukufu: Well, that made me curious as well. Why did your family keep this riding crop? I tell William about my discovery at the Columbus State University Archives. Preston Brooks and John Davis did serve in the Mexican War in different regiments. But they were under the command of the same general- John Quitman. So it's more than likely, they fought alongside each other, which is probably why Brooks kept this gift from Davis.

William: Okay! So that's the connection. Makes me feel good to finally resolve this question. It's been a true mystery solved. Well, Tukufu, I have to thank you immensely for your great work.

Tukufu: Well, it's been my pleasure. Preston Brooks died in 1857, at the age of 38, only one year after the caning incident. Ironically, he never lived to see the long-range consequences of his action, the defeat of the Confederacy, and the ending of slavery in his beloved South Carolina.

ENDS