

Peter Aaron Van Dorn, 1773-1837



Above, Judge Peter Aaron Van Dorn, ca. 1800. His daughter Emily said, “I have a quaint old oil painting of my father taken by a French artist in New Orleans over 100 years ago [this as of about 1905]. It is in powdered hair and ruffles. He sent it to his parents and in 1876, when on a visit to New Jersey, it was given to me.” The painting is also mentioned in an 1848 letter from Earl Van Dorn to his sister Octavia (quoted in *A Soldier’s Honor*):

“Will you not write to Uncle William Van Dorn at Peapack, New Jersey, and get him to give or lend us our father’s portrait? I think I could copy it.”

An accomplished painter, Earl planned to paint a duplicate of the original. The painting is still in the Miller family.

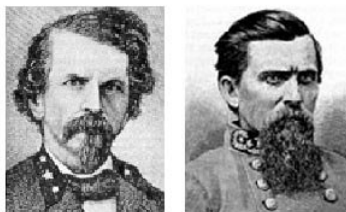
Judge Peter Aaron Van Dorn, son of Aaron Van Dorn and Ghacy Schenck (sometimes spelled “Aure” and “Gesha”). Born 12 Sep 1773 around Peapack, New Jersey, m. Sophia Donelson Caffery in Natchez, Mississippi, 18 Aug 1811, d. 12 Feb 1837, buried in Wintergreen Cemetery, Port Gibson, Mississippi, beside his son Maj. Gen. Earl Van Dorn, C.S.A. Peter Van Dorn died en route to a plantation he owned on the Yazoo River.

Peter Van Dorn graduated from Princeton in 1795 with courses in theology and law. He married, moved to Virginia, where his wife died (her name is unknown; no children). At the age of 21, he moved to the Territory of Mississippi, first at Natchez. In 1804 he was appointed Marshal of Natchez by Governor Claiborne. He was a lawyer and became Judge of the Probate Court, and at some point settled in Port Gibson. He was also clerk of the Circuit Court, and would ride circuit from Port Gibson to Natchez, forty miles away.

His daughter Emily said, “He was a man of unswerving integrity, unimpeachable veracity, and redoubtable courage, with a quaint humor that made him a pleasing acquisition to any circle. The older people of the state never tired of recounting his witty sayings, anecdotes and amusing jests. He was a Mason of high degree.” His grandson Hon. Clement Sulivane (a C.S.A. colonel and aide to Generals Earl Van Dorn and Joe Johnston) said, “Having married a niece of the wife of Andrew Jackson, and being thus quite nearly connected with the General, the house of the Judge on the hill, overlooking Port Gibson, used to be one of General Jackson’s stopping-places, as the latter would journey from Nashville to New Orleans and return. I used to hear my mother tell of the impression made on her mind by that celebrated character.” Emily

Van Dorn told of the time in 1830 when Peter Van Dorn took his daughter Octavia (age 14) to New York and Washington, D.C., visiting with President Jackson. “General Jackson idolized his wife, and was interested in her kindred; he fancied that the beautiful young girl resembled his wife, then deceased, and paid her much attention. On one occasion in driving on Pennsylvania Avenue, he stopped the carriage at a jeweler’s and selected a ring set with pearls, had a lock of his hair placed in it and presented it to his fair visitor, who treasured it as a souvenir of her memorable visit to the White House.”

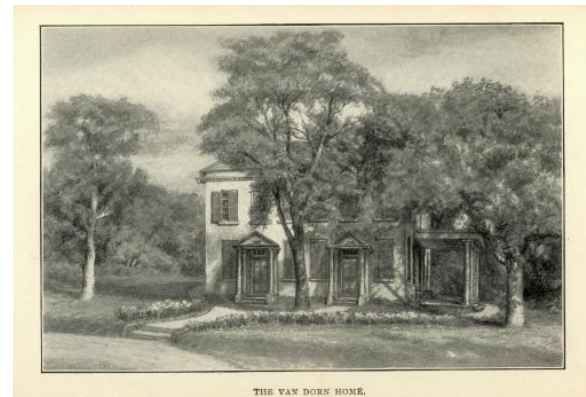
Peter Van Dorn’s second wife, Sophia Donelson Caffery, was of a prominent Tennessee family. She was the granddaughter of Col. John Donelson, said to be of General Washington’s staff, who settled the Tennessee frontier around Nashville. Her aunt Rachel Donelson Caffery was married to Andrew Jackson, though she died before he was inaugurated President. Sophia Caffery was an aunt of Senator Caffery of Louisiana. She and her sister Sarah were both mothers of Confederate major generals, Earl Van Dorn (1829-1863) and John George Walker (1821-1893), respectively. In some sources, Sophia is said to have died in 1829, but she signed a deed in Port Gibson in 1830, and seems to have died in February or March of 1831, shortly before Peter filed a document assuming her debts.



Earl Van Dorn John George Walker

Peter and Sophia Van Dorn had 9 children: (1) Mary Ann, 11 Oct 1812 – 27 Jul 1837, m. John Overton Lacey, 3 children; (2) Jane,

3 Apr 1814 – 30 Nov 1870, m. John D. Vertner, 3 children; (3) Octavia, 20 Jul 1816 – Jul 1897, m. Alison Ross and Vans Murray Sulivane, 3 children; (4) Sophia Mabella, Jul 1819 – Aug 1826; (5) Earl, 17 Sep 1820 – 19 Jan 1863, m. Caroline Godbold, 2 children, 3 others by Martha Goodbread; (6) Sarah Ross, Jan 1825 - 18 Jun 1828; (7) Aaron, 15 Sep 1822 – abt 1874; (8) Emily Donelson, 6 Feb 1827 – 1915/16, m. William Trigg Miller, 2 children; (9) Jacob, 1829 – 1837. Our family connection is through Emily Donelson (Van Dorn) Miller.



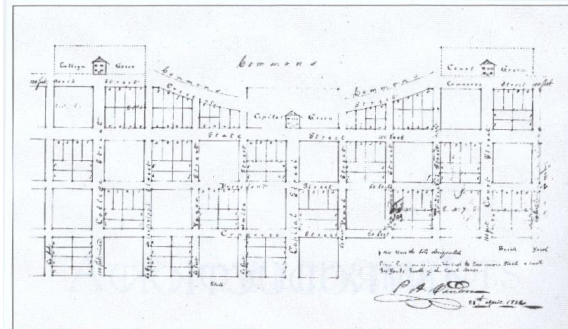
Above, the Van Dorn home in Port Gibson, MS. It still stands. Emily Van Dorn described it as follows: “On an eminence overlooking the town of Port Gibson was located the home of Judge P. A. Van Dorn, which was known as ‘The Hill.’ The Hill was a rare old place. The Judge had built the almost square double brick mansion after a simple model adapted to comfort, ventilation and sunlight;.... There were two porches forming front entrances and a large covered porch at the side with colonial pillars and stationary seats. Paved walks led from the carriage-way to the porches, each walk lined with rows of gay jonquils that in springtime looked like troops of yellow-plumed cavalry drawn up for inspection. On the left was the garden with its terraces, grape arbors, jasmine, roses of every name, flanked by flowers of every hue and

perfume; and hidden from view by the horticultural display were the more useful beds of vegetables and fruits, carefully tended by a German gardener. On the same side was the winding carriage-way through a grove of stately poplars.... On the right of the house, commanding a view of the village from the side porch, were two ridges or hills that ran parallel and sloped gradually down to a meadow, forming midway a gentle declivity, at the foot of which was a spring and spring-house, where the water flowed as cool as a mountain stream into the dairy, and converted the spring-house into a refrigerator for the use of the good housewife. The hollow between the hills was filled with tall spreading trees that waved and flaunted their branches over the eaves of the mansion, giving a grateful shade when the sun was at high noon. A pathway wound down to the spring, where there were rustic seats and tables, and here often the midday luncheon or evening meal was supplemented by the fruit of the dairy, and melons made ice-cold by the water of the spring.”

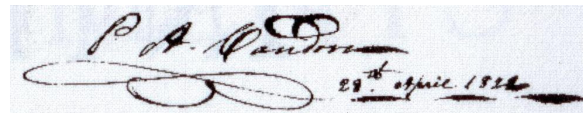
At Grand Gulf, on the Mississippi River and 10 miles from Port Gibson, Peter bought a rocky hill and built a house on it. In 1862, long after Peter had died, the whole town was washed away except for Van Dorn’s house and two houses right at the foot of the hill. A few months later, a Confederate battery on Van Dorn’s hill fired on a U.S. transport on the river, and the transport responded with a bombardment that destroyed the remaining houses at the foot of the hill, and left Van Dorn’s house the sole survivor of Grand Gulf.

In 1817 (the year of statehood), Peter Van Dorn became Clerk of the Mississippi House of Representatives. Four years later the Legislature selected him to work with Dr. William Lattimore and General Thomas

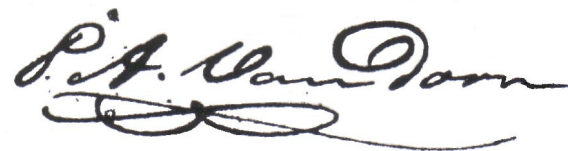
Hinds to design the new capital city of Jackson. Andrew Jackson and Hinds had negotiated the treaty with the Choctaw Indians in which 5 million acres in central and western Mississippi were purchased and opened to settlement. Below is Peter Van Dorn’s layout for Jackson, containing parks or greens interspersed with areas for public buildings, following a checkerboard plan suggested by Thomas Jefferson.



Figured above is an 1822 VanDorn map. (Mississippi Department of Archives and History.)



Note that at this point he was signing his name “Vandorn,” This is an evolution from his earlier signature (1811) on his marriage certificate, where the “Van” and “Dorn” are clearly separated:



Below, vital statistics from early MS newspapers.

Statesman & Gazette, June 19, 1828: Died at the house of her father, near Port Gibson, on Wednesday morning last, Sarah Ross, daughter of P. A. Vandorn, Esq., aged 3 years and 6 months. [This would be 18 Jun 1828.]

Mississippi Journal, Apr. 26, 1833: Married near Port Gibson, on Wednesday, the 17th, by the Rev. Mr. Butler; Allison Ross, Esq., of Jefferson, to Miss Octavia, daughter of the Hon. P. A. Vandorn, of Claiborne County.

Port Gibson Correspondent, Aug. 5, 1837: Died at her plantation on Deer Creek, Washington County, Miss., on Thursday evening, 27th ult., Mrs. Mary A. Lacy, daughter of the late Judge P. A. Vandorn.

Port Gibson Correspondent, Jan. 21, 1843: Married at the Presbyterian Church in this town, on Sunday last; by the Rev. Z. Butler, William T. Miller, Esq., of Vicksburg, to Emily, youngest daughter of the late Hon. Peter A. Vandorn, of this place.

Below is a later portrait of Peter Van Dorn, in which he seems to better fit the description of him given by his grandson Clement Sulivane: "He was an undersized man, with a large abdomen."



Peter's will is recorded at Claiborne County, MS, "1837: Peter A. Vandorn, Book A, pages 346-348." The text follows.

In the name of God, Amen. I, Peter A. Vandorn, being weak of body, but of sound and disposing mind memory and understanding, do make this my last will and testament in manner and form following; that is to say, first, I will, that my body be delivered over to the worshipful master of Washington Lodge No. 3, Port Gibson, to be buried with Masonic honors.

Secondly. It is my will and desire that all my just debts be paid by my Executor hereinafter named, but it is expressly understood that my Executor shall not pay, any claims against my Estate, existing prior to the first of January 1830, unless proved by express legal testimony; and in no case Shall the Oath of the Claimant be sufficient.

Thirdly. It is my will and desire, after the payment of my just debts, that all my Estate real and personal, shall be divided between my seven children, by my Executor, so that a just and equal division, may be made, that is to say, I will and desire, that all such of my said children as may now be educated, have so much deducted from their portions of my Estate, on account of expenditures in their education, as to place my younger children, uneducated, on an equality with them.

Fourthly. It is my will and desire that my two sons, Earl and Aaron, shall be educated at the National College in the City of Washington, and so soon as they may be qualified to enter the same, to be placed and continued for the space of four years, and after graduating, it is my wish that they remain in said City, to study such profession, as they may choose.

Fifthly. It is my will and desire, that my two young children Emily and Jacob, shall live with and be under the care and management of my two daughters & sons in Law, to wit,

John C. Lacey and Mary his wife, John D. Vertner and Jane his wife.

Sixthly. It is my will and desire that when the contract now existing between my son in Law John C. Lacey and myself, shall have expired, that the same be settled, by my executor, and said Lacey, in pursuance of the principles contained in the existing contract for purchasing and establishing a plantation on Bayou Tache, State of Louisiana, and should they not agree upon the same, that then, it shall be referred to the decision of two disinterested persons mutually chosen.

Sevently and lastly. I do hereby constitute and appoint my friend Daniel Vertner, my Sole Executor of this my last will and testament, and revoking all others, by me heretofore made; and I do hereby give to my said Executor, unlimited power at his discretion, to sell all and any part of my Estate, both real and personal, either for the benefit of my creditors, or my said children, and good and sufficient conveyances for the same to make; and it is further my will and desire, that my said Executor, Shall execute no bond for the faithfull performance of his trust / he taking the Oath as Executor relying upon his doing every thing for the benefit of my said Estate and children.

In testimony whereof, I have hereunto set my hand and affixed my seal this 29th of April, eighteen hundred and thirty one.

P. A. Vandorn seal

Signed, sealed, published and declared by the Testator as his last will and testament, in our presence, who at his request, have hereunto subscribed our names as witnesses.

James P. Parker }
Isaac Ross Jun'r } Witnesses
Thos. R. Magruder }

The State of Mississippi
Claiborne County T.T.

I, John Wetherall clerk of the Probate Court, in and for the County aforesaid, do hereby certify, that the foregoing will of Peter A. Vandorn, was duly proven in Open Court by the subscribing witnesses, and admitted to record, this the 1st of March 1837

J. Wetherall Clerk / n

J. Montgomery Moreland
Dep. Clk.



Peter Van Dorn's ancestry can be traced through the 1600s because of the good records kept by the extended Van Dorn family. His father Aaron Van Dorn (1744-1830) farmed in Peapack, New Jersey. He and Ghacy Schenck (1748-1820) had 12 children. His will contains many bequests, but "Nothing to Jacob, Peter and Gilbert: much being advanced to them." In the late 1700s Aaron journeyed to the North West Territories on horseback, and purchased 1000 acres of land where Cincinnati is now located. He offered the land to any of his sons who would settle it. Jacob accepted and went west to farm the land. One day Jacob and two other men were hoeing corn when they were surprised by Indians, who fired on them and killed one man. Jacob and the other man escaped into a blockhouse. "Jacob was so much disgusted at such conduct that he sold his land for \$5 and a silver watch, saying he would not stay there to be shot at by Indians! He then started on

foot and alone for New Jersey, and, after many hardships and narrow escapes from the Indians, and nearly starved, he reached home, to be reproached by his mother, she saying: 'Ah, Jacob, I am afraid I shall see you carrying the pillow-case to the mill,' referring to a custom of poor people who went to the mill on foot with a pillow-case to hold the few pounds of flour or meal they could afford to buy." But Jacob in fact did quite well in life. Aaron would have been the right age to have fought in the Revolutionary War, but the only record known is that of his son Isaac having fought in the War of 1812.

Peter Van Dorn's paternal grandparents were Jacob Van Dorn (Jr.), (1703-1779) and Maritje Schenck (1712-1756). Jacob (Jr.), was a farmer and owned a mill at Holmdel, New Jersey. They had 10 children. Jacob's will left a bequest of £250 to our Aaron, Peter's father.

Peter's Van Dorn great-grandparents were Jacob Van Doorn (Sr.) (1654-1720) and Marritje Bennet. They had 10 children. They originated in Gowanus, Long Island (now part of Brooklyn), and purchased land in the "wilderness country" of Monmouth County, New Jersey, near Holmdel in 1697, where they farmed and owned a grist mill. The Indians in that area were said to be peaceful and helpful. Jacob was appointed an Ensign in the militia for the eastern part of Freehold by "Edward, Viscount of Cornbury, Capt. Generall and Governor in Chief of the Province of New Jersey, New York and Territories depending thereon in America and the Admirall of the same." (Freehold is the county seat for Monmouth County.) This Jacob and Marritje are the source of most of the Van Dorns and Van Dorens in the U.S. (As with most at the time, they were inattentive to spellings, and their names appear in various records

spelled slightly differently; Jacob was "Jakop" in the first church record; he signed his will "Jacob van Dorn.") Jacob, Sr., bequeathed Jacob, Jr. (Peter's grandfather), half of one mill plus half the farm upon the death or remarriage of Marritje, provided that he make specified payments to siblings. Jacob, Sr., had a daughter Angenycctie whose son Capt. John Schenck (1740-1794) fought in the Revolutionary War with the 3rd Hunterdon County (New Jersey) militia.

Peter's Van Dorn great-great-grandparents were Pieter Van Doorn and Catherine Stelling. Pieter is thought to have been born in 1609. Pieter and Catherine emigrated to America from Gravezande, Holland, probably in 1639. He resided in Gowanus, Long Island. Little is known about Pieter; the first church record is from 1657 when as the widower of Catherine Stelling, he married Janneke Rancken. Two years later the church record lists Janneke as the widow of Pieter Van Doorn.

As early as 1088 the Van Doorn name was in use in Holland, namely Stephen van Doorn, High Sheriff of the Margravate of Antwerp, part of the Holy Roman Empire. The Margrave of Antwerp, appointed by Henry IV with the title Duke of Lorraine, led a Crusade of 90,000 which captured Jerusalem in 1099; he ruled the city until his death in 1100, and is buried there. Sadly, it is not known whether Stephen van Doorn accompanied the Duke on this Crusade. There seems to be a continuous stream of Van Doorn sheriffs over the centuries, and a number of Baron Van Doorns. In the 16th century, one Baron Van Doorn which our Peter Van Dorn counted as one of his direct ancestors, was Lord High Chancellor to the King of the Netherlands.

Sources: *The Van Doorn Family* by A. V. D. Honeyman (Honeyman's Publishing

House, Plainfield, NJ, 1909, reprinted in 1991), which includes much family information provided by Emily (Van Dorn) Miller. *A Soldier's Honor*, by His Comrades (Abbey Press, New York, 1902), assembled by Emily (Van Dorn) Miller. *The Tarnished Cavalier*, by A. B. Carter (University of Tennessee Press, Knoxville, 1999) *Van Dorn*, by R. G. Hartje (Vanderbilt University Press, Nashville, 1967). *Jackson*, by J. L. Kimbrough (Arcadia, Charleston, SC, 1998). *They Sleep beneath the Mockingbird*, by H. A. Cross (Southern Heritage, Murfreesboro, TN, 1994). *Early Mississippi Records*, by B. C. Wiltshire (Heritage Books, Bowie, MD, 1996). *A History of Mississippi* by former Governor (1882-1890) Robert Lowry and newspaper publisher William H. McCardle (R. H. Henry & Co., Jackson, Miss., 1891, and reprinted by AMS Press, New York, 1974). *The Henrys of Maryland and Related Families*, by Clement Sulivane Henry, Jr., and Ryder Henry II (Vantage Press, New York, 1982). The photographs are from family members or the books listed here, or the Internet. Peter's will was transcribed by T. M. Miller.