

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

DATA SHEET

FOR NPS USE ONLY

RECEIVED OCT 18 1976

DATE ENTERED AUG 24 1977

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
INVENTORY -- NOMINATION FORMSEE INSTRUCTIONS IN *HOW TO COMPLETE NATIONAL REGISTER FORMS*
TYPE ALL ENTRIES -- COMPLETE APPLICABLE SECTIONS**1 NAME**

* * HISTORIC

The Briars (also Briers)

AND/OR COMMON

2 LOCATION

STREET & NUMBER

The Briars Road

NOT FOR PUBLICATION

CITY, TOWN

Natchez

CONGRESSIONAL DISTRICT

VICINITY OF

Fourth

STATE

Mississippi

CODE

28

COUNTY

Adams

CODE

001

3 CLASSIFICATION

CATEGORY

DISTRICT

X BUILDING(S)

STRUCTURE

SITE

OBJECT

OWNERSHIP

PUBLIC

X PRIVATE

BOTH

PUBLIC ACQUISITION

IN PROCESS

BEING CONSIDERED

STATUS

X OCCUPIED

UNOCCUPIED

WORK IN PROGRESS

ACCESSIBLE

X YES: RESTRICTED

YES: UNRESTRICTED

NO

PRESENT USE

AGRICULTURE

COMMERCIAL

EDUCATIONAL

ENTERTAINMENT

GOVERNMENT

INDUSTRIAL

MILITARY

X MUSEUM

PARK

X PRIVATE RESIDENCE

RELIGIOUS

SCIENTIFIC

TRANSPORTATION

OTHER:

4 OWNER OF PROPERTY

NAME

Wilds and Canon Design, Inc.

STREET & NUMBER

2909 Fountain View Drive

CITY, TOWN

Houston

VICINITY OF

STATE

Texas

5 LOCATION OF LEGAL DESCRIPTION

COURTHOUSE.

REGISTRY OF DEEDS, ETC.

Office of the Chancery Clerk, Adams County Courthouse

STREET & NUMBER

CITY, TOWN

Natchez

STATE

Mississippi

6 REPRESENTATION IN EXISTING SURVEYS

TITLE

Historic American Buildings Survey (1 photo)

DATE

1934

X FEDERAL STATE COUNTY LOCAL

DEPOSITORY FOR
SURVEY RECORDS

Library of Congress

CITY, TOWN

Washington

STATE

D.C.

7 DESCRIPTION

CONDITION

☒ EXCELLENT
☐ GOOD
☐ FAIR

☐ DETERIORATED
☐ RUINS
☐ UNEXPOSED

CHECK ONE

☐ UNALTERED
☒ ALTERED

CHECK ONE

☒ ORIGINAL SITE
☐ MOVED DATE _____

DESCRIBE THE PRESENT AND ORIGINAL (IF KNOWN) PHYSICAL APPEARANCE

Constructed in 1818, The Briars is a nogged frame, one-and-a-half-story structure covered with stucco on the front, or east, elevation and clapboard on the remaining sides. It is a classic example of the "undercut" form indigenous to the early architecture of the lower Mississippi Valley. Characterized by a long, low profile, the form derives its name from its gallery, which is not conceived of as an appendage but rather as an integral space within the structure's volume. Similarly, the rear gallery is "undercut" into the structure, but is flanked by small end cabinets and thus open on only one side. Between the two galleries is a grouping of nearly square rooms which share interior chimneys. The whole arrangement was an early and quite successful attempt to cope with the nearly tropical climate of the region.

Because it developed as a vernacular form, the "undercut" was rarely employed in residences of any significant architectural sophistication. At The Briars, however, the form is greatly enhanced by its well-calculated proportions and excellent Federal woodwork. A graceful Doric colonnade divides the facade into nine bays and supports a steep roof broken by four dormers with so-called Gothic sash. The broad entrance, with its sidelights and elliptical transom, is framed by a frontispiece composed of engaged Doric columns supporting a full entablature. Occupying the two end bays are a pair of secondary entrances topped by semicircular fans. Windows are double hung with twelve-over-twelve glazing and are surrounded by finely molded, symmetrical architraves with corner blocks. The rear (west) elevation, fronted entirely by a narrow porch with an arched plaster ceiling, was apparently more of an open passage than a living space. Now wholly enclosed by glass, it gives access to the end cabinets as well as the open gallery between, from which it is divided by a five-bay arcade.

As is typical of the "undercut" form, the interior plan of The Briars consists of a center passage connecting the front and rear verandas and flanked on either side by two commodious chambers. From the rear veranda, which has become a large living room, twin Colonial Revival staircases ascend to the second level, which accommodates bedrooms under the eaves. Dating from ca. 1927, these stairs replaced a single flight of steep stairs along the gallery's south wall. Other, less serious, alterations to the plan of The Briars have been limited to the installation of kitchen and bathrooms in the end cabinets.

The beautifully detailed interior trim is among the finest of the Federal period in Mississippi. Doors and window panels are treated with fielded hollow-corner panels and the surrounding architraves are symmetrically molded with corner blocks. Parlor and dining room mantels were designed with engaged, wreathed columns, five-part friezes, boldly carved paterae and returned shelves. Less elegant mantels in the remaining front rooms have unusual oval columns, paneled friezes and plain shelves. In addition, these end rooms received somewhat conservative chair rails. Despite minor renovation in the past, the architectural fabric of The Briars's interior has remained almost wholly intact.

8 SIGNIFICANCE

PERIOD	AREAS OF SIGNIFICANCE -- CHECK AND JUSTIFY BELOW			
___PREHISTORIC	___ARCHEOLOGY-PREHISTORIC	___COMMUNITY PLANNING	___LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE	___RELIGION
___1400-1499	___ARCHEOLOGY-HISTORIC	___CONSERVATION	___LAW	___SCIENCE
___1500-1599	___AGRICULTURE	___ECONOMICS	___LITERATURE	___SCULPTURE
___1600-1699	☒ ARCHITECTURE	___EDUCATION	___MILITARY	___SOCIAL/HUMANITARIAN
___1700-1799	___ART	___ENGINEERING	___MUSIC	___THEATER
☒ 1800-1899	___COMMERCE	___EXPLORATION/SETTLEMENT	___PHILOSOPHY	___TRANSPORTATION
___1900-	___COMMUNICATIONS	___INDUSTRY	☒ POLITICS/GOVERNMENT	___OTHER (SPECIFY)
		___INVENTION		

SPECIFIC DATES 1818, 1845

BUILDER/ARCHITECT

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Located on a bluff overlooking the Mississippi River southwest of Natchez is The Briars, the most fully developed and sophisticated example of the long, low "undercut" architectural form indigenous to the lower Mississippi Valley. This regional idiom is characterized by a range of nearly square rooms placed between broad front and rear verandas which are invariably set into the building's volume. Usually considered vernacular, this form reached its most elegant architectural expression at The Briars. The residence is also significant for being the setting, in 1845, of the marriage of Jefferson Davis and Varina Howell.

On October 30, 1818, John Perkins (1781-1866) gained title to "that tract of land about 1 mile below the old Spanish Fort Panmure in the city of Natchez containing 99 acres" (Deed Book K:232). Shortly thereafter he began construction of a dwelling house (Rainwater, p. 976), where he settled after his marriage that same year to a Mrs. Bynum. A native of Somerset County, Maryland, Perkins had migrated to Natchez ca. 1802, and during the next thirty years he amassed a large fortune from 18,000 acres of cotton-producing land in the Louisiana Delta. About 1816, he was appointed parish judge of Concordia, Louisiana. Upon his wife's death in 1824, Perkins offered his house for sale, describing it as "The New and pleasant Situation called the BRIARS." Confident of its excellent reputation, he continued, "The situation is so well known, that a particular description is deemed unnecessary" (Mississippi Republican, December 1, 1824). The property was not sold, however, until 1833, one year after Perkins had moved to Lowndes County, Mississippi, where he remained for the rest of his life. It was during this latter period that Perkins established three separate endowments for the Theological Seminary of the Presbyterian Church in Columbia, South Carolina, thus becoming a noted benefactor of that institution (Rainwater, pp. 970-79).

From 1828 until 1850, The Briars was rented to William Burr Howell (1795-1863), New Jersey governor Richard Howell's fourth son, who moved to Natchez ca. 1815 and became engaged in merchandising and planting. In 1823, he married Margaret Kempe, and the couple lived with her family at "Kempeton," near Natchez, until the destruction of that residence by fire in 1828 caused Howell to move his young family to The Briars. It was here that Varina Banks Howell (1826-1906) spent her childhood (McIntosh, p. 124), and in the drawing room at The Briars, on February 26, 1845, Varina Howell married Jefferson Davis.

9 MAJOR BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES

James, D. Clayton. Antebellum Natchez. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1968.

McIntosh, James T., ed. The Papers of Jefferson Davis. Vol. 2. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1974.

10 GEOGRAPHICAL DATA

ACREAGE OF NOMINATED PROPERTY 17.7

UTM REFERENCES

A	15	650180	3491820	B	15	650180	3491440
ZONE		EASTING	NORTHING	ZONE		EASTING	NORTHING
C	15	649863	3491440	D	15	649863	3491820

VERBAL BOUNDARY DESCRIPTION

Beginning at the intersection of north boundary of the Briars Tract with the east edge of the Natchez and Southern Railroad right-of-way. Thence run in a south-west direction along the east edge of the Natchez and Southern Railroad right-of-way for 702 feet, more or less; thence S 61° 41' E parallel to and 660.0 feet from, measured at right angles, the north boundary of the Briars Tract for 1400 feet, more or less, to the center of a bayou; thence along the center of said bayou in a northerly direction for 690 feet, more or less, to the north boundary of

LIST ALL STATES AND COUNTIES FOR PROPERTIES OVERLAPPING STATE OR COUNTY BOUNDARIES

STATE	CODE	COUNTY	CODE
STATE	CODE	COUNTY	CODE

11 FORM PREPARED BY

NAME / TITLE

William C. Allen, Architectural Historian

ORGANIZATION

Mississippi Department of Archives and History

DATE

October 8, 1976

STREET & NUMBER

P. O. Box 571

TELEPHONE

(601) 354-6218

CITY OR TOWN

Jackson

STATE

Mississippi

12 STATE HISTORIC PRESERVATION OFFICER CERTIFICATION

THE EVALUATED SIGNIFICANCE OF THIS PROPERTY WITHIN THE STATE IS:

NATIONAL X

STATE

LOCAL

As the designated State Historic Preservation Officer for the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 (Public Law 89-665), I hereby nominate this property for inclusion in the National Register and certify that it has been evaluated according to the criteria and procedures set forth by the National Park Service.

STATE HISTORIC PRESERVATION OFFICER SIGNATURE

William C. Allen

TITLE

State Historic Preservation Officer

DATE

October 11, 1976

FOR NPS USE ONLY

I HEREBY CERTIFY THAT THIS PROPERTY IS INCLUDED IN THE NATIONAL REGISTER

DATE

8/24/77

DIRECTOR, OFFICE OF ARCHEOLOGY AND HISTORIC PRESERVATION

KEEPER OF THE NATIONAL REGISTER

ATTEST:

DATE

8-24-77

KEEPER OF THE NATIONAL REGISTER

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

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AUG 24 1977

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8 - SIGNIFICANCE

In 1853, The Briars was sold to Walter Irvine, whose descendants held title until 1927 (Deed Book II:383). During this period the residence fell into a state of disrepair but, fortunately, its architectural fabric remained intact. When it became the property of Mrs. Emma Augusta Wall in 1927, a restoration partially obscured the original appearance of the rear gallery. Despite this, her efforts assured the continual preservation of The Briars, and today it functions as both a popular house museum and as a private residence.

9 - MAJOR BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES

(Natchez) Mississippi Republican and Literary Register. November 5, 1824,
December 1, 1824.

(Natchez) Mississippi State Gazette. November 6, 1824.

Rainwater, P. L., ed. "The Memorial of John Perkins." Louisiana Historical Quarterly 20:965-89.

10 - GEOGRAPHICAL DATA

the Briars Tract; thence along said north boundary N 61° 41' W for 1000 feet, more or less, to the point of beginning. Being situated in Adams County, Mississippi, and containing 17.7 acres, more or less.

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CONTINUATION SHEET

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AMENDMENT
THE BRIARS
NATCHEZ VICINITY
ADAMS COUNTY, MISSISSIPPI

10 - GEOGRAPHICAL DATA

The original Briars tract of 99 acres purchased by John Perkins in 1818 has been reduced to its present 17.7 acre size after legally changing hands a total of 16 times. While considerably reduced, the 17.7 acre site adequately preserves the original rural character of The Briars and protects it from the encroaching commercialism of Natchez.

RESUME OF HOUSE CALLED THE BRIERS
Natchez, Mississippi

Primarily The Briers is significant because, it was the scene of the marriage of Jefferson Davis to Varina Howell on February 26, 1845¹, Varina Howell having lived in the house since the age of approximately two years.²

Secondly, it is an excellent example of Southern planter architecture in the first quarter of the 19th century, fortunate in that the exterior elevations and basic interior plan remain unaltered.

Thirdly, it is unique in the beauty and seclusion of its grounds, which contain an Indian mound and with its bluff that overlooks the Mississippi River and the flat plains of Louisiana.

The original tract of 100 acres was granted to Richard Bacon by Spanish Grant on April 20, 1784.³ Arthur Mahan acquired the property (plus 50 additional acres) with the appurtenances for \$1,200.00 on January 18, 1814. We believe the present house to have been built by Arthur Mahan subsequent to this date and prior to 1818 for the following reason. On October 30, 1818, Arthur Mahan conveyed 99 acres (being that part of the tract granted to Richard Bacon by the Spanish) of his 150 acres and appurtenances to John Perkins for a consideration of \$9,996.00.⁴ The increase in value from 1814 to 1818 would definitely indicate a major improvement.

The interior trim, mantels, window detail, etc., which are in the Adam style, are almost identical to other houses that Levi Weeks, the architect, designed in the Natchez area during this period; but to date we have not found any documentation to prove that Levi Weeks designed the house.

John Perkins was still the owner of the property when William Burr Howell (a cousin of Aaron Burr) and his wife, Louise Kempe Howell, moved there with their two children in 1828-29.² One of these children was Varina. The Howells lived there until 1850 when they moved to New Orleans. William Burr Howell had a lifetime of business failures which may account for the house never having been recorded in his name even though he lived there over twenty years.

On February 11, 1853, the house was acquired by Walter Irvine. It stayed in the Irvine family until August 5, 1927, when it was conveyed to Mrs. Emma Augusta Wall of New Orleans. Mrs. Wall and her descendants owned the house until 1968.

Today the house is in a remarkable state of preservation. The only problem confronting it is the access road that is maintained by Adams County, part of which has completely washed out, necessitating a detour through the Ramade Inn parking area.

The present appearance of The Briers:

The facade has a 15 ft. deep one story gallery extending across the entire width (approximately 80 ft.) of the front, the roof above being supported by ten Doric style columns, each 12 ft. in height. The front exterior wall which the gallery protects is plaster over brick and contains nine openings framed by the 10 columns and is completely symmetrical in all details. The center opening is the paneled entry door with arched fan light, side

lights, and with wood pilasters supporting a straight classic cornice with egg and dart detail. Flanking this opening on either side are three tall double hung mullioned windows with classic trim and panel below. The fourth opening on either side of the center entry door is a paneled door with arched fan light just the width of each door. Except at the center steps (which fan out to approximately 16 ft.) there is a simple wooden balustrade and railing the entire perimeter of the gallery. The porch levels to 4½ ft. above ground level.

In the roof above are four dormers with arched windows. Approximately 90% of the glass in all windows is the antique original glass.

The sides and rear of the house are horizontal ship-lap frame construction of cypress (original) believed to be over brick. Interior walls are plaster over brick made on the site. Interior floors are the original cypress wood.

The house is painted white with the exception of the facade under the gallery which is painted pale apricot. All columns and trim are white. Shutters on the two sides and the bannister railing on the front are dark green.

The grounds (of which approximately 8 acres are manicured) contain large live oaks, magnolias, dogwood, pecan, holly and azaleas. About 150 ft. from the house is a bluff with a magnificent view of the Mississippi River (about 200 ft. below and 1/4 mile away) and the flat Louisiana landscape.

The unusual floor plan of The Briers is described as follows: The house is a simple rectangle 80 ft. wide x 57 ft. deep. This includes the gallery across the front which is 15 ft. deep. From the gallery, one enters the entry hall which is 20 ft. deep. Flanking this hall are four rooms, two on either side (all 20 ft. deep as the entry hall). To the right are the parlor and a library. To the left are the dining room and a bedroom with bath. To the rear, the entry hall has double doors opening into a large living room or drawing room approximately 46 ft. long x 22 ft. deep. This room is divided along its length by 5 arches supported by square reeded wooden columns. There are twin staircases at the ends of the room to reach the upper floor. Across the back of the room are 9 double hung mullioned windows separated by slender reeded columns. To the left of this room is the kitchen, which at one time was an open porch, which led to a separate building housing the kitchen. To the right of this room is a small porch with a hallway and bath connecting to the library. From the kitchen on one side and this small porch on the other side, are two stairs with railings descending to the garden. In the rear the main floor of the house is about 10 ft. above ground level as the property slopes to the rear. There is a basement with brick floor under the rear half of the main floor. Ceilings on the main floor are 12 ft. in height.

The second floor has a bedroom on either end with a ballroom between. There are numerous large closets formed by the spaces flanking the 4 dormer windows on the front and the 2 dormer windows on the rear. Two of these closets have been made into bathrooms for the two bedrooms. Upstairs ceilings are 9 ft.

Basically, the physical appearance of The Briers has not changed since its construction. The simplicity and symmetry of its design fortunately made changes virtually impossible.

A photograph taken in 1911* shows the basic structure to be identical to that at present. No interior changes are known to have been made except as follows: Porch on left rear of main floor made into kitchen about 1927; 2 closets up and 2 closets down made into bath rooms about 1927.

Today the house is owned by Wilds & Canon Design, Inc. of which Robert E. Canon and Newton Wilds are stockholders. Mr. Canon and Mr. Wilds have restored the house and grounds into a near perfect state; and the house is furnished with their collection of antique English furniture including Queen Anne, Georgian, and Regency with a few pieces of Victorian (circa 1850). Backgrounds and colors reflect the style of the more vibrant English Regency period during which time the house was built.

*This photograph in the owners possession is a copy of a 1911 calendar distributed by Benoist Brothers, Natchez, Mississippi.

- Footnotes:
1. page 200, Jefferson Davis, Ex-President of the Confederate States of America, by Varina Howell Davis, 1890; also letter of Jefferson Davis to Mr. W. G. Irvine, dated October, 1889; and numerous other sources.
 2. page 55, The Papers of Jefferson Davis, Vol. 2, edited by James T. McIntosh, 1974; also Davis Papers, University of Alabama
 3. page 872, American State Papers.
 4. Chain-of-title edited by Campbell J. Miles for Arch R. Winter



Photo No. 1 - The Briars
Natchez vicinity
Adams County, Mississippi
William C. Allen
Mississippi Department of Archives
and History
June, 1976
East elevation

10/1

OCT 18 1976

AUG 24 1977



Photo No. 2 - The Briars

20/3

Natchez vicinity

Adams County, Mississippi

William C. Allen

Mississippi Department of Archives
and History

June, 1976

Drawing room - from southwest

AUG 24 1977

OCT 18 1976



Photo No. 3 - The Briars
Natchez vicinity
Adams County, Mississippi
William C. Allen

3 of 3

Mississippi Department of Archives
and History

June, 1976

Rear (west) gallery and enclosed porch -
from southeast

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THE BRIERS, 1975 PHOTO



THE BRIERS, PHOTO 1975



THE BRIERS, 1975 PHOTO



THE BRIERS, 1975 PHOTO



THE BRIERS, 1975 PHOTO



THE BRIERS, PHOTOGRAPHED ABOUT 1920



THE BRIERS. PHOTOGRAPHED 1911



(Extract from a letter to Mr. W. G. Irvine
from Ex-President Davis, dated
October, 1889, about three
months before his death.)

"The house at the Briers was built
by John Perkins, Sr., but was sold by
him when he removed to his plantation
on the Mississippi River. It was the
residence of William B. Howell, when I
married his daughter, Varina, on Feb.
26th, 1845. The room in which the
ceremony was performed, was the front
on the right of the hall entrance door.

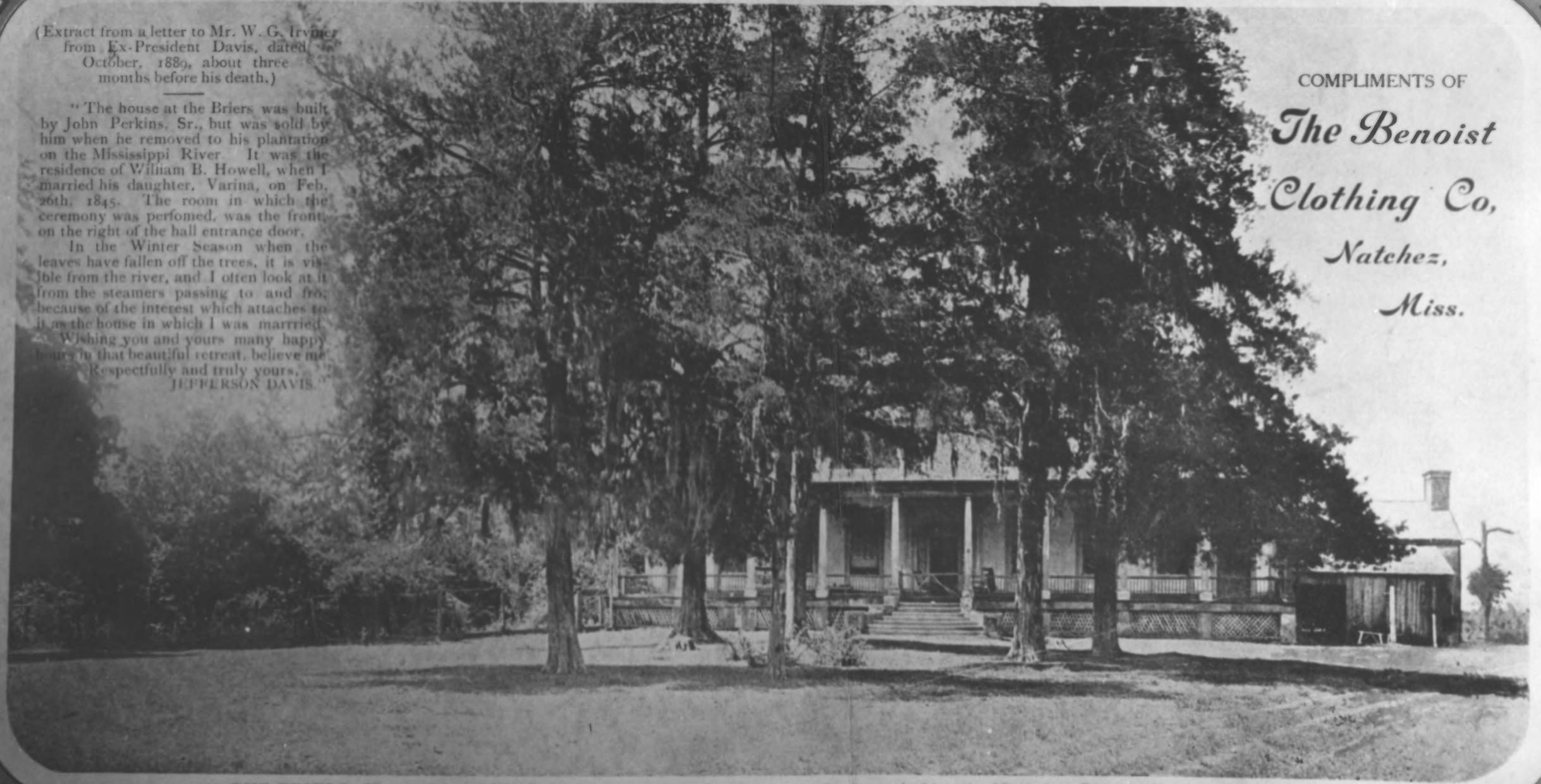
In the Winter Season when the
leaves have fallen off the trees, it is vis-
ible from the river, and I often look at it
from the steamers passing to and fro,
because of the interest which attaches to
it as the house in which I was married.

Wishing you and yours many happy
hours in that beautiful retreat, believe me
Respectfully and truly yours,

JEFFERSON DAVIS.

COMPLIMENTS OF

*The Benoist
Clothing Co.,
Natchez,
Miss.*



THE BRIERS—Home of the IRVINE family, situated on the picturesque Bluffs overlooking the Mississippi River at Natchez, Miss.

1911