Samuel Boyer Davis was raised by Isaac Ridgeway Trimble, his great-uncle by marriage, and his aunt, Maria Presstman Trimble, when his mother died, and his father, Alonzo B. Davis, a naval lieutenant, was at sea. Trimble enrolled the 15-year-old at MAC on October 20, 1859, just a few weeks after the college opened, and Davis stayed at least through the first academic year.

In April 1863, Davis was appointed a first lieutenant in the Confederate States Army as an aide-de-camp to Trimble and served with him at Gettysburg. Like his uncle, he was wounded and taken prisoner, escaping from the field hospital in which he received treatment the following month.

In June 1864, he was assigned to the staff of General John J. Winder at Camp Sumter in Georgia, also known as Andersonville, the infamous prison camp. Within weeks of his arrival at the prison, Winder sent Davis to the Confederate capital in Richmond with a letter describing the increasingly dire conditions at Andersonville and requesting improvements – to no avail. In August, camp commandant Captain Henry Wirz became ill, and twenty-year-old Lieutenant Davis took command in the interim, during the camp’s peak capacity of 32,000 prisoners and a death rate of approximately 100 per day.

Shortly afterwards, the Confederate Army began transferring prisoners to other locations to relieve the conditions.

Captain Wirz was the only officer tried, convicted, and hung for conspiracy and murder of Union prisoners at Andersonville, and it is generally believed he served as a scapegoat. In Davis’ 1892 memoir, entitled Escape of a Confederate Prisoner, he admitted that he “witnessed suffering in its bitterest form” at Andersonville, but disputed that any officers, including Wirz, were guilty of “premeditated cruelty.” But the very public position thrust upon Davis at the prison did put him at risk after his next assignment.

Back in Richmond, Davis was ready for adventure and impulsively accepted a mission to travel undercover to Canada to deliver dispatches. Using the alias Willoughby Cummings, he crossed the border successfully, but he was arrested on his return trip, when he was recognized by released Andersonville prisoners in Ohio. After a two-day court martial, he was found guilty of being a spy and sentenced to be hung on February 17, 1865. As informal appeals were made to federal authorities, Davis pondered his impending execution, writing to his cousin, David C. Trimble, that he was prepared to “die like a man & like a soldier.”

Davis received word the morning of his scheduled hanging that his sentence had been commuted by President Lincoln to life imprisonment. He was finally released in December 1865, several months after the end of the war. In later life, he captained steamboats on the Potomac River. Davis died in 1914.