

Soon after the capture of Jefferson Davis, Northern publishers distributed cartoons depicting the Confederate president fleeing in women's clothes. In fact, Davis was wearing his wife's raincoat and shawl but not a dress. He also was not carrying a knife.

Capturing a Confederate

by Paul D. Mehney

On the evening of April 2, 1865, Jefferson Davis, president of the Confederate States of America, fled Richmond, Virginia, as Union forces approached the rebel capital. During the following weeks, Davis and members of his government journeyed southward, hoping to reach Texas and rekindle the dying embers of the Confederacy. By early May, Davis—now the most wanted man in the United States because of the mistaken belief he had ordered Abraham Lincoln’s assassination—was believed to be in Georgia. There, his path crossed with a group of battle-hardened Michigan cavalymen who had been ordered to capture him.

In early May 1865 the Fourth Michigan Cavalry was bivouacked at Macon, Georgia. In two and one half years of fighting, the Fourth Michigan had earned “a reputation as a tough outfit capable of almost any task.” The regiment was commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Benjamin D. Pritchard. The University of Michigan Law School graduate had entered the Fourth Michigan as a captain in 1862, and following the Battle of Chickamauga, where he was wounded, Pritchard was promoted to lieutenant colonel.

Lieutenant Colonel Benjamin Pritchard led the Michigan troops who captured Jefferson Davis. He was commissioned brevet brigadier general for his role in the capture.



John Sickles collection unless otherwise noted

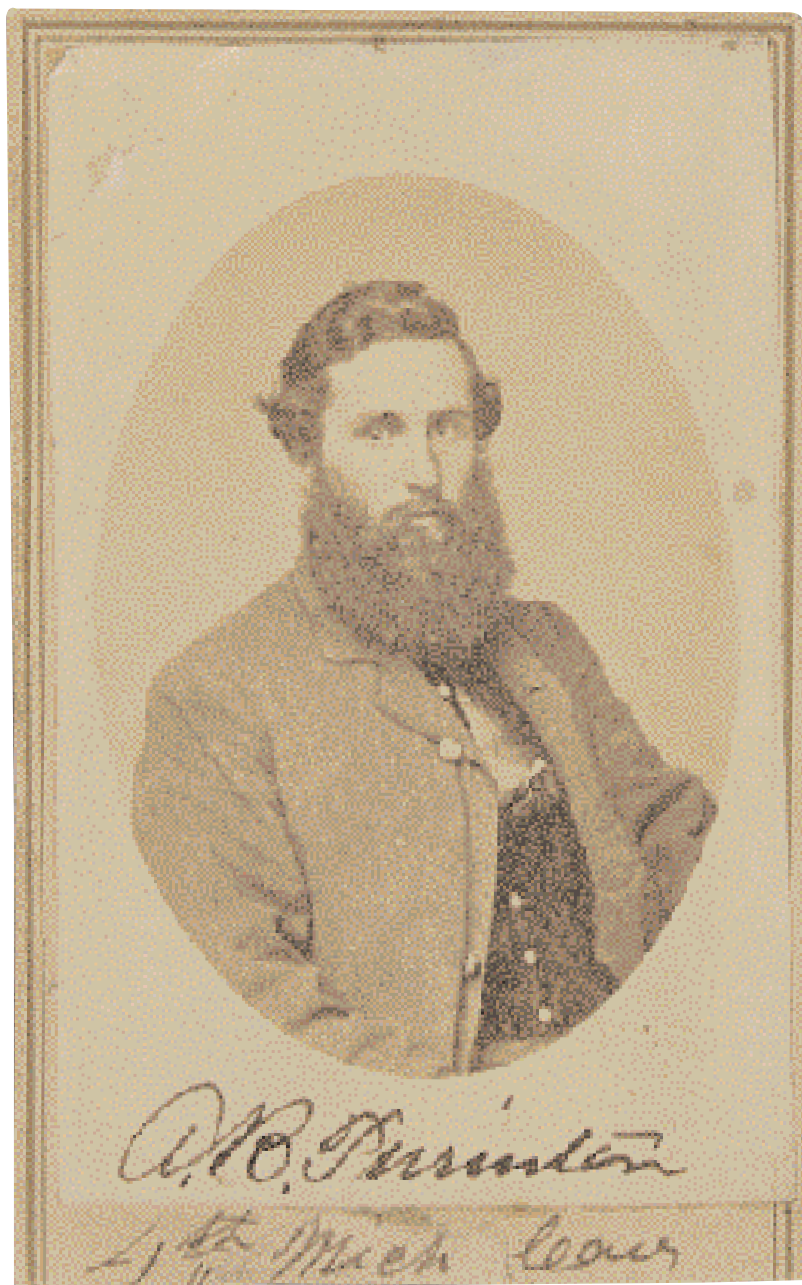
On May 7, 1865, Pritchard received orders to join the growing search for Davis. The Fourth Michigan was to picket the Ocmulgee River and “scout through the country.” At dusk, Pritchard, with more than four hundred troopers, left Macon.

Over twenty four hours later, the Michiganians reached Hawkinsville, fifty miles south of Macon. After a short rest, the regiment moved along the river to Abbeville. There, Pritchard encountered elements of the First Wisconsin

Cavalry and learned from its commander, Lieutenant Colonel Henry Harnden, that the Badgers were also on Davis’s trail. The two officers briefed each other, and Harnden told Pritchard that his men were on the way to Irwinville, about twenty miles south of Abbeville. According to Pritchard, “there was no plan of action agreed upon” since neither Harnden nor the Michigan colonel “knew anything about the roads.”

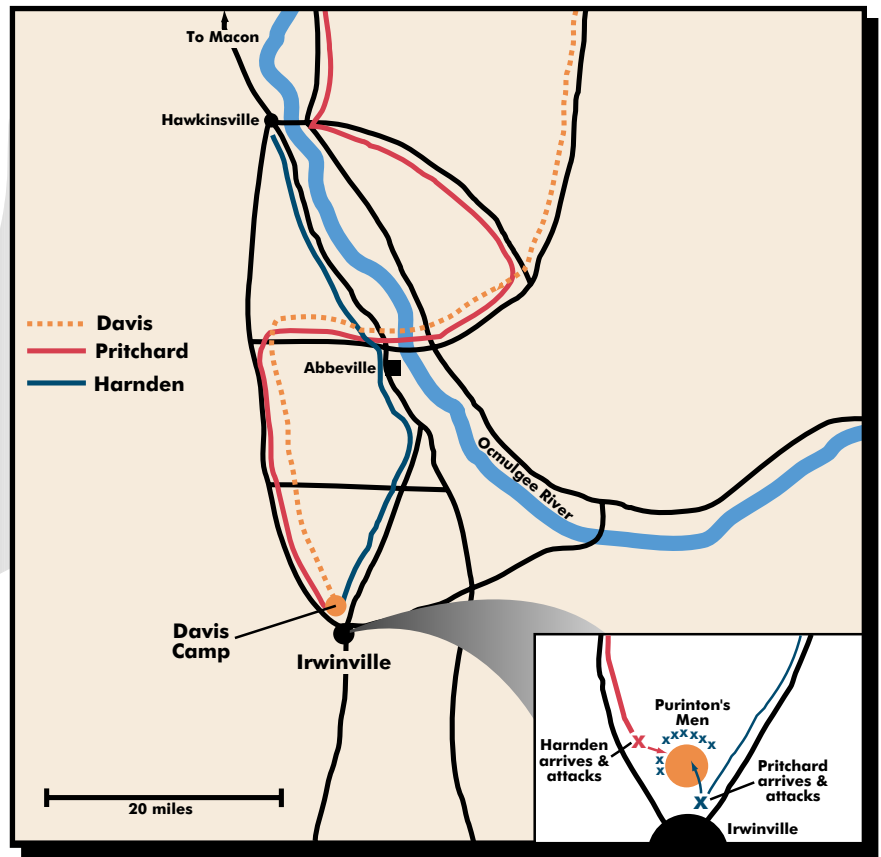
After leaving Harnden, Pritchard’s men continued along the river several miles south of Abbeville where a local resident told them that the previous night a party believed to include Davis had crossed the Ocmulgee above Abbeville. More important, Pritchard also learned there were two roads to Irwinville. Convinced that “no effort” on his part should be spared that might “aid or insure” Davis’s capture, Pritchard decided to follow the other road to Irwinville. With northern cavalry units on both roads, he hoped the unidentified rebel party “would fall in between the two commands.” Pritchard handpicked 136 men with the best horses to accompany him toward Irwinville. The rest of the Fourth Michigan stayed on the Ocmulgee near Abbeville.

After a seven-hour, eighteen-mile ride over “a blind woods road through an almost unbroken pine forest,” Pritchard arrived in Irwinville, a settlement of about half a dozen “slab-sided buildings.” It was about 1:00 A.M. on May 10. Much to Pritchard’s surprise, there was no trace of either Harnden or the rebel president. But Pritchard learned from the local inhabitants that a party had



Although his men fired on the First Wisconsin Cavalry, thirty-two-year-old Alfred Purinton of Coldwater was promoted for his actions during Davis’s capture.

The Trap Closes ON THE Confederate President



encamped about one and one half miles north of the town. Pritchard thought it was Harnden's men. But after learning that the party had tents and wagons, which the First Wisconsin was not carrying, it had to be someone else. Guided by a former slave, Pritchard immediately moved his command toward the camp, but not before giving "strict orders" that since the First Wisconsin might be in the same area, the Michiganians needed to learn "the character of all parties before firing upon them."

To block a potential escape route north along the road out of Irwinville, Pritchard ordered Second Lieutenant Alfred Purinton and twenty-five men to dismount, move west through the trees and place themselves on the north side of the rebel camp. Once again, Pritchard cautioned his men to identify their targets before firing. He also delayed attacking the camp since "the moon was getting low and it would be easy

for persons to escape to the woods and swamps in the darkness." It was about 2:00 A.M.

Two hours later, as the first dawn colored the sky, the Fourth Michigan charged the camp, which included Davis, his wife, Varina, and about twenty-five others. Colonel Burton Harrison, Davis's secretary, later recorded, "Colonel Pritchard and his regiment charged up the road from the south. As soon as one of them came within range I covered him with my revolver and was about to fire, but lowered the weapon when I perceived the attacking column so strong as to make resistance useless, and reflected that, by killing the man I should certainly not be helping ourselves." The rebels were so startled they had no time to escape or offer any resistance. Pritchard ordered his adjutant, twenty-one-year-old Julian Dickinson, to form a guard and secure the camp. About ten minutes later, Pritchard heard sharp fighting from the north.



Jefferson Davis used this compass to help navigate through the back roads of southern Georgia.

Leaving Dickinson's men, Pritchard took most of command and rode toward the sound of the shooting.

Listening to the distinct sounds of rapid gunfire, Pritchard realized the noise they were hearing was the sound of Spencer repeating carbines, which the Fourth Michigan and First Wisconsin carried. The Michigan colonel dismounted his men and threw out a skirmish line. The firing grew "very sharp on both sides" before Pritchard realized his men had been exchanging fire with Harnden's men. Pritchard ordered his men to stop firing, then spurred his horse past Purinton's line yelling to the Badgers that they were firing on the Fourth Michigan.

What had happened?

Purinton later explained that about an hour after reaching his position he heard mounted men approaching from the north. He continued,

I stepped out in person and halted them, and received the reply at first "Friends," when I ordered one to ride forward, which they refused to do. I then asked them what command they belonged to, when one replied, "By God, you are the men we are looking for." I then told them if we were the men they were looking for to come forward, when they immediately wheeled and fled, when I, supposing they must be the enemy, ordered my men to fire on them. In about five minutes I heard a column as I supposed approaching, and when they had arrived about at the same point as the others I halted them, saying, "Halt, who comes there?" (in a loud tone) and received no reply, but heard the officer in command give the order in a full and distinct voice, "Prepare to fight on foot." . . . As soon as they had formed their lines they commenced sending their horses back, and firing at once commenced on both sides.

The shooting lasted only five minutes, but the tragic mistake left two Michiganians dead and one wounded; the First Wisconsin suffered eight wounded.



Disguised as a woman, Davis might have been able to escape had not a trooper eyed the president's riding boots and spurs below his overcoat.



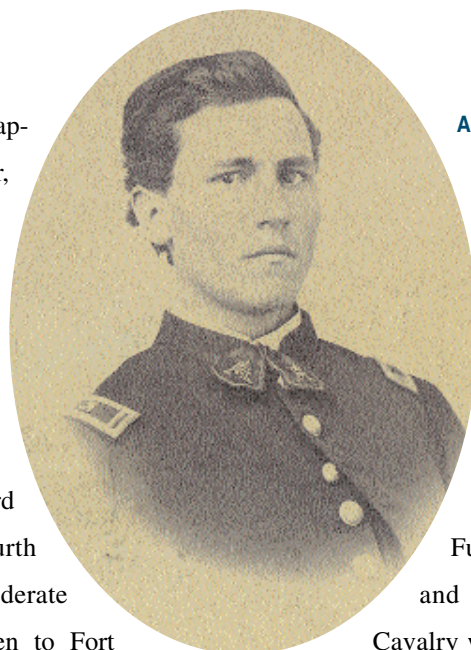
At the time of his capture, Jefferson Davis was wearing this coat under his wife's waterproof raglan. Colonel Pritchard took Davis's revolver as a souvenir. The revolver, coat, spurs and compass are all in the collections of the Museum of the Confederacy in Richmond, Virginia.

As Pritchard and Harnden sorted things out, Dickinson had his hands full back in the rebel camp. After Pritchard galloped off, Varina Davis conned trooper Andrew Bee, who was guarding her tent, to allow her “old mother” to go for water. As Bee stepped away, Mrs. Davis and a person dressed in a woman's overcoat and a black head shawl left the tent. Noticing that the person was wearing men's riding boots with spurs a trooper shouted, “There goes a man dressed in women's clothes!” Dickinson and Corporal George Munger rode over to the pair and order them to halt. The couple ignored the command until they were surrounded by several

troopers. Dickinson removed the shawl, revealing the Confederate president. As Davis later wrote, “I had gone perhaps fifteen yards when a trooper galloped up and ordered me to halt and surrender to which I gave a defiant answer. He leveled his carbine at me but I expected if he fired he would miss. My intention was to put my hand under his foot, tumble him off on the other side, spring into his saddle and escape.” The plan might have worked had Mrs. Davis not shielded her husband from the trooper's gun. Davis added, “Success depended on instantaneous action and recognizing that the opportunity had been lost I turned back.”

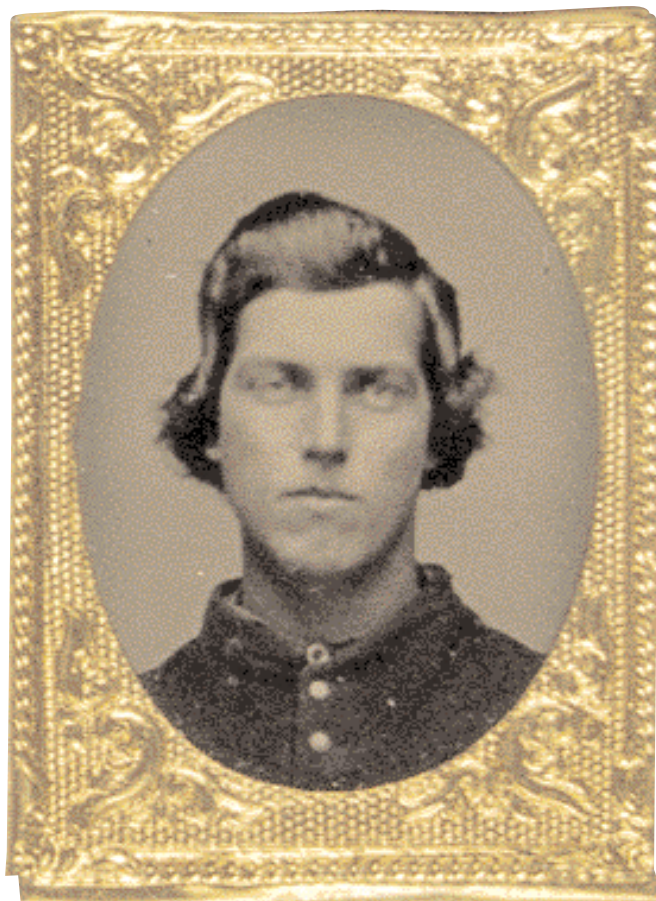
Pritchard allowed his men and their captives to eat breakfast and rest for one hour, then he loaded his dead and wounded into a wagon and left for Macon. While passing through a Union cavalry camp near Hawkinsville the Michigani-ans first learned of a \$100,000 reward that was promised by the federal government for Davis's capture. On May 15 Pritchard and twenty troopers from the Fourth Michigan escorted the former Confederate president to Washington, DC, and then to Fort Monroe, Virginia, where he was incarcerated.

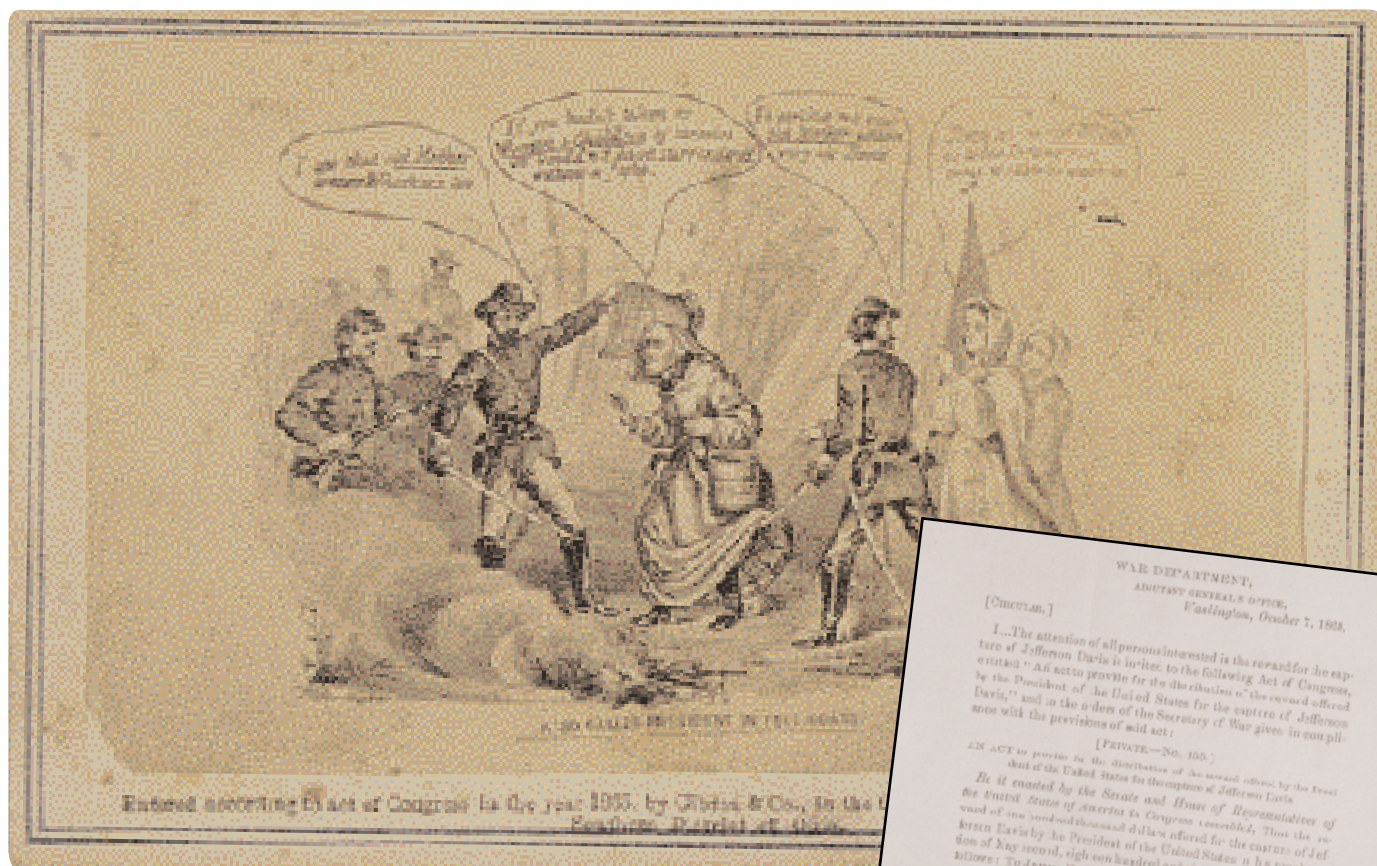
Davis was behind bars, but the matter of what happened outside of Irwinville during the early morning hours of May 10 was still being hotly debated. In his after-action report, Harnden contended that he had been duped by Pritchard into



Adjutant Julian Dickinson of Jackson (left) was left in charge of the rebel camp while his commander took the other members of the Fourth, including Martin L. Brown of Venice (bottom left) and Sergeant Elias Pierce of Sandstone (bottom right) to investigate gunfire coming from Purinton's position.

thinking that the Michigani-ans were not going to pursue Davis to Irwinville. Furthermore, "Had we not been waylaid and fired upon by the Fourth Michigan Cavalry we should without a doubt have captured Jeff Davis." Harnden's superior officer, Colonel Oscar La Grange, once the commander of the First Wisconsin, accused Pritchard of "unsoldierly selfishness" and deception that "resulted in unnecessary bloodshed and a sacrifice of lives for which no atonement can be made. What may have





Publishers sold thousands of satirical cartoons such as this one to commemorate the capture of the Confederate president. On October 7, 1868, Congress issued this statement (right) equally distributing the \$100,000 reward for Davis's capture between the Fourth Michigan and First Wisconsin.

been merely an act of bad faith toward a fellow soldier resulted in a crime."

Pritchard responded to these accusations that as he approached Irwinville he "had no thought" of being ahead of the First Wisconsin, especially since they had a substantial head start. Pritchard concluded, "I would not censure any one, for I believe each did what he believed to be right at the time and under the circumstances."

General James Wilson, commander of the cavalry corps that included both regiments, sided with Pritchard. In his after-action report, Wilson noted, "I do not think the strictures of Colonel La Grange are warranted by the facts. Colonel Pritchard would have been more culpable had he have remained in camp knowing the object of his search had already passed on. I am unwilling to believe him intentionally guilty of any act unbecoming of a good soldier."

In 1868 Congress authorized the reward money be equally

WAR DEPARTMENT,
ADJUTANT GENERAL'S OFFICE,
Washington, October 7, 1868.

[Circular.]

1. The attention of all persons interested is hereby called to the reward for the capture of Jefferson Davis is hereby, to the following Act of Congress, by the President of the United States for the capture of Jefferson Davis, and in the order of the Secretary of War given in compliance with the provisions of said act:

[PRIVATE.—No. 105.]

AN ACT to provide for the distribution of the reward offered by the United States for the capture of Jefferson Davis.

Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America in Congress assembled, That the reward of one hundred thousand dollars offered for the capture of Jefferson Davis by the President of the United States in his proclamation of May second, eight hundred and sixty-five, shall be paid as follows: To James H. Wilson, of the State of Illinois, late major general of volunteers, three thousand dollars; to Ferdinand D. Pritchard, of the State of Michigan, late lieutenant colonel of the Fourth Michigan Cavalry, three thousand dollars; to Henry Harrison of the State of Wisconsin, late lieutenant colonel of the First Wisconsin Cavalry, three thousand dollars; to Joseph A. O. Tamm, of the State of Iowa, late captain of the first Ohio Cavalry, three thousand dollars; and to the following officers, not less than one hundred dollars each, in proportion to the number of months which they were respectively entitled by law to the grade which they held at the time of said capture:

Officers and men of the Fourth Michigan Cavalry that were present at the capture of Jefferson Davis and party on the morning of May ten, eighteen hundred and sixty-five: Julius C. Dickison, adjutant; Perry J. Davis, regimental quartermaster; Charles Z. Hutton, captain company E; Silas F. Stanner, first lieutenant company G; Henry S. Bonnell, first lieutenant company C; (wounded); Alfred B. Furston, second lieutenant company I; John Bennett,

split between the two regiments. By that time, Davis, who was never brought to trial, had been released from prison and had returned home to Mississippi. Pritchard was back in Michigan, where he resumed his law practice in Allegan, married, fathered two children and served his adopted state as state treasurer. Today, at Irwinville, the state of Georgia operates the Jefferson Davis Memorial Historic Site where 135 years ago one of the final scenes of this nation's bloodiest conflict was acted out. ■

Paul D. Mehney is an assistant editor at *Michigan History Magazine*. A special thanks to John Sickles of Merrillville, Indiana; Carolyn Parsons of the Museum of the Confederacy in Richmond, Virginia; Tracey Standridge and Bryan Fagan of the Jefferson Davis Memorial State Historic Site at Irwinville and Charles Cusack of the State Archives of Michigan for assistance in the preparation of this article.