

It's Not The Alamo But Juneteenth

EDWARDS, HODEE

The Chicago Defender (National edition) (1921-1967); Jun 18, 1949;

ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Chicago Defender

pg. 13

It's Not The Alamo But Juneteenth

By HODEE EDWARDS

IT'S Juneteenth in Texas.

To Texans, the word means liberation from slavery and the time for celebration; for on Juneteenth (June 19), 84 years ago, Union troops finally arrived in the state, assuring freedom for the oppressed.

Lincoln had issued his Emancipation Proclamation freeing slaves in September, 1863. But actual liberation did not come to Negroes in the area until the troops arrived. The soldiers did not get to Texas until 1865.

When the Men in Blue did arrive, they were greeted not only by the slaves but by many whites to whom slavery was as abhorrent as it was unendurable to the Negroes.

In command of these troops was Major General Gordon Granger, a New Yorker by birth and one of the heroes of Chickamauga. His first act upon landing was to announce that henceforth all slaves in the great state were free. Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation had been issued on Sept. 23, 1863, and now its spirit was being made real for Texas.

Freedom, At Last

As word of this spread, out into the streets trooped thousands of people. The Negroes mingled with their many friends among white Texans. Spontaneously, the happy throngs tumbled along to the barbecue pits—Texas Negroes' contribution to the culinary delights of the nation. Pigs, cows, lambs, goats and fowl, so carefully concealed or even slaughtered at the approach of Confederate troops, were brought out now with abandon and roasted to juicy tenderness on the live coals. Stomachs were as full as hearts that day, with dancing to ease the strain on the one, while music let the ache from the other.

Freedom, At last! At last and overdue, at that.

For, the celebrants knew, whether any of them put the thought into words or not, that they had all—Negro and white—EARNED happiness. It was not being handed them on a silver platter by this welcomed federal officer. He merely confirmed an existing condition fought for and won within Texas itself by people of all national origins.

Slaves Were Not Passive

First and foremost, everyone knew then what their descendants were soon to be taught to forget: that the slaves themselves had never been passive under the lash. The slaveowners had lived in daily, hourly—and justified—fear. Moreover, everyone also knew—another fact their descendants still have someday to re-learn—that from the 1840's on, whenever slaves were caught or implicated in any anti-slavery or pro-Union act, white men were invariably also implicated, and punished with them.

It had been in October, 1835, they remembered, while Texas rebelled against Mexico, that a plot involving at least 100 slaves had been uncovered. These slaves had been arrested and many of them whipped nearly to death. Their "crime" was really serious in slaveowner eyes; their plan had been to divide the land after conquering their masters.

Early in July of 1860, fires had swept over the devastated cities and counties in northern Texas. Blame was at once fixed on scores of slaves, who, arrested, were beaten, tortured and executed. As always, white men were also implicated: the fires were ascribed to "abolitionists, preparing a revolt of slaves," and several white men were beaten, tortured and executed along with the slaves.

The following is a list of the counties in which plots were reported, cities burned, or rebels executed: Anderson, Austin, Dallas, Denton, Ellis, Grimes, Hemp-

stead, Lamar, Milam, Montgomery, Rusk, Tarrant, Walker and Wood.

Uprising Lasted 8 Weeks

These uprisings lasted some eight weeks. They were the answer of the slaves and white progressives to the anti-Union hysteria which swept Texas, as it did all the South, preceding and following the election of Abraham Lincoln—and deepening with the firing on Fort Sumter on April 12, 1861.

This hysteria against the Union was spread mainly by secret societies of the slaveholders, such as the Knights of the Golden Circle set up in Texas in 1860. It was implemented by illegal "vigilance committees" whose work was sampled in the hanging of three Negroes in Dallas that year, and of three white men on Fort Worth gallows for "tampering" with slaves.

Slaves resorted to strikes and sabotage during the war. A Texas slaveholder in 1863, greatly alarmed at the extent of damage caused by his slaves, is reported to have tried putting on an unmercifully cruel overseer, who beat and shot down slaves. Soon finding this measure of no avail, he even considered getting rid of his slaves and working "with my hands." Finally, slaves were extremely active in aiding Union spies, Confederate deserters and escaped Yankee prisoners.

The record of white Texans who aided the Union and the cause of Abolition before and during the Civil War was a proud one, too.

Despite the fact that 90 per cent of all white immigrants to Texas came from the old South, by 1848 two factions had developed in the state. One, led by Sam Houston, opposed the extension of slavery; the other, led by slavers, stood for "states rights;" that is, the unbridled expansion of slavery.

By 1857, the "states rights" faction had gained control of the Democratic Party, while the Whigs and "Know-Nothings" had both disappeared from the political

scene. As a result, Sam Houston was defeated for governor by an extreme pro-slavery man named Runnels.

Rabidly Pro-Slavery

For the next two years, no state in the South was more rabidly pro-slavery in its activity than Texas. But pro-Union and anti-slavery feeling in the state were strong enough that, in 1859, Sam Houston again won the governorship.

Pro-Union men supporting Governor Houston opposed demands for secession. Houston, argued that the South could protect "her own interests" better inside the Union than outside, refused requests to call a special session of the slaver-controlled legislature.

Thereupon, the secessionists appealed over his head to the voters of the state—which is, for all practical purposes, to say the white male slaveholders. A convention was called for January, 1861, to be comprised of two representatives from each political district.

Houston Outsmarted
Outsmarted, Houston hastily convened the legislature to January 21, 1861, a week before the convention was scheduled. The legislature authorized the convention to act for the people of Texas, but pro-Union sentiment forced them to add that the matter of secession was to be left to the electorate to decide.

When the convention met, on Jan. 28, it drew up the proposed ordinance of secession. Eight delegates defied hysteria to vote against it. They also opposed convention action in sending seven delegates to the Confederate Convention at Montgomery, Alabama. The convention adjourned on Feb. 5 to reconvene March 2, following the election.

Exceptions To Successions

When the vote was counted on secession, 46,129 pro-slave votes constituted a majority. Nevertheless, 14,697 white male Texans cast their vote for the Union. Ten counties around Austin gave the Union a majority. Even among

some heavy slave-holding counties, history recorded exceptions to the huge majority favoring secession.

On March 2, 1861, the reconvened convention, despite the fact that the vote for secession had not specifically authorized joining the Confederacy, took that step. Houston refused to pledge allegiance to the Southern government and said the convention had no authority to put Texas in the Confederacy. He was summarily removed from office.

Abraham Lincoln had offered federal aid if Houston would try to maintain his position by force. This far, Houston was not ready to go. His refusal undoubtedly was a contributing factor in what happened to the federal troops guarding the Texas border, the very troops which would have come to his aid had he been willing.

Twiggs Outmaneuvers Waite

Texas frontier garrisons were manned by 2700 Federal soldiers, constituting more than 10 per cent of the entire U. S. Regular Army at that time. Commanding these troops was one Major General D. E. Twiggs, a Georgian, with headquarters at San Antonio. Garrisons and equipment under his command were worth \$3,000,000. The entire national income around this time was estimated at \$10,000,000.

Following Lincoln's election, Twiggs had requested orders from his superiors. They gave him none. He then offered to resign, and his resignation was accepted. C. A. Waite was named to replace him. Waite never made it. Twiggs worked too fast.

Immediately the resignation became known, the Texas convention demanded that Twiggs surrender all public arms and munitions piously. Twiggs noted that such a step would not be "legal" before the vote on secession on March 2. The Texas Confederate troops, under Ben McCulloch, obliged by marching into San Antonio. Twiggs at

once came to terms. The agreement provided that the 160 Federal troops in the garrison were to leave, after surrendering Federal property. On Feb. 18, Twiggs completed his treason with a similar agreement covering all Federal garrisons in the state.

Resistance To Drop

After the firing on Fort Sumter, on April 12, 1861, McCulloch declared void the agreement with Twiggs. All 2700 of the Federal troops with their side arms and other equipment were impounded as prisoners of war for the duration.

In 1862, organized resistance to the draft in Texas had to be put down by martial law under Confederate General Magruder. Many Unionists left Texas early in the war, both to avoid the draft and to serve with the United States Army. Others hid out in the isolated wastes of Texas where they were joined by deserters from state and Confederate forces.

By Feb. of 1863, desertion had become such a problem in Texas that General Magruder called on the governor for aid in suppressing it. In Wise, Deaton, and neighboring counties, deserters became so numerous that "they intimidated loyal citizens," the General reported.

Scores were arrested, tried and convicted by the "vigilance committees." At Gainesville in Cooke County forty men were hanged for merely belonging to this organization. Five men were hanged in Wise county for the same offense. Forty more were condemned to death in Grayson county, but organized pressure forced the release of all but one of these.

The two trends of resistance to slavery and of struggle for the Union found dramatic expression in the last battle of the Civil War. This battle was fought in Texas at Palmito Ranch near Brownsville on May 13, 1865, two months after Appomattox. 300 Texas Confederates "defeated" two Negro regiments and a company, of un-