



Texas Navy Association

Historical Article



The Baytown Sun

Local seafarers had active role in Texas navy

By Wanda Orton

Contributor

Published April 12, 2009

Sea-going guys in the bay area helped win the war in the 1830s.

At long last, the Texas Navy is gaining recognition for its role in the struggle for independence from Mexico, and maritime leaders like the Scotts, the Spillmans and other locals played a key role in this nautical success story.

As early as 1832, when the revolution started heating up, Baytown area seafarers were busy on the bay, playing both offense and defense.

Who do you think prevented reinforcements from reaching that tariff tyrant, Col. Juan Bradburn at Fort Anahuac? Local men like David Kokernot, James Spillman and son, and William Scott and his sons – that's who.

Composed of three schooners with a total of 18 men aboard, the feisty flotilla sailed over Galveston and Trinity Bays, blockading any vessels destined for the Mexican garrison.

Capt. Kokernot, at the helm of the Red Rover, discovered one such vessel crossing Galveston Bay, gave chase and caught her.

Near the mouth of Double Bayou, Capt. Scott of the Stephen F. Austin, nabbed an Anahuac-bound boat, and Spillman, captain of

the Waterwitch, nailed two boats off Cedar Point.

These guys were typical of early Texans who lived on the waterfront, built boats and navigated them with confidence and competence.

Scott's home faced Scott Bay in the vicinity of the present-day ExxonMobil docks, while Kokernot had a home upstream. Today his domicile would be pinpointed on part of the Baytown Nature Center, formerly the Brownwood subdivision.

Spillman's place stood on an island directly opposite from Black Duck Bay, where the Baytown-La Porte Tunnel would be dug out in the next century.

By September 1835, Scott planted his sea legs on the ground, drilling the Lynchburg Volunteers for the Texas Army, but son George stayed afloat in the Texas Navy.

As a Navy man, George Scott participated in one of the most daring adventures of the Texas Revolution – the capture of the Correo – about the same time that his dad's Army unit was organizing and flaunting a battle flag with a lone star and the wording, "independence."

Young Scott served aboard the San Felipe, a schooner owned by brother-in-law Samuel May Williams and Thomas F. McKinney. The San Felipe's main claim to fame, before the Correo affair, was bringing the notable Stephen F. Austin back to Texas from Mexico after he had been released from prison.

Along with the steamboat Laura, also owned by Williams and

McKinney, the San Felipe sailed out of Velasco in pursuit of the Correo, a Mexican schooner of war commanded by Thomas M. Thompson, an Englishman whom the Texans hated.

Thompson had stirred their anger by capturing a sloop en route from Anahuac to Velasco and warning the folks in Anahuac that they better not form a militia. Furthermore, he threatened to hang William B. Travis and to seize the Texans' faithful little steamer, the Cayuga.

“Them’s fightin’ words!”

The Texans went after Thompson with a vengeance, capturing him and his vessel. Having been named the prize captain, George Scott had the honor of sailing the Correo to New Orleans where Thompson, allegedly lacking proper credentials in the Mexican government, faced charges of piracy.

His trial is another whole story in itself as it turned into a kind of comic opera, complete with lawyers yelling and throwing inkwells and books. The judge was so disgusted that he jailed the lawyers on both sides and released Thompson and his crew from the New Orleans jail.

The official Texas Navy was launched in 1836 with the purchase

of four vessels, the Independence, the Invincible, the Brutus and the Liberty. Thanks to the Big Four, plus various other schooners operating from Galveston to Tampico, Texans succeeded in dominating the coast and blocking reinforcements for Santa Anna's Army.

Historian Jonathan Jordan, author of “The Lone Star Navy,” said, “The Texas Navy, as much as the Battle of San Jacinto, saved Texas and thereby altered the history of the American west.”

Wanda Orton is a retired managing editor of The Baytown Sun.

Copyright © 2010 The Baytown Sun