



Texas Navy Association

Historical Article



Tom Toby - Forgotten Texas Privateer

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Standing out from Mississippi Pass, she spread her topsails to catch the freshening gulf breeze, main, and foresail billowing in the evening sun. West by south her course was laid; the old privateer was coming out of retirement at last. Once she had been the schooner-clipper Swift, most feared of the Baltimore based corsairs which sailed against the Spanish, but that was years ago. Now another proud flag fluttered from her main gaff, the Lone Star of the infant Republic of Texas. It was the spring of 1836 and the Texas privateer Tom Toby was leaving on her last war cruise.

The exploits of the Texas Navy have been fairly well recorded, but surprisingly little is remembered of the two privately owned vessels which sailed as privateers under letters of marque from the Republic of Texas. Both the schooner Terrible and the schooner-clipper Tom Toby were fitted out with this intent; but of the career and eventual end of the Terrible there seems to be no record other than she was captured by a U.S. Revenue cutter of Key West and brought in on suspicion of piracy. Of the Tom Toby, ex-Swift, the records are sketchy at best.

Continued complaints by the government brought an end to the Swift's career against Spanish shipping in the Caribbean in about 1820. From then on we have no record of her movements until early in 1836, when she was found laid up at New Orleans by a Henry G.

Heartt.

It seems likely that as the U.S. government successfully suppressed piracy in privateering in the eastern Caribbean, Swift moved her operations into the lesser patrolled Gulf of Mexico as did LaFitte, Autey, McGregor and other brethren of the coast.

"In 1836," states Heartt in a letter dated 1874, "I, a resident of this city of New Orleans and a partner in the commercial firm of James Reed & Co., along with other friends, took an active interest in the struggle for Texas independence. In May of that year I purchased the Baltimore schooner-clipper Swift and had her pierced for guns and fitted out at Algiers by Mr. Hassam, shipbuilder, and named her the Tom Toby in honor of my good friend Thomas Toby of this city, a strong supporter of the Texas movement."

Her new guns were acquired from James Breedlove, also of New Orleans. A pair of the fine brass cannon taken from a Spanish vessel, they bore the monogram of Carlos III and were named "El Canal" and El Fuelle." They were dated 1788.

Command of the new privateer was given to the former 1st lieutenant of the Texas Navy's sloop of war Brutus, Nathaniel Hoyt. First officer and sailing master was a Scotsman, James H. Urie, formerly of the Royal Navy.

Like a hurricane down the Mexican coast she flew, pouncing on

unsuspecting merchant ships while easily showing a clean pair of heels to Spanish men-of-war who gave chase. For over a year she was the scourge of the Gulf. Tampico, Vera Cruz, Campeche, she prowled their harbor approaches and sent her prizes home to Galveston in alarming numbers. She ambushed many Havana bound merchantmen and slipped into neutral ports in Jamaica and the Caymans to re-supply.

In 1837 she dropped her hook off the Texas Navy yard which then stood on the Strand between 27th and 28th streets at Galveston and was sold to the mercantile firm of Sweeney & Crayson to be fitted out for another war cruise. Her movements over the next few months are uncertain but she was again at the Texas Yard in October 1837.

After all of her years as a sea raider it is ironic and perhaps even sad that the stout little schooner would meet her end while anchored in the lee of her home port of Galveston. Gale force winds, pushed up by a tropical depression somewhere in the Gulf, roared across Galveston sending merchant ship and man-o-war alike scurrying for any available cover. When it ended several vessels were sunk or stranded, including the German schooner Eric, the Texas Navy's sloop of-war Brutus, and the privateer Tom Toby.

She was a total loss, hard aground and breaking up near Virginia Point just a little north of the present railroad causeway. There was no attempt made to save her guns or equipment, and Texas soon forgot all about its privateers. In the winter of 1864 a Confederate soldier walked his solitary picket line on the shores of Virginia Point,

his back bent against a blue norther. At low tide he was surprised to see a pair of brass cannon sticking out of the mud near shore. The find was reported but the waters of Galveston Bay covered the cannon before they could be removed and again they were forgotten.

Early in May of 1873 the two cannon were again found by a pair of wreckers. This time they were removed and sold to the Galveston Artillery after nearly 36 years on the bottom of the bay. They were displayed for a while at the plumbing and gas fitting establishment of Frank D. Harrar at the corner of Mechanic and 22 streets. Shortly thereafter, the Galveston Artillery ceased to exist as a military unit and the guns were sold to a local junk dealer and shipped out of the city. From that point on there is no record of what happened to the Spanish brass cannon of the Tom Toby, but in all probability they were melted down for scrap.

The rest of the Texas privateer still lies beneath the mud and shells somewhere just off Virginia Point. She was not far from Fort Hebert, whose ruins are still sometimes visible during low tides and which has shown up quite well under infrared photography. I know of no modern efforts to locate the wreck which, though she carried no treasure at the time of her sinking, would still contain many interesting and valuable artifacts of early Texas history.

*Note...The Terrible was owned by John Melville Allen and apparently carried only one gun. Her owner went on to fight at the Battle of San Jacinto, and in 1839 became the first mayor of Galveston.