

STERLING CLACK ROBERTSON

The following sketch of Major Sterling Clack Robertson was written by Judge Z. T. Fulmore, whose wife was a granddaughter of Major Robertson, and was published in The History and Geography of Texas as Told in County Names:

Sterling C. Robertson was born in Nashville, Tennessee, October 2, 1785, Tennessee at that time being a part of North Carolina. He was the son of Elija Robertson who accompanied Gen. James Robertson to the present site of Nashville and founded that city, Elija being associated with him in the enterprise. Elijah was a member of the General Assembly of North Carolina in 1798 and represented the political fortunes of that portion of Tennessee up to its admission into the Union as a separate state, being associated with Thomas Hardeman who was in the same assembly and also a member of the Convestion of 1788 which met at Hillsboro and the Convention of 1789, which met in Fayetteville, North Carolina, to deliberate upon the ratification of the United States Constitution.

Sterling C. Robertson was reared in Nashville with all the educational advantages the embryo city afforded. Upon the first call for volunteers he enlisted in the volunteer army of the United States and served against both the Indians and the British, and was finally promoted to the rank of Major and served with that rank on the staff of General Carroll at the battle of New Orleans, in January, 1815.

When Mexico achieved her independence from Spain his eye was turned to Texas and in 1823, made an extensive tour through the province

and was charmed with the prospect and upon his return to Nashville, determined to cast his fortunes with the country. In furtherance of his plan he interested himself and others in organizing a company for that purpose. After the Congress of the new Republic of Mexico had given over the matter of colonization to the states, Robert Leftwich was sent to Mexico to procure a contract to introduce 800 families.----

The date of the concession of Leftwich was April 15, 1825, and was the first contract made to colonize portions of Texas by the State of Coahuila and Texas. For reasons which need not be explained, the contract was made with Leftwich individually but it was in fact the Nashville Company's contract, and so recognized by Coahuila and Texas, as will be seen in the description of Austin's third or Little Colony, when it is called the 'Colony of the Nashville Company' in 1827.

Leftwich after securing the concession returned to Nashville where his health began to decline and he finally died. Robertson then took charge of the company's affairs, reorganizing the work, establishing his headquarters for officers of the company at a place on the Brazos near where the town of Marlin now stands. At the same time he settled further down the Brazos and established a village which he called 'Nashville' on a high bluff on the right bank of the river just above the present crossing of the river by the International and Great Northern Railway Company. This was to be the objective point of the settlers who were to be distributed from there to such locations as they chose to settle. It was made secure against the Indians and grew

to be quite a village. About ten miles below this point and where the old San Antonio crossed the Brazos was another point called 'Tenochtitlan' (Tenoxtitlan). A few miles above the village of Nashville a river flowed into the Brazos which had been called by the Spaniards San Andress, but the Spaniards had abandoned the old missions on the San Gabriel and left that region about seventy-five years previously the new settlers found it virtually without a name and called it 'Little River'. The protracted illness of Leftwich and the delays occasioned by the readjustment of the business of the Nashville Company, Robertson having in the meantime to assume full charge, delayed the introduction of immigrants so that not until 1829 did any settlers come into the colony. The original contract of the company required the fulfillment of the contract within six years from its date; in other words, the contract would expire April 14, 1831. In contemplation of this he secured a renewal of the contract and went actively to work in securing settlers in the colony.

In the meantime a new and most serious complication arose in the decree by the Mexican government for forbidding the introduction of any more American settlers into Texas. At the time of the decree Robertson was in the east organizing and equipping at his own expense companies of settlers for his colony and in 1830 and after the date of the decree, a long line of immigrants in charge of Alexander Thomson reached the boundry of Texas and there learned for the first time that they were forbidden by the decree to settle in Texas. It was wholly impracticable to return to Tennessee or Kentucky. They

had disposed of their homes and all their belongings and they concluded to enter Texas and risk the consequences, many of them finding an asylum in Austin's colony.

As Robertson had a valid contract still in existence permitting him to introduce settlers, he took the American view that the government could not destroy his vested rights. Consequently he continued the work of his enterprise.

At this point Mary Virginia Henderson is¹ quoted:

An examination of the records shows that little was done by the company before the passage of the Law of April 6, 1830, or before the expiration of the term of the parties mentioned Robertson and (Benjamin R.) Foster during the years 1825, 1826, and 1827, but each had returned without accomplishing its purpose.

In November, 1830, just a few months before the expiration of the contract, Sterling C. Robertson and Alexander Thomson with eight or nine families attempted to reach the territory of the Nashville Company. Since they did not possess the passports required of all Americans² by the law of April 6, 1830, Colonel Piedras, the military commander at Nacogdoches, refused to allow them to proceed to the colony. But Colonel Piedras did grant permission to Robertson and Thomson to go to Austin's Colony to attend to some business. The permission was granted on the condition that they leave the

~~families at Nacogdoches to await their return, that they return in~~
1. Mary Virginia Henderson, Minor Empresario Contracts for the Colonization of Texas, 1825-1834, published in The Southwestern Quarterly, XXXI, 319.

2. Translation of Empresario Contracts, 237.

twenty days, and then leave the Republic.³ After a few days Robertson and Thomson returned one dark night, stole the families away and rushed on to Austin's colony. When the Mexican authorities were aware of what had happened, they issued orders to all military and civil authorities in Texas to expell them from the nation.⁴

Again quoting Judge Fulmore:

In the meantime the decree of April 6, 1830 was repealed but now arose anew difficulty.

The Congress of Coahuila and Texas having been informed of the disobedience to the decree forbidding the introduction of any more settlers from the United States, the contract of the Nashville Company was cancelled and the region embraced in his contract was given over to Austin and Williams February 25, 1831. It took over three years for Robertson to have this order annulled and the Nashville Company restored which was done April 29, 1834. Desiring that settlers already in his colony should not be left to themselves and to carry out his contract at all hazards, he continued to introduce settlers but on the 18th of May, 1835, it was restored to Austin and Williams and matters were in this situation when the Texas Revolution broke out in October, 1835.

On November 27, 1835 the Consultation ordered all the land offices in Texas closed.⁵ Robert Peebles and C. C. Dyer were appointed to close the office of the Robertson Colony. These men went to Viesca,

3. Piedras to Austin, November 12, 1830. Translation of Empresario Contracts, 236.

4. Translation of Empresario Contracts, 237.

5. H. P. N. Gammel, Laws of Texas, I, 540-541.

the headquarter of the colony, and there presented in writing the following order:

Viesca Novr. 27th. 1835

To William H Steele

Sir

In compliance with an ordinance passed by the chosen Delegates of all Texas in general convention assembled on the 14th. Inst. to take charge of all the archives belonging to the different land offices in the Department of Brazos and deposit the same in safe places secure from the ravages of fire or the devastation of enemies, and directed to us as commissioners to carry the same into effect, we require of you forthwith to deliver over to us, all the books, documents, and papers, contained in the land offices now under your charge at this place.

With due consideration we are

Respectfully &c

Robt. Peebles

We certify the foregoing to be a

C c Dyer

Copy of the original communication

to Wm H Steele

Robt Peebles G. C. Dyer⁶

Mr. Steele handed them the following reply:

Commission of Colonization

for the Nashville Colony

(Nov. 27, 1835)

6. William C. Binkley (ed) Official Correspondence of the Texan Revolution I, 149-150.

To Messrs Peebles & Dyer

Gentlm

I received your communication dated Viesca Novr 27, 1835, in which you as the Commissioners of the Delegates of Texas in Convention assembled, require of me to deliver to you forthwith all the Books, documents &c belonging to the Archives of this colony now under my charge, and in answer to which I must say that the authority under which I now discharge the duty of Commissioner of this Colony is the Colonization law and the Constitution of the state of Coahuila & Texas and that of the General Government of Mexico, that when the People of Texas elected a consultation they delegated to them no power whatever to Legislate, they were elected alone to advise the people of their condition, and if possible to advise measures to sustain the constitution and laws, and not in any wise to trample upon the Colonization law of the 24th March 1825, and at this time to sustain that law and the Constitution our Fellow Citizens are in arms, and in conclusion I am forced to say that I cannot recognize in said consultation or any person acting under their authority any right whatever to demand or receive of me the Archives of this Colony under my charge.

yrs verry Respy

W. H. Steele ⁷

On December 2, the General Council of the Provisional Government ordered J. L. Hood to arrest Mr. Steele and bring him before the council⁸

7. ¹bid.

8. H. P. N. Gammel, Laws of Texas, I, 947.

The minutes of the General Council of December 17 show that:

Mr. Steele came before the Council and stated that the warrant to arrest him had not been served upon him, but hearing that one had been issued, he appeared for the purpose of explaining the circumstances of his refusal.

He stated that the citizens of Viesca did not consider that their delegates were clothed with conventional powers, but that they generally approved of the doings of the Convention, so far as they were informed of them; that he lived at a great distance from the seat of Government from which communications were very uncertain. That as he had been informed of the provisions of the organic law, no such powers were given as claimed by the commissioners, one of whom was a commissioner for issuing titles under Austin and Williams, who claimed to be empresarios of that colony. That the refusal was made through misunderstanding, and in the moment of excitement, and not from any disrespect to the Government or its authorities. With this explanation he submitted himself to the Council.

On motion of Mr. Royall.

Resolved, that this council is satisfied with the explanation made by Mr. Steel, that his refusal to deliver up the archives of the land office under his charge, was made under a misunderstanding, and not from any disrespect to the Government or its authorities.⁹

During this controversy Major Robertson was in Tennessee where
9. Ibid, 677.

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he had been since in July trying to induce citizens there to emigrate to Texas and settle in his colony. On his return he arrived at Viesca December 6 with fifteen families; other families having proceeded him and still others on their way. On December 18 he petitioned the Provisional Government to permit him to issue land titles to those with whom he had contracted. In his petition he stated that when he left Texas in July "all was then favorable & pacific in the country, except some local discontents, which he had no expectation would either involve the country in war, or operate a change in Govt." 10

Again quoting Judge Fulmore:

The first clash of arms of the Texas Revolution on the 2nd of October, 1835 was at Gonzales, Texas. Robertson at this time was busily engaged in the east, organizing and equipping settlers for his colony. As soon as the news of a clash of arms reached him he hastened back to Texas and found that an election was soon to take place for delegates to a Convention to meet on the Brazos, and he and his nephew, Geo. G. Childress, were elected delegates to represent the Municipality of Viesca, later known as Milam. He took his seat in that convention participating in all the deliberations, until a day or two before adjournment, when, hearing the news of the fall of the Alamo, he hastened to his colony, had all the important land papers and other evidence of title belonging to his colonists securely packed in a box, placed in a cart drawn by a yoke of oxen, and entrusted the same to his son, then only fourteen years old, with orders to take them beyond the limits of Texas.

10. William C. Binkley, Official Correspondence of the Texan Revolution, I, 218.

He then organized a company and proceeded with all dispatch to join the army of Gen. Houston, then on its way to San Jacinto. Whether he overtook Houston, in time to participate in that battle is not certainly known. His name does not appear in the official list prepared by Gen. Houston's direction. On the other hand a donation certificate of six hundred and forty acres of land was issued to him for participation in that battle before the issuance of which, strict proof was required by law. When matters had settled down after the battle many left the army by permission to look for their fleeing families who had left their homes upon the approach of Santa Anna's army and Robertson left to find his son, who had been sent with the archives of his colony to a place of safety, and after finding him with the archives he returned. At the election in that year he was chosen Senator in the first Congress of the Republic from the Milam District and served in that body until the expiration of his term in 1839 and retired to devote his exclusive attention to his land matters which we have already seen were in a most complicated condition at the beginning of the Revolution in 1835.---

Major Robertson came to Texas to make it his permanent home in November 1830, opening his headquarters near the falls of the Brazos near the falls of the Brazos near the present town of Marlin, where he laid out a town which he names Sarahville de Viesca, named after his mother, Sarah, and Jose Maria Viesca, Governor of Coahuila and Texas. He later laid out the town of Nashville, further down the Brazos, the site of which is in the present County of Milam, and which was

named for Nashville, Tennessee.

Judge Fulmore, who married a granddaughter of Major Robertson, was somewhat confused regarding Major Robertson's activities in 1835 and 1836. He was mistaken in saying that when Major Robertson "hastened back to Texas" he found that an election was soon to take place for delegates to the convention. As has been shown on his return he reached his colony December 6, 1835. The election was held February 1, 1836. On that date he happened to be near the present town of Wheelock, Robertson county, and he voted there at the home of James Dunn.¹¹

This writer has been unable to find reliable evidence to substantiate Judge Fulmore's statement that Major Robertson "organized a company and proceeded with all dispatch to join the army of Gen. Houston."

On January 17, 1836 Major Robertson recruited a company of volunteers of which he was elected Captain. The names of the sixty four men who formed the company are listed on page 119 of the army rolls in the General Land Office under the caption: "Muster Roll of Capt. Robertson's Co. Rangers mustered into service on the 17th January, 1836, afterwards commanded by Capt. Calvin Boales." This company disbanded, however, before the Spring campaign.¹²

At Washington, Texas on March 5, 1836 General Houston addressed the following order to Major Robertson:

- Sir--You will proceed forthwith to the United States and are
11. Convention Election Returns, Archives, Texas State Library.
 12. "--and its organization (merely nominal) fell to pieces. It is probable that the full company never met at all--George W. Tyler, The History of Bell County, 28.

hereby authorized to raise such number of Troops as may be in your power for the service of Texas for two years or during the present war - - in the event of a company or Regiment being raised the men shall have the power of electing their own officers who will report their command to the Head Quarters of the Army of Texas without delay.¹³

That he did not "proceed forthwith" is evidenced by the fact that on December 22, 1845 Bounty Certificate No. 10043 for 640 acres of land was issued in his name, but delivered to his son, due him for having served in the army from April 20 to September 20, 1836.¹⁴

Judge Fulmore was mistaken when he stated that Major Robertson was issued a donation certificate for participation in the battle of San Jacinto. The General Land Office was opened late in the year 1837 and Major Robertson died in 1842 without applying for a donation certificate. His name is not on the army rolls in the Land Office among those who were detailed to remain at Harrisburg but on May 1, 1846 Donation Certificate No. 7 for 640 acres of land was issued in Major Robertson's name, due him "for having been detailed to guard the encampment near Harrisburg April 21, 1836."¹⁵

The following item regarding Major Robertson published in the Nashville (Tennessee) Banner was republished in the Richmond (Virginia) Enquirer, June 12th, 1836:

EVENTS IN THE WEST AND SOUTH TEXAS

We have no late, important intelligence from this fine country -
13. Amelia W. Williams and Eugene C. Barker, (eds) The Writings of Sam Houston, I, 362.

14. File 496 Milam Bounty, General Land Office.

15. File 494 Milam Donation.

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but we understand, that the two intelligent Commissioners, (Messrs. Collingsworth and Grayson,) have arrived at Washington City - have held conferences with the President - and express the strongest assurances of the ultimate and complete triumph of the Texian cause. We have a few items, however, which we lay before our readers under this head:

(From the Nashville Banner)

Extract of a letter, from Colonel Sterling C. Robertson of Texas, to his friend at Nashville, dated May 26, 1836, at San Augustine, Texas.

I am sent on here, by the commanding general, to try and raise some recruits for the army which is not on its march to San Antonio; at which place there are some fears, that the Mexican army, may make another stand; although they have been ordered by Santa Anna, to march out of the country, to Monte del Rey in the State of Nova Leon. The panic prevalent among the citizens of Texas, was not to be compared with that of the Mexican army, when they heard of the defeat and capture of Santa Anna, Cos, Almonte, &c. I went in pursuit of those who escaped from the field of battle, and those that were in the rear of the reinforcement, commanded by Cos; and left as a guard for his baggage. -- They appeared to have been frightened nearly to death. Every hundred yards on the road, for twenty miles they had thrown away some of their plunder, and a whole mule load could have been collected, frequently in the distance of a mile; and often the mule with his pack on his pack, being run down, was left on the roadside. They

left the main road, and went through the prairie; and travelled all night, to enable them to reach the Brazos; where the division of Sezema lay, or was crossing the river, at a place called Fort Bend; about forty miles below San Felipe.

I there joined a detachment of mounted men and went on a reconnoitering trip, in pursuit of Sezema, and Filasola, on their retreat out of the country. From every appearance presented, by scattered baggage, muskets thrown away, and mules left bogged in the mud, the panic appeared even greater, than among the fugitives from the field of battle. They left fifty mules and fourteen baggage wagons, in the mud in the distance of ten miles, buried one piece of cannon and threw at least one thousand stand of arms in the river San Bernard. When the advance of the detachment came up with them, they said they were getting out of the country as fast as they could; and would obey the orders of Santa Anna, and go on to Monte Del Ray, by the way of San Antonio - We could have taken at least 1000 men of them, with all of their mules, and baggage and cannon, if we had been allowed to do so, but as a treat was on hand we were ordered not to molest them. If I had had the command, I would have endeavoured to have misconstrued my orders, and at least taken their cannon and arms from them. They had ten pieces of cannon - six pounders; and an immense quantity of plunder, which they had taken from the houses of the citizens of Texas, after they had left them. Our men were all anxious for the contest; flushed with victory, and full of resentment against the Mexicans. On the other hand, the officers and soldiers,

were nearly frightened to death; and would have surrendered, in one moment, and I think without the firing of a gun. I have no doubt, General Rusk regrets, that it was not done, as nothing has been done with regard to the treaty; and he is now on his march after them to San Antonio; at which place I expect we shall have them to fight, unless we can show a respectable army. If we do, I think they will acknowledge our independence. Two expresses, in the last two days, have gone on from General Gaines, to the headquarters of the Texian and Mexican armies. Some think he offers mediation of the United States between the parties, and others, that the United States have bought the country.

Yours respectfully,

STERLING C. ROBERTSON."

The records in Spanish Archives in the General Land Office show that between January 5 and July 2, 1835 Major Robertson received title to a total of thirty four leagues and one labor of land from the Mexican government.

Major Robertson was a member of the senate of the First and Second Congresses of the Republic, representing the district of Milam county. He died in Robertson county, March 4, 1842, and was buried across the Brazos River in Milam county in the cemetery at Nashville. His remains were removed by the State of Texas and on January 28, 1935, reinterred in the State Cemetery at Austin where a monument was erected at his now grave.

The Act of the legislature creating Robertson county, Texas, De-

ember 14, 1837 failed to state for whom it was named.¹⁶ Rev. Thrall in 1879, said it was named for Sterling C. Robertson.¹⁷

General Elijah Sterling Clack Robertson, son of Major Robertson and Frances King was born in Giles County, Tennessee, August 23, 1820. He was married July 29, 1846 in Robertson county by H. Reed, Probate Judge to Eliza Hamer Robertson, who was born December 15, 1824 in Davidson County, Tennessee and died March 25, 1852 at Austin, Texas. By the union the following children were born: Sterling, born August 7, 1847 in Robertson County and died August 26, 1847; Sterling Clack, born April 20, 1849 in Austin and died January 2, 1915 in San Antonio and was buried in Salado; and Eliza Medora Susan Robertson, born in Austin, Texas, December 29, 1851 and died August 10, 1858 at Salado.

General Robertson was married November 8, 1852 at Austin by Rev. B. J. Smith to Mary Elizabeth Dickey, who was born September 22, 1834 at Paris, Henry County, Tennessee, and died December 11, 1882. Mr. Robertson died October 8, 1879. The two are buried in marked graves in the Robertson family cemetery in Salado, Texas.

Children of E. S. C. and Mary E. (Dickey) Robertson were Randolph, who married Mrs. Mary Huckabee (Cochrane); Lauella, who married Zachary Taylor Fulmore; Huling Parker, who married Mary Catlin Cooke; Marion, who married Lola Mary Taylor; Maclin, who married Alice Johnson Woods; Mary Sterling, who married Richard Henry Harrison; Eliza Sophia, who married Cone Johnson; Imogene, who married James Archibald Camel; Lela S., who married Eugene Floyd Ikard; and Celesta Teresa Robertson, who married James W. Durst.

16. H. P. N. Gammel, Laws of Texas, I, 1398.

17. Homes S. Thrall, A Pictorial History of Texas, 691.

Mrs. Lela S. Robertson, only surviving child of General Robertson, was in March, 1940 residing at 4822 Swiss Avenue, Dallas.

Some of the surviving grandchildren of General Robertson in 1940 were Westbrook Robertson, 118 East Courtland Place, San Antonio; Iran Randolph Robertson, 1742 West Gammaerney Place, San Antonio; Huling P. Robertson, 3821 Potomac Avenue, Dallas; Maclin Robertson, Salado; Elijah S. C. Robertson, Salado; Gordon Robertson, 4149 Prescott Street, Dallas; Mrs. Thomas Shelton Sutherland, Austin; Mrs. Dallas Duncan McLean, Belton; Mrs. Birdie Alice Howell, 1600 Congress Avenue, Austin; Mrs. James M. West, 2106 Crawford Street, Houston; Mrs. W. E. Harlee, 1753 Lamont Avenue, Washington, D. C.; Sterling Fulmore, Austin.