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COLONEL AMASA TURNER'S REMINISCENCES OF
GALVESTON.

FRANCES HARWOOD.

[Colonel Turner was born in Plymouth county, Mass., November 9, 1800. He lived there until he was twenty-five years old, with the exception of two years spent in New York (1822-24). In 1825 he left Boston for Mobile, Alabama. After remaining in Alabama ten years he emigrated to Texas in April, 1835. He was so pleased with Texas that he declared his intention of becoming a citizen, and received a certificate of "headright" to a league and labor of land. October, 1835, he joined the armed citizens of the country in the campaign against Bexar. After the capitulation of that place he returned to San Felipe, where the Council of the Provisional Government was in session, and was presented with a commission in the First Infantry, Regular Army of Texas. As he was on his way to visit his family in Mobile, General Houston gave him orders to recruit as many men for the Texas army as possible. In Mobile he found it difficult to raise recruits, but during the few days that he remained in New Orleans on his return, he obtained one hundred men; to which number he added enough men to make two full companies soon after landing in Velasco, early in February. One of these companies he enlisted for two years as regulars; while the other, which elected Richard Roman as captain, was mustered in for two years as permanent volunteers. He soon received orders to join with these two companies the main army, supposed to be at Gonzales; but on starting he met General Houston on the Colorado river and they fell back first to the Brazos, and then to Harrisburg, where they heard of the movements of General Santa Anna's army. The campaign ended at San Jacinto.

In 1839 and '40 he improved a plantation on Cedar Bayou, Harris county, but divided his time between that place and Galveston until 1848, when he moved to the Navidad, in Lavaca county, and began to farm. While enjoying this pleasant home he was elected, in 1852, to represent Lavaca and Gonzales in the lower house of the State Legislature, and again in 1854 to represent the counties of Lavaca and De Witt. In 1865 he moved to Gonzales, where he remained until his death in 187—.

At his home in Gonzales, March 20th, 1876, Colonel Turner made notes of some of his recollections of Galveston's early days. On these notes is based the following paper.—F. H.]

In 1836 Colonel Turner belonged to the army of Texas under the command of Major General Sam Houston. On the fourth day of May, 1836, he was ordered with his command (Company B, First Infantry Regulars) to go on board the steamboat Yellow

Stone, which was then lying on the camp at Buffalo Bayou, one mile above Lynchburg. He was to proceed to Galveston with the prisoners taken at San Jacinto and report for duty to Colonel James Morgan, who was then in command of Post Galveston. 'We arrived at Galveston,' says Colonel Turner, 'about midnight on the fifth.' 'I disembarked with my company, lay down on the sand and slept soundly until the next morning, when I reported as ordered after guard mount.'¹

Post Galveston was situated on the extreme eastern end of the island on what was afterwards termed "the Reserve." When the city was surveyed the government reserved all east of a bayou, the amount being seventy-five acres more or less, for public uses. The line ran from the head of this inlet, a little east of south to the nearest point on the gulf shore. Colonel Turner says, 'When I last visited the place, but little of this reserve remained; or it was so washed that I could scarcely recognize the place where our old quarters were situated.'

Colonel Turner remained at Post Galveston until July 20, 1836, when he was promoted to the command of his regiment, and ordered to headquarters on the Lavaca in Jackson county. He stayed at Camp Johnston until the following December when he visited Columbia during the session of the first congress, and tendered his resignation to the Secretary of War. President Houston refused to accept it, but agreed that he should have a furlough of sufficient length to enable him to go back to Mobile, where his family still lived, move them to Galveston, and then take command of the post.

'I had,' he says, 'now accomplished what I had in view in resigning my commission in the army—to wit, the settlement of my family at Galveston. I chartered a schooner of one hundred tons that drew nine feet of water, loaded her with lumber, took my family on board, and sailed for Galveston. I arrived in Galveston Bay on the sixth of February, 1837, four days after leaving Mobile. As the captain of the vessel had never crossed the bar, and as there were no pilots at that time I agreed in the charter to pilot the vessel in myself; but I tremble when I think of it, for my wife and

¹Single quotation marks, in this article, will indicate that slight changes have been made in the phraseology, while double marks will show a literal quotation of Colonel Turner's words.

children and every cent of property that I possessed, except some land, were on board that vessel. On the seventh day of February I relieved Major Moreland of the command of Post Galveston. Major Moreland had anticipated my arrival and had detailed from among the Mexican prisoners a gang of experts to erect for the accommodation of my family a "casa grande," and on my arrival I found it completed.'

This house consisted of one room, ten by eleven feet, made of wire grass sods taken from the shore of the bay, cut in shape with spades, with the roof thatched with grass. A chimney and fireplace, and a hole through which to enter completes the description of this "casa grande" which was very durable if not reached by high tide.

Colonel Turner remained in command of Post Galveston until August the fifth, when his resignation was accepted. Soon after this he received the position of boarding officer from Gail Borden, Jr., collector at Galveston. The first custom-house used at Galveston was the old Mexican custom-house, which had been used as commissary quarters by Colonel Morgan, and which had afterwards been repaired and occupied as a dwelling by Colonel Turner and his family; but now the lower rooms were offered by Colonel Turner to Mr. Borden until a proper building could be erected for a custom-house.

Colonel Turner writes, "The first duties collected were in June (I think), 1837, and the first consignee that paid duties was W. M. Cook, who settled at Houston. The first clerk employed by Collector Borden was David Murphree, who was first lieutenant of Captain Wm. H. Patton's company, Second Regiment, Texas Volunteers."

A contract was closed by Borden in August 1837 for the building of a new custom-house, which was to be completed by the first of October. It was to stand on the northwest corner of Strand and Tremont Streets. The keys were delivered to the collector two days before the great storm of 1837, which blew it down and, it is supposed, washed it out to sea, as no vestige of it was ever found afterwards.

About this time, August 1837, the survey of most of the city had been made by J. C. Groesbeck, and the first plot of the city by Harrison Sandusky.

Improvements in the way of building began. McKinney and Williams commenced erecting a large warehouse at the shore end of the wharf which is now called by their name. Collector Borden began to gather material to build his residence in the southwestern portion of the city. Some other temporary and small improvements were made on Mechanics Street. Vessels from the North began to arrive with goods, principally for Houston, as that city, having been made the capital of the State, improved rapidly.

There were about thirty foreign vessels in Galveston harbor when the great storm commenced on Oct. 1, 1837. It began with a wind from the south-east and held to that quarter mostly for three days; then it veered a little to the east and so continued to the sixth day, filling the bay very full, making a three or four foot rise at Houston. On the evening of the seventh the wind veered to the north-east and blew very strong. The *Tom Toby*, a privateer, parted her chains and went ashore above Virginia Point. About sunset the wind, veering all the time to the north, and if possible increasing, brought the large volume of water from the bay ashore with such force and volume as to sweep everything in its course. Only one of the vessels held its mooring, while the others drifted ashore, some higher than others, according to size and tonnage. On land every house, camp, sod house, and inhabited structure was swept away except the old Mexican custom-house occupied by Colonel Turner. That was saved by good management, and on account of its location being more elevated. After this many felt discouraged and left Galveston, thinking it would always be subject to such storms, while others maintained that this one was an exception.

Much building material had been ordered for Galveston, and as soon as it arrived reconstruction began. The owners of the stranded vessels got them afloat again, and every one went to work with a vim to repair the damages. Vessels from the North brought adventurers, goods and lumber, and improvement was the order of the day. In the autumn of 1837 Col. Turner built a much needed hotel called the Galveston Hotel, and rented it to Biggs and Brothers. It was situated on Avenue A, near the location of the old Mexican custom-house, which stood in the center of A Street according to the present plot (1876) of the city. This ground was the highest on the bay front, and was the spot on which stood

Lafitte's improvements. The hotel measured 40 by 38 feet, having a dining room, office, and three bed rooms on the lower floor, and six bed rooms above, with kitchen and other outhouses near. Colonel Turner built five houses, moved the custom-house out of the street, and made a dwelling of it in the spring of 1838. The wharf known as "Turner's wharf" was exactly opposite the hotel and ran north to twelve feet of water. It was about three times the length of Center Street wharf with a 100 foot T. The piles were of pine, and the worms destroyed them in three years, though it was thought at the time it was built that the bark would protect them. However it would not have been a financial success, as nearly all the business centered on Avenue B above and below Tremont Street, so that few vessels discharged at Turner's wharf. The next wharf west of Colonel Turner's was built soon after, about midway between the Turner and the Brick wharves.

In 1839 Colonel Turner erected an ice house of one hundred tons capacity, which was filled but once. As the material of which it was built (three-inch plank) was wanted immediately by the government, the officer in charge, Col. G. W. Hockley, pulled it down in order to floor some batteries at the post. This was the first ice house built at Galveston, and it was built on the same block with the hotel.

Colonel Turner says, "My impression is that the first district court held in Galveston county was held by Judge Johnston. Henry Smith was Sheriff, and the name of the clerk I do not remember. The County Court was (I think) held by Judge F. F. Gibson and held in my house (the old custom-house, after I had moved it.) The first election for Congress was held in my house. Lieutenant Colonel Nicholas Lynch and Moseley Baker were the candidates, and Baker was elected."