



Texas Navy Association

Historical Article



gone to texas

Texas did have a navy and still does

Yes, Texas had a navy and, in fact, still does have a navy.

Today's version is an honorary group formed to recognize outstanding Texans who have made contributions to the state. One local citizen selected for his work in preserving local history is Admiral Jim Nabors, Editor and Publisher of *The Brazosport Facts*. Today all such persons honored are Admirals.

In 1835, when the first government of Texas was formed with Henry Smith as governor, someone had the idea of creating a navy composed of privateers. The reasoning was that the state was so poor that it could not put oars on a row boat much less outfit a fighting ship.

THIS IDEA had worked well in the American Revolution and in the War of 1812. In both conflicts, the ship owners spurred by getting to keep what they could capture, were most successful in disrupting England's shipping.

Largely at the insistence of Gov. Henry Smith the bill was read on Nov. 25, 1835. The rules were suspended, and the bill passed on Nov. 27, 1835, allowing nine licenses for privateers.

The license was called "Letters of Marque and Reprisal." The Republic of Texas was to receive 10 percent of the value of the cargo captured. The other 90% was to be divided



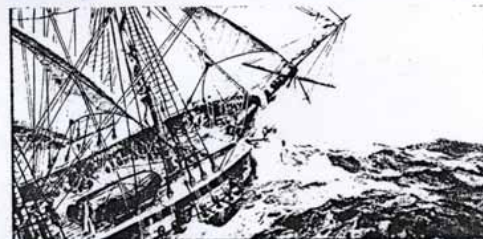
dr. w.g. mc alexander

ed between captain and crew. Even the town of Matagorda was given such a license for privateering.

BY JANUARY of 1836, the governor had second thoughts about giving a license to plunder. In fact, these licenses were one of the charges brought during Smith's impeachment hearings but were not mentioned in the trial.

The first constitution of the Republic gave congress the right to grant such licenses. President Houston in a letter dated Sept. 15, 1837, recalled all Letters of Marque and Reprisal calling the Texas Navy. "Pirates all — outlaws and pirates."

Houston made this declaration for he feared that Texas would be drawn into another war with Mexico. John Wharton had sailed into Matamoros under a white flag to secure the release of his brother, a prisoner of Mexico. The brother was William H. Wharton of Eagle Island. John Wharton was also arrested and detained. Later negotiations freed



Artist Robert Moak shows the Texas Navy brig Archer on the high seas. Moak's paintings of the Texas Navy are on display at the Rosenberg Library in Galveston.

both men.

TO BACKTRACK in the story, the people residing along the Texas coast knew that the Republic had no ships. They also knew that the Mexican navy had several ships that could harass the coastal towns. Another interesting bit of history has to do with the first flag of the navy.

The original licenses stated that the privateers would fly the flag of the United States of Mexico with the numbers 1824 plainly displayed on the flag to denote loyalty to Mexico but also to point out they were fighting for rights granted under the Mexican constitution of 1824. The peculiarity of this flag is that this pattern was the flag made by two ladies of Brazoria and carried by the Brazoria Militia in the battle of Fort Velasco.

THE FIRST vessels fitted out for the navy were the San Felipe and the William Robbins. Both vessels were fitted in New Orleans.

In November, 1835, sections of the Texas coast were blockaded by the Mexican ships Montezuma and Bravo. McKinney and Williams, the merchants of Quintana, purchased the first Texas vessels with the option that the Republic could have them for war ships.

It is also interesting to note that the same merchants had one of the first "Letters of Marque and Reprisal."

The first mission of the new navy was to help the Hannah Elizabeth, a ship out of New Orleans, which had been driven ashore by the Mexican ship Bravo. Citizens from Matagorda also went along to help. Captain

Hurd, and 20 volunteers rowed out to the Hannah Elizabeth only to find a prize crew from the Bravo was on board.

CAPTAIN HURD accepted the sword of Lt. Mateo and took his 11 men as prisoners of war. There were 15 Americans and five Mexicans who were passengers. Several cannon and rifles had been thrown overboard by the owner as he feared the cargo might be considered contraband.

For some reason, one of our Brazoria County boys was there. James W. Fannin Jr., who was in the land raiding party, wrote a letter to Gov. Smith telling his part of the story. He condemned the whole preceding.

Fannin stated that he and some others captured a boat from the Bravo when it overturned in the surf. They kept the boat preventing the Bravo party from looting and burning the Hannah Elizabeth. Fannin and Sommers guarded the prize for two days before Capt. Hurd and the William Robbins arrived. Fannin claimed he had already captured the ship and crew. Lt. Mateo was only waiting until an officer arrived to accept his sword.

HURD decided that the cargo should be sold immediately, but no one had any money. Hurd took notes from some of the expedition since they had no money. Kerr, the owner, took \$2,541 and the auction brought in \$2,843.83. Is it not odd that in this time of strife such meticulous numbers could be kept?

From this beginning trouble seemed to follow the Texas Navy.