



Texas Navy Association

Historical Article



Commodore Edwin Ward Moore

(Fleet Commander, April 1839-July 1843)

Edwin Ward Moore was the guiding light of the Texas Navy during his glory years. The son of an aristocratic Virginia family, Moore joined the U.S. Navy in 1825 as a midshipman at the age of 15. He was assigned to squadrons serving in the Mediterranean and Atlantic coastlines until he was transferred to the U.S. West Indies Squadron aboard the warship *Hornet*. This squadron, based in Pensacola, covered the Gulf of Mexico and the Caribbean Sea, and it was during his voyages with this squadron that Moore first became exposed to warfare in the Gulf, malaria, and Texans. In 1835 he was promoted to lieutenant, and he quickly proved to be one of the U.S. Navy's brightest stars. Despite his mastery of naval skills, his quick intelligence, and his hard work, Moore was unlikely to get beyond lieutenant for another decade in the peacetime U.S. fleet. Many captains from the War of 1812 were still around, and Moore's midshipman class would not expect to find many commanders in its ranks until the Civil War. When Moore's ship anchored at Galveston in early 1838, it is likely that Moore began thinking of possibilities in the naval service of Texas.

With the naval appropriations act of 1837, Texas began rebuilding its navy. Sometime in April 1839, President Lamar offered Moore the job as commander of the Texas Navy, and Moore evidently accepted, recruiting officers from the ranks of the U.S. Navy while at the Brooklyn Navy Yard in New York. The U.S. Secretary of the Navy, John Forsyth, moved to court-martial Moore for violating the Neutrality Act of 1819, but Moore managed to resign in July 1839 before a trial could be convened. He moved to Texas, assuming the rank of Post Captain, and because he commanded a squadron, he was universally given the courtesy title of Commodore.

Moore spent the last half of 1839 recruiting men and procuring supplies for his new fleet, which included the steamer of war *Zavala*, the six-gun schooners *San Bernard*, *San Antonio* and *San Jacinto*, the sixteen-gun brigs *Archer* and *Wharton*, and biggest of all, the 500-ton sloop-of-war *Austin*. On the last day of 1839, Moore was arrested in New York for violating U.S. neutrality laws by recruiting more men for the Texas Navy, and upon his release on bail, he sailed back to Texas to begin operations.

By June 1840, the largest fleet Texas ever fielded was ready to sail. The *Zavala*, the *Austin* and the three schooners left Galveston for the Mexican coast, intent on persuading Mexico to accept Texas independence. During this cruise, Moore's fleet allied itself with federalist rebels in Mexico, particularly those fighting for the government of Yucatán, which was in revolt against the central Mexican government. In October 1835, Moore's squadron forced a garrison of centralists out of the Tobasco town of San Juan Bautista, earning the fleet \$25,000 in silver as promised by the federalist rebels. Unable to find any warships to fight, and with his provisions running low, Moore returned to Galveston on February 1, 1841.

Moore was a brilliant naval commander and an excellent administrator, but he lacked the kind of political skills needed to maneuver the labyrinth of Texas politics, and he was surprised to find that President Lamar's political support had eroded to virtually nothing. Congress ordered most of the fleet mothballed, and Moore spent the summer and fall of 1841 conducting a survey of the Texas coastline, a mundane but important job that saved the Republic thousands, if not millions of dollars in insurance by providing a reliable map of the treacherous Texas coastline.

With the fall of 1841 came the return of Sam Houston. President Lamar, constitutionally prohibited from succeeding himself, lost the support of Congress, and prepared to watch Sam Houston undo all his hard work in creating a first-class fleet for Texas. Before he left office, however, Lamar signed an extraordinary agreement with the government of Yucatán which rented the Texas Navy out to Yucatán in return for \$8,000 per month. Moore was ordered out to sea in October 1841, and he made sure that his ships were well away from Galveston when Sam Houston was sworn in on December 13, 1841.

Houston tried to recall the fleet, but it was too late. When he arrived off the Yucatán coast in January 1842, however, Moore was disappointed to learn that Yucatán was engaged in heavy negotiations to reunify with Mexico, and Moore saw little action on this cruise. When Houston's orders to return reached Moore in March 1842, he had no choice, and he retired to Galveston to find provisions and men for his fleet.

The year 1842 was a frustrating one for Moore. The bankrupt Texas government could not, and did not, pay its officers or sailors, and Moore chafed under President Houston's anti-naval policy, which Moore viewed as tactically short-sighted and strategically indefensible. Houston demanded that his government save money by mothballing its fleet at a time when Mexico was building its navy up for an invasion of Texas. The steamer Zavala was abandoned on the Galveston shore for lack of funds, and sank into the mud, never to sail again. The brigs likewise began to decay from lack of maintenance, and men began to resign and desert with alarming regularity. Commodore Moore used his personal funds, then his personal credit, to feed his men and keep the ships safe while he vainly tried to get President Houston to release appropriated naval funds. When the public demanded a strong response to Mexico's capture of San Antonio in 1842, Houston declared a blockade of the Mexican coast, although he refused to provide Commodore Moore with any money to fund the blockade. As 1842 passed into 1843, Mexico's rebellious province of Yucatán was again at war with the central government, and Moore, now stuck in New Orleans with no money to come home, saw an opportunity to renew the alliance that funded the Texas Navy during the Lamar administration. He sent the schooner San Antonio to Yucatán to renew the alliance (it was never heard from again), and by January 1843, he had pledged to support Yucatán as a means of saving Texas from another Mexican invasion, which diplomats said was sure to follow rapprochement between Mexico and Yucatán.

But Sam Houston had other ideas. Convinced that the Texas Navy was just a glory-hounding waste of money that would serve no purpose other than to provoke a war with Mexico and complicate Houston's plans to annex Texas to the United States. In January 1843, Houston convened a secret session of Congress, convinced the legislators that the fleet was a waste of resources, would never go to sea again, and needed to be sold. On January 16, the Texas Congress passed a law ordering the sale of the Texas Navy at auction, and President Houston appointed James Morgan and William Bryan to go to New Orleans, assume command of the decrepit fleet, and sell it.

Moore, now learning about the ways Sam Houston operated, met the commissioners and showed them a first-rate, professional fleet, drilled and equipped to make a fearsome naval force. He used Yucatán silver to fit out the 20-gun Austin and the 16-gun brig Wharton, and convinced the commissioners that Texas would have no defense against invasion if it sold its fleet and Yucatán joined Mexico, as Mexico made it clear that once it put down the Yucatán revolt it would turn its attention to the "Question de Tejas." Commissioner Morgan saw that Moore was right, and authorized Moore to take the squadron home to Galveston, as ordered, via Yucatán. Moore's two-ship squadron sailed from New Orleans to Campeche in mid-April 1843 and broke a Mexican blockade that included the world's mightiest warship, the 1,100 ton ironclad steamer Guadalupe. Mounting monstrous guns that fired 68-pound exploding shells, the English-made Guadalupe was the most advanced warship in the world. The Guadalupe was escorted by the equally huge armed steamer Moctezuma and a squadron of sailing ships. Even when some small Yucatán ships sailed to join Moore's sloop and brig, the Mexican fleet easily outgunned the allies.

The first contact between the two fleets took place on April 30, 1843, when Moore drove the Mexican fleet off Campeche, saving the embattled city from capture by the centralist army. The Mexican fleet dispersed, leaving only the warships Guadalupe, Moctezuma and Aguila to guard Moore's tiny squadron. On May 16, 1843, the fleets battled a second time, and Moore's Austin and Wharton, unaided by

the timid Yucatán squadron, drove off the Mexican ships with a heavy loss of life. This engagement proved to be the only time in history that a sailing ship bested an ironclad steam-powered warship, and signaled the swan song of the Age of Sail.

The Texas Navy returned to Campeche in triumph, only to find that in March, President Houston had published a proclamation to the world claiming that his officers were pirates, and calling on the “naval powers of Christendom” to arrest his rogue officers! When the Yucatán coast was secure, Moore returned to Galveston to tumultuous applause and celebration as Texas’ newest hero. Coastal inhabitants claimed he would be the next president, perhaps even king, of Texas, and welcomed the fleet home with parades, banquets and speeches. Moore, however, offered himself to the Galveston County Sheriff as a prisoner under President Houston’s March proclamation, but the sheriff refused to arrest Moore. President Houston quickly dismissed Commodore Moore, and virtually all officers of the Texas Navy submitted their resignations in protest. Moore demanded a court-martial, as required by Texas law, and when Houston ignored Moore, the commodore published a pamphlet, “To the People of Texas,” in which he set out the doings of the Texas Navy in great detail. (This pamphlet, which has become the single most important record of the Texas Navy, survives only in archives and a few libraries today.) The pamphlet had its desired effect: Congress passed a resolution forcing Houston to give Moore a court-martial, and the court, a group of hand-picked friends of Houston, promptly acquitted Moore of virtually all of Houston’s charges.

Commodore Moore never commanded a warship after July 1843. He spent the remainder of his days trying to get the Republic, then State, to reimburse him for nearly \$50,000 in personal loans he made to keep the navy afloat. He also worked to get himself and the other Texas Navy officers inducted into the United States Navy, on grounds that the treaty of annexation incorporated the men as well as the ships into that service. The efforts failed, although in 1857 Congress awarded the Texas naval officers five years’ pay in return for a release of all claims of rank in the U.S. Navy. Moore married Emma Cox of Philadelphia in 1849, and returned to Galveston in 1860 to assist with the construction of the Galveston customs house. He lived long enough to see the conclusion of the Civil War, and died on October 5, 1865.

In 1876, Texas honored Moore by naming a county after him. It is one of the great ironies of Texas history that a county named for Texas’ naval commander should be located in the Texas Panhandle, about as far from the Gulf of Mexico as a Texan can travel.

For further reading, see *Commodore Moore and the Texas Navy*, by Tom Henderson Wells, and *The Texas Navy in Forgotten Battles and Shirtsleeve Diplomacy*, by Jim Dan Hill. Other papers relating to Commodore Moore can be found at the Texas State Library and Archives in Austin, the Center for American History in Austin, and the Rosenberg Library in Galveston. Also, check our Texas Navy Bibliography. *The New Handbook of Texas*

Prepared by Admiral Johnathan W. Jordan
Copyright © 2000-2001