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# Star Of The Republic Museum

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## NOTES

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## “STUMP SPEECHIFICATION” OR ELECTIONS AND POLITICIANS IN THE TEXAS REPUBLIC

*Nothing is now talked of but the approaching elections. I was present yesterday at a “stump speechification.” There was much recrimination and but little discrimination between the Candidates. One of them carried his best speech in his saddle Bags in the shape of a bottle of whiskey which ever and anon we had recourse to, as it were to cheer us on our weary way. This speech though short made on some a very visible impression.*

Charles S. Taylor  
Nacogdoches, 1839



George Caleb Bingham, *The County Election*

The Texas Republic existed in a period of American history often referred to as the Age of Jackson or Jacksonian Democracy. In a political sense, Jacksonian Democracy meant a broadening of the suffrage. Throughout the United States “viva voce,” or stating out loud to a recording clerk an individual’s choice for office, was increasingly being replaced by a written ballot or printed “ticket.”

The word ballot comes from the Italian “ballotta” or “a little ball used in secret voting.” The ballot was used in both England and the Netherlands, and from there it was introduced into the United States. Yet the use of the ballot did not necessarily make voting secret. Sometimes ballots were handed to the clerk unsealed or unfolded before being recorded, or candidates and parties had different colored papers or sizes of ballots. The Australian or secret ballot as we know it today was not introduced into the United States until the 1870’s.

Suffrage was, of course, white male suffrage; women and blacks did not vote. Initially the privilege of voting was subject to property requirements, taxpaying qualifications, or length of residency restrictions. But suffrage in the Age of Jackson shifted the issue of who would be allowed the vote to a concern with the actual manner of voting. Both the season of the year and the number of days or hours that the polls were open was also a factor in increased suffrage. Nearly 80% of the eligible white males in the United States voted in the 1840 election.

The delegates, who met at Washington to sign a Declaration of Independence and write a Constitution, elected the officers for the interim government of the new Republic “viva voce.” Yet when they wrote the Constitution, they decided that elections would be by ballot and designated the first Monday in September as the election date. In October of 1837, Congress passed an act “regulating elections” noting

that it was illegal for the election clerk or officer to “examine or unfold any ticket presented by a voter.” During the Republic period, a voter would write in the names of his choices on a ballot or ticket, or if illiterate, have someone else write them for him, and then place the slip of paper in the ballot box.

As late as the 1840’s, overt electioneering by a candidate for public office was not common. Since there were not primary elections or nominating conventions during the Texas Republic period, typically a candidate’s name was placed up for nomination at a meeting of voters, usually personal friends. In 1836 the first public nomination of Sam Houston came at a meeting in San Augustine County. Often a resolution nominating the candidate and detailing his qualifications would be drafted and copies sent to other towns to be published in the newspapers. The nominee would then make a “sacrificial” response to the demands of good citizenship, and modestly announce that he had “yielded to the solicitations of his friends,” and decided to run for office.

As an official candidate, one was expected to “canvass” his respective district. Francis Lubbock described his first initiation into politics when he “came out of the clerkship” of Harris County in 1840-1841. Not really knowing anyone outside of Houston, he went along with a friend, William Wilson (who was deputy sheriff), as he made tax assessments over the entire county. While campaigning, Lubbock carried a good supply of cut tobacco which he distributed because it gave one “an opportunity to make acquaintances, and making acquaintances is what a candidate wishes to do.” He also noted that a candidate was expected to attend every ball and wedding in the county.

In the 1842 congressional election, Nacogdoches resident Adolphus Sterne described “canvassing” for Congress at the home of a friend where 300 people came to hear the speeches. “The Candidates for congress made Speeches promising of Course to do great things if elected, a good deal of queens English was murdered, much roast Beaf and Pork was devoured, and lots of dancing.”

As a young girl, Dilue Rose Harris remembered attending a barbeque and ball at a friend’s home which was the local polling station for the election of 1836. “The ladies spent the day quilting, and the young people began dancing at three o’clock and kept it up until the next morning.” It was to be her last ball at an election, because from then on “there was too much whisky drunk for ladies to be present.”

The dispensing of free liquor was common, and “treats” were exchanged for votes. Francis Lubbock noted that it was customary for a candidate to place a barrel of whiskey with a friend at the local country store. A barrel cost eight to ten dollars in those days, and customers were offered a drink after being informed of who had purchased the barrel. If he drank from the barrel, he was expected to support that candidate. As a candidate for the House of Representatives from Galveston, Mosely Baker supposedly spent \$3000 on

“treating” – providing food, and most important, liquor for his potential constituency.

The mud-slinging associated with elections often led to violence. In 1839 Ben McCulloch was forced into a duel because of statements made in the heat of an election campaign. His opposition in the election, Col. Alonzo Sweitzer, a physician and educated man, thought he would have the advantage over a “backwoodsman” like McCulloch. He had a reputation for being insulting when intoxicated, so McCulloch declined to debate him. Sweitzer began calling McCulloch a “moral coward” and “sneaking skulker.” The election resulted in an overwhelming victory for McCulloch, and several weeks later at a time of his own choosing (when Sweitzer was sober), McCulloch challenged him to a duel. When Sweitzer declined, McCulloch remarked: “As you will not fight when you have a fair and honorable opportunity, I cannot afford to shoot you down like a dog. I must content myself by pronouncing you a black-hearted cowardly villain, and in every respect beneath the notice of a gentleman.”

McCulloch ultimately ended up dueling with Sweitzer’s second, Col. Reuben Ross (since he no longer recognized Sweitzer as his equal and a gentleman). The circumstances involved rifles at forty paces. McCulloch was wounded in the arm, which he carried in a sling throughout the following congressional session, and in fact, the wound never fully healed.

As the media of the period, the press played an important role in the politics of the Texas Republic. The Telegraph and Texas Register was probably the most prominent paper during the Republic. Gail Borden had made it the voice of the revolution, but it was Francis Moore, Jr., who made it the voice of the Republic period. The patriarch of Texas newsmen, he served as its editor for seventeen years and was noted for publishing his opinions as well as for serving the Republic government. Having lost one arm in an accident as a youth, he was called a “lying scribbler” by Sam Houston, who said that Moore’s one arm could “write more malicious falsehoods than any man with two arms I ever saw.”

Since printers had a monopoly on mass communication, most newspapers were propaganda or special purpose sheets. Politics, personal or party, accounted for the founding of more newspapers than any other single factor. The outcome of an election often had an immediate effect on the press. Of the seven Republic papers publishing in the summer of 1838, only two had been in existence at that same time the previous year, and only two continued to publish the following year. The election of 1838 had obviously stimulated the founding of newspapers which were basically designed as a campaign organs.

The politics of the Texas Republic placed an emphasis on personalities, rather than principles. A member of the legislature noted in 1843 that “we here in Texas had nothing to do with parties in the United States. We were Sam Houston or anti-Sam Houston; Eastern Texas was largely for and Western Texas against him.”

In the presidential election of 1836, General Houston “came as close to being a national hero in Texas as it was ever his lot to be.” In spite of years of hard work, his opponent, Stephen F. Austin, had been out of the country too long, and since many voters were recent immigrants to Texas they did not know him. Austin’s support came mostly from the “original 300” who remained loyal to him to the end. Still, he simply couldn’t compete with the charisma of the hero of San Jacinto, and the election was a landslide victory for Sam Houston.

Since Houston could not succeed himself, posturing for the 1838 election began early, and then Vice-President Mirabeau B. Lamar was the front runner. A former newspaper man himself, he secretly owned or controlled more than one paper, “with a design entirely patriotick,” to promote his candidacy. His platform consisted of remedies for the mistakes which he believed Houston had made.

Houston’s followers faced a rather bizarre series of misfortunes in the election – their candidates tended to commit suicide. Their first choice, a former attorney general of the Republic, Peter W. Grayson, took his own life on his return to Texas from Washington, D. C. Their next nominee, James W. Collinworth, also committed suicide shortly before the election by jumping off a boat into Galveston Bay. It was said that “he could neither handle liquor or leave it alone.” Their third candidate was Bob Wilson who went down to a resounding defeat.



[?] Gautier after George Caleb Bingham. *Stump Speaking*

In the 1838 and the 1841 elections, the press reflected the temper of the time more so than determining the outcome of the election. From the 1838 election on, Houston’s supporters increasingly appreciated the potential power of the press and began arranging for his views to appear in print.

The election of 1841 between Sam Houston and David G. Burnet was probably the most acrimonious of any in the Republic period. Each candidate wrote letters for the press under pseudonyms, with Burnet choosing the name of “Publius,” while Houston wrote under the name of “Truth.” David Burnet received his most substantial support from newspapers like the Telegraph and Texas Register and Texas Sentinel. Houston’s supporters expressed their editorial opinions in newspapers such as the Houstonian and the Colorado Gazette and Advertiser.

Burnet consistently alluded to what he perceived as

Houston’s incompetent, if not outright cowardly, behavior at the Battle of San Jacinto: “When the whole truth shall be known, then this reputed hero will be despoiled of his furtive laurels; and be depicted as a quailing, irresolute braggadocio who fled by instinct and fought by compulsion.” Burnet continued, “Oh, fugitive fame, got by accident, retained by fraud, and merged in bestial debaucheries.” Burnet also made much over Houston’s drinking, saying he was a man who “with his robes of office dabbled in intoxication and the foul and most bloated blasphemies trembling on his tongue.”

Houston likewise accused Burnet of debauchery: “Even some of the soldiers facetiously remarked that the letter ‘G’ in your name stood for ‘Grog’.” He also accused him of being a horse thief, using the Indian word, “wetumpka.” Referring to his hypocrisy, Houston said, “You prate about the faults of other men while the blot of foul unmitigated treason rests upon you. You political brawler and canting hypocrite, whom the waters of Jordan could never cleanse from your political and moral leprosy.” Houston won the election by a large majority prompting the comment: “Old Sam H. with all his faults appears to be the only man for Texas – He is still unsteady, intemperate, but drunk in ditch is worth a thousand of Lamar and Burnet.”

The 1844 election between Edward Burleson and Anson Jones lacked the intense partisanship of the previous election, and there were few concrete political issues. Anti-Houston papers portrayed Jones as a stand-in for Sam Houston. “He is nothing but a mere tuft of political mistletoe, having no root of his own, adhering to and supported by the limb of a distant trunk altogether.”

Houston’s and Jones’ supporters condescendingly suggested Burleson, the semiliterate Indian fighter, could be placed in charge of the Rangers, but that he was out of his league socially and intellectually as President: “Give him the command of the Rangers, and award him such honors as he may deserve. Elect him President and you deprive the country at once and effectually of his aid in killing the savages and bring him into a sphere of action which he frankly acknowledged he is unqualified to fill.” Anson Jones won and oversaw the annexation of Texas into the United States.

Throughout the United States during this period of Jacksonian Democracy there had been a tremendous increase in universal manhood suffrage – the removal or lessening of property requirements for voting, and a trend towards a written ballot, with a corresponding decline in “viva voce” voting.

Ironically, with statehood, Texas initiated a regression from the political trends evolving in the rest of the country. In March of 1846, in the first session of the state legislature, it was declared that “at all popular elections each voter shall express his preference at the polls by viva voce vote.” This legislation was particularly unusual for a so-called western state, which tended to be more progressive about suffrage laws. The law suggested a desire on the part of Texas elites to maintain control over the voting population at large.

P.O. Box 317 Washington, Texas 77880

**NOTES**

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This newsletter covers only one aspect of the new exhibit, "Our Beloved Country," opening March 1, 1987. It will examine law and justice on the frontier, newspapers in the Republic, and the army and the Texas Rangers. There will be sections on "Bloody Wars with Indians," "Lone Star Patriots," annexation, and presidents and capitals of the Republic, currency and treasury warrants, and the Texas Navy. Be sure to come and view the printing press, the Bowie knives, the ballot box, the liquor box, the Indian bow and bow cover, and a variety of other artifacts relating to the government and the defense of the Texas Republic.

We would like to recognize individuals for their contributions of artifacts to the Museum. Mrs. Lois Cooper Mayer of San Francisco, California, has given additional items from her family, once residents of Washington County. Mrs. Mona Floyd of Navasota gave the Museum a book and carpenter's gauge, which once belonged to her grandfather. The Cincinnati Museum of Natural History contributed a recently printed lithograph of John James Audubon's white American wolf for the upcoming exhibit on Audubon. David Harrison White donated five drawings of ships of the Texas Navy. Two books, Brazos County History, Rich Past—Bright Future and a Bibliography of Brazos County (Texas) History were presented to the Museum by the Brazos Family History Foundation.

A portion of the Museum's general operating funds has been provided through a grant from the Institute of Museum Services.

**Star Of The Republic Museum**

Last year the Museum's education programs operated at capacity levels, especially in the spring. To be sure of obtaining a tour reservation, you should schedule your visit as soon as possible. For further information on reservations or the Museum's school outreach programs, please contact:

Curator of Education  
Star of the Republic Museum  
P. O. Box 317  
Washington, Texas 77880  
(409) 878-2461

**MUSEUM SCHEDULE**

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Editor: Ellen N. Murry  
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