CHAPTER IX: A History of Jefferson County, Texas

Early Industry and Businesses

By W. T. Block

Since early-day Jefferson County abounded in cattle and timber, it was inevitable that the first primitive industries would engage in processing both items into finished products. A barter economy and problems of transportation and distribution forced each household to be as near self-sustaining as possible. Spinning, leatherwork, and soap and candle-making are examples of the home manufactures to be found on the East Texas frontier. The first goal was to supply the family needs, but any surplus production could be easily bartered to neighbors. Hence, early manufacturing sought to supply the local demand first, with the prospect that an exportable surplus could be exchanged for merchandise manufactured in other regions.

Many pioneer households combined subsistence farming with another occupation. This is illustrated by the agricultural schedule for the 1850 Federal census which lists a physician, two lawyers, numerous shopkeepers and cattlemen among those engaged in agriculture in the county.\footnote{1} The abundance of timber enabled many subsistence farmers to engage in lumber or shingle-making, occupations which required no capital outlay other than a few hand tools and a windlass for removing logs from the streams.

Jefferson County had no natural sites suitable for harnessing water power, and there is no record of steam-driven industry prior to 1846.\footnote{2} Beaumont inhabitants planned to install steam driven mills to develop the timber resources, but insurmountable transportation problems frustrated their efforts prior to 1856.

In 1837, the only steam-driven industries in Texas were located between Galveston Bay and the Brazos River, the center of Texas' population.\footnote{3} Perhaps imitating their neighbors to the west, the Beaumont town site proprietors reserved the steam mill square on Brake’s Bayou for the exclusive use of a steam sawmill,\footnote{4} and in 1838, conveyed the site to W. H. Irion upon his agreement to erect a mill.\footnote{5} In 1838, the Texas legislature chartered the Neches Steam Milling Company at Beaumont, to Henry Millard, Christian Hillebrandt and others, for the purpose of milling shingles, lumber, and grains.\footnote{6} However, nothing materialized from the early planning. Irion deeded the steam mill square back to the proprietors in the same year, and the site remained unoccupied until 1856.\footnote{7}

By 1842, Jefferson County was producing handmade lumber and shingles in sufficient quantities to export.\footnote{8} In December, 1843, H. A. Cobb and Brothers of Galveston advertised to purchase square oak beams, from eight to forty feet long with twelve to twenty inch dimensions, to be delivered to them at Sabine Pass.\footnote{9} As of that year, Jefferson County could have produced timbers of that size only in its whipsaw pits or by horse-driven “peck” mills.

Whipsawing required two men, one to pull the crosscut saw above the log, and another man to pull in the pit beneath. The “muly” or sash sawmills were horse-driven adaptations of the same principle.\footnote{10} A characteristic of the horse-driven “peck” mill was the peck hammer, a swinging multi-adze arrangement, which could be heard at a distance of one mile through the forest. “Peck” mills were used to chip away bark and to square a rough timber, obtaining one from each log. By 1843, a “peck” mill was being operated by Simon Wiess at Wiess’ Bluff, sixteen miles north of Beaumont, probably the same mill that Joseph Grigsby had owned at an earlier date.\footnote{11}

Hand shingle-making was less laborious. A windlass or a yoke of oxen was needed to remove the cypress logs from the Neches or Sabine rivers. Sections of the log were then cut to shingle-length, split with wedges, and dressed with a froe, a two-handled blade.\footnote{12} Shingles sold for $2.00 a thousand as of 1850.\footnote{13} In that year, only five Jefferson County residents listed themselves as shingle-makers with the census enumerator, but the writer believes that many subsistence farmers followed that occupation on a part-time basis.

In 1846, Major Sidney A. Sweet, a prominent San Augustine contractor and architect,\footnote{14} moved to Sabine Pass, where he bought a half-interest in the Sabine town site and McGaffey league.\footnote{15} He soon built a sash and door millwork plant, a shipyard, and a single-circular steam sawmill, operated as S. A. Sweet and Company.\footnote{16} Sweet was convinced that he could surmount the lumber transport problems by floating log rafts down the rivers, towing them by steamboat through Sabine Lake, and milling them at Sabine Pass.

In January, 1848, Sweet sold the sawmill to Henry Hubbell of Galveston who increased the mill’s cutting capacity. By January, 1849, three new circular saws, capable of cutting 10,000 feet daily, had been installed at a cost of $10,000.\footnote{17} During the same month, Hubbell sold the sawmill for $12,000 to David Bradbury, Orrin Brown, Isaiah Ketchum, and Benjamin Granger, all of Sabine...
In 1850, the Spartan Mill Company cut 4,000 saw logs worth $5,500 into 1,200,000 feet of lumber valued at $23,000. The plant employed fifteen men and paid a total of $637 in wages each month. By 1857, however, hard times had befallen the company, and the Spartan sawmill lay abandoned and rusting. To secure the lien balance of $2,000, Sealy sold the sawmill in March, 1858, to David R. Wingate of Newton County, who moved soon afterward to Sabine Pass.

In 1859, D. R. Wingate and Company, capitalized at $30,000, cut 7,488 saw logs worth $11,980 into 2,496,000 feet of lumber valued at $43,680. Wingate employed ten men, who were paid a total of $300 monthly in wages. In 1860, a boiler explosion, which killed and injured four persons, disabled the saw and planning mill for several weeks.

Wingate also owned lumber schooners which carried his manufactures to Cuba and Mexico, but by 1861, the Civil War ended his export business. With no market for the three-quarter million feet of lumber stacked at the mill, Wingate closed his business, but donated lumber and logs for barracks and military fortifications. On September 25, 1862, a Union navy squadron occupied the Sabine Pass and Lake. The sailors, however, generally avoided Sabine City because a yellow fever epidemic was raging there. On October 21, 1862, when fired upon by Confederate pickets ashore, the squadron shelled Sabine City. A naval detachment came ashore and burned the sawmill and other property, a loss estimated at $150,000, thus ending the lumbering epoch at Sabine Pass.

In 1856, Samuel Remley and John T. Johnson built a grist mill and steam sawmill at Grigsby's Bluff, now Port Neches. In 1859, the mill cut 5,000 logs worth $5,000 into 1,000,000 feet of "planks and scantlings" valued at $12,500. The saw millers employed six men paid a total of $200 monthly in wages. In 1862, Johnson left the partnership upon being commissioned as adjutant of Spaight's Texas Battalion.

It appears that the Grigsby's Bluff sawmill remained inoperative during the Civil War years. Export and local demand ceased, for large lumber inventories on hand were not used. Perhaps the nail supply was exhausted or wartime necessity may have halted the construction industry. Remley's grist mill, however, is frequently mentioned in the commissioner's court minutes, for the sawmiller ground the county-owned corn that was distributed to the indigent families of Confederate soldiers.

In 1870, Samuel Remley is listed in census returns as being a sawmiller, but no mill statistics appear in Jefferson County's Schedule V, Products of Industry, for that year. It seems logical that his sawmill burned in that year, for in June, 1870, Remley purchased another steam saw and grist mill from H. C. Pedgo of Tyler County and erected them on the original mill site at Grigsby's Bluff. Two months later, the saw-miller sold a one-half interest in the new mill to Charles H. Alexander of Sabine Pass, and in 1875, an additional interest to Joseph Bunn of Orange County. The Remley-Alexander mill burned in October, 1876, and was never rebuilt.

One other industry existed at Grigsby's Bluff during the Reconstruction period. In 1866, George F. Block established a shingle mill there, which manufactured 333,000 shingles in 1869 and employed three men.

After a wait of twenty years, steam sawmilling became a reality in Beaumont in 1856, and three single-circular mills were completed there by 1859. In January, 1856, the town site proprietors transferred the steam mill square, between Mulberry and Cypress Streets, to William Phillips and Loving G. Clark, and within six months, the Phillips mill was in operation.

In January, 1858, William Lewis, a Beaumont lawyer, acquired Clark's interest in the Phillips sawmill for $2,500, and complete ownership a year later. In 1859, Lewis cut 2,000 cypress and pine logs valued at $2,000 into 300,000 feet of lumber worth $5,400. He paid five employees a total of $95 monthly in wages.

Nothing is known of Lewis' mill during the Civil War years. The commissioners' court minutes record nothing about the county's sawmills during the four-year period. In 1863, Union prisoners of war from the 42nd Massachusetts Regiment were billeted in A. J. Ward's mill at Beaumont, which suggests that the mills were closed or operated only infrequently. Confederate troops occupied William Russell's mill at Orange in January of the same year. William Lewis lost heavily on his mill investment, and in 1,866, sold the sawmill to J. D. Bullock for $700. The latter lost as well, selling out for $300 to John F. Pipkin and his son-in-law, Dr. N. G. Haltom, who operated the mill during the Reconstruction years.

Early in 1857, John R. Ross and James R. Alexander freighted a steam sawmill overland from the Trinity River and erected it on Brake's Bayou adjacent to the Woodville Road, now Pine Street. In December, 1857, a Galveston newspaper correspondent was amazed at the "self-setter at Ross and Alexander's mill, with which the logs are set to the saw, and which reduces the boards to an exact precision in width and thickness at both ends." The mill exported lumber to Galveston, but by November, 1858, the ill-fated partners were in financial straits. Michael Alexander was appointed as receiver to pay the saw millers' indebtedness, but the mill and 60,000 feet of lumber burned in February, 1859. Correspondent Henry R. Green reported a conflagration "which illumined so brilliantly that persons and objects were recognizable at a great distance.

In March, 1860, Michael Alexander sold the mill site and salvaged machinery to James Long and his brother-in-law, Frank L.
However, Coffin's business was not listed in Schedule V of the Federal law, Mary Hawley, acquired the shipyard after Carroll,66 although Long repaired the mill, it soon ceased operating when Long entered the Confederate army.47 The Ross and Alexander mill is important principally as forming the nucleus of Long and Company’s post-Civil War operations during the heyday of Beaumont lumbering. By then, the firm was milling shingles at the rate of 160,000 daily. It soon splintered into two additional companies, the Beaumont Lumber Company and Texas Tram and Lumber Company, owned by Long’s brothers-in-law, Frank L. Carroll, Joseph A. Carroll, and William A. Fletcher.48

In 1859, Otto Ruff bought a sawmill from the Steadman Foundry in Indiana and shipped it via steamboat to New Orleans and via schooner to Beaumont. It was equipped with a 12-by-24-inch steam engine and a ten-foot drive wheel, powered by a double-flue boiler.49 During the succeeding year, Ruff cut 8,000 logs worth $8,000 into 1,250,000 feet of lumber valued at $18,750. He employed ten men, whose wages totaled $300 monthly.50

In December, 1860, Ruff sold his mill to Andrew J. Ward, who reputedly used it to cut timbers for the Confederate government.51 In October, 1865, Ward sold it to E. L. Goldsmith and M. W. Reagan, both of whom died of yellow fever at Houston in 1867.52 Other title transfers occurred until 1878, when Ruff’s mill emerged as the Reliance Lumber Company, its sixty-one-year history being continuous until 1920.53

Only one shingle mill is listed in Jefferson County in the census returns of 1850. In 1849, Marvin Delano of Green’s Bluff (Orange) processed by hand 300 logs worth $1.00 each into 576,000 shingles valued at $1,152. He employed three men, each at $20 monthly, and one woman at $12 monthly.54

Steam milling made its debut along the Sabine River shortly before Orange County was separated from Jefferson County. John Merriman built the first mill at Green’s Bluff in 1851, and was soon followed by R. H. Jackson’s mill and R. A. Neyland’s steam shingle mill.55 These mills engaged in fence picket, lathe, spoke, and stave-making as well, accounting for the 210,000 barrel staves and most of the 6,120,000 shingles exported at Sabine Pass in 1857.56

As early as 1844, Green’s Bluff was exporting large quantities of barrel staves and shingles to Galveston.57 The rapid strides of industry along the Sabine River are apparent in an article in the Nacogdoches Chronicle which states:

Messrs. Smith and [John] Merriman have a large steam mill in successful operation; it is a masterpiece of workmanship. Capt. [Robert H.] Jackson has one now building. A company from Louisiana has purchased a lot, and will in a short time commence building. Mr. Smith has one at the East Pass, and Messrs. [Solomon] Sparks and Douglas are preparing to build one on Old River. In six months, there will be five large steam sawmills in operation at or in the vicinity of Madison [Orange], yet there is room and timber for twenty more. They will find ready sale for all the lumber they can make.58

On May 31, 1856, the Empire Mills, located on the Sabine five miles south of Orange, burned along with 100,000 feet of lumber, a $15,000 loss. The first victim of the county’s vigilante violence of that year, the mill was described as the "best in the state."59 In 1859, correspondent Henry R. Green was particularly impressed with Merriman’s mill, remarking that ‘the spoke-shaving machine in Merriman’s Mills takes’ me beaver… Let timber fall within its reach and it comes out a wagon forthwith!’60

Jefferson County’s early shipbuilding industry was closely allied to sawmilling and steam boating, the latter being a seasonal activity between December and June. Shipbuilders needed a ready supply of lumber, and steam boaters required an off-season occupation to supplement their incomes. A shipbuilder could expect to earn $2.50 daily as a carpenter and the same or more as a steam boatman, the county’s highest-paid occupations in 1850.61 The antebellum shipyards at Beaumont and Sabine Pass were located at sites adjacent to sawmills.62

In September, 1848, S. A. Sweet, Niles F. Smith, and Neal McGaffey sold their “Shipways of Sabine Pass” to Dexter B. Jones, an early schooner captain.63 A year later, Jones sold the property, “being the same … land where … Jones and Peter D. Stockholm erected a shipyard and ways,”64 to Isaac B. Bailey, a merchant who died soon afterward. Jones retained the right to overhaul his 80-ton schooner Ganger during the slack season at the shipyard.65 Sidney J. Sweet, a nephew of the sawmiller, and his mother-in-law, Mary Hawley, acquired the shipyard after Bailey’s death, selling out to Captain W. L. Hurd in 1854. The Shipways of Sabine Pass apparently dissolved following Hurd’s death in 1856.66

As early as January, 1846, Charles Baxter and John Fielding were engaged in building and repairing schooners at Green’s Bluff. In February, 1847, Baxter leased a shipyard site on the Sabine River from William D. Smith of Sabine County, and in 1849, the shipbuilder sold an interest in the business to Peter Stockholm of Sabine.67 In June of that year, the partners signed a contract with Captain Moses Patton to rebuild the superstructure of the steamer Angelina.68 Baxter moved to Beaumont in 1851, leaving Fielding as owner of the firm which was subsequently purchased by the Levingston brothers. In 1859, the J. H. Levingston Shipways employed six men, paid a total of $588 monthly as wages, and repaired 1,104 vessels in that year.69

In June, 1857, the Galveston Weekly News reported that Dr. Abel Coffin was “engaged for some time past in building shipways at the lower part of Sabine Pass and will have them completed in about a month hence … to accommodate the largest class of vessels.” A year later, the newspaper added that Coffin’s shipyard was “capable of hauling out vessels of large tonnage.”70 However, Coffin’s business was not listed in Schedule V of the Federal census of 1860.

Little is known about early shipbuilding at Beaumont. In 1858, the 40-foot steam tug S. R. Marble was built on the banks of
Houston merchants, paid a $200 merchandising fee R. and Michael Alexander, purchased the Herring grocery and cotton-buying and ginning at his location at the foot of Pearl Street, another store at Grigsby's Bluff. Founded a grocery store on the Neches River at Beaumont. In 1839, Wiess formed a mercantile partnership with Dr. John A. Veatch and settled at Sabine Pass to William Harris, an English immigrant, who operated it until the 1870's. Harris' products included windows, doors, blinds, cabinet work, furniture, and coffins. His manufactures in 1869 included sixty safes and twenty tables.

Leather-making and processing was second only to lumber among Jefferson County's early manufacturing industries. By 1840, a slaughtering firm at Beaumont killed cattle for their hides and tallow. By 1849, two tanneries were processing raw hides into leather. All surplus hides above the processing capacity of the tanneries were exported to Galveston or New Orleans. A natural limitation existed in the early leather industry. To process 600 hides, the tanners needed 8,000 pounds of oak tree bark, which had to be peeled from the county's limited hardwood forests, for producing the necessary tannic acid.

John Jay French operated a horse-driven tannery in Beaumont. In 1849, French used 300 raw hides and 5,000 pounds of bark, valued at $450, to make 600 sides of finished leather worth $2,000. He employed three men who were paid a total of $40 monthly. Larkin R. Thomas, of present-day Orange County, owned a tannery at the Cow Bayou settlement. In 1850, he utilized 300 hides and 3,000 pounds of bark, worth $420, to manufacture 600 sides of leather valued at $2,400. Thomas paid three employees a total of $45 monthly as wages. Both John Jay French and Larkin R. Thomas had ceased tannery operations by 1860. French's sons, David and John Jay, Jr., took over their father's business and were the only tanners in the county at the outbreak of the Civil War.

The county's earliest processors of finished leather included nine shoemakers and five saddlers in 1850. Since the census Schedule V, Products of Industry, for that year listed no shoe or saddle shops, each leather processor apparently made his product at his residence. All of the 1850 residents resided in present-day Orange County, and none were enumerated in the 1860 Jefferson County census returns.

In 1860, nine shoemakers, five of whom were European immigrants, resided in Jefferson County, but none were recorded in the county's Schedule V return of that year. By the 1870's, the Jefferson County shoemakers were adopting factory methods. In 1879, D. J. Coleman employed seven men at his Beaumont shoe factory, paying his skilled craftsmen $3.00 and unskilled laborers $2.00 for a 10-hour work day. He operated one leather sewing-machine, and utilized during the year 340 sides of upper and sole leather valued at $7,000. Coleman's products included 900 pairs of boots worth $10,000 and 670 pairs of shoes valued at $4,020.

There were five blacksmiths in Jefferson County in 1850, and eight in 1860. During the latter year, Isaiah Junker and Gabriel Landrum were blacksmiths at Beaumont, Leopold Gianbrun owned a shop at Sabine Pass, and H. A. Reed operated a blacksmith shop in the Pine Island community. The county's other four blacksmiths were employed by the Texas and New Orleans Railroad at Beaumont. Closely allied to blacksmithing was the wagon-making trade, an occupation in which two early Beaumonters, Joseph E. Rogers and August Blumaier, were engaged.

During the late 1830's, Jefferson County began licensing the retailers of liquor and merchandise. The county's "Record of Retail Licenses, 1839-1851," indicates that many merchants failed in business, and that only a few stores survived during the antebellum years. Licenses could be obtained for one year or for as little as four months. It is also apparent that the licensing ordinances were frequently evaded. Some merchants, who functioned continuously over long periods, obtained one license, but did not bother to renew it; other merchants are not recorded at all. The county's early "Criminal Docket Book" verifies that liquor dealers could expect prompt punitive action for non-compliance, but only one merchant was brought to court. The case against Dr. Niles F. Smith, who began and sold many businesses at Sabine, was nol-prossed in 1844, and the physician dutifully paid his fees thereafter.

After Henry Millard moved to Galveston in 1842, his store passed to Sidney H. Millard and his brother-in-law, George Bryan, who paid the license fees continuously until May 8, 1846, the approximate date that Bryan moved to Galveston. The firm's name was then changed to J. P. Pulsifer and Company, a partnership composed of Pulsifer and Dr. J. 0. Millard, which continued until the latter's death. As of 1850, the business was conducted in the only two-story building in Beaumont. In 1849-1850, Jefferson County leased the building's second story from Pulsifer and Millard for use as a courthouse.

In 1838, Simon Wiess, a former Nacogdoches merchant, floated a keelboat loaded with cotton to Sabine Lake, after which he founded a grocery store on the Neches River at Beaumont. In 1839, Wiess sold out to his clerk William P. Herring, and began another store at Grigsby's Bluff. In December, 1839, Wiess formed a mercantile partnership with Dr. John A. Veatch and settled permanently thereafter at Wiess Bluff in southwest Jasper County.

License records indicate that William P. Herring paid his store fees regularly, beginning in 1841. By 1851, he was engaged in cotton-buying and ginning at his location at the foot of Pearl Street and prospered until his death in 1859. Two brothers, James R. and Michael Alexander, purchased the Herring grocery and operated it until 1861, when they sold out to Isaiah Junker.

License records reveal that other Beaumont merchants were less successful. In 1840, G. Winslow and L. Czarnikow, early Houston merchants, paid a $200 merchandising fee for a store in Beaumont, but failed to renew their license a year later. In 1841
and 1842, Alexander Calder paid annual $100 retail fees to sell merchandise in Beaumont. In 1842, George Anthony Nixon, the former land commissioner at Nacogdoches for the Galveston Bay and Texas Land Company, paid a $250 retail fee for a store at Beaumont, but allowed his license to lapse upon expiration. 99

There are several descriptions of Beaumont’s antebellum business community. In October, 1856, K. D. Keith, upon arriving to manage W. A. Ferguson’s new hardware store, roomed at Cave Johnson’s hotel. Keith recalled that Beaumont contained:

…two stores — one owned by Mr. W. P. Herring, the other owned by Herring and Ruff. 97 The Herrings were brothers. I found one saloon owned and managed by C. H. Ruff, brother of the merchant. One blacksmith shop owned by Isaiah Junker. A ferry across the river in the northern part of town, owned by Mrs. Hutchinson. One sawmill on Brake’s Bayou, north of town, owned by William Phillips … There was one doctor, G. W. Hawley, who owned a drug store 98 There were two lawyers in town, John Calhoun Robertson and Walking Gray. 99 Walking was a nickname given to Mr. Gray because he walked around the circuit to attend the courts… 100

In 1854, Frederick Olmsted spent the night at Beaumont’s “very tolerable little village hotel,” and crossed the Neches River on the Hutchinson and Collier’s ferries. 101 As early as 1843, Joseph and Nancy Tevis Hutchinson had been licensed to operate a “public boarding house in Beaumont.”102

In 1856, a roving Galveston Weekly News correspondent observed that Beaumont contained:

…twenty-four families all told, two doctors, two lawyers, two merchants, one grocery, one wagon shop, one blacksmith shop, one carpenter shop, one apothecary shop, one school … one steam mill and another going up, one shoemaker, and one substantial courthouse, which is an ornament to the town. The dwelling houses are handsome, frame buildings, built of cypress which is found here in abundance… 103

Two months later, the same reporter added that:

…Some new buildings are going up, and the town seems to be shaking the accustomed dreariness. A heavy mercantile firm [W. A. Ferguson’s] has just been opened for the accommodation of the upcountry people, making the third establishment of the kind in the place. Cotton is coming in from the upper counties, and the streets are daily filled with wagons, coming and returning with alternate loads of cotton, merchandise, and groceries… 104

The fall of 1856 also witnessed perhaps the largest eastbound cattle movements through Beaumont. Correspondent Henry R. Green reported in November that:

…from accounts kept at this place, it appears that fifteen thousand head of beef cattle have crossed the river here this fall en route to New Orleans. They come in from all directions, but mostly from the San Antonio, Guadalupe, and Colorado Rivers. Three droves came in last night from Refugio County… These animals seem to lose nothing in flesh from their long march and are the finest specimens of cattle that I have ever seen. The animals have been passing almost daily for about five weeks, and still they come… 105

License records indicate that numerous persons paid fees to “hawk and peddle” door-to-door in the countryside. During the 1840’s, fees were paid by John Fabrigas, Mordecai Primrose, Jacques Noguess, Simon Goldman, Hadon Graham and Company, and others. 106 On one occasion, the traveler Olmsted encountered the “mud-cart of a grocery peddler whose wheels were broad blocks sawn from a log.” 107

The history of some early firms is closely linked to the shipping industry. Some merchants entered business and later found it necessary to acquire a schooner or steamboat on which to ship cotton and other commodities. Hence, many pioneer merchants doubled as ship captains.

Orange’s second merchant of record, Captain Christian Warner, operated the sloop William Wallace in the Sabine Lake-to-Galveston trade for several years before opening his store adjacent to Delano’s shingle mill. 108 During a voyage in February, 1844, he carried 4,000 barrel staves and 56,000 shingles from Green’s Bluff to the Island City. 109

A. G. and William Swain, “having located at Green’s Bluff … for the purpose of selling merchandise,” were the earliest merchants at present-day Orange, but they paid no fees after 1842. 110 As of that year, A. G. Swain was the deputy collector of customs in charge of the Sabine River region. 111 In 1847, Dennis Call began a mercantile and cotton brokerage business at Green’s Bluff, which continued until his death in 1881. As an exporter and blockade-runner, he owned a number of schooners and the steamer Dennis Call in the course of his lifetime. There is no record, however, that he paid any retail tees prior to 1852. 112 Captain Augustine Pavell was another early cotton trader, blockade-runner, and merchant-sailor, who owned the schooner Sophia and a store at Pavell’s Island, the delta island in the Sabine River. 113

Many merchants were attracted to early-day Sabine Pass, but only two were in business continuously for a decade or longer. The first merchant, Augustus Hotchkiss, arrived with the founding of the Sabine City Company in January, 1839, and began exporting cotton. He remained until 1842, when he returned to Sabinetown. 114 The second, Stephen H. Everett, a Jasper County resident who surveyed the town site City of the Pass in 1839, enjoyed a lucrative cotton trade as well, prior to his death of yellow fever at
Niles F. Smith's merchandising activities are chronicled in numerous deed and newspaper records, the earliest being dated in March, 1842, the year of Hotchkiss' departure. His licenses to retail liquors and merchandise are continuous from 1844, when he was indicted for unlicensed retailing, until 1852. After S. H. Everett's death in 1845, a number of San Augustine residents opened cotton commission businesses at Sabine. Matthew Nicholson came in 1845 and remained two years. Two partners, John Burke and John Perry, forwarded cotton at Sabine from 1846 until 1848. In 1847, Captain Alanson Canfield, the founder-publisher of San Augustine Redlander, settled at Sabine, where he operated a cotton brokerage and mercantile firm. Beginning in 1847, the latter four men felt the brisk competition preferred by two newcomers from Galveston, John H. Hutchings and John Sealy. Nicholson, Burke, and Perry soon returned to San Augustine, and in August, 1850, Canfield sold out to Sealy and moved to Matagorda. During 1848, the Nacogdoches Times carried each week the advertisements of Sabine commission merchants A. W. Canfield, Border and Brothers, Isaac B. Bailey, and Hutchings, Sealy, Simpson and Company. Border and Brothers remained in business about one year and returned to San Augustine. Bailey died in 1850 and his assets were liquidated. In 1849, Bondies, Roehl and Company operated stores at Nacogdoches and Sabine. In 1853, Captain Bondies closed his stores and moved his steamboat Kate to the Trinity River trade.

In 1853, Captain John Clements, who shipped cotton from Bevilport, Jasper County, aboard his steamer Pearl Plant, purchased the "large and commodious warehouse at Sabine formerly occupied" by John G. Berry and Hugh Ochiltree. Otis McGaffey, who opened a store at Sabine Pass in 1847, was the lone merchant survivor when the seven-year Hutchings and Sealy era ended.

Arriving at Sabine with a credit consignment of goods from their former employer, Henry Hubbell, the Galveston partners joined with Niles F. Smith to found Hutchings, Scaly, Smith and Company in 1847. In May, 1848, Smith sold his interest to his realty associate, William M. Simpson, and the store became Hutchings, Scaly, Simpson and Company until the latter partner sold out and returned to Nacogdoches. Having realized a $50,000 profit in gold, the shrewd traders returned to the Island City in 1854 and shortly afterward, a new firm, Ferguson, Alexander and Company of Jasper, occupied the Galveston titans' former site on the Pass. W. A. Ferguson dissolved his interest in the store in 1857, leaving C. H. Alexander and Company to become the largest trading firm at Sabine.

In 1857, K. D. Keith settled at Sabine Pass, where he married a daughter of Otis McGaffey and bought a half-interest in his father-in-law's store, one of the town's two cotton brokerage firms as of that year. In 1859, upon assuming the Sabine agency for the Morgan Steamship Lines, McGaffey sold out to John Craig. McGaffey reentered the business in 1861, when Craig opened a store in Beaumont. Keith described the Sabine Pass of 1857 as a "small village of 250 inhabitants ... The houses were all of wood and strung along the Pass ... There was not a doctor or lawyer in the place, but the people were the happiest, most social, healthy, and generous of people I ever saw." The increase of upcountry cotton (18,000 bales arrived in 1859) and the construction of the East Texas Railroad brought a sudden influx of population which reached about 500 freemen and 100 slaves by July, 1860, and about 1,500 persons in 1861. One description of 1858 observed that there were "four commission and forwarding houses, four dry goods stores, one tin shop, one blacksmith shop, one gunsmith, two retailing grocers, two hotels ... three wharves forty-five families, forty-odd voters ... [and] some 400 inhabitants" in the community.

Describing the antebellum seaport, Captain E. I. Kellie, who had been a printer's devil for the Sabine Pass Times in 1860, wrote that:

...Among the merchants were C. H. Alexander, Craig and Keith, Otis McGaffey, Tom Snow, Edmondson and Culmell, and others. They all did a big business. Just before the war broke out, Sabine Pass was -on a veritable boom. People were flocking there from all over Texas. Many handsome residences and large store buildings were going up. Among the newcomers were Eddy and Adams, who established a wholesale house equally as large as any in Texas. John McRae was another large concern, and the general opinion was that Sabine Pass was going to be THE city of Texas.

There were other merchants who owned businesses for short periods during the late 1850's. These included Sidney J. Sweet, Abel Coffin, Jr., Julius Kaufman, Charles H. Ruff, Thomas B. Whiting, R. F. Green, Charles Hotchkiss, and Wesley Garner. Dr. James D. Murray and Jerome Swinfond owned drug stores there, and Renaldo Hotchkiss and Joseph Martin operated saloons. With the outbreak of war, however, the town's export commerce, except blockade-running, ceased abruptly, and most of the merchants had closed their doors and moved away by September, 1862.

All available evidence suggests that the decade of the 1850's was the most prosperous in Jefferson County's nineteenth-century history. At the precise moment when the county's economic forces were girding to expand, a double calamity, war and the dreaded "yellow jack," halted all progress. Yellow fever caused a hundred deaths at Beaumont and Sabine and the flight of hundreds of people from the county. The death of its economy, the loss of population, and the ashes of defeat became the fragile ground upon which the Civil War's survivors in Jefferson County were forced to rebuild during the Reconstruction epoch. And an entire decade expired before the county regained its antebellum economic level.
SIMON WIESS—Principally a Jasper County figure, Simon Wiess became the second merchant at Beaumont in 1838 and the first at Port Neches in 1839. He lived at Wiess Bluff after 1840, but greatly influenced the county’s history.

OTIS McGAFFEY — A successful merchant from 1846 until 1878, Otis McGaffey was Sabine’s lone cotton broker to survive the John Sealy-J. H. Hutchings epoch which ended in 1854. He held many public offices during his lifetime.

End Notes

1Manuscript Returns of Jefferson County Schedule IV, Products of Agriculture, Seventh Census of the United States, 1850.


3In 1829, Stephen F. Austin’s colony contained “one steam sawmill and a number of other mills and cotton gins.” By 1830, William Harris and Robert Wilson had erected a “molino de vapor” on the “Rio Buffalo.” See letters, Austin to T. F. Leaming, May 13, 1829 and Austin to Ramon Musquiz, June 14, 1830, in E. W. Winkler (ed.), Manuscript Letters and Documents of Early Texans, 1821-1845 (Austin: Steck Company, 1937), pp. 83, 93. By 1835, there were a number of steam mills on Buffalo Bayou, including one owned by David G. Burnet and Norman Hurd. In December, 1837, the Velasco Steam Sawmill and Manufacturing Company advertised for 10,000 saw logs to be delivered at its mill on the Brazos River. See (Brazoria, Texas) The People, April 18, 1838; W. F. Gray, From Virginia To Texas, 1835: Diary of Colonel William Gray (reprint; Houston: Fletcher Young Publishing Company, 1965), p. 146; Visit To Texas: Being The Journal Of A Traveler (reprint; Ann Arbor: University Microfilms, Inc., 1966), pp. 74-75; A. W. Williams and E. C. Barker, The Writings of Sam Houston, 1813-1863 (8 volumes; Austin: Pemberton Press, 1970), II, 103. The earliest record however of a powered sawmill in Texas was on Ayish Bayou in San Augustine County. Wyatt Hariks built a water-powered mill there in 1826. By 1842, only the ruins of the mill dam remained. See (Houston) Morning Star, February 1, 1842.


5Ibid., p. 47.


8Quarterly Return” R. C. Doom to the Secretary of the Treasury, June 30 and September 30, 1839, Sabine Bay Customs Records, File 4-21/10 Texas State Archives; Ibid., “Quarterly Return,” N. F. Smith, Collector, April 30, 1843.

9(Galveston) Civilian and Galveston Gazette, December 3, 1843.


11Beaumont Journal, June 12, 1914.


13Analysis of the 1850 Census,” Texas Gulf Historical and Biographical Record, VII (May, 1972), p. 70.


15Finally, Sweet and Neal McGaffey, March 8, 1846, Volume F, p. 209, Deed Records, Jefferson County Texas; Partnership Contract and Indenture, Sweet and William M. Simpson, Deed Records, San Augustine County, Texas, copies owned by the writer.


19Files 87 and 87-A, Estate of Sidney A. Sweet, 1849, Probate Records, Jefferson County, Texas.
Manuscript Returns of Jefferson County, Schedule V, Products of Industry, 1850.


A. W. Spaight, “History of Spaight’s Texas Regiment,” as supplied to the Adjutant General’s office, January 18, 1881, in A. W. Spaight Papers, File 2G276, University of Texas library, Austin, Texas.

Volume C, pp. 120, 126, 131, 142, Commissioners’ Court Minutes, Jefferson County, Texas.


Ibid, Volume Q, pp. 352, 404, 545.


Volume L, p. 8, Deed Records, Jefferson County, Texas.


(Galveston) Weekly News, December 8, 1857; Volume B, p. 246, Commissioners’ Court Minutes, Jefferson County, Texas.


Volume M, p. 113, Deed Records, Jefferson County, Texas.


54 Manuscript Returns of Jefferson County, Schedule V, Products of Industry, 1850.
55 Ibid, Orange County, Texas, 1860.
56 Texas Almanac, 1859 (Galveston: Richardson and Company, 1860), p. 150; Works Progress Administration, Inventory of the County Archives of Texas: No. 181, Orange County (San Antonio: Texas Historical Records Survey, 1941), p.7.
58 (Nacogdoches) Chronicle, August 16, 1853.
59 (Galveston) Weekly News, June 7, 1856.
60 (Galveston) Weekly News, May 10, 1859.
61 Manuscript Returns of Jefferson County, Schedule VI, Social Statistics, 1850. In the census schedules of 1850-1860, numerous steamboat pilots, captains, and engineers are listed as carpenters. Census enumeration was usually conducted between June and October, the off-season for steam boating.
62 Volume K, p. 94, Deed Records Jefferson County Texas; William M. Simpson, "Map of The Town Site of Sabine Pass," 1847, copy owned by the writer; Perlstine, "Map of Beaumont," 1889, University of Texas library. Sweet's shipyard at Sabine Pass occupied Block 1, Range 1 of the town site. Spartan sawmill was located on Block 1, Range 2. All steamboats known to have been built in Beaumont were constructed on Brake's Bayou in the sawmill district.
65 Volume G, p. 199, Deed Records, and File 96, Estate of I. B. Bailey, Probate Records, Jefferson County, Texas. Jones' shipyard was described as containing "ways and grabs for hauling out vessels, storehouse, wharf, cistern, and Fence together with four 3-fold purchase blocks on the yard, and fall rope not less than ... 1,000 pounds with the necessary anchor chains and small blocks, small cordage, carpenter bench, tools and ship tools, crosscut saw, bellows, and anvil with all other appurtenances." See p. 199.
68 Volume A, p. 69, Personal Property Record, Jefferson County, Texas.
69 Manuscript Returns of Orange County, Texas, Schedule V, Products of Industry, 1860. In 1860, Baxter was listed as a ship carpenter in the census and lived at Grigsby's Bluff.
70 (Galveston) Weekly News, June 2, 1857 and June 8, 1858.
71 Volume B, pp. 223-234, Personal Property Record, Jefferson County, Texas.
J. P. Landers, "Valentine Burch," *Texana*, III (Summer 1965), p. 109. This was the second steamer named Albert Gallatin. See Chapter VII, footnote 83.

Beaumont *Enterprise*, January 8, 1933. There was some antebellum shipbuilding at other points on the upper Neches. In 1853, Pipkin, Shipman and Company of Bevilport built the steamer *Tom Shark*. See (Nacogdoches) *Chronicle*, February 1, 1853. In 1857, the steamboat *T. J. Smith* was built by Smith and Force at Town Bluff. See (Galveston) *Weekly News*, December 15, 1857.


Manuscript Returns of Jefferson County, Schedule V, Products of Industry, 1870, Microfilm Reel No. 46, Texas State Archives.


Manuscript Returns of Jefferson County, Schedules I and V, 1860; ibid, Orange County, Schedule V p. 1. In 1859, David Harmon of Orange, who formerly was a Jefferson County resident, manufactured one hundred Spanish saddles valued at $2,000.


Manuscript Returns of Jefferson County, Schedule V, Products of Industry, 1880, Microfilm Reel No. 48, Texas State Archives.


Ibid pp. 44, 73, residences 273, 444.

Record of Retail Licenses, 1839-1851, pages unnumbered, and Criminal Docket Books, 1839-1864, Jefferson County, Texas.

Record of Retail Licenses, 1839-1851, Jefferson County, Texas.


Volume A, pp. 133-134, Commissioners' Court Minutes, Jefferson County, Texas.


Record of Retail Licenses, 1839-1851, Jefferson County, Texas.


File 97, Estate of Sarah Herring, Probate Records, and Original Probate, Final, Jefferson County, Texas.

Beaumont *Journal*, August 1, 1908.


John J. Herring and Otto Ruff, who were wed, respectively, to Sarah and Lucinda Calder formed a realty partnership in 1854 which quickly expanded into a general mercantile firm. Charles H. Ruff became the third partner in the business in 1861. See Ruff and Herring partnership indenture, June 1, 1861, Volume M, p. 536, Deed Records, Jefferson County, Texas.

George W. and Mary Hawley were among the wealthiest ($81,500) of antebellum Jefferson County's citizens. They settled at
Sabine Pass in 1847, where in 1851, they purchased a grocery, bowling alley, and drug store from Dr. Niles F. Smith. About 1854, Dr. Hawley acquired considerable real estate in and moved to Beaumont. As of the 1860 census, Mary Hawley was enumerated at the residence of her children at Sabine. Pass and possibly resided there to manage their extensive business properties at Sabine and Galveston. She and her husband died during the yellow fever epidemic at Beaumont in 1862. See Manuscript Returns of Jefferson County, 1860, Schedule I, pp. 45, 51, residences 282, 309; Beaumont Journal, February 25, 1906; Volume I, pp. 92-93, Deed Records, Jefferson County, Texas.


102 Record of Retail Licenses, 1839-1851, Jefferson County, Texas.


104 (Galveston) Weekly News, December 2, 1856. As of December, 1856, the steamboats Doctor Massie and Mary Falvey were both upriver on the Neches River, buying cotton. In February, 1856, the former vessel sank near Town Bluff, Tyler County, and blocked the river until raised, probably accounting for the heavy wagon-freighting of cotton to Beaumont during the fall of 1856. See (Galveston) Weekly News, May 27, 1856 and March 7, 1857.

105 (Galveston) Weekly News, December 2, 1856.

106 Record of Retail Licenses, 1839-1851, Jefferson County, Texas.

107 Olmsted, Journey through Texas, p. 228.

108 Record of Retail Licenses, 1839-1851, Jefferson County Texas; “Entrances and Clearances,” October 31, 1843, Sabine Bay Customs Records File 4-21/10, Texas State Archives. Warner paid retail lees from 1845 until Orange County was separated in 1852.


110 Letters, A. G. and W. Swain to the Treasurer September 4, 1840 and September 1, 1841, Record of Retail Licenses, Jefferson County, Texas.


112 (Orange) Tribune, February 22, 1884; Brown, Indian Wars and Pioneers of Texas, pp. 467-469; “Analysis of the 1850 Census,” Texas Gulf Historical and Biographical Record, p. 105.

113 Manuscript Returns of Orange County, 1860, Schedule I, Population, p. 28, residence 191; Will and Testament of A. Pavell, 1867, Volume 162, p. 378, Deed Records, Galveston County, Texas; (Galveston) Civilian and Galveston Gazette, November 23, 1865. As of 1850, Thomas Blake was the only innkeeper enumerated at Green’s Bluff. Orange’s innkeepers of 1853 were H. B. Force and John M. Taylor. See (Nacogdoches) Chronicle, August 16, 1853.

114 (Galveston) Civilian and Galveston Gazette, November 4, 1840 and April 16, 1842; Volume D, pp. 154-155, Deed Records, Jefferson County, Texas; Crocket, Two Centuries in East Texas, p. 219.


117 Record of Retail Licenses, 1839-1851, and Criminal Indictment No. 11, Republic of Texas Versus Niles F. Smith, Volume A p. 43, Minute Book, District Court, Jefferson County, Texas; “Quarterly Return of Exports,” April 30 and July 31, 1845, Sabine Bay Customs Records, File 4-21/10, Texas State Archives.

118 (San Augustine) Redlander, November 6, 13, 20 and December 18, 1845; February 12 and April 2, 9, 1846; Volume E, p. 372, Deed Records, Jefferson County, Texas; “Abstract of Imposts,” January 31, 1845, and “Quarterly Return of Exports,” April 30, 1845, Sabine Bay Customs Records, File 4-21/10, Texas State Archives; (Houston) Morning Star, April 24, 1845.

119 Record of Retail Licenses, 1839-1851; “The 1850 Census of Jefferson County,” Texas Gulf Historical and Biographical Record, VII, p. 115. See issues of the San Augustine Redlander prior to 1846 for the events of Canfield’s life. While he was
Jefferson County is a county located in the Coastal Plain or Gulf Prairie region of Southeast Texas in the United States. The Neches River forms its northeast boundary. As of the 2010 census, the population was 252,273. The 2015 United States Census estimate is 254,308. The county seat of Jefferson County is Beaumont. The county was established in 1835 as a municipality of Mexico, which had gained independence from Spain. Because the area was lightly settled, the Mexican government allowed European

120 Volume I, pp. 160-161, Deed Records, Jefferson County, Texas; Crocket, Two Centuries in East Texas, pp. 2 45-246.

121 (Nacogdoches) Times, April 22, 29, June 3, 17, 24, and July 8, 1848; File 96, Estate of I. B. Bailey, Probate Records, Jefferson County, Texas.

122 (Nacogdoches) Times, March 17, 24, 1849: (Nacogdoches) Chronicle, August 7, 1852 and November 8, 185

123 (Nacogdoches) Chronicle, October 30, 1852 and December 6, 13, 1853. After selling out at Sabine, Hugh Ochiltree settled at Orange in 1854 and eventually became the largest merchant there.

124 Record of Retail Licenses, 1839-1851, Jefferson County, Texas.


126 (Galveston) Civilian and Galveston Gazette, June 2, 1848; (Galveston) Weekly News, October 27, 1848; (Nacogdoches) Times, July 8, 1848.

127 Brown, Indian Wars and Pioneers of Texas, pp. 149, 152.


130 Ibid., p. 15.

131 Manuscript Returns of Jefferson County Schedule I, 1860, pp. 51-62, residences 306-381, and Schedule II. Both Keith and Captain E. I. Kellie estimated Sabine’s population as totaling 5,000 in 1861. However, the writer rejects their figure as an exaggeration. While conceding that the town was booming, there were neither businesses nor industries to support 5,000 persons nor enough high land to house them. Most of the land along the Sabine Pass is artificial, built up from channel spoil dredged since 1875.

132 (Galveston) Weekly News, September 21, 1858.


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