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# Texas in the Southwestern Fur Trade, 1718-1840.

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TEXAS IN THE SOUTHWESTERN FUR TRADE, 1718-1840.

by J. Ryan Badger

A plan-B thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS in History

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Much has been written about the North American trade dealing in beaver and otter pelts. The drive to acquire valuable hides drove the early colonial economy and served as one of the industries which pushed Americans to expand their national reach beyond the Rocky Mountains, the British, Scots, and Russians to move southward from Canada and Alaska, and the Spanish to assert their claim to the North. Admittedly, the Spanish were latecomers to the fur trade and often lacked the population and practical experience to pursue trapping as a nationalized industry, however, the portion of North America they laid claim to boasted far greater riches in fine furs than in the mineral resources typically sought after by Spanish. One region often dismissed by historians as being rich in fine furs is Texas, excluded from fur trade studies due to a perceived inhospitable climate for the animals, language barriers, and limited documentation. Nevertheless, evidence from Mexican inspectors and American travelers making their accounts of life in Texas, particularly between 1821 and 1836, show that the fur trade was a vibrant and as much of a dynamic industry in this frontier region as it was throughout any other part of the Southwest.

This paper will provide an opening perspective to the fur trade in Texas as a part of the larger Southwestern history, seating Mexican Texas into the same regional context as the rest of the Southwest to contextualize this part of the fur trade as an international industry and illustrate the nuances that occurred particularly in the Texas trade. The region proves impossible to limit its context to either “wilderness” or “settled;” moreover, the trade that took place was not limited to American Mountain Men, but was seen as a lucrative endeavor by most immigrants. Texas’ fur trade was a combination of the old American Factory System, the realm of the more widely considered “Free Trappers,” a method for African American slaves to acquire the funds

necessary to purchase their own freedom and dispossessed Native Americans to thrive in their new home.

## **TEXAS IN THE SOUTHWEST**

The arid region now known as the American Southwest (Arizona, New Mexico, Colorado, Utah, Nevada, Texas and Southern California and Wyoming) contained ecosystems ideal to the proliferation of aquatic mammals, particularly the otter and beaver whose hides were sought to meet increasing demands for beaver-skin hats, coveted by Europe and America's affluent populations. To harvest a beaver from a wilderness stream, transport that hide to a hatter who made it into an accessory suited to elite gatherings in London or Paris required a certain set of conditions be met in order to make it cost effective for all parties concerned. Indeed the fur trade proved quite lucrative to organized companies like the Hudson's Bay, American Fur and Rocky Mountain Fur Companies as well as "Free Traders" who pursued their own interests outside of contractual obligations. While the Upper Missouri and colder climates of Canada and the Pacific Northwest exceeded the rest of North America in terms of animals per square mile and generally produced thicker, more valuable furs, these regions were also overrun with company trappers who literally warred against each other to gain exclusive rights to the those animals. Despite the abundance of furs in the Northwest through the 1820s and early 1830s, company men were limited in their ability to accrue wealth due to their dependence on the fur company with whom they were employed and the price that company was willing to pay per hide. In addition, the American Mountain Men were constantly in danger of coming into conflict with the HBC or Native tribes allied with the British including the Blackfeet and Arikara. Some of these men, after having worked for one of the major fur companies, often sought to pursue greater opportunities away from the crowded streams of Idaho, Oregon and Montana. There were

large beaver populations throughout the Southwest, which could bring a trapper just as much income while allowing them the freedom to market their goods to the highest bidder at a rendezvous or trading post; opportunities to omit the company dependency and work in close approximation to a settled town or trading post were most available in the Southwest.

The Southwest was prime territory for these Free Trappers who seemed to prefer working outside of the regimentation of company policies and wanted a greater degree of control regarding the sale of their annual catch. The fur trade in the Northwest and Central Rockies was able to thrive, in large part, due to the rendezvous system instituted by William Ashley in 1824.<sup>1</sup> Being landlocked and far from any major trading posts, trappers needed this annual gathering to take place so as to provide them with an opportunity to purchase badly-needed supplies and acquire hard currency. The Southwestern towns of Santa Fe, Taos and the eastern provinces of Texas lessened the trapper's reliance on the rendezvous and often provided discrete trading posts within Mexican Territory. The New Mexican trade capital sat at the terminus of one of the most well-established trade routes of the early nineteenth century, the Santa Fe Trail. A busy highway of commerce from its creation in 1821, the Santa Fe Trail created a road for such Free Trappers to access the markets of the United States. Unfortunately, this road was not without its hazards and caravans traveling the trail exposed themselves to government interception or raids from the Comanche.

In their quest for skins, Free Trappers had looked to Texas early on as a location in which they could acquire the skins they needed to be profitable, pass the winter months in relative comfort and resolve many of the exportation issues which plagued their counterparts to the North and West. These benefits were not novelties which occurred to hunters in the 1830s, in fact the advantages of harvesting the beaver and otter populations of Texas had long been on the minds

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Glass Cleland, *This Reckless Breed of Men*, (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1950). pg. 23.

of enterprising men. Since the first decade of the nineteenth century, individuals with vision had sought the opportunity to trade and trap in Spanish Texas.

## **SPANISH TEXAS**

A land that seemed ideal for agriculture and expansion, Texas initially appeared a great asset to the Spanish government as they moved to expand their colonial influence beyond Central and South America. Spain's first attempts at settling the territory that would eventually become Texas began with the establishment of missions. These missions, the first being San Antonio de Valero in 1718,<sup>2</sup> were designed to colonize Native Americans in South Texas. Linguistically known as the Coahuiltecan, these disparate bands were incorporated into mission life in order to culturally mold them into Spaniards. Ideally, the Spanish crown hoped to create a population of loyal citizens in these missions who could not only maintain Spain's rights to the land through occupation, but could possibly defend the territory from encroaching nations if necessary. Part of the ecclesiastical education that these Native people received was the dismissal of any means of sustenance which seemed "barbarous" to the priests administering these missions, including hunting or trapping.<sup>3</sup> As a result of this change, Coahuiltecan were required to adhere to a rigorous daily schedule which included daily prayer, the production of textiles, and learning an agricultural trade.<sup>4</sup>

Though the priest's efforts were primarily directed toward setting aside Native traditional means of sustenance, they were not averse to trading with outsiders for furs in order to accumulate additional funds to support the mission. The Spanish, who were quite skilled in

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<sup>2</sup> Juan de Almonte & C.E. Castañeda, *Statistical Report on Texas*, (The Southwestern Historical Quarterly, Vol. 28, No. 3 (Jan., 1925). pgs. 187-188.

<sup>3</sup> Edward S. Barnard, ed., *Story of the Great American West* (Reader's Digest Association, Inc. Pleasantville, New York). pg. 114.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.* pgs. 114-115.

mining and ranching, were amenable to Native people outside the missions. Evidence would suggest that neither the Spanish, nor Coahuiltecan possessed the knowledge of how to trap and prepare the beaver hides, rather that the Spanish carried on a regular trade in deer and bison robes.<sup>5</sup> In fact, Juan de Oñate attempted to propagate Santa Fe as an area where the crown could make a fortune on bison hides and worked unsuccessfully to make bison “wool” a viable commodity. Despite petitions to Mexico City, the government dismissed the fur trade due to the lack of skilled laborers available and the exorbitant cost of exporting merchandise.<sup>6</sup>

With the Spanish in control of Texas and no opposition to speak of for acquiring the furs, businessmen from the United States made their early attempts to breach Spanish Texas and gain licensure to trade. Many individuals sought any edge or connection they could exploit to gain access to the vast territory Spain held in North America though often their efforts proved futile. Manuel Lisa attempted to parley his reputation in the fur trade and his Spanish heritage to “anyone who might deign to speak to him” about his Missouri Fur Company and the opportunities that might be available in Santa Fe; his men were chased back to the United States.<sup>7</sup> The ill-fated McKnight Expedition also attempted to enter the territory and found themselves prisoners of the Spanish government for ten years.<sup>8</sup> While many Americans saw the potential opportunities for the fur trade in Texas and the Southwest, all they appear to have done was confirm the fears of an already paranoid Spanish colonial government: that the Americans saw value in their land and resources and were willing to take it; this apprehension was certainly

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<sup>5</sup> Two types of hides were pursued in the Southwest; the coarse-hair hides (from elk, deer, and bison) and fine-hair hides (from beaver, otter, martin, and ermine). The sheer number of deer and bison hides taken from Texas is staggering. Some estimates on deer alone number 40,000+ taken in a single year. A study of the course-hair fur trade in Texas is a study in of itself and will not be attempted in this particular study.

<sup>6</sup> David J. Weber, *The Taos Trappers: The Fur traders in the Far Southwest*. (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1968). pg. 16. See also Carroll and Haggard, *Three New Mexico Chronicles*, 37 & 134.

<sup>7</sup> Herbert E. Bolton, *New Light on Manuel Lisa and the Spanish Fur Trade*, (The Southwestern Historical Quarterly, Vol. 17, No. 1 (Jul., 1913)). pg. 64.

<sup>8</sup> David J. Weber, *The Taos Trappers: The Fur traders in the Far Southwest*. (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1968). pg. 54.

not without foundation. Some American truly believed that they would acquire all the land in North America at some point, but these fears only spurred the creation of a closed border to Americans, making Texas a buffer zone to keep encroaching foreigners away from Spanish cities.

As a solution to the Spanish immigration policies, American traders established trade factories just opposite the border in hopes of attracting Texas Natives to transport hides and furs in exchange for supplies. John Fowler established one of these trade factories on the north bank of the Red River and ran it from 1818-1820. Fowler traded with local Caddo and Comanche for deer and bison hides, but was also able to obtain fine beaver and otter pelts as he also traded with displaced Cherokee and Delaware. During this brief period Fowler logged 455 beaver, 1,183 otter, fox, raccoon and bobcat hides, to say nothing of the deerskins traded to his establishment.<sup>9</sup>

Americans willing to risk discovery, feeling the profit outweighed the risks, did trap the rivers of Far East Texas, and quickly absconded to the city of Natchitoches, Louisiana. There they were able to sell their pelts to the trading house of Barr and Davenport or directly to New Orleans.<sup>10</sup> The military reach of the Spanish Crown was extraordinarily limited at this point and it appears that not even the officials in Mexico City were aware of the extent of trapping that was actually taking place in East Texas. This region's distance from the seat of power in this era of Spanish Texas set a precedent in which American trappers, unwilling to lose their profits to government tariffs, worked as stealthily as possible and then returned to the United States, thus retaining the greatest possible profit from their labors. This method of trapping, prevalent in the Mexican Southwest in the 19<sup>th</sup> century as well, led to little documentation maintained by the trappers who sought to avoid any incriminating detection that might lead to the same fate as the

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<sup>9</sup> Skipper Steely, *Six Months from Tennessee*, (Henington Publishing Company: Wolfe City, Texas). pgs.111-114.

<sup>10</sup> J. Villasana Haggard, *The House of Barr and Davenport*, (The Southwestern Historical Quarterly, Vol.49, No. 1 (July, 1945). Pgs. 73-75.



McKnights. Some of the best sources for discovering the extent of the fur trade in Texas, during both the Spanish and Mexican era, are found in the ledgers kept by trading houses near Texas' eastern borders.

Throughout the Jacksonian Era, as the United States was expanding, Native American people were displaced. Prior to the 1830 Indian Removal Act under President Andrew Jackson, some Native bands moved to Texas to escape the encroachment and violence in their homelands. Bands of Cherokee moved to the banks of the Red River around 1819, with the Delaware settling nearby only a year later in 1820.<sup>11</sup> These two nations possessed years of experience trapping as well as trading with Americans. For these people, trying to survive in a new homeland trapping and trading in beaver and otter facilitated their survival and adjustment to life in Texas. As the 1820s dawned and the Spanish monarchy lost the last of their North American colonies to the forces of Augustín de Iturbide and Vicente Guerrero<sup>12</sup>, the newly established Mexican nation quickly recognized the need for new sources of currency and the potential benefit of bringing American settlers into Texas and allowing American trappers to ply their trade.

## **MEXICAN TEXAS**

The end of the Mexican Revolution in 1821 occurred at a point in history in which Americans were searching for ways to recoup their financial losses from the Crisis of 1819. The fledgling Mexican nation was in need of revenue to maintain their infrastructure and the fur trade in the Southwest provided a lucrative opportunity. One of the first individuals to penetrate the foreboding border between the United States and Mexico was William Becknell, also known as

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<sup>11</sup> *Handbook of Texas Online*, Carol A. Lipscomb, "Delaware Indians," accessed April 15, 2018, <http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/bmd08>. Uploaded on June 12, 2010. Published by the Texas State Historical Association.

<sup>12</sup>

the “Father of the Santa Fe Trail.” Becknell saw incredible opportunities for trade in the New Mexican capital of Santa Fe and made several expeditions to the region where he trapped as well as traded. By 1824 Becknell indicates through his letter to Governor Bartolomé Baca that there were other trading parties in the region beyond his own.<sup>13</sup>

Indeed, the American fur trade was beginning to expand throughout North America. After some trepidation following the War of 1812, large trapping parties were beginning to ascend the Missouri River in search of furs. The industry took a rather dramatic downturn as the British in Canada and their American Indian allies drove Americans southward, away from their sources for beaver and otter pelts; it was not until the Ashley-Henry Expedition in 1822 that a major effort was made to revive the fur trade. While the initial voyage under Andrew Henry proved successful, the subsequent journey in 1823 to resupply under William Ashley resulted in a devastating attack by the Arikara and the death of twelve of Ashley’s men.<sup>14</sup> Distressed at the potential loss of the season, Ashley sent a small group of men led by Jedediah Smith overland in hopes of procuring enough hides to help counterbalance some of the company’s losses. This side-journey resulted in the rediscovery of South Pass and the nascence of the Mountain Man.<sup>15</sup>

The creation of the Mountain Man as a legitimate profession took place largely because of Ashley’s ability to meet the needs of his employees and customers by bringing “civilization” into the remote regions of Utah, Idaho and Wyoming through the rendezvous system. The rendezvous enabled the Ashley-Henry and later the Rocky Mountain Fur Company to maintain a workforce in the field year-round by selling needed supplies, albeit at dramatically inflated prices. The rendezvous also provided the transportation method necessary to return trappers’

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<sup>13</sup> Larry M. Beachum, *William Becknell: Father of the Santa Fe Trade*, Southwestern Studies, Monograph No. 68 (El Paso, TX: University of Texas Press, 1982). pg.41.

<sup>14</sup> Cleland, pg. 60.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.* pgs. 61-62.

furs to hatters and other craftsmen in large eastern cities. By meeting these essential needs the rendezvous became the crux to the fur trade's success in the Rocky Mountains and northwest.<sup>16</sup> While many fur companies followed suit with this method, other trappers opted to find more creative ways of selling their annual supply of furs, these Free Trappers split much of their time between the rendezvous in the Rockies and the villages in Mexico's Northern Territories. Some of these same trappers were able to extend their range to the rivers of West Texas and sell their furs in the villages around San Felipe de Austin and Nacogdoches. William Wolfskill was one of these early trappers who saw the potential of Texas as a land that would meet his professional needs and, hopefully, increase his profits.

Born in Kentucky in 1798 Wolfskill served in the War of 1812 and joined William Becknell's second expedition to Santa Fe in 1822.<sup>17</sup> After spending the year exploring the beaver population throughout New Mexico Wolfskill, accompanied by an unknown New Mexican trapper who Wolfskill was likely training<sup>18</sup>, moved eastward into West Texas and began trapping along the Pecos River.<sup>19</sup> The fact that they were able to successfully trap the river was remarkable in that other trappers who had explored that region of Texas often left empty-handed due to either their inability to find the animals, as was the case with "Old Bill" Williams in 1833, or more often, because they experienced what Job Dye called "Comanche Fever."<sup>20</sup> Indeed the region was the domain of the Comanche nation whose rule was absolute. It

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<sup>16</sup> Records show that the trappers relied heavily on these gatherings to resupply for another year, as well as to sell the furs they had acquired. The rendezvous was considered such a necessity that when a trapper missed one he was considered diseased. For further information see:

<sup>17</sup>Iris Higbee Wilson, LeRoy R. Hafen, ed. *Fur Traders and Trappers of the Far Southwest*: "William Wolfskill," (Logan: Utah State University Press, 1997.). pg. 220.

<sup>18</sup> It was the official policy at this time in New Mexico for American trappers to take New Mexican apprentices in order to acquire a trapping permit. See: J. Ryan Badger, *Bartolomé Baca and the Opening of the Mexican Southwest*, (Rocky Mountain Fur Trade Journal, Vol. 7, No. 1 (July 2013)). pg. 70.

<sup>19</sup> Wilson, pg. 221.

<sup>20</sup>David J. Weber, *The Taos Trappers: The Fur traders in the Far Southwest*. (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1968). pgs. 195-196.

seems that Wolfskill and his partner were able to slip unseen into Comancheria, however, Wolfskill was shot through the hand and arm one evening as he lay sleeping. He miraculously survived the attack and made his way from the river to the small Mexican town of Valverde. Evidence seems to suggest that he was shot by his partner, who would have been the one to inform the rest of the company of his death, and was later arrested for the crime.<sup>21</sup> While Wolfskill recovered in Valverde the rest of the company would have likely continued to trap the Pecos before returning to Santa Fe; Wolfskill's wounds were slow to heal but did not keep him from returning to Texas. He returned in 1825 to meet his comrades in San Felipe de Austin to collect the livestock and furs they had acquired over the winter to be sold in Alabama.<sup>22</sup>

In 1824, the same year that Ashley was sending men overland to trap beaver; Stephen F. Austin was busy finalizing his plans to establish his Texan colony. San Felipe de Austin was originally settled by 300 families gathered from around the United States and became one of the most successful and most appealing destinations to Americans and Europeans seeking a new life in Texas.<sup>23</sup> Austin himself sought to create a thriving society and worked to establish a community whose industries would mirror the towns and cities of the United States. Austin created an enormous map of his capital and laid the city out in a grid, which by 1828 supported two taverns, a print-shop, three general stores and a blacksmith.<sup>24</sup> The city had grown to such proportions that Austin himself declared:

“We emigrated to this country when it was a wilderness, by our labors we have Settled and improved it- plenty now rewards our industry- the charms of refined society, like the budding rose, is beginning to

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<sup>21</sup> Higbee, *Wolfskill*, pg. 221.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.* p.223.

<sup>23</sup> Several travel journals exist from this time period instructing potential immigrants about the bounties of the Texas landscape. One of the most detailed accounts, directed toward European farmers is Detlef Dunt's *Journey to Texas, 1833*.

<sup>24</sup> *Handbook of Texas Online*, Charles Christopher Jackson, "San Felipe De Austin, TX," accessed April 15, 2018, <http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/hls10>. Uploaded on June 15, 2010. Modified on May 9, 2016. Published by the Texas State Historical Association.

shed their genial influence around us and the wild characteristics of nature are rapidly disappearing before the March of enterprise and civilization.”<sup>25</sup>

His vision of Texas, as it was frequently advertised to potential immigrants, was a wilderness subdued and molded into an agricultural paradise. The climate and the resources in Texas were certainly suited for farmers and travelers who chronicled their voyages to the region typically exaggerated these qualities.<sup>26</sup> Nevertheless, stories about Texas spread widely and many an opportunity seeker abandoned their failing farm, leaving nothing on their door but an etched GTT to indicate their destination.<sup>27</sup> Texas became such a popular destination for immigrants, both invited and illegal, that the Mexican federal government sent an expedition to the Northern provinces to inspect the conditions of the citizenry and evaluate their loyalty to the government. It is through the account of this inspector, General Manuel de Mier y Téran and his associate Jean Louis Berlandier that we gain some perspective on how prevalent trapping and American hunters were in Mexican Texas.

General Mier y Téran, having a great deal of experience with celestial observation for the purpose of cartography and being a well-read officer seemed the ideal candidate to send northward to evaluate the colonies and map the boundaries of Texas. Fortunately, Téran kept a detailed account of his journey from Béxar [San Antonio], to Nacogdoches, north to the Red River and back down the Trinity River to the Rio Grande. This particular expedition, Téran would return to Texas in 1831 as the Comandante General of the Northern Provinces, was designed to gather necessary information as to the number of immigrants who had settled in Texas since 1821, what resources were available for the profit of the Mexican government, and

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<sup>25</sup> Eugene Barker, ed., *Annual Report of the American Historical Association for the Year 1919: The Austin Papers*, (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1924), 3 vols., Vol 1, Part 2, pgs. 1648-1649.

<sup>26</sup> Detlef Dunt, , *Journey to Texas, 1833*, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2015). pgs. 30-37.

<sup>27</sup> GTT stands for “Gone to Texas.”

the characteristics of the Native Americans who were residing in Texas. As a counterpart to his cartographic study T eran was accompanied by Jean-Louis Berlandier, a French-Mexican naturalist and physician who intended to catalog the various tribes and natural curiosities in Texas.

This pair meticulously detailed their journey and interactions with the Tejanos,<sup>28</sup> Anglo-Americans and Native Americans. The majority of the journal is T eran's astrological observations, his daily notes and the trials he experienced due to the weather conditions and the insects that are still prevalent in East Texas today. In addition to the geographic details T eran delves into the economic details of each region that he travels through. Of particular note are his and Berlandier's descriptions about the fur trade in Nacogdoches, which seems to be, at this time, the fur trade center of Texas. From T eran's descriptions we learn that Nacogdoches had constructed a supply depot and location for trappers to sell their furs far beyond the reach of federal government. This arrangement makes sense on multiple levels, as East Texas is a densely wooded region with multiple streams and waterways, an ideal environment in which both otter and beaver were able to thrive for hundreds of years. Moreover, Nacogdoches sits a mere hundred miles from Natchitoches, Louisiana where furs could be easily shipped on to New Orleans.

Through T eran's account we gain great insight into the method and the extent to which widespread trapping had impacted the environment of East Texas. According to T eran, Anglo and Native American trappers were utilizing "olerum castoreum" as bait and trapping the animals with steel leg-traps, hidden in the water and secured by a chain and hook to the shore to drown their quarry. This method, also utilized by Mountain Men further West, had yielded 1,200 otter skins and 600 beaver pelts in the first half of 1828 alone. The General then laments

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<sup>28</sup> The term Tejano(a) is used to refer to a Mexican citizen born or residing the state of Coahuila y Tejas (Texas).

that “Otter and beaver have almost been eradicated along the Neches, Angelina and Trinity Rivers because of the relentless pursuit of American trappers, who today seek those precious trade commodities at the headwaters of the Brazos and Colorado Rivers and on all the branches of the Río Bravo del Norte and in New Mexico.”<sup>29</sup> Berlandier’s study of Native Americans in Texas also yields similar sentiments. Through his interactions with Native people Berlandier came into contact with many American traders who were working closely with the Native American immigrant tribes. Berlandier also sees the sheer number of furs being extracted from Texas and fears that between the American traders and hunters and American Indian trapping, the Mexican government might never have the opportunity to reap the profits of its own territories.<sup>30</sup>

Later in his journey, now accompanied by a trader from Nacogdoches, Téran considers the value of the furs being exported from Mexican Texas. Based on the count he presumably gained from his interaction with the unnamed merchant, he calculates the value of one beaver pelt at two pesos, the same as a single black bear skin or two deerskins.<sup>31</sup> Needless to say, the losses the Mexican government suffered from American trapping in Texas alone was enough to necessitate a plan of action in order to stem the flow of unregistered immigrants into Texas. Remarkably, this plan only served to further facilitate and spread trapping in Texas, and ironically it was conceived by General Téran.

Mexico felt the need to reassert her dominion over the northern colonies and devise a system which would enable Mexican presidial soldiers to quickly detain and turn back any Anglo-American colonists attempting to settle in Texas. As Commander of the Northern

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<sup>29</sup> Manuel de Mier y Téran and Jack Jackson, ed., *Texas by Téran: The Diary Kept by Genral Manuel de Mier y Téran on his 1828 Inspection o f Texas*, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2000). pgs .75-76.

<sup>30</sup> Jean Louis Berlandier & John C. Ewers, ed. *The Indians of Texas in 1830*, (Washington DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1969). pgs. 47-48.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.* pg.153.

Provinces, it fell to General T3eran to create an effective solution. T3eran, well acquainted with the North Americans already settled in Texas, knew the routes taken to enter the country and the major crossings along those routes. T3eran determined to “Mexicanize” the region by establishing a series of fortifications, named after major figures or sites central to Mexican culture and heritage. The General believed that the assertion of authority would deter new settlement and encourage Tejano settlers to build communities around the forts, thus further asserting Mexico’s claim to Texas. While the idea seemed practical in theory, the reality was wildly different. The forts that were established did little to intimidate settlers, and rather than hinder the American fur trade and trapping in East Texas, it only served to expand it. The fortress in which T3eran took particular pride was called Tenoxtitlan.<sup>32</sup>

Tenoxtitlan was established in 1830 under the orders of General T3eran and the direct command of Lt Colonel Jos3 Francisco Ruiz who, with 100 soldiers from the Second Flying Company of 3lamo de Parras, built the fortress on the western bank of the Brazos River and along the Old San Antonio Road. This location sat at a halfway point between B3exar and Nacogdoches and was a fairly centralized location in Texas. In fact it was considered such a strategic location that General T3eran declared, “it is extremely important that it be settled in order to keep Texas in subjugation, and it is well-suited for Mexican colonists because the land is adequate for farming and ranching...In my opinion this point, if it is developed, in time will become the capital of all Texas.”<sup>33</sup> If the experiment were successful T3eran would manage to control Anglo-American immigration as well as keeping displaced Native Americans from entering Texas. As most of the trapping taking place in Texas was carried on by these two groups, this plan would effectively bring the American fur trade in Texas to a halt; however,

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<sup>32</sup> Almonte, pgs. 200-201.

<sup>33</sup> Malcom D. McLean, *Tenoxtitlan, Dream Capital of Texas*, (*The Southwestern Historical Quarterly*, Vol. 70, No. 1 (Jul., 1966). pg. 25.



Téran did not anticipate that his site commander, Col. Ruiz, would be sympathetic to immigrants.<sup>34</sup>

Ruiz, a Tejano by birth, felt that commerce with the Americans would only benefit the economy in Texas, much in the same way the economy in Santa Fe blossomed from their ties to Missouri and the fur trade. Ruiz regularly allowed immigrants to pass unmolested and permitted the establishment of a trading post in Fort Tenoxtitlan and Francis Smith, an American settler, was named the proprietor of the establishment.<sup>35</sup> The trading post served not only the fort, but also all the outlying regions, including Austin's colony. While Smith was able to sell his wares with ease, he had to have some of his items imported from Brazoria through a supplier. From a letter he wrote in 1832, not long before Tenoxtitlan was abandoned by Ruiz and the soldiers under his command, we learn that Smith's supplies came from the trading house of Robert and Andrew G. Mills. These two brothers were among the wealthiest citizens of Brazoria and supplied Smith with the stock he needed. In his letter, dated March 11, 1832, Smith delineates the supplies he requires, what will not sell, and the profits he anticipates from the fur trade, particularly from displaced American Indians who have moved to Texas. According to Smith:

“I have learned that common strouding is not good for those beaver hunters that they will not wear but tolerable good broadcloth. I wrote before for brass kettles & beaver traps I think I could sell 100 next fall & summer... I think that 40 thousand dollars worth of Indian produce (furs) can be taken in here between now and the first of next Feby [February] perhaps much

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<sup>34</sup> McLean, pg. 27.

<sup>35</sup> *Handbook of Texas Online*, Charles Christopher Jackson, "Fort Tenoxtitlan," accessed April 17, 2018, <http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/qbf49>. Uploaded on June 12, 2010. Published by the Texas State Historical Association.

more [for] the Cherokees, Shawnees, Delawares & Kickapoos have been very successful at  
beaver this winter.”<sup>36</sup>

While Smith’s estimation of a profit of \$40,000 in furs was high, his anticipation of what he could sell was rather telling.<sup>37</sup> He indicates that the quality of his trade goods were such that he was particularly popular among the Native American trappers, however, his records also indicate that he sold hunting equipment to Tejanos, Anglo Americans and African Americans.

The majority of immigrants who came to Texas to settle generally came for the purpose of establishing themselves on a labor of land which would produce a plentiful crop of corn or cotton. For these settlers, and the African American slaves they brought with them to perform the labor necessary to harvest a cotton crop, their focus was primarily on the business of establishing a permanent home in Mexican Texas and improving their economic situation; while that was possible for the Anglo settlers, slaves never saw any part of the profits from the cotton they produced. Instead, slaves who wished to purchase their freedom had to pursue tangential jobs to raise the money required for their liberty. Some of these individuals could have taken to trapping beaver and otter to raise the funds they needed.<sup>38</sup> It stands to reason that while slaves at that time period could not carry a firearm, and fishing would be time-consuming, running a small trap line to acquire the cash necessary to buy one’s freedom might be a real possibility.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Eugene C. Barker, *A Glimpse of the Texas Fur Trade in 1832*, (The Southwestern Historical Quarterly, Vol. 19, No. 3 (Jan., 1916). pg. 281.

<sup>37</sup> Numbers differ greatly on the subject of how many furs were exported in the region around San Felipe. Barker’s article gives a figure of \$7,000 in exports for 1832 and 1833; however, Almonte’s report on fur exports in that year and region were estimated to be as high as \$50,000 dollars. While Almonte’s report is known to be inflated to a degree, and he does not distinguish between beaver and other furs exported. It seems quite likely that the sale in furs in 1832 were somewhere between the two figures. Regardless of the exact number, it seems that the fur trade was quite profitable for the San Felipe region.

<sup>38</sup> According to an article by Malcolm D. McLean on Fort Tenoxtitlan Francis Smith’s dry goods store was supplying “the Indians, Mexicans, Anglo-Americans and Negroes of the community with such hunting equipment as beaver traps, tomahawks, rifles, fire steels, large fishhooks, pocket knives and spurs.”

<sup>39</sup> Téran’s journal lists the worth of a single beaver pelt at two pesos, the same as a bear hide and double that of a deerskin. See: Téran, pg. 153.

Despite General T3eran's hopes for Tenoxtitlan, the flourishing Mexican would-be-capital of Texas, the post only served to expand the fur trade and provide trappers and new groups of people a more convenient location to trade their furs. T3eran, thoroughly disheartened by Tenoxtitlan's failure to restrict immigration, took his own life by literally falling upon the point of his own sword.<sup>40</sup> Lt. Col. Ruiz, ill and greatly diminished from life in his frontier outpost, left the fort and ordered his men to return to B3exar in 1832. After the fort's closure, the site was largely deserted as settlers moved to larger colonies. Though the era of Tenoxtitlan was brief, it was not the end of the fur trade in Texas. As in the Rockies and the other Mexican Northern territories, beaver prices were still high and could be trapped wherever there was water and trees enough to support the aquatic rodent.

Given the success of Stephen F. Austin's colony other empresarios also made an attempt to claim the Texan land that Mexico was willing to sell at such a low cost. Of the many stories of failed colonies, the journal of the Beals Colony provides further evidence that the trappers had discovered beaver throughout Texas and would explore each waterway to cash in on the trend. The Beals Colony was conceived by Dr John Beals, an Englishman who had been residing in New York in the 1830s and managed to secure a Texan empresario land grant of eight million acres in Southwest Texas, between the Nueces and Rio Grande Rivers. The intention was to settle 800 European immigrant families in this region, making it one of the largest colonies in Texas. The founding group landed in Matagorda Bay in December 1834 and did not reach their final destination until March the following year.<sup>41</sup> While the narrative of the party provides a fascinating European perspective on life in Texas in 1834 the story contains a remarkable detail with regard to the fur trade being carried on much further south than one might anticipate.

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<sup>40</sup> McLean, pgs. 32-33.

<sup>41</sup> William Kennedy. "Villa De Dolores Attempt at Settlement of Beales' and Grant's Concessions on the Rio Grande 1833-1834." *Sons of DeWitt Colony Texas*, 1997-2001, accessed April 13, 2018, [www.sonsofdewittcolony.org/](http://www.sonsofdewittcolony.org/).

Indeed, the settlers come across a small hunting party comprised of five Shawnee and an American hunter at the Rio Grande, south of Béxar.<sup>42</sup> Beals describes the encounter as follows:

“We crossed the stream without farther accident, and on the opposite bank we found five Shawnee Indians encamped, hunting beaver. One or two of them spoke English perfectly. They had caught about forty beavers, and expressed their intention of following us to the lands and spending some time there in hunting...we were also joined by an American hunter, with his wife and children.”<sup>43</sup>

While the Beals colony was disbanded after only a year, the information which they left behind demonstrates the wide range of beaver and otter in Texas and the distances to which trapping parties pursued these animals.

It was clear that American trappers were prevalent throughout Mexican Texas in the 1820s and early 1830s and that the unchecked illegal trapping was a major concern for the Mexican government. However, in 1833 it also began to be a problem for immigrants as well, in one case particularly for William Barrett Travis. Travis, not yet the young commander of the Alamo, was working as a lawyer in Brazoria and was approached by an individual calling himself “F. [Francois] Robidoux” who retained Travis to write a letter of attorney making a another individual, Joseph Urban, a sub agent of the American Fur Company.<sup>44</sup> The request was not an unusual one. If trapping was as profitable as T éran claimed then it would seem reasonable that the American Fur Company would appoint agents to administrate the business and establish a base of operations around San Felipe or Nacogdoches, and the Robidoux name carried enough weight in the Southwest that the source seemed credible. However, after “Robidoux” failed to

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> The Shawnees and American hunter joined the Beals Party on March 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> 1834.

<sup>44</sup> William B. Travis and Robert E. Davis, ed. *The Diary of William Barret Travis*, (Waco: Texian Press, 1966). pg.12.

pay the \$4 service fee, Travis grew suspicious of his identity. The next day (September 17, 1833) Travis's suspicions were confirmed as he states:

“My suspicions about F. Robidoux realized-wrote petition & got order of arrest & seizure on him in my favor for \$4. Dinsmore & Cochran vs. F. Robidoux ac/c \$17.62 ½ wrote petition & got order of arrest & seizure &c &c.”<sup>45</sup>

According to Travis' account above, it appears that the would-be Robidoux had attempted to use this false name to procure some supplies from local merchants Silas Dinsmore and James Cochran for \$17.62 ½.<sup>46</sup> Travis never indicates how he was able to unmask the false Francois nor does this individual appear again in Travis' account. While this individual was not Francois Robidoux, and he almost certainly was not as the real Francois Robidoux was reportedly on the Upper Missouri around Fort Union at this time.<sup>47</sup> The interesting fact about this minor event in the life of William Travis is that it is very telling about the fur trade in Texas at this time, particularly East Texas in 1833. Travis does write the letter of attorney for the American Fur Company and only indicates suspicions after the false Robidoux welched on his debt to Travis. Indeed Travis would have no reason to doubt the AFC's interest in Texas if the rivers around Brazoria were full of beaver. In fact, a mere two years later, when Texas was on the cusp of revolution with Mexico, it was the excessive trapping that worried Inspector Juan de Almonte more than the political disposition of the American settlers.

Mexico in 1835 had proved to be an uneasy year for the citizens in the outlying provinces. In April a violent outbreak of fighting between the Federalists and Centralists in

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<sup>45</sup> Travis Journal, pg. 13.

<sup>46</sup> Travis Journals, pg.32n.

<sup>47</sup>Hugh M. Lewis, in his online collection of microforms presents evidence that Robidoux was in fact around Fort Union and that “Francois name appears on the ship's manifest of the Steamboat Yellow Stone in the spring of 1832, the year that George Catlin made his journey up the Missouri. He is listed as an "engagee" boatman.” See Hugh M. Lewis, *FRANCOIS LOUIS ROBIDOUX*, accessed April 3, 2018.

<http://www.lewismicropublishing.com/Publications/Robidoux/RobidouxFrancois.htm>. Last Updated 09/16/06.

Zacatecas had led to a Centralist defeat. The Federalist commander, Antonio Lopez de Santa Anna, the president and general of Mexico pronounced three days of pillage on the town as punishment for the rebellion.<sup>48</sup> Civil unrest had been rampant in Mexican provinces and Texas was seen as a potential threat to the peace of the republic. In order to gain some sense of the disposition of the Texans Inspector Juan de Almonte was ordered to evaluate the Northern colony, its citizens and the colonial profits for the year. Almonte, who had been sent in 1834 by Vice President Valentine Gómez Farías, had returned to Mexico City and compiled his report. His account of the various cities, or “departments” as they are referred to in Almonte’s report, illustrate the societal melting pot that was Texas as well as the various trades which drove the economy. One of the industries to which Almonte refers on multiple occasions is the fur trade. His report contains one of the most poignant warnings for the government as he witnessed the profits that Anglo and Native American trapping brought in, how those profits were deferred from Mexico and the overall impact that trapping had on the environment.

Almonte focused on three distinct departments; Béxar [San Antonio], San Felipe, and Nacogdoches. In each of these various departments he commented on the relationship between colonists, minerals, wildlife, climate, and industry. In each region Almonte records, with as much detail as is available to him, the status and profits of the fur trade for each of those regions. While Nacogdoches exceeds the other departments in their overall productions, it bears noting that the other two departments also had large annual harvests in furs. In fact, Almonte reports that in Béxar specie was a rarity and that the citizenry had such difficulty in exporting goods that “the export and import trade is reduced to eight or ten thousand pelts of different kinds and to a few articles imported from New Orleans for the trade of Bexar, where they are sold in exchange

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<sup>48</sup> Richard Bruce Winders, *Crisis in the Southwest: The United States, Mexico and the Struggle Over Texas*, (Wilmington: Scholarly Resource Books, Inc., 2002). pg. 17.

for pelts and money.”<sup>49</sup> He fails to record any further details with regard to the annual export in furs from Béxar.

Completing his tour of South Texas Almonte turned toward the other two departments, San Felipe and Nacogdoches. In Austin’s colony Almonte elaborates on the bounties of the land and the myriad of valuable wildlife. Throughout his tour he discovered at least one trade post in Brazoria which did not enforce any duties on goods exported or imported as there was no government customs house in the region.<sup>50</sup> This situation clearly galled Almonte as a government representative, but worked to the advantage of trappers working in San Felipe or Nacogdoches (no Mexican custom house was noted in Nacogdoches either) who wished to sell their pelts for the greatest profit. This seems to have been the case as Almonte reports enormous exports in furs in both provinces. According to the report, which included some figures from 1833 and 1834, a total of 170,000 furs were exported from the departments of San Felipe and Nacogdoches.<sup>51</sup> Although Almonte is clear that he is counting “furs” as the hides of “deer, otter and beaver” he is also quick to point out to that the Mexican government has been losing an incredible amount of money though their disregard for a very finite resource. He states that “All of Texas abounds in the same kind of game, but beaver and otter are more abundant in this department [Nacogdoches]. There are so many hunters, however, that unless some measure is taken so that may be hunted only during a given season of the year, the most valuable fur bearing animals will be extinct.”<sup>52</sup> Indeed, there was great concern from General T3eran as well as Almonte that the beaver and otter would go extinct long before Mexico was able to harvest its own rivers. 1834-35 appeared to have been a very lucrative time for trappers in Texas, as it was

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<sup>49</sup> Almonte, pg.192.

<sup>50</sup> Almonte, pg.200.

<sup>51</sup>Almonte, pgs. 205 & 212. Reports 80,000 from San Felipe over two years, and 90,000 from Nacogdoches in 1834 alone.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid. pgs.214-215.

for Mountain Men and Free Trappers throughout the West; unfortunately, the political unrest that led to the Battle of Zacatecas would soon erupt in South Texas and upset the lives of all who lived and worked there.

## **THE REPUBLIC OF TEXAS**

After the outbreak of hostilities between the Centralist and Federalist factions in Mexico, President Santa Anna sent expeditionary forces to the Northern Provinces to reclaim all government-issued artillery; this included a small cannon from the town of Gonzales, Texas. Seeing the reclamation as a threat to their constitutional rights and a precursor to the kind of violence endured by the people of Zacatecas, the citizens of Gonzales determined to keep the cannon. When soldiers from Béxar attempted to reclaim the cannon they were fired upon by the men of Gonzales, effectively initiating the Texas Revolution.<sup>53</sup> Further fighting in Béxar in 1835 spurred President Santa Anna to lead an army of 2,500 + against the Federalists of South Texas. His arrival in the city and victory at the Battle of the Alamo threw the Anglo-American population into such a panic that many people took what they could carry and fled toward the western border of Louisiana and the safety of the United States. This flight, known as the Runaway Scrape included the abandonment of homes, businesses and the burning of San Felipe.<sup>54</sup> Victory came for the “Texan Army” on April 21, 1836 at the Battle of San Jacinto, when a reduced Mexican force of 1,300 led personally by Santa Anna was overwhelmed in eighteen minutes. The President was captured the next day and forced to deed Texas to the

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<sup>53</sup> *Handbook of Texas Online*, Stephen L. Hardin, "Gonzales, Battle Of," accessed April 19, 2018, <http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/geg03>. Uploaded on June 15, 2010. Modified on June 30, 2016. Published by the Texas State Historical Association.

<sup>54</sup> Winders, pg. 26.



provisional government in exchange for his life.<sup>55</sup> Though the Federalist Texans had successfully managed to gain their independence from Mexico, their cities and economy was badly upset and there was constant fear of another invasion by Mexican forces.<sup>56</sup> The Republic required years to recover from their losses, losses which effectually halted the fur trade in Texas.

The Texas Revolution of 1835-36 came on the heels of plentiful years for trappers in Texas; however, declining beaver and otter populations, changing fashions, and political unrest made their continued work in the rivers and streams of the Republic unprofitable. As Almonte feared, after the enormous catches of 1833 and 1834 the number of beaver and otter in Texas began to dwindle, to the point that their numbers were never able to fully recover.<sup>57</sup> Trappers found fewer animals to trap and, after the Revolution, fewer businesses in which to sell their annual cache. Now a nation, Texas suffered from want of specie and the paper currency that they had printed was so inflated that it was virtually worthless. Though few records exist on individual trappers, trading posts records reflect the drop in furs brought to Texan posts. It is likely that some trappers sought game further north or quit the enterprise altogether. As early as 1834 it had become clear to one of the fur trade's great moguls, John Jacob Astor, that the fashionable beaver hat was losing its appeal. Astor sold off his shares of the American Fur Company to invest in other opportunities.<sup>58</sup>

The trade in beaver and otter had peaked and was now on its downward slope. With the depletion of the beaver populations and the natural shift in fashion, many trappers struggled to

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid. pgs. 27-28.

<sup>56</sup> Texas was invaded again on more than one occasion and Béxar taken by General Woll in 1842. See Winders, pgs. 54-56.

<sup>57</sup> Robin W. Doughty, *Wildlife and Man in Texas: Environmental Change and Consideration*, (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1989). pg. 4.

<sup>58</sup> Eric Jay Dolin, *Fur Fortune and Empire*, (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 2010). pg. 280.

turn a profit on their catch. By 1840 it was clear to fur companies throughout North America that the rendezvous system had seen its day, and was disbanded.<sup>59</sup>

The Republic of Texas' second president Mirabeau B. Lamar made an attempt to extend the reach of the Republic and unite with Santa Fe.<sup>60</sup> In Lamar's vision of Texas, the Republic would follow the Rio Grande, take in Santa Fe, extend northward to the source of the Rio Grande River in the Rocky Mountains of Southern Wyoming as well as portions of the Arkansas and Red Rivers. Though impressive, this vast region was far beyond the abilities of a struggling young nation to populate and protect. Interestingly enough, had Texas been able to maintain the boundaries that Lamar envisioned it would have owned some of the richest fur country left in North America as well as immediate proximity to Bent's Old Fort and could have profited from the residual trade in beaver (those that were left) and the bison hide trade. The Republic was annexed into the United States in 1845 and business in agriculture, ranching and oil defined the economy of the Lone Star State.

Though overshadowed by the rich history of a colony-turned-nation-turned-state, the story of the fine fur trade in Texas adds an exciting new dimension to the narrative of the Southwestern fur trade. The Anglo, Native and African American trappers involved saw Texas as a haven, far from the reach of the Mexican federal government where anonymity could yield great wealth. Though they left few personal narratives of trapping exploits and rarely worked with organized companies, their presence was noted by the declining number of beaver and otter and the thousands of pelts shipped through Nacogdoches and San Felipe. The trappers' work was a source of deep anxiety for government inspectors, great benefit to affluent men in Europe and the United States and fleshes out the already complex narrative of men in pursuit of wealth

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid. pg. 289.

<sup>60</sup> Thomas Maitland Mitchell, *Commercial Aspects of the Texan Santa Fe Expedition*, (The Southwestern Historical Quarterly, Vol. 20, No. 3 (Jan., 1917)). pgs. 247-249.

on the Mexican Northern frontier. The legacy of trappers in Texas creates nuance that will hopefully spark further research for years to come.