

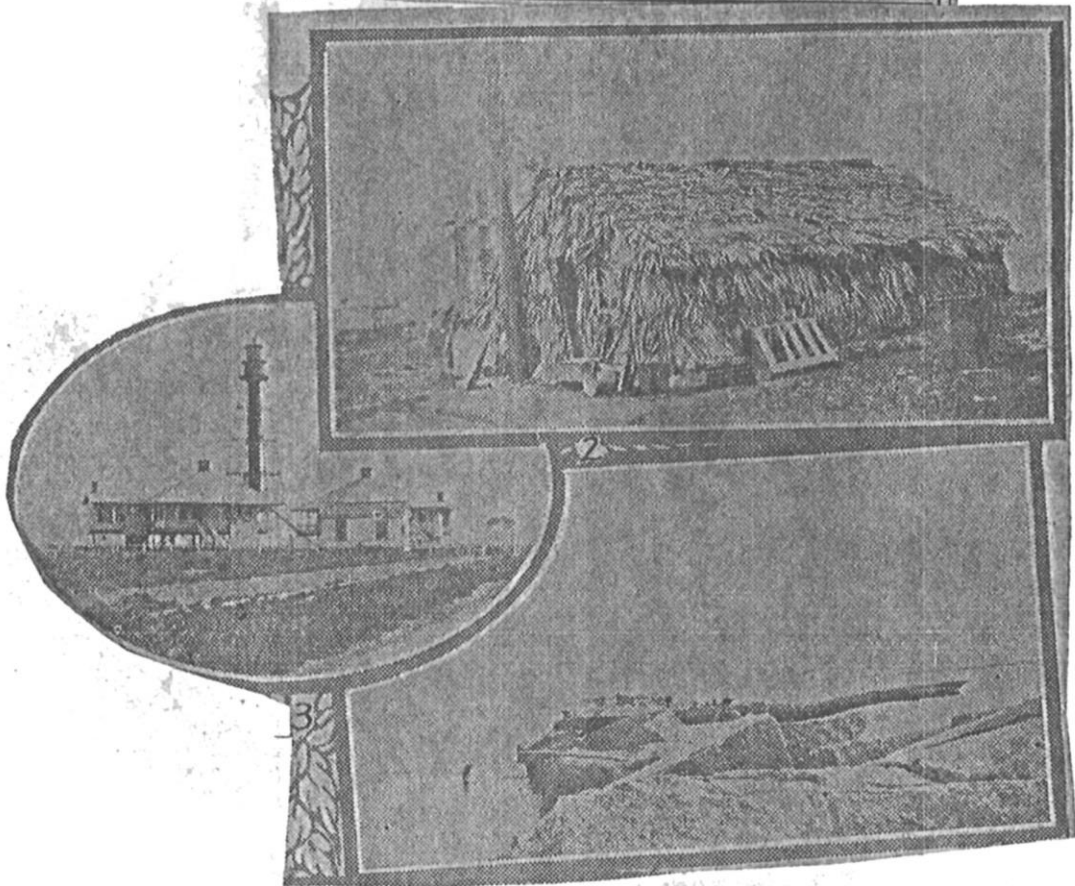
HOUSTON CHRONICLE

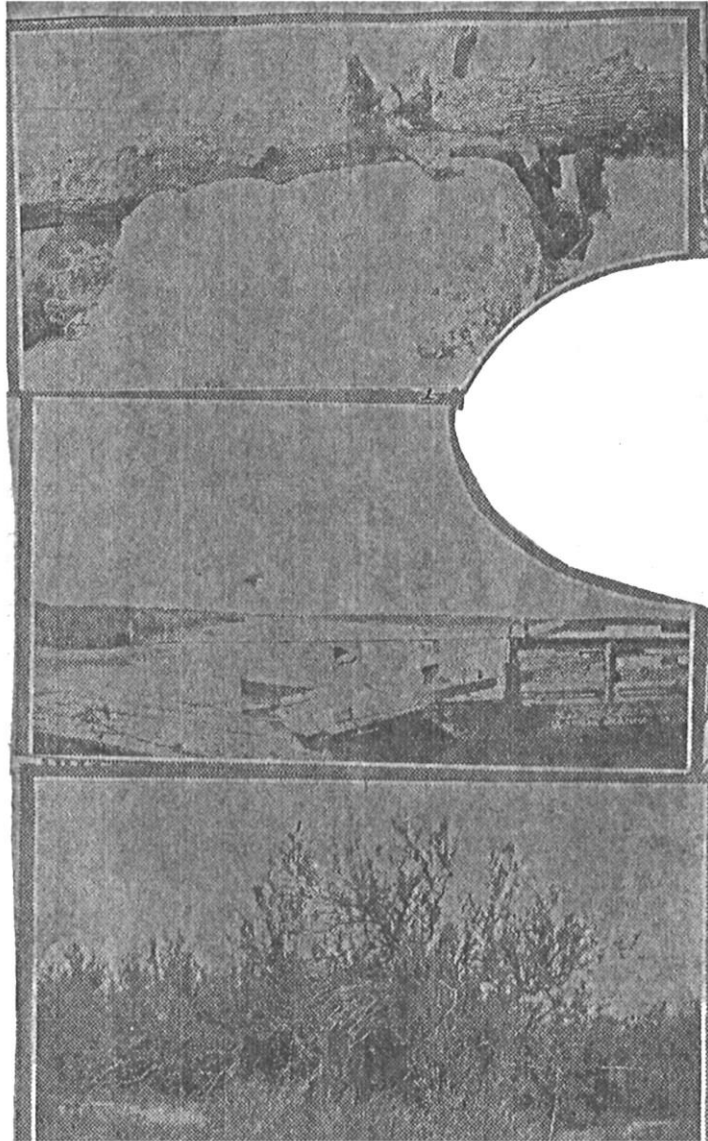
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DESERTED OLD

VELASCO ONCE

BUSY PLACE





**O**LD Velasco, Texas' first seaport and one of her most historic spots, once a large, important town, for many years has been only a memory. The destruction by storms and floods has been so complete that scarcely any trace of the early settlement remains. Mrs. T. A. Humphries of Freeport, author of the following article, has carefully compiled from authentic sources the information it sets forth. Here and there historic incidents, well understood by students of Texas history, are introduced without preamble.

**N**O spot in Texas is more historic than the site of Old Velasco, where the foundation

of Southwestern liberty was fused. Its sands today leave an impression of a vast loneliness.

Where the land ends at the mouth of the Brazos River, a few squatters' huts and fishing shacks are scattered among the flats. Far across the green waters of the gulf run the jetties, where foaming breakers smash to geysers against piles of jagged granite. Fishermen climb along the rocks. Occasionally an ocean liner is glimpsed or a fishing boat chugs past. Otherwise the waves splash monotonously and circling gulls squawk overhead.

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There was once a popular rendezvous for smugglers, slave traders and pirates. Here strode the picturesque figure of Jean La Fitte; here flames leaped high and captives walked the plank.

On a foggy day in late December of 1821, a battered, salt-encrusted schooner dropped anchor at the mouth of the Brazos and unloaded the first settlers of Austin's colony. The ship, with its cargo of tools, seeds and supplies, sailed westward and failed to return. It left the settlers helpless and bewildered on this grim, drift-covered shore.

Among piles of drift logs they set to work making dugout canoes. Late one afternoon they heard shouts above the roar of the breakers. Straightening their weary backs, saw a 40-foot canoe, carrying five persons, approaching from the gulf. A wiry little old man climbed over the side and waved his coon-skin cap.

"Hoo-ray for Texas," he cried. "Folks, I'm Old Man Frazier, come plumb from Calcasieu, Louisiana, in this canoe an' we're ready to jine you in the settlin' of Texas."

## Fort Once Stood There.

Somewhere under salt cedars and sand dunes lies the foundation of the Mexican fort where Ugartechea and his trained forces were routed in the battle of Velasco in 1832. The settlers, infuriated by the imprisonment of their comrades at Anahuac, manned a schooner at Brazoria and sailed to the mouth of the Brazos, where they were halted by the Mexicans.

The Texans attacked the fort both from sea and from land. They hid behind drift logs and fired with unerring aim. On the schooner a huge negro laughed and sang as though he were at a picnic. Glee-fully he discharged his blunderbuss

1. A log of driftwood, resting on one of the concrete blocks made by the Kanter family many years ago.

in the first attempt to build the Brazos jetties.

2. A squatter's hut on the beach near the site of Old Velasco, where merchants once sat in their counting houses, planning to send cargoes by clipper ships to New York and to other ports.

3. The Velasco light, near the site of Old Velasco. It is a beacon for mariners at sea.

4. Part of what is now the Intra-Coastal Canal project. It once was a canal dug with slave labor, that steamboats might dock at plantation wharves for cargoes of cotton and return with luxuries from the cities of the coast.

5: The Brazos jetties which a beneficent federal government has flung into the water far out into the gulf as a harbor improvement.

6. Salt cedars, which mark the general area where the battle of Velasco was fought in 1832, the first real fight in the struggle of Texas for independence.

in every direction. The commander of the vessel refused to fight and sat in the cabin making cartridges. A cannon ball from the fort drove a pillow through his body. This engagement was the first armed protest against Mexican despotism.

On these now barren sands, toward the salt marshes, Stephen F. Austin passed a night of mental agony in 1835. He had returned, broken in health, from two years of imprisonment in the dungeons of Mexico. Before entering the harbor of Velasco, he witnessed an exchange of shots between Mexican and Texan vessels and realized the imminence of revolution.

Fearing that the colonists were not ready, he was in despair. That night until dawn the frail figure of Austin could be seen pacing back and forth along the water's edge, seeking comfort for his troubled heart in the myriad voices of the waves. When the sun climbed

from the tumbling waters, his course was planned. He determined to call for a general consultation of the settlers.

Salt grass now bends in the wind where Velasco merchants sat in their counting houses and mapped trade with New York City and foreign ports. Above the muddy water of the Brazos were wharves and warehouses owned by McKinney & Williams. In 1831, Edwin Waller, merchant of Velasco, shipped a schooner load of cotton to Matamoros, Mexico, where it sold for 62½ cents a pound. Much of old Velasco was owned by John A. and William H. Wharton. Many years later it was sold to an agent of the English Rothschilds, who planned to build a great seaport.

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#### Santa Anna Prisoner There.

Driftwood and scuttling sand-crabs cover the spot where, on May 14, 1836, Santa Anna and President Burnet of the young Texas Republic signed the treaty of peace between Texas and Mexico. From there the Mexican dictator wrote to his generals, instructing them to withdraw their forces beyond the Rio Grande. It was a red letter day in the history of the Southwest.

There Santa Anna was held prisoner on the ship Independence, while Velasco citizens lighted huge bonfires along the beach and loud-

ly insisted that the Mexican be lynched.

On shipboard, Santa Anna sat at a plain pine table. He was writing long, haughty letters demanding his release. Between times he gazed scornfully at the sea gulls and the waves. On a dark night, when the tide was low, he was smuggled shore and taken to safety at Columbia.

Extending from the old channel of the Brazos toward West Bay is an exceptionally wide portion of the Intra-Coastal Canal. It marks the course of the old steamboat canal, dredged in the fifties, for transporting cotton and sugar from the rich plantations of Brazoria County to Galveston.

Along this winding stream, edged with wild flowers and tall marsh grass, splashed the paddle wheels of river boats, while banjos tinkled, merry parties danced and plantations were won or lost by the turn of a card.

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#### Once Gay, Desolate Now.

The desolate beach of today was once lined with pretentious summer homes of wealthy planters from Port Bend, Brazoria and Matagorda counties, who came with their families and retinues of slaves to spend the holidays.

On a sandy ridge in the neigh-

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neighborhood of the coast guard station stands a clump of gnarled salt cedars and the crumbling ruin of a huge brick cistern. They are all that remain of the palatial summer home of the Herndons, one of the wealthiest and most influential families of the Old South. Its founder is said to have owned on million acres of Texas land.

During slavery days this spot was occupied by a stately white mansion, surrounded by wide porches and supported by solid colonial columns. It was the tallest house along the coast and could be seen so far at sea that it became a landmark, and sailors steered their course by its coat of snow gleam. It stood on the highest point of land and was used as a lookout by the neighborhood.

The house contained 12 large rooms. Those of the lower floor were connected by folding doors so that they could be thrown into one huge ballroom. The Herndons were famous for brilliant entertainments where guests assembled from many miles.

Ladies in hoopskirts drifted down the wide stairway and curtained to black clad men. Fiddle scraped, youthful couples strolled on the long veranda and listened to the musical cries of negroes who were loading cotton and sugar on clipper ships.

During the lazy summer days the ladies and their house guests lounged at ease in the seclusion of the upper back porch. Tight stays discarded, they chatted and gossip while black women waved palmetto fans and carried cooling drinks.

The house was surrounded by salt cedars and oleanders. Hidden among the shrubbery was an ice-house with concrete walls. In the spring of each year a shipload of ice was brought from the North, carefully packed in sawdust and stored for the use in the summer.

A fort was maintained at Velasco during the four years of civil war and the beach was patrolled by men in gray. The coast defense was under the command of General Bates and Col. R. R. Brown.

The harbor was closed by fed-

eral gunboats. In order that enemy ships could not enter the Brazos, the Confederate soldiers barred the channel with live oak logs driven into the bottom of the stream.

#### An Ambitious Plan.

Scattered among the boulders at the shore end of the jetties are many square concrete blocks. Thereby hangs a tale. For more than half a century after settlement was made on the Brazos, a crescent-shaped bar formed at the mouth of the river with each rise. Ships were often imprisoned in the harbor for months. The first government contract for improvement of the Brazos River was let to the Kanters of Holland, Mich., for construction of the jetties. The father and four sons, expert dike builders, originally were from the Netherlands. The father, set in the ways of the old world, would not speak English and his sons served as interpreters. While they discussed contracts, the old man puffed on his pipe and grunted in guttural bass.

The five men came from Michigan to bid for the job and stayed through the years of 1879 1880 and 1881. Their first move was to let a contract for the construction of a fleet of barges. Next they made several thousand wooden forms and hired as many laborers as they could find.

Two large, flimsily-constructed wooden houses were built near the river for the use of the workmen, and were known as the "Kanters shanties."

Men were employed to haul crushed shell and sand from the beach. It was mixed with cement brought by sailing vessels from Portland, and molded with the wooden forms into blocks of uniform size.

In another division of the project, scores of men were employed along Oyster Creek and the Brazos to cut willow and cottonwood brush, which was barged to the mouth of the river and woven with wire into "mattresses" three or four feet thick and about 25 feet square. These were weighted, taken out on barges and carefully sub-

merged in line. The concrete blocks were then lowered and settled on the foundation of the mattresses.

At the expiration of their contract, the Kanters returned to Michigan. Although they had worked industriously for three years, the concrete jetties made little showing. In 1889, the Farwell Syndicate secured a government contract to build the jetties with Texas granite.

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#### Old Brick Road Uncovered.

Buried under a section of salt marsh where no house has been known to stand since the dawn of Texas history, lies an ancient red brick road. After the Brazos River flood of 1913, the highest within a century, Mrs. A. P. Shannon of Velasco walked along a ridge that skirts the beach and noticed that the flood had cut wide slashes across the salt marsh. Suddenly she saw at her feet a long section of red brick road, swept clean and in good condition.

She called her husband and they made a thorough inspection of the old highway. They found it was narrower than necessary for one wagon or carriage and was constructed of hard red brick—a type not made in Texas. For more than 100 yards it was bare, with scarcely a brick

missing. Other sections were deep in pickle grass which had sprung up between the bricks. The road apparently had been buried under two feet of dirt before the flood.

Mr. and Mrs. Shannon traced the road for a mile across the salt marsh. They found that it began

near the coast and led to the "Old Steamboat Landing" on the canal, which before being dredged was known as East Union Bayou.

Mr. Shannon had lived in the community from the time that the bayou was changed into a steamboat canal. His family had settled there long before but he had never heard of the road. He made careful inquiry among old settlers whose memory went beyond his own but no one knew anything about it.

When the 1915 hurricane swept the gulf waters inland, the old brick road was hidden again by flood deposits. Today, deep under pickle grass and wild flowers, it still leads across the salt marshes, its secrets locked in the coffers of the past.

What sailing vessels brought the bricks from a distant shore? Whose hands laid the road with such skill that after a century it still is intact? Who traveled this lonely trail? There is no answer but the mocking cry of the seagull and the eternal splash of the waves.