

Transportation Enterprises for the Brazos River Valley, 1836-1861

The Texas Rail Road, Navigation, and Banking Company 1836

The Brazos and Galveston Rail-road Company 1838

(ref.) The Houston and Brazos Rail Road Company 1839

(ref.) The Harrisburg Rail Road and Trading Company 1841

The Brazos Canal Company 1842

The Houston Plank Road Company 1850

The Galveston and Brazos Navigation Company 1850

(ref.) Brazos, San Bernard and Oyster Creek Canal and Navigation Company 1850

The Buffalo Bayou, Brazos and Colorado Rail-Road Company 1850

The Houston Tap and Brazoria Railway Company 1856

By Brazosport Archaeological Society (James L. Smith)

The existence of a hazardous, ever shifting sand bar at the mouth of the Brazos River was observed to be a major obstacle to river traffic at an early stage in the development of Stephen F. Austin's Colony. J. Child wrote to Austin February 1, 1824, from Natchez of his concerns:

...the navigation—of the Brassos is at all times practicable—with small boats and although I found 10 feet water over the Bar at the mouth—the entrance is deemed unsafe particularly in a rough sea—Yet is but 16 miles from the mouth of the Brazos—to the west end of Galvezton—where vessels have a safe anchorage with 30 feet water...[Austin Papers Vol I Part 1: p.735]

On December 12, 1825, while staying at the mouth of the Brazos, River Stephen F. Austin wrote to his sister, Emily M. Perry, that the excavation of a canal could connect the Brazos River with Galveston Bay:

...This river mouths into the wild ocean without any bay, and the breakers are roaring within Eighty yards of me...there is at this time 8 feet over the bar...I have discovered in my fishing trip that the west end of Galveston bay comes within four miles of this place, and within 200 yards of a deep tide water creek that empties into the Brasos, so that 200 yards digging will open an inland water communication with the Harbor of Galveston where ships of 400 tons can enter with safety...[Austin Papers Vol I Part 2: 1239]

Throughout the 1830's and into the 1840's, the commercial and agricultural trade along the Brazos was crippled by the loss and damage of numerous schooners and steamers trying to cross the bar at the mouth of the Brazos. The first enterprise with the potential to eliminate the problem was the Texas Rail Road, Navigation, and Banking Company, incorporated December 16, 1836. The charter provided that the company "shall have banking privileges, with a capital stock of five millions of dollars, as well as the right of connecting the waters of the Rio Grande and the Sabine, by means of internal navigation and rail-roads..." and "...the capital stock of said company, shall be five millions do dollars, and be divided into fifty thousand shares, of one hundred dollars each..." [H. P. N. Gammel, ed., *The Laws of Texas, 1822-1897*, Vol. I: 1188-1192]. Once the company had one million dollars paid in, they were authorized to start banking operations and had to pay to the Republic treasury a bonus in gold or silver of twenty five thousand dollars. The petition for the charter was signed by several prominent citizens of the Republic, Branch T. Archer, Thomas F. McKinney, A. C. Allen James Collinsworth, A. C. Horton, Thomas J. Green, Moseley Baker, J. Pickney Henderson, and Stephen F. Austin. Though the charter was passed unanimously by the legislature, it ran into violent political opposition immediately, primarily by Francis Moore¹ and Anson Jones². While it was felt that the company created a monopoly on transportation in the Republic, it was the banking privileges that created the most opposition; both Jones and Moore were in opposition to banks in general. The company made no efforts to let any contracts to begin construction of any project, and being unable to pay the treasury the bonus of twenty five thousand dollars in gold or silver, the company charter was soon forfeited [Andrew Forest Muir Railroad Enterprises in Texas, 1836-1841 *SWHQ* XLVII 339-345]. Despite the delays, the increase in the agricultural market during this period, alone, dictated that a solution for the Brazos River had to be reached:

¹ Francis Moore Jr. was editor of the *Telegraph and Texas Register* published in Houston.

² Anson Jones was elected to the Texas Senate in 1837 on a platform based on his opposition to the charter and was later to serve as the last president of the Republic of Texas.

There is nothing which could benefit us so much, and has been so much neglected, as the navigation of the Brazos. While many have been found willing to enter into schemes of townmaking, or any other scheme equally vain, no one has invested a dollar in any project to increase the facilities of transportation on the river. When we consider the great effect which the establishment of regular communication between the various landings on river would have towards increasing the growth of cotton and drawing out the resources of the country, we are at a loss to account for this neglect of our interest. There are many of our farmers higher up on the river who would devote their attention entirely to raising cotton³, were not the difficulty of getting it to a shipping point so great; and the great resources of the upper Brazos must remain forever locked up unless some convenient communication is established with the seaboard. It cannot be, that the trade of the river is insufficient to support a vessel calculated for it. From this county and others above us, a steamboat of light draft would have the carriage this year of some seven or eight thousand bales of cotton...

If the steamboats which have heretofore occasionally been employed in this trade have not been able to realize any profit, it is because they were for the most part ill adapted to the river...There are many steamboats on the western rivers of the United States drawing when loaded not more than eighteen inches water...The San Luis company promised us to have here such a boat six months ago; but we see yet no signs of its appearance...We hope these suggestions hastily thrown out, will have some effect towards inducing an immediate embarkation in the enterprise.⁴

While not immediate, The Brazos Canal Company was incorporated January 3, 1842, by an initial group with interest in the development of the port of San Luis, located on an island across the pass from the west tip of Galveston Island (Figure 1):

...the said company shall have the right to effect a communication, by water between the Brazos river and the harbor of San Luis; and shall also have the right to make such improvements in the different bays, bayous, creeks, &c., lying between the Brazos river and the harbor of San Luis....may charge such tolls for passing through said communication...
 ...the capital stock of said company shall be one hundred thousand dollars, and be divided into one thousand shares of one hundred dollars each...
 ...James F. Perry,⁵ William T. Austin,⁶ Matthew Hopkins,⁷ Fernando Pinckard,⁸ and George L. Hammekin,⁹ are hereby declared to be directors of this company...[H. P. N. Gammel, ed., *The Laws of Texas, 1822-1897*, Vol. II: 698-701]

Emily M. Perry and Eliza H. Hill¹⁰ had inherited San Luis Island from Stephen F. Austin and gave their husbands, James F. Perry and William G. Hill¹¹ along with Ferdinand Pinckard and Matthew Hopkins the power to sell and allot the property for the benefit of the San Luis

³ At this early date sugar had not become a substantial cash crop for the lower Brazos valley.

⁴ *Brazos Courier*, July 14, 1840, Brazoria, Texas

⁵ James F. Perry was married to Emily M. Austin Perry, sister of Stephen F. Austin.

⁶ This should be William H. Austin. In 1830 William Henry Austin, usually called Henry, came to Brazoria County in his steamboat *Ariel*. He was a cousin of Stephen F. Austin and brother of Mary Austin Holley [James A. Creighton, *A Narrative History of Brazoria County* 1975: 49].

⁷ Matthew Hopkins moved to Galveston after the financial collapse of the San Luis Company.

⁸ Fernando Pinckard was editor of the *San Luis Advocate* until it was sold to a group from Galveston and removed from San Luis in April 1842.

⁹ George L. Hammeken (several spellings of his last name in various documents) was a business associate and close friend of the Perry family. He moved to New Orleans after the collapse the San Luis Company and remained close to the family for many more years.

¹⁰ Eliza M. Hill was the wife of Stephen F. Austin's deceased brother James E. B. Austin. She married Zeno Phillips 2nd and William G. Hill 3rd.

¹¹ William G. Hill owned Osceola Plantation.

Company stockholders. Four hundred and fifty lots were appropriated for the opening of a communication between the Brazos River and San Luis Harbor [James F. Perry Papers, Deed, March 2, 1843].

The Brazos Canal Company was essentially taking over the assets left over by the Galveston and Brazos Rail-road Company.¹² A petition signed by forty-one citizens of Brazoria County was submitted by George B. McKinstry, Patrick C. Jack, and George L. Hammeken to build a railroad from Galveston Bay to the Brazos River. This company, chartered on May 24, 1838, had “the right to make turnpikes and rail-roads, from the main channel of Galveston Bay to the Brazos river” and “capital stock of said company shall be five hundred thousand dollars, and be divided into five thousand shares of one hundred dollars each” [H. P. N. Gammel, ed., *The Laws of Texas, 1822-1897*, Vol. I: 1507-1512]. The main purpose of the company was to promote the town of Austinia located at Dollar Point on the north side of Galveston Bay. This property was again owned by the Perry’s. The construction of the railroad was to be financed by the sale of stock and donation of lots in Austinia and Bolivar¹³ for the stock subscriptions. The railroad would then run from Austinia to Bolivar on the Brazos River. The charter was amended in January, 1840, by substituting “canals” for “turnpikes” [H. P. N. Gammel, ed., *The Laws of Texas, 1822-1897*, Vol. II: 391-392].

By this time, the group was interested in promoting their fortunes at San Luis; and Emily Perry sold Austinia to William J. Bryan and George L. Hammeken. Hammeken gained financial backing for the San Luis Company in New Orleans from Victor Massieu and A. Compagnon & Company in July, 1840 [Brazoria County Deed Records A: 399-409]. At first, a railroad between San Luis and Velasco at the mouth of the Brazos was envisioned, then routes for a possible canal were surveyed:

Wm. H. Austin has returned—we left N. Orleans together on the 1st August--& has since been engaged in reconnoitring West & Bastrop Bays—the result of his investigations thus far is, that a canal will cost at least 3 times more than a rail road—

He & his assistant Engineers left here yesterday, provided with tents, provisions &c. & c. and 3 negroes to make the final surveys, so as to furnish their report early in October—both as to Canal & Rail Road routes...[James F. Perry Papers, Letter George L. Hammeken to James F. Perry, San Luis, September 16, 1840].

At its height, San Luis was a bustling community anxious for its competition with Galveston to be the leading seaport on the coast of Texas. In a letter from Mary Austin Holley to Harriette Brand, November, 1840:

...It is a lovely spot by nature, & the houses, about 20 of them, are in every stage of progression, from the skeleton frame to the neatly finished edifice. Carpenters, surveyors, wharf-builders, and boatmen are all active. There are no idlers here...Mr. Bennett, keeper of the Hotel...The house is large & spacious—My room is in the second story—has four windows, all looking on the sea.¹⁴

¹² In this same time frame two more competing groups, the Houston and Brazos Rail Road Company (Houston to Hempstead route) chartered January 26, 1839 and the Harrisburg Rail Road and Trading Company (Harrisburg to Richmond route) chartered January 9, 1841, tried to construct railroads and failed in a short time.

¹³ Bolivar was located on the east bank of the Brazos several miles above Columbia and was laid out by Henry Austin.

¹⁴ Hatcher, Mattie Austin, *Letters of an Early American Traveller* 1933: 79-80

By 1842 San Luis was beginning to wane. The harbor was silting up and most of the inhabitants moved to other locations. The Brazos Canal Company was, however, still struggling forward. An attempt in making a “cut” to Oyster Creek was started by Frederick Lemsky,¹⁵ although we do not know the exact area of his work, upwards of \$3000 and much labor had been expended on the canal by December, 1843 [*Memoranda and Official Correspondence*, Anson Jones 1966: 274-275, Letter George L. Hammeken to Anson Jones, December 6, 1843]:

The Brazos and San Luis Canal

We understand from Mr. Lempsky that (he des)igns commencing again on the Canal. (We we)re not fully informed of his plans, but (k)nowing him to be a practical man, we (h)ave great reliance on his efforts. If Mr. Lempsky can succeed in making the cut to Oyster creek so as to give general confidence in the work, we are convinced that he will find no difficulty in procuring the requisite aid for the balance of the work. The efforts of Mr. Lempsky at a former period were unsuccessful, in consequence of the invasion,¹⁶ he marched his men to the frontier but did not succeed in again obtaining their services for the Canal. He has now ample provisions for the year, good dwellings and implements and when we take into consideration the character of his former subscriptions—which were in orders on stores, cattle &c., not intrinsically worth more than half the amount at which they were estimated—and take into consideration the work done—He has produced results out of the means placed at his command of the most favorable character. We do not know how long a time it will take Mr. Lempsky to cut the Canal—but *he will cut it* if he lives, help or no help.¹⁷

The words of the editor of *The Planter* held an ominous ring as an article in the spring of 1844 relates to the death of Lemsky:

We regret to learn the death by drowning of Frederick Lemsky and his partner Mr. Franke—They left San Luis, some weeks since with a flat of corn for Galveston. During the night, it blew a hard norther, and is believed the flat filled and sank, as nothing has been heard of it. The body of Mr. Lemsky was discovered some days afterwards near Virginia point. The body of Mr. Franke has not been found. Mr Lemsky was favorably known to our citizens, as an enterprising and industrious man. Alas! Poor fellow, his restless spirit, sleeps the sleep that knows no waking! Though many will sorrow over his untimely end, there are none to weep [*The Planter*, March 22, 1844].¹⁸

The canal construction remained at a standstill until James Hamilton of South Carolina, a close friend and half owner with Abner Jackson of the Retrieve Plantation, wrote to James F. Perry February 2, 1845, requesting information about the canal:

...I would have been much gratified to have had some conversation with you in regard to the proposed communication between the Brasos & Bastrop Bayou, which I hope during the next

¹⁵ Various spellings of last name in several different documents Lemsky, Lempsky, Lemkey, and Lemky. Frederick Lemsky was a veteran of the Battle of San Jacinto and was one on the musicians that played “Come to the Bower” as the Texan troops charged [James A. Creighton, *A Narrative History of Brazoria County*, 1975: 179]. Frederick Lemkey was given 50 lots in San Luis for building a bridge from the mainland to the San Luis Island, January 27, 1841 [James F. Perry Papers].

¹⁶ The invasion was most likely the capture of San Antonio by General Adrian Woll of the Mexican Army, September 11, 1842.

¹⁷ *The Planter*, November 18, 1843, Brazoria, Texas

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, March 22, 1844, Brazoria, Texas

Summer Major Jackson will be able to commence & finish the communication between Bastrop & Oyster Creek by the Spring.

Should Mr. Hammekin have left with you any of Major Austins¹⁹ Profiles or Surveys I will thank you to hand them to Major Jackson or inform him where they are to be found...[James F. Perry Papers]

Jackson had to transport any produce overland several miles from his plantation headquarters located on the bank of Oyster Creek east to a steamboat landing on Bastrop Bayou. From this location a small boat could travel down Bastrop Bayou to Bastrop Bay (San Luis Bay) and then to Galveston Bay. The opening of a canal between Oyster Creek and Bastrop Bayou would open the way for shipping directly from his plantation.

On November 13, 1845, James F. and Emily Perry with William G. and Eliza Hill under the charter granted the Brazos Canal Company next entered into an agreement with Abner Jackson to complete a series of canals that would connect Bastrop Bayou and Bastrop Bay with the Brazos River. Jackson was “to dig or cause to be dug a canal not to be less than twenty four feet at the bottom with a slope of not less that one foot to one on the banks & to contain not less than three feet of water to connect the River Brazos with Bastrop Bayou & San Luis harbor to commence the first day of May next & to complete the first section between Bastrop Bayou & Oyster Creek²⁰ within two years from the above named time and the second section between Oyster Creek and the Brazos²¹ within four years” [Brazoria County Deed Record D: 36-37. Figure 2.] Jackson was to receive stock bonuses for completion of each section of canal and agree to purchase stock in the San Luis Company.

Construction on the first section of canal connecting Bastrop Bayou and Oyster Creek was begun using slave labor from Jackson’s plantation and oxen to pull the Fresno’s. Jackson wrote James F. Perry requesting some oxen to help with the canal April 15, 1847:

...we are trying to get up some oxen for the canal and you will oblige me if it suits your convenience to let me have some that will answer well for that purpose...[James F. Perry Papers]

During this same period Abner Jackson was under severe financial distress. In 1844 he had purchased the lands for the Retrieve Plantation from Emily M. Perry secured by heavy mortgages [Brazoria County Deed Record B: 404-406]. He also owed several other mortgages for slaves and additional lands. James Hamilton wrote several letters to the James Perry trying to convince him that it was in his best interest that he should help keep Jackson from being foreclosed on and that he would help secure financing in the United States:

March 26, 1847

I beg leave to say that I have every expectation of obtaining from New York by the 1st June an account equal to lift my encumbrance on our Oyster Creek Lands...
...You must not disturb Jackson this Summer. Any injury to his credit would event an operation on the Court & might be very injurious to your own interests at San Luis—Indeed Dear Sir you have a great Stake in sustaining a man of his decision & energy in our Enterprise...[James F. Perry Papers]

¹⁹ William Henry Austin was the surveyor for the San Luis Company and platted the city of San Luis.

²⁰ This section of canal is what is locally known as the “Slave Ditch” or “Hamilton-Jackson Canal”.

²¹ The exact location of the canal between Oyster Creek and the Brazos was not disclosed.

Perry was being advised by Jonas Butler of Galveston that it was time to foreclose on Jackson and make him settle his debts:

February 16th, 1847

I wish to foreclose the mortgage taken by you from Abner Jackson to secure the note now held by Reed and in Judgment—It is the best & surest way to get the money out of Jackson...The time for court is coming round rapidly...[James F. Perry Papers].

The Perrys and Hills brought suit against Jackson; and he was forced to sell the property on April 1, 1848 [Brazoria County Deed Record D: 634-635]. While the Hamilton family retained control of the Retrieve Plantation, Jackson moved south of the Retrieve Plantation to an area near a small oxbow lake named Lake Jackson and established a new plantation, Lake Place or Lake Jackson Plantation. The continuation of the canal system by the Brazos Canal Company was brought to an end, although James Hamilton had wanted to extend the charter for the canal until 1852.²²

General Greenberry Harrison, along with two other men, was employed to conduct a survey of the Brazos River from Washington-on the Brazos to the Gulf to determine the cost of removing obstacles and improving the channel. During the course of the survey, he did observe the work already done on the canal and gives us an insight into the course the Brazos Canal Company had chosen to connect the Brazos with Galveston Bay:

The *Pioneer* is a small boat built at Washington expressly for the purpose of making an accurate survey of the Brazos River...three men on board, employed to make this survey, namely, Gen. Harrison, Mr. Tarvir, and Mr. Burke...The *Pioneer* then pursued her way under the direction of Gen. Harrison. She reached the mouth of Buffalo Bayou²³...This bayou connects the canal, now in the progress of construction with the Brazos. They proceeded up the bayou about four miles and had their boat carried over land three fourths of a mile to Oyster Creek. This is the route for the canal. They then followed Oyster Creek to the point intersected by the canal from Bastrop Bayou. Thence they pursued the canal and the channel of Bastrop Bayou to its entrance into Galveston bay opposite San Luis Island; and there sounded out the main channel to this city where they arrived last night, being just 16 days from Washington...

Between Washington and the projected canal there are five shoals or riffles, Cochrane's 75 miles below Washington, San Felipe 35 miles below Cochrane's, Cooper's 5 miles below San Felipe, Randon's 45 miles below Cooper's, and Thompson's near Richmond...Gen. Harrison estimates...to make permanent navigation year round, at less than \$2000—that is for steam boats drawing any thing less than 3 feet of water. An additional expense of perhaps as much more, may be necessary for removing all the snags...

Buffalo Bayou connecting with the channel has an easy entrance from the river, and has a perfectly straight channel for about four miles with two feet depth in extreme low water, and on a soft mud bottom. The first part of the canal from this bayou to Oyster Creek is three fourths of a mile. The second part from Oyster Creek to Bastrop Bayou is one mile. This part is more than half complete.²⁴ Gen. H. examined the soil where excavations have been made to the full depth, and finds it a strong stiff clay the whole distance, the best quality for a canal [Figure 2.]. He also sounded down Bastrop Bayou, and found the shallowest places 2 feet 3 inches, 2 feet 6 inches, 2 feet 10 inches, and 3 feet deep with a soft mud bottom. The shoal not far from the mouth has been

²² James F. Perry Papers December 29, 1847 Letter Guy M. Bryan to James F. and Emily Perry.

²³ Buffalo Camp Bayou.

²⁴ It is still not understood whether this canal was ever completely finished or ever used for its original purpose.

cut with a channel of three feet.²⁵ From Bastrop Bayou to this city, the channel is generally 6 to 8 feet...[*Galveston Weekly News*, April 21, 1848].²⁶

During this period, competition between the merchants of Houston and Galveston for the thousands of bales of cotton and hogsheads of sugar produced by the Brazos valley was heating up. “Ox trains” were able to get to Houston, while Galveston had to depend on her harbor as a drawing card. In October, the Galveston County committee met at the Tremont House in Galveston. They presented the names of 150 citizens who had been assessed from five to twenty-five dollars each “for the furtherance of the work of removing the obstacles to the navigation of the Brazos” [*Galveston Weekly News*, October 20, 1848].

This group was unable to gain enough support to achieve its desired purpose, but several merchants in Galveston pressed forward with the purchase of two new light-draft vessels. The *Brazos* and *Washington* were built in West Elizabeth, Pennsylvania under the supervision of Galveston merchant and Brazos Steam Association president Laird M. Harris Butler. Arriving in January 1849, the steamers were considered to be sister ships, although they were not identical in tonnage or arrangement; both had 120 keels, 22-foot beams, and 4-foot holds. Their hulls were built of white-oak planks, three inches thick and double butt-bolted, and their twin-fluted boilers were 20 feet long and 35 inches in diameter. A refinement seldom found on sternwheelers of that era were their twin engines, each with a 10-inch cylinder and 4-foot stroke, capable of propelling the boats at five miles per hour against the strongest current. The steamer drew only 15 inches of water, light, and required an additional foot for every 300 bales of cotton taken on board.²⁷

Captains S. W. Tichenor of the *Brazos* and James E. Haviland of the *Washington* made the trip from Velasco to the head of navigation at Washington-on-the-Brazos in five days. After loading cotton at several landings on the return route, the *Brazos* reached Velasco with 524 bales and the *Washington* 387 bales.²⁸ Planters would now start to bring their produce to the various landings along the Brazos.

The merchants of Galveston were heartened by the increase in shipments to their city:

...Upon making inquiry we have ascertained that the following vessels are now engaged in the trade between Galveston and Velasco, to wit: The schooners *J. G. McNeel*, *Uncle Bill*(*Ben*), *Atlas*, *Horizontally*, *Spray* and *Wave*; also the sloops *Alamo* and *Brazoria*...the cotton, sugar, and molasses brought from the Brasos by the Gulf, during the present season thus far, are as follows:

Cotton.....	6,059 bales.
Sugar.....	1,386 hhds.
Molasses.....	2,908bbls.

The value of the whole being about \$300,000....²⁹

In Houston the editor of the *Telegraph & Texas Register* lamented that 10,656 bales of cotton had moved down the Brazos River to Galveston during the year following September 1, 1849; “Nearly two-thirds of this cotton would in all probability have been conveyed to Houston if a plank road had been constructed from this city to the Brazos”[Earl F. Woodard, Internal Improvements in Texas in the Early 1850’s, *SWHQ* Vol. LXXVI, 171] On February 7, 1850, the

²⁵ The clearing of the shoal at the mouth of Bastrop Bayou may be the work that Frederick Lemsky started.

²⁶ *Galveston Weekly News*, April 21, 1848, Galveston, Texas

²⁷ Puryear and Winfield *Sandbars and Sternwheelers* 1976: 63-67.

²⁸ *Galveston Weekly News*, January 26, 1849

²⁹ *Ibid.*, April 19, 1849, Galveston, Texas

Houston Plank Road Company was incorporated. The company composed of Houston businessmen had the “right to construct a Plank Road from the city of Houston to the Brazos River, and also, to establish a Ferry across the Brazos...to erect toll gates and charge tolls...” [Gammel, ed., *The Laws of Texas, 1822-1897* Vol. III, 563-565.]

The plank road’s construction progressed slowly. In September, 1850, after securing \$25,000 from investors in Boston and New York, the company directors chose to build toward a point on the Brazos slightly south of Washington-on-the-Brazos. By July, 1852, twenty three miles of the roadbed had been graded. The plank road—selected specifically as a device to overcome the high cost of laying rock and gravel roadbeds over the wet clay prairies—proved too expensive to build at the rate of \$2500 per mile [Earl F. Woodward, *Internal Improvements in Texas in the Early 1850’s*, *SWHQ* Vol. LXXVI 171-172].

At this time, the ever present sand bar at the mouth of the Brazos was the subject of several schemes, including the dredging of a channel through the bar. A group of businessmen from Galveston, including Samuel May Williams, M. B. Menard, Jonas Butler, and Gail Borden, put forth the idea of a canal from Galveston Bay to the Brazos River. Their justification of the canal was placed upon the fact that they had calculated that at least \$1.00 per bale could be saved on transportation costs versus land transportation to Houston [*Galveston Weekly News*, May 14, 1849].³⁰ On February 8, 1850, the Galveston and Brazos Navigation Company³¹ secured a charter “...for the purpose of cutting a Canal from San Louis or West Galveston Bay, to the waters of the Brazos River, and with the privilege also, of connecting by Canal the waters of the Brazos river with the San Bernard, Peach Creek and Colorado river...” [Gammel, ed., *The Laws of Texas, 1822-1897*, Vol. III: 571-576.] This canal, while primarily a project of cotton brokers and business men from Galveston, would benefit the residents of Brazoria County and others along the Brazos. A canal fifty feet wide and only three and one-half feet deep was to be constructed between West Galveston Bay and the Brazos River within six years of the charter date. Its completion would make an alternate route available to shippers, providing them with a safer direct route to the port of Galveston other than the open gulf ensuring that Galveston, not Houston, would be the favored port of destination [Figure 3.]

Two individuals properly deserve most of the credit for the actual work done on the canal: a young contractor from Maine, David Bradbury; and James E. Haviland, an experienced steamboat captain who designed the machinery used in the digging. Captain Bradbury had begun building dredge boats in Galveston in March, 1851, and by April of that year had built a dredge boat:

The first dredge boat we have ever had in Texas, was completed last week, under the direction of Mr. Bradbury, and left yesterday for West Bay, to commence operations on the long talked of canal. Before leaving, she gave our citizens a small sample of her capacity for throwing

³⁰ *Galveston Weekly News*, May 14, 1849, Galveston, Texas

³¹ On February 11, 1850 a group of citizens from Brazoria County including D. Hardeman, M. Austin Bryan, and Branch T. Archer were able to incorporate the Brazos, San Bernard and Oyster Creek Canal and Navigation Company. The said company was empowered to “survey, construct, navigate, and maintain a line of canals and water communication: first, from the San Bernard river, in Brazoria County, to the Brazos river in said county. Second, from the Brazos river, in Brazoria county, to Oyster creek, and said county, which said canal shall be at least fifty feet wide at the surface, and three feet in depth at common low tide...shall not interfere with the charter granted to the Galveston and Brazos Navigation Company...” [Gammel, ed., *The Laws of Texas, 1822-1897*, Vol. III: 627-631]. This company does not seem to have begun any construction though they did secure the rights to operate on a part of Sarah A. Wharton’s property March 3, 1850 [Brazoria County Deed Records F:63-64].

mud from the bottom of the bay. All who witnessed the performance admitted that she could throw a bigger shovel full, than any other canal digger they had ever seen...[*Galveston Weekly News*, May 6, 1851].

By June Bradbury notified the Board of Directors that first section of canal was complete:

We have been informed by Capt. Hitchcock, of Galveston, that Capt. Bradbury has completed the first section of the canal, to connect the Brazos with the west bay of Galveston . The cost of the work is much less than it was set down in the estimate of Major Stein. The Major estimated the cost at \$11,000; and the work, exclusive of the first cost of the excavator, has not exceeded \$1200. The bars in the bay have all been cut through, and the water flows in the channel with a current so strong, that it will keep it free of all obstructions from drifting sands. Capt. Bradbury has shipped the other excavator, and it is probably now at the mouth of the Brazos.—He intends to continue the work at both ends of the canal, until it is completed. Captain Hitchcock thinks that Clopper's and Red Fish Bars could be removed by one of these excavators, in a few weeks, so that vessels drawing six feet of water could, at all seasons, ascend to Houston. The machines are not furnished with buckets like those formerly used in Mobile bay, but have a large scoop attached to them, which is worked by a windlass, moved by a steam engine. The scoop lifts a cubic yard of earth each time it is raised, and deposits it on the side of the canal. When it is in operation, seven cubic yards of earth are raised each minute [*Telegraph & Texas Register*, June 6, 1851].(Separate article *The Civilian Gazette*, June 3, 1851)

After solving the logistical problems of being able to dispose of the earth removed by the dredge while transversing the main land, Bradbury made steady progress.³² By 1853, the canal had been completed from West Galveston Bay to Oyster Creek:

The Canal has at length been opened into Oyster Creek. There was quite a gathering of the citizens of Brazoria county at the junction, on Saturday last, to celebrate the event. Steamboats may now run from Galveston to the plantations on Oyster Creek , when that stream is up. We learn that great enthusiasm prevails in Brazoria county, at the prospect of the speedy completion of the canal to the Brazos—In view of the present depression of business matters in this city, in consequence of the epidemic, we hope our friends in Brazoria will lend a helping hand, and not allow the work to languish for want of laborers or other cause. They have an equal interest with the citizens of Galveston in the work [*Columbia Democrat*, October 18, 1853].

By the mid winter of 1854, the construction under the direction of David Bradbury, was nearing Velasco:

Dredge Boat, near Velasco, Jan. 23d 1854

Dear Swain—I arrived here today on my way to Galveston...

...the principal thing I have seen yet is the canal. I have been making an examination of the work today...At my visit of last spring, I found the cutting still wanting nearly eight hundred yards of connection with the creek. This was just previous to the placing of the new boat and excavator in the canal. Since that time this connection has been made, a channel five feet in depth and fifty feet in width has been cut for a mile and three quarters down the creek, and the canal dug in the main land west of the creek a distance of five hundred and thirty yards, as I found by measurement this evening. There still remains of this cutting through the main land, thirteen hundred yards of digging to connect the waters of Galveston Bay with those of the Brazos. Besides this about two weeks work will be required in deepening and widening East Union Bayou. The excavator, at present, progress at the rate of forty feet per diem, and the ground where it is now

³² *The Civilian Gazette*, October 21, 1851, Galveston, Texas

working is at least a foot higher than the remainder of the distance. Making all allowances I think we may safely count on the canal being opened early in the summer at the farthest.

This being done there is a channel fifty feet wide and four feet deep at low tide, from the Brazos to the western extremity of the Bay. This channel is in every respect all that could be desired. The nature of the earth through which it is cut, is such as to resist all motion the waves. It is a hard stiff clay upon which the currents of the creeks and bayous never encroaches. To prove that all is safe in this respect I looked at the condition of the banks of the canal where it enters the land from the Bay.—This was cut in the summer of 1850. The sides of the canal in this two years and a half do not seem to have been in the least affected by the action of the waves. The bottom seems to be hard and just as it was left by the excavator. There is neither bar nor sediment in the whole length.

It has been supposed that the great difficulty would be in the mud flat at the West end of Bay. These, I am happy to assure the friends of this enterprise have made it out to be. When I was there it was at low tide, and there was about six inches of water on the flats. In the channel where it had been cut I found more than two feet of water. The bottom of this channel is very soft mud, and would scarcely offer any resistance to the keel of a boat. But this is not all. The ridges of mud that were thrown up by the excavator when it first came through in May 1850, still remain, and they have hardened so much that they will bear a horse for distance of at least one hundred and fifty yards,—a gentleman walked out upon it two hundred and sixty yards. Now where this channel is dug out again, the mud will be thrown outside these banks and the idea of its sliding back so as to fill up the channel is out of the question. It is the impression practical men who have examined the whole work, that it may be necessary for the dredge boat to pass through two or three times. After that there can be no danger from this source...

Quintana, Jan 24, 1854

Dear Swain---...Quintana still appears to stick to the slow and sure method of progress... The time for the merchants is a little in the future. When the river rises and the steamboats begin to come down...

I was at the mouth of Oyster creek today, or rather at the place where the mouth used to be—There is now a bank of sand and drift wood across the mouth. This bank is, at least seventy yards in breadth, and appears to be high enough to set all the current of Oyster Creek through the canal. I scarcely think it possible that the creek should ever break over this bar into the gulf again.

Sometime since a paragraph appeared in the *Houston Telegraph*, in which has been copied into many of the papers to the effect that the bar at the mouth of the Brazos, was extending and would, doubtless form a barrier to navigation. Capt. S. C. Lyons³³ has kindly furnished me with a statement of the facts in reference to this matter. It may be well to state that Capt. Lyons is the pilot of the bar, and has examined it thoroughly every day for a year—A survey was made of this bar by the corps of U. S. Engineers, belonging to coast survey September last. Since this, the circle, pockets and ridges have changed in no respect. The course has not changed materially, it being nearly due East and West. When the survey was made, at common tides there was 4 ½ feet of water, and at high tides 6 feet large, in the channel, and such has been the case ever since. Never within the memory of the oldest inhabitant has there been a time when the tides have been as low as they have been for the past two months. During this time the steamer *Bell*³⁴ has taken over the bar nearly double the cargo ever taken by any vessel, since Capt. L. has been acquainted with the outlet, which is fifteen years.³⁵—From this it will be readily seen that the mouth of the river is not closed. Capt. L. has promised to furnish a monthly report of the vessels, and their draft which cross the bar. ...

³³ Captain Samuel C. Lyons was the harbor pilot for many years and a survivor of the Mier Expedition.

³⁴ The steamer *Josiah H. Bell*, Captain Charles Fowler, was owned by Robert and David G. Mills, merchants operating several plantations in Brazoria County and export businesses in Galveston. It was put into service in December 1853 and was the finest vessel on the river at that time [The *Texas Planter*: December 14, 1853].

³⁵ The *Bell* left here [Columbia] for Galveston ...with 547 bales of cotton, 43 Hhds of sugar and 2 bales of moss. She was to take on more freight at the lower landings...Her trips will be weekly and she is calculated to carry 1000 bales over the bar if necessary [Columbia Democrat: December 10, 1853].

There are several schooners here, among which I observe the *McNeil*, Poindexter master, loaded with sugar and molasses. The Captain informs me that his next trip will be from the Sabine to Columbia with shingles &c., for our friend Nash of the Lumber yard...

Of the merchants, I am glad to see that Col. Brown is doing an extensive business...³⁶

In the early spring another reporter visited the canal, reporting on its progress:

Mr. Hitchcock together with P. C. Tucker, Esq., visited the Galveston and Brazos Canal on the 21st and 22^d ult., with a view to report the progress of the work to the Directors of the Company. We learn from this report, as published, that for the twelve working days preceding the visit, Captain Bradbury had dug 654 feet, and during his stay of two days 104 feet, averaging over fifty feet per day. The distance that remained to be dug the morning they left, to East Union Bayou, was 1552. He says that Capt. Bradbury was confident that he would complete the Canal to the Bayou by the 1st of May, and to the river by the first of June. He recommends that the channel should be clearly marked through the bay by buoys. He speaks in high terms of the economy with which Capt. B. has carried on his labors, and speaks of the obligations which the Company are under to persons living along the Canal, especially Col. R. R. Brown of Quintana, without whose assistance operations would have long since ceased. He states that he is confident that the Canal will be open by the first of July for navigation, the whole route.

We have learned such a variety of opinions expressed as to the ultimate success of this work, that we are pleased to learn that it is so near completion, and that its merits will soon be tested, that it may be known certainly whether it will result in a benefit to the people living along the Brazos river.—Gentlemen in whom we have great confidence, and who have visited this work from time to time, have confessed to us that they have no faith whatever in it. They say that the channel which was dug through the bay has so filled up that a skiff cannot pass through it without great difficulty; and they think from the nature of the mud and the action of the water that the channel will fill up as fast as opened. Others, in whom we have equal confidence, have given it as their opinion that the channel can be kept open with but little difficulty. Even should it be necessary to run a dredge boat through it occasionally, the expense would be but comparatively small, when the advantages to be derived from it are considered. If, when finished it should meet the wants of the people, and lighten the cost and trouble of transportation, we will be much pleased; but should this not be the case, the bar at the mouth of the river will have to be deepened in some way [*The Planter*, April 5, 1854].

The official opening was delayed by the hurricane which struck Matagorda 18th-19th, September 1854, causing heavy damage to city of Matagorda and southern Brazoria County:

...work has been delayed chiefly by the damage done to the boat and machinery which was sunk in the last September gale involved the company in heavy additional expenses...[*Galveston Weekly News*, March 13, 1855]

Though the canal was not officially open, the *Major Harris* ventured through the canal to reach the Brazos:

The steamer *Bell* came up from Galveston on Wednesday and returned on Friday.—She took off with her this trip a full load of Cotton and Molasses.

During the last week the river has risen several feet, and is now in good navigable condition as high up as Washington. As the planters above have by this time commenced hauling their produce to market, we expect that several steamboats will soon be put in the trade.

³⁶ *Columbia Democrat*, January 31, 1854, Columbia, Texas

The steamboat *Brazos* passed here on Thursday morning last, on her way to Quintana, with quite a good freight of Cotton on board. She went up the river again on Saturday evening.

We understand that the steamboat *Maj. A. Harris* will commence running this week from Galveston, through the canal, to the various landings along the river, and continue in the trade during the season [*Texas Planter*, November 15, 1854].

People along both the lower and upper parts of the Brazos were anxious for the opening of the canal:

Pleasant Hill, March 3, 1855

Dear Sir:--The steamer "*Fort Henry*," passed here yesterday on the best water I have ever seen float a steamboat in Texas. I now wish that all the freight, which you feared to ship, had been on board of her, instead of the Houston steamer. The shipments by the "*Betty Powell*" and the "*Brazos*," have not been received yet, and cannot be, until it rains or the river rises.

The whistle of the *Fort Henry* was a joyful sound to me. We were out of many necessaries, and I had concluded we should have to suffer the privation, for a good while to come. But thanks to the energy and perseverance of Capt. King and Pilot Winders. She has been pushed passed all obstacles, mostly rocks. The intervening snags she pulled out and cut ___. She found enough water in the channel for her draft, and considerable to spare, although I have never seen the river more than from eight to twelve inches lower than it is now. This boat, I think, could have run the whole of last year, with some freight.

I am now confirmed in my oft expressed conviction, that a boat of the proper dimensions and construction, can run from Galveston to Washington, every day in the year, and carry, at the lowest stage of water the weight of, at least, three hundred bales of cotton.

You must get your people to put the Canal in as good condition as possible. Two and a half feet of water, if you can do no better, will do first rate.

We would inform the writer and others interested, that, as far as the Canal is concerned there is three feet of water at the lowest point _____, has been in crossing the flats of Oyster Bay, where the Canal has not been dug. We hope to be able to report its completion by the end of the present week, when this difficulty will be removed.—The dredge boat will then have only to straighten the channel a little in two or three places, which may take to the end of the present month [*Galveston Weekly News*, March 13, 1855].

In July, 1855, M. B. Menard, Wm. Hendley, H. Close, J. J. Hendley, H. de St. Cyr, John Dean, J. E. Haviland and C. Shaw, directors of the Galveston and Brazos Navigation Company, were joined by the mayor, aldermen, newspaper editors and other citizens of Galveston on board the steamer *Dr. Smith* for what was described as an overnight tour of the canal. Soundings were taken at intervals to determine that water in the channel was nowhere less than the specified three feet; and the assembled business and civic leaders were encouraged by Captain Haviland's estimate that this depth was sufficient for stern-wheel boats, 150 feet in length with 25 feet beam to carry 700 bales of cotton [*Galveston Weekly News*, July 10, 1855].

The *Dr. Smith* was a sidewheeler; and her awkward progress through the canal against the set of strong tidal current and the pressure of an inshore breeze convinced the directors that traffic through the canal should be limited to sail vessels, barges, and sternwheelers. Sidewheelers were banned, as their wheels caused damage to the banks when these top-heavy

craft were pushed against the margins. It was noted that six steamers³⁷ had already passed through in safety, and the Galveston and Brazos Canal was officially open.

In the months that followed, the canal was discovered to be something less than the unqualified success that had been predicted in spite of collecting \$1500 in tolls. In April, 1856, the Board of Directors met once more to consider their mounting economic woes and heard a report that must have been disquieting, to say the least. The passage through West Bay was found to be too shallow in some places, too narrow in others, unnecessarily crooked, and to have embankments of a height insufficient to identify the channel. Additionally it was concluded that there was a lack of steamers of the proper type—those designed to carry considerable freight on two feet of water. Also, it was remarked that there were still in operation in the coasting trade a number of sailing vessels that could not be expected to use the canal under any circumstances. The stockholders in the company were advised that the total cost of the enterprise was \$142,000 (estimated cost was \$70,000), leaving the company \$72,000 in debt. An additional \$30,000 was needed to deepen the channel to four feet and pay off bond interest [Pamela A. Puryear and Nath W. Winfield, *Sandbars and Sternwheelers Steam Navigation on the Brazos* 1976:20-23 and James F. Perry Papers, Report of Stockholders of the Galveston and Brazos Navigation Company, April 1, 1856.]

On August 1, 1856, the state passed legislation that produced another frenzy of activity among the planters along the Brazos:

Our Legislature has passed the River and Loan Bills. It has offered four dollars to every one dollar that is subscribed by individuals, for the purpose of removing obstructions in our navigable streams, and that so soon as \$1,000.00 are subscribed, and 5 per cent of it paid in cash, the work shall commence, proceeding from the mouth of the river upward...Now, \$50,000.00 properly expended, will certainly make the Brazos navigable for the light draft boats, at least three fourths of the year, from the canal to Washington...[*Washington American*, August 13, 1856].

An amendment to the original bill spelled out the appropriations for the Brazos River:

Oyster Creek Canal to Retrieve	\$ 2,833
Brazos River from mouth to Washington	50,000
Galveston Bay to Canal and Red Fish Reef	23,000 ³⁸

The citizens of Brazoria County met August 16, 1856, in Brazoria to take “preparatory steps towards receiving some of the benefits of the River Bill” and to “receive subscriptions from the citizens of Brazoria county for the purpose of improving the navigation over the Bar at the mouth of the Brazos river”.³⁹

On September 29, a river convention was held at Bellville with delegates from Washington, Austin, Fort Bend and Brazoria counties. John A. Wharton,⁴⁰ H. Cone, John Adriance, S. S. Perry and Guy M. Bryan were the delegates from Brazoria County and Guy M. Bryan was appointed president. The counties united in their efforts and resolved to first, clear a channel through all the shoals in the river up to Washington-on-the-Brazos; second, they would

³⁷ The *N. S. Hill*, the *Guadalupe*, two trips; the *Maj. Harris*, two; the *Dr. Smith*, two; the *Fort Henry*, one; and the *Brazos*, one [*Galveston Weekly News*: July 10, 1855].

³⁸ Reed, S. G., *A History of Texas Railroads* 1941: 40

³⁹ *Democrat & Planter*, August 19, 1856, Columbia, Texas

⁴⁰ John A. Wharton was the son of William H. and Sarah Ann Wharton of Eagle Island Plantation.

contract a company to clear all the snags and other obstructions from the mouth of the river to the town of Washington; and third, that each county should raise \$3125 to make them eligible to receive the \$50,000 from the state. Also, John A. Wharton was to correspond with the proper state officials with the view of procuring the use of a snag boat.⁴¹

With the potential of receiving \$2,833 for the canal to Retrieve and portions of the \$23,000 for improving the canal system to Galveston Bay, the Hamilton-Jackson Canal or Brazos Canal Company saw new life. On the October 7, an “Internal Improvement Meeting” was held in Brazoria. General James Hamilton addressed the meeting and introduced Captain Abel Hawley, recently from Milwaukee, who had 29 years experience in digging canals, and had at his and Abner Jackson’s request examined the several proposed routes for canals from Galveston Bay to the Brazos river:

...Capt. Hawley first estimates the cost by sections of finishing the canal by Bastrop Bayou to the Brazos, which was commenced several years ago by Gen. Hamilton and Maj. Jackson. As nearly as we can judge, by adding the estimated cost of the several sections of this canal, the whole cost of its completion will be something over \$100,000. Capt. H. then proceeds to give his opinion as to what will be the cost of finishing the canal near the mouth of the Brazos, which cannot now be successfully navigated during northers and low tides, though, at other times light draft steamers and other craft are constantly navigating it. Capt. H. says, very truly, we believe that this canal, that is, the Galveston Bay and Brazos River Canal, furnishes, at present, a very precarious navigation, liable to be interrupted by low tides and high winds. He estimates the cost of finishing this canal as to give it five feet of water at all times at \$150,000, which we believe, is just about three times the cost estimated by Maj. Stein, who was employed to examine and report upon this route, of completing this canal from the commencement...⁴²

It was evident to this group, though it was indispensable for the development of the Brazos valley to have a cheap uninterrupted navigational route to the market, that the sum of money appropriated by the legislature was too small. They resolved to go ahead with plans for clearing the river from the mouth to Washington but would wait on recommendations for which canal route to market they would approve. James Hamilton was still in great confidence of the route proposed by Captain Hawley:

...I am convinced that the canal could be finished in three years, probably in two, by the imposition of a tax of 12 cents and ½ on \$100 of value on the property of the County for 15 years...

...it can be built for the estimated cost (\$100,000), as I know an individual who would contract to finish it for that sum...

...address ...the Pres & Directors, of the Galveston & Brazos Canal Company, requesting them...whether they are prepared to furnish uninterrupted navigation with an adequate depth at all stages of the tide from Galveston to the Brazos...

...the plan I have proposed ...meets with the unqualified support and approval of Govr. Pease...

...I do not think the Galveston & Brazos Company will grieve very much at our probable competition as I presume that they are quite willing to suspend all expense & operation...[James F. Perry Papers, Letter James Hamilton to Stephen S. Perry, October 28, 1856].

While the canal plan was put on hold, the contract for clearing of the shoals was awarded to Richard French and John M. Brown of Washington on their bid of \$50,000. By August, 1857,

⁴¹ *Democrat & Planter*, October 14, 1856, Columbia, Texas

⁴² *Galveston Weekly News*, October 21, 1856, Galveston, Texas

ten miles of river above Richmond had been opened; and a channel sixty feet wide and twenty-four to thirty inches deep had been cut through Thompson's Shoals. It was then proposed to begin operations just below Washington with a crew of slaves hired at that place. By December, all but twelve miles of river between Richmond and the Gulf had been cleared by the contractors.⁴³

In a letter to the editor from William Fields it is evident that the Galveston Bay and Brazos River Canal Company seemingly did not attempt to even start on the work needed:

...I desire to call the attention of those interested to the necessity of taking some steps at once to complete and put in successful operation, the Galveston and Brazos Canal. Upwards of sixteen thousand dollars of public funds have been set aside for the improvement of the navigation of the bays leading that way, but it will be useless to expend this sum there, unless the canal be made to answer a better purpose than it now does. It has, I admit, been navigated with some success heretofore, and that portion of it passing through the main land is still good enough for any purpose, but the balance, in the bay, is not; the banks in some places have been washed away, and the canal filled up until it is almost wholly useless. Twenty-five thousand dollars will be sufficient, no doubt, to render it entirely reliable, and the State fund will remove the obstructions in the bay from the canal to Galveston. With this accomplished, the stock will be a paying, rather than, as now, a losing investment...[*Galveston Weekly News*, August 25, 1857].

The Galveston Bay and Brazos Canal possibly went bankrupt from lack of interest and lack of sufficient funds to complete any contract to remedy the situation:

As we feared would be the case, there was not a quorum of the Canal stockholders present at the meeting called on the 15th, and of course nothing could be done...It is obviously not for the interest either of the stockholders, the bondholders, or the public, that the Canal should continue longer in its present unfinished condition.—We say *unfinished*, for although it was at first out to the depth required by the charter, so that boats of a suitable draft plied through it successfully for a time, yet the banks through Oyster bay were never raised high enough to prevent the water, in high tides, from washing over them, and this circumstance, together with the fact that boats in attempting to go through drawing more water than the Directors had prescribed, often got aground, compelling others to cut down the banks in many places to get past them. In these ways the Canal through Oyster bay has become obstructed in several places, but the best judges do not believe it will require exceeding \$20,000 or \$25,000, at the out side to make it *permanently* navigable.

...The Directors feel it their duty, as agents for the stockholders, to secure a contract, if possible, for the completion of the Canal in order to save the stock...The present indebtedness of the canal is about \$140,000 stock and bonds...[*Galveston Weekly News*, October 27, 1857].

The feasibility of the Hamilton-Jackson Canal was also brought to an end due to the untimely death of James Hamilton. On November 15, 1857, Hamilton was on board the steamship *Opelousas*, from Berwick Bay to Galveston, when it was in collision with the steamship *Galveston* of the same line, off the coast of Louisiana and sank during heavy weather. The crews of both vessels were accused of manslaughter for the deaths of 20-25 passengers, Hamilton among them:

...Mr. R. B. Allen, of Bastrop, who was so fortunate as to preserve his whole family, consisting of his mother, brother and two servants, reports that, when the hurricane deck was under water, as he

⁴³Puryear, Pamela A. and Winfield, Nathen, *Sandbars and Sternwheelers Steam Navigation on the Brazos*, 1976, 28-29.

was engaged in fastening a life-preser on his mother, Gen. Hamilton, one of whose arms was disabled by paralysis, came to him with a life preserver and requested him to buckle it on him. This he promised to do as soon as he had attended to his family; but the General went off in quest of other assistance, and was not seen afterwards...⁴⁴

Another factor in the demise of the canal systems was the introduction of the railroad. On February 11, 1850, an act to incorporate the Buffalo Bayou, Brazos and Colorado Rail-Road Company (B.B.B. & C. Railroad) was passed. The company, financed by Boston businessmen trying to promote Harrisburg, was to construct a railway “commencing at any suitable point on Buffalo Bayou, between Lynchburg and Houston” to a point between Richmond and Washington [H. P. N. Gammel, ed., *The Laws of Texas, 1822-1897*, Vol. III: 632-636].

The B. B. B. & C. Railroad had innumerable difficulties but began construction in 1851. It was not until January 1, 1856, that the tracks reached the Brazos River opposite Richmond. The businessmen of Houston were unwilling to be bypassed, and the Texas legislature authorized the city to construct a line from its business district south to the Buffalo Bayou, Brazos & Colorado line. By October 29, the Houston Tap was connected to Pierce Junction [Andrew Forest Muir, *Railroads Come to Houston 1857-1861*, *SWHQ* LXIV:47-49]. The planters of Brazoria County and businessmen of Houston obtained a charter for the Houston Tap and Brazoria Railway Company on September 1, 1856 [H. P. N. Gammel, ed., *The Laws of Texas, 1822-1897*, Vol. IV: 808-816]. On January 23, 1860, the line, which connected into the Houston Tap, was finished to the east bank of the Brazos opposite Columbia [Figure 4]. Railway communication with productive Brazoria County contributed greatly to the commerce and prosperity of Houston and Galveston.

The old canal from the mouth of the Brazos to Galveston Bay did see sporadic usage during the Civil War as Union ships tried to blockade the ports of Galveston, Velasco and Quintana on the Brazos. Troops, supplies, and contraband were moved up and down the canal, while blockade runners were also able to use either San Luis Pass or the Brazos to make their run. Though the Union blockaders could see vessels in the canal, they were out of reach.⁴⁵ [Fears of Federal invasion led Confederate authorities to put obstructions in portions of the canal, which hampered commerce after the war. In the late months of 1865 thoughts of bringing the canal back to life were revived although the estimate of time required for repairs were quite low:](#)

...The Galveston Bay and Brazos Canal has also become somewhat obstructed during the war and requires, as I learn, the operation of a dredge boat for a month or two, to put it again in navigable condition. I cannot suppose this will long be neglected, as I believe the old dredge boat is still in good condition and requires but little repairs to be made as serviceable as ever. The Canal is really one of the most valuable improvements ever made by merchants of Galveston, but its advantages had scarcely begun to be realized before the war put an end to all trade. But through this Canal is the natural and cheap channel of an immense future trade from the lower Brazos, Oyster Creek, Caney, the Bernard and Colorado, yet its further extension into Matagorda Bay...will increase this

⁴⁴ *Galveston Weekly News*, December 1, 1857 & December 15, 1857, Galveston, Texas Abner J. Strobel had related in his work “when all had put on their life belts, there was one lady on board who had none. General Hamilton immediately gave her his and went down with the ship [Abner J. Strobel, *The Old Plantations and Their Owners of Brazoria County Texas* 1930: 33].

⁴⁵ The enemy has evidently discovered the valuable and daily increasing trade passing by our inland navigable route, and are watching to cut it off. This was the object, I presume, of the attempt on Velasco...[Letter Major Forshey to Commander Hunter C. S. February 2, 1862, *O.R. of the Union and Confederate Navies in the War of the Rebellion* Series I Volume 17: 165-166].

coast trade three or four fold...It might therefore be deemed premature to speak of it now, and I only do so to prevent it from being entirely lost sight of...⁴⁶

In 1866 the Canal Company again started work on the canal. Different types of dredge boats were used and Captain J. J. Hendley again took the lead in organizing the company and overseeing the dredging operation. Also, incorporated into the agenda of the company was the vision of an intercoastal canal reaching all the way to Brownsville:

The trade with the Lower Brazos, by way of the Canal, though not large, seems to be very regular, and is steadily increasing. Heretofore the side-wheel steamer, *Bay City*, has done most of this trade, but we understand the regulations of the Canal Company do not allow side-wheel steamers to enter into the Canal, as they injure its banks, and that hereafter none but stern-wheel boats will be allowed in this trade, together with barges that may be taken in tow, and sailing vessels. The dredge boat has been employed for the last 10 or 12 months in deepening and widening the Canal, and removing the obstructions put in it by the military authorities during the war. This work will now be completed in a few weeks. It has been a heavy expense to the company.⁴⁷

Those few weeks turned to months before the canal was upgraded and completely finished:

THE CANAL—We made a trip to the Galveston Bay and Brazos river canal on Saturday last in company with Captains Hendley and Hitchcock, and Mr. J. L. Briggs. We found the work nearly complete. Indeed, Capt. Hendley says he will now be able to finish what remains in twenty or thirty days and be done, without calling for further installments from the stockholders. Those who have not seen the canal since the time it was formerly opened by Captain Bradbury, can form but a very inadequate opinion of the present canal. It has now been cut to near twice its original width, and is several feet deeper. The original canal through Oyster Bay was cut with several angles or curves, while the present canal is entirely straight with high banks, quite above all ordinary high tides. And broad and hard enough to be traveled over by teams with loaded wagons. The depth of water we believe, is no where less than five feet, except a short distance, which is now being further deepened. We found generally six and seven feet of water. The whole length of the canal is a bout fifteen miles. It is wide enough for two steamers to pass each other without inconvenience, and two are now running constantly through it, and have been for the past year or two, though the amount of trade has been greatly reduced since the war. There has been an immense amount of work expended on this canal. The cost, of course, has been much greater, owing to the fact that it was the first experiment in this part of Texas. Several different kinds of dredge boats have been employed, but the one now used is found far superior to the Osgood patent, that was first procured. With the advantage of all our past experience this canal could probably, be extended to Matagorda Bay...⁴⁸

With the completion of work in April-May 1868, the stockholders sought about making the survey for extending the canal to Matagorda Bay and by 1870 had received the estimate of \$150,000 to \$200,000 for a canal to be completed in one year with two dredge boats.⁴⁹ With an unstable labor force during this period revenues were down on the canal due to much lower crop

⁴⁶ *Galveston Daily News*, December 1, 1865, Galveston, Texas

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, January 24, 1867, Galveston, Texas

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, March 4, 1868, Galveston, Texas

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, May 23, 1868, April 21, 1869, and June 22, 1870, Galveston, Texas

production along the Brazos, San Bernard, and Oyster Creek. However, the seeds for the modern Intercoastal Canal were now planted.