

## INTRODUCTION

The old town of Velasco was the scene of some of the earliest and most ambitious land development efforts of Texas's Mexican and Republic periods. As early as 1833, Asa Mitchell and neighboring landowners formed a land development organization called the Velasco Association to plat and promote town lots in his *labor* (177 acres granted by Mexican authority) on the east bank of the Brazos River where it spilled into the Gulf. The actual date is uncertain because deed records are unavailable until 1837, after Brazoria County was created under the government of the Republic of Texas. However, because George Erath noted in his reminiscences that the town was laid out shortly after the Battle of Velasco in June 1832 (Erath 1923) and newspapers began reporting activities of the Velasco Association as early as March 1833 (*Constitutional Advocate and Texas Public Advertiser*, June 15, 1833), the association probably formed between June 1832 and March 1833. From the time the group formed and the beginning of the Texas Revolution in 1835, there is little record of the Velasco Association, although it is apparent from newspaper advertisements (*Constitutional Advocate and Texas Public Advertiser*, June 15, 1833) and accounts by Mary Austin Holley (Holley Papers, diary entries for 1836) and other contemporary travelers that a number of buildings, including "one public house, two stores, four or five dwelling houses, and the ruins of an old Spanish fort" (Parker 1968: 220), were standing in the town between 1833 and 1836, a period which predates Brazoria County deed records. The ambitions of the association managers, as they were called, may have been precluded somewhat by uncertainties of the revolution. By 1836, when it became clear that Texas would be successful in its attempt to throw off the government of Mexico, several enterprising entrepreneurs, Thomas Jefferson Green pre-eminent among them, joined the association, and proceeded to promote the town with zeal.

The infusion of professional speculators following the establishment of the Republic of Texas catapulted the Velasco Association into a period of frenzied real estate sales, promotional endeavors, and building programs. Such "town-making" was typical during the early years of the Republic (Hogan 1969:89; Holley Papers, letter to Harriette

Brand, February 21, 1838), but Velasco was among the most highly touted and universally promoted towns of the period. Lots along the riverfront were apparently the most coveted building sites in a town that presumed to build its fortune as a shipping port for both river as well as ocean traffic.

## MEXICAN REPUBLIC PERIOD

Although there is evidence of early Spanish visitation to the Brazos coastal area, the history of Velasco began in December 1821 when the schooner *Lively* sailed to the mouth of the Brazos River and deposited a group of 18 immigrants recruited by Stephen F. Austin (Webb 1952:II:66). It was an ill fated lot who were left to fend for themselves, particularly since they were to have joined Austin at the mouth of the Colorado River and not the Brazos. Some chroniclers (e.g., Fox et al. 1981:10) have suggested that Asa Mitchell, who received title in 1824 to the land at the mouth of the Brazos where the town of Velasco was later established (ca. 1833), may have been among the *Lively's* passengers. If so he was one of only two or three of the *Lively's* would-be settlers who persevered in Austin's colony after failing to rendezvous with the empresario. However, the Mitchell family Bible indicates that Mitchell first came to Matagorda and shortly afterward in 1822 to the Velasco area (Bryan Papers, Box 2Q452, Vol. II: Item 217). Regardless, Mitchell was probably the first of Austin's colonists to settle permanently at the site of what would become the town of Velasco. He was certainly there by June 16, 1823, when his son William was born (Bryan Papers, Box 2Q452, Vol. II, Item 217).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> According to the Asbury Papers, the Mitchell family emigrated to Hopkinsville, Kentucky, in 1822 and later that year to Texas, first settling in Matagorda but moving shortly to Velasco (Asbury Papers LXXXII in Bryan Papers, Box 2Q452, Vol. II). Mitchell was in Velasco by June 16, 1823, when his son William was born, according to the Mitchell family Bible that recorded William's birth at Velasco. In 1824, Mitchell received both a league and a *labor* of land on the east side of the Brazos, the town separated by some miles. Mitchell first established his residency in his *labor*, Labor 17, which was to be the site of Velasco. Mitchell operated a salt works (and possibly a tannery, according to the Bryan Paper, Box 2Q452, Vol. II) at the mouth of the Brazos and a store, and served as boarding officer for the Mexican revenue service and as a lookout and informer to the inland settlers during their siege of the Mexican fort in 1832. Three of his children were born in Velasco, and his first wife and infant child were buried near the mouth of East Union Bayou, both having succumbed during childbirth on September 17, 1830 (Ward 1962:423). Another son, 4-year-old Theodore, died in the cholera epidemic of 1833. Mitchell is known to have remained in the vicinity through the Battle of

On August 24, 1824, Asa Mitchell was officially granted his *labor* of land:

being situated at the mouth of the Brazos River, Texas, on the bank of the said river, near its junction with the Gulf of Mexico ...containing two acres and 26,052 square feet of land being a part of the Asa Mitchell labor survey No. 17 [Brazoria County Deed Record 32:536].<sup>2</sup>

Mitchell's presence at the mouth of the Brazos River, from ca. 1823 until 1835 when he moved to Washington-on-the-Brazos (Bryan Papers, Box 2q452, Vol. II, Item217), was one of the few consistent factors in the development site through the Mexican period. Austin's census of 1825 (completed March 1826) lists Mitchell and his wife Charlotte, their three children, and eight servants at the Velasco site (Ward 196:110), citing Spanish Archives, Vol. 54:11). Mitchell's cabin was undoubtedly the first dwelling at Velasco, and his house and the buildings associated with his salt making and tannery operation formed the nucleus of a tiny community at the mouth of the river. Subsequent endeavors associated with coastal/river navigation and commerce, including a custom's house, pilot's house, and inn to accommodate new immigrants to the colony, were established at the site, either by Mitchell or with his cooperation, in the following decade. Mitchell's name appears variously as a farmer, stock-raiser, pilot, customs agent, salt-maker, and inn keeper in the sketchy records of the fledgling colony during this period (Barker 1919: Webb 1952:II:218).

The establishment of towns to facilitate the disbursement of manufactured goods to settlers struggling to work the land was crucial to the survival of the colony. In the absence of good roads, rivers provided the most reliable means of transportation for both supplies and immigrants, and accordingly, the first and most

important towns sprang up along the navigable waterways of the colony (Ward 1962:133). Mitchell's grant at the juncture of the Brazos River and the Gulf of Mexico was a particularly favorable location for both river and ocean trade, and as early as 1823 Stephen F. Austin proposed it as a port (Ward 1962:143). By December 1825, Austin had to acknowledge the lack of natural harbor and the treacherous sand bar at the mouth of the river. He described the location as follows: "This river mouths into the wild ocean without any bay and the breakers are roaring within 80 yards of me-- ...and there is at this time 8 feet over bar" (Ward 1962:144). Austin also noted that "there is a good two-story frame house and some cabins here [at Velasco]" (Ward 1962:144). These buildings were probably Mitchell's.<sup>3</sup>

Despite Austin's misgivings about Velasco's suitability as a port, entrepreneurs encouraged riverboat pilots, in their attempts to navigate the shallow, winding Brazos and serve the needs of the early cotton plantations that fanned out along the river (Hogan 1969:68). In 1825, John Richardson Harris, a land grantee settled at the confluence of Bray's and Buffalo bayous in present Harris County where he set up a trading post. He set up a second trading post at Bell's Landing on the Brazos River where he purchased a small schooner that he named *The Rights of Man*. Commanded by his brother David, Harris's craft may have been the first designed specifically for trade between the Brazos River, Galveston Bay, and New Orleans (Stuart Papers, Box 2, File 3). Small boats including canoes continued to ply the Brazos throughout the initial settlement of the colony, and August 1830 the first steamboat on the river, *Ariel*, owned by Stephen F. Austin's cousin and Mary Austin Holley's brother, Henry Austin, ascended as far as the town of Brazoria (Hogan 1969:57, 69).

Although Mitchell's location at the mouth of the river seemed a promising spot for a commercial center, the town of Brazoria, about 15 miles upriver, preceded the establishment of Velasco—on Mitchell's *labor*—by about 5 years. Laid out in 1828 by John Austin, a distant cousin of Stephen F. Austin, Brazoria competed with another river town known as

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Velasco (1832) but left the area by July 1835 (Austin County Colonial Archives Book 4, "Mitchell") for other parts of Texas, eventually settling in San Antonio, where he died in 1865.

<sup>2</sup> Mitchell's *labor* adjoined the Calvit League, which was immediately east and south, and includes much of the modern seaside village of Surfside. Later, William H. Wharton located his Eagle Island Plantation above Mitchell's *labor*, adjoined on the east side of the river. The Calvits and the Whartons later contributed greatly to the development of the seaport of Velasco. Their legacy continued into the 1870's through their descendants and in-laws, the John H. Herndons. According to Strobel (1926:n.p.), "the Whartons at one time owned the greater part of old Velasco, and many years after, they sold their interest to an agent of the English Rothschilds, who at the time contemplated building a seaport there".

<sup>3</sup> By 1831, however, Fiske saw only one building, "an inn used to receive passengers from the schooners that frequented the Brazos" (Ward 1962:145). It is curious that Fiske saw only one building since there should have been a number of other buildings in addition to G. B. Cotton's inn at that time.

Bell's Landing or Marion (now East Columbia), established a few years earlier by Josiah Bell even farther upriver (Brazoria County Probate Records, "History of Brazoria County" scrapbook, Item 4). While neither of these early river towns enjoyed Mitchell's proximity to the ocean, they were at least spared the brunt of damage from the severe storms that regularly visited the Gulf Coast.

While Josiah Bell and John Austin engaged in town-making upriver, Asa Mitchell attempted to improve his salt works at the coast. In a letter he sent to Stephen F. Austin at San Felipe, dated June 18, 1826, from the "Mouth of the Brassos," Mitchell described his trip to "buy a set of salt kettles" in New Orleans. Although frustrated in his primary mission, Mitchell informed Austin that he managed to buy "a good supply of sugar[,] coffee and other articles in the provision line to accommodate those who would wish to visit the sea shore" ( Mitchell to Austin, June 18, 1826 in Barker 1924:1363). This is the earliest known depiction of the Velasco area as a potential resort. In addition, while Brazoria and Bell's Landing (East Columbia) were the principal centers of commerce in the mid and late 1820's, Mitchell's seaside position allowed him a modicum of mercantile possibilities as well. Stephen F. Austin carried an account with Mitchell from 1824 until November 1830 that included three pair of cotton cards (1826); six bushels of corn furnished the militia for an Indian expedition (1825); three bushels of salt (1826); and a set of shaving utensils, two bushels of salt, and three bottles of spirits for an oyster trip (1827) (account of Stephen F. Austin with Asa Mitchell, paid November 27, 1830, in Barker 1928:544). Apparently Mitchell traveled to New Orleans for some supplies and probably accepted others from ships that visited the mouth of the Brazos. He charged a trading fee for his services and offered discounts, at least to Austin (Barker 1928:544). By the end of the 1820's, Mitchell's advantageous location allowed him quite a variety of enterprises. Mitchell must have recognized the site's larger possibilities for the future colony because early in 1833 he joined with his neighbors, primarily William H. Wharton and Branch T. Archer, to form a land association that would plat, promote and develop his *labor* into a thriving river and sea port.

William Harris Wharton, a young lawyer from Tennessee, arrived in Austin's colony in

1827 and shortly thereafter married Sarah Ann Groce, daughter of one of Austin's original 300 colonists, Jared E. Groce ( Webb 1952:II:890). The couple moved to the United States for a few years but returned to Texas in 1831 at the request of Stephen F. Austin and built a fine home and plantation called Eagle Island on land given to them by the bride's father. The Wharton's first residence was a log house with dirt floors, typical of pioneer dwellings at that time. It was soon replaced with a two-and-one-half-story frame house with two long galleries and a large hall (Strobel 1926:n.p.). Situated on the east bank of the Brazos River, about 6 miles above Velasco on the coast, Eagle Island became the social and political hub of the lower Brazos region, and Wharton, along with his brother John and friends Branch T. Archer and Edwin Waller, became among the most prominent and out spoken advocates of Texas independence They were also among the founders of the town of Velasco.

Possibly in response to the influx of immigrants like Wharton, whose affiliations with the United States and disdain for Mexican law posed a threat to continued Mexican authority in the area, the government of Mexico began to increase its visibility in Texas. In accordance with the Law of April 6, 1830, a result of General Manuel de Mier y Teran's concerns over increasing Texas recalcitrance, Mexican military outposts were established at several strategic locations along the Texas coast, including the mouth of the Brazos. Although John S. "Rip" Ford implied in his memoirs that a Mexican fort was garrisoned "on the west [sic] Bank of the river at Velasco" when his grandfather settled at Gulf Prairie in 1824, there are no archival records to substantiate his claim (Bryan Papers, Box 2Q452, Vol. II). The earliest evidence of an official Mexican presence at Velasco appears to have been a customs checkpoint established at Velasco about 1830 (Barker 1919). George Fisher, a Mexican customs agent stationed at Galveston, apparently commissioned Asa Mitchell to serve as boarding officer at Velasco sometime before November 2, 1830, prior to the garrisoning of troops the following year (Barker 1919). By the time Colonel Domingo de Ugartechea began construction of a Mexican fort in 1831, nearly a decade had passed since the *Lively* deposited its passengers at the mouth of the Brazos. In the intervening years, thousands of travelers and immigrants had passed over the shallow

bar and traveled upriver to settle the new colony.

One of the earliest descriptions of Velasco was written by an anonymous visitor, generally thought to be a Mr. Fiske, who traveled to Texas in 1831 and recorded his adventures in *A Visit to Texas*. Fiske, who arrived at the mouth of the Brazos in March 1831, had a harrowing arrival that was not out of the ordinary. Indeed, hundreds of passengers who came after Fiske experienced similar landings, some not as happily ended:

Early in the month of March, 1831, I reached New Orleans from the Northern States, on my way to Texas...

There was a vessel at that time preparing to sail for Brazoria, a place on the river Brazos; and I took passage on board. After stipulating for the price of twenty dollars...I embarked with fifty-three other passengers, of different descriptions and colors. The *sloop* Majesty, in which we sailed, was commanded by Captain Spear...

We kept down the coast until we arrived off the mouth of the Brazos, near which we began to discover something of the country in the interior. This was an extensive plain, scarcely elevated above the level of the Ocean, varied in some parts with wood, but without a single elevation of the surface. A pilot came down to the shore, and we stood near the land to receive him. The sloop was got in over the bar without much difficulty, though she struck two or three time, as she drew five feet of water...

Before our vessel reached the point, four of the passengers including myself, took the boat intending to land. After rowing a short time, we perceived that the surf ran high upon the beach, and that a landing would be difficult. We had also by this time discovered that we were all but poor oarsmen; but nothing remained for us but to keep the boat's head as well as possible towards the shore. We had however, no sooner reached the breakers, that she swung round in spite of us, and instantly overset, throwing us all into the water. We scrambled among the waves and the undertow, and with

difficulty gained the land, after spending some time in hauling the boat upon the beach ...we soon reached the house of Captain Cotton [sic], where a flag was flying. It stands on the bank of the Brazos river, and is an inn, for the accommodation of passengers landing here, though a mere log house. The owner was formerly editor of a Mexican Gazette".

...From this place we had an extensive prospect. Although the spot is but little higher than the surface of the water, the country around is so low, and so perfectly flat that the eye embraced an extent of many miles toward the interior, as well as up and down the seacoast... Not a dwelling, except the inn, was anywhere in sight, nor a single vessel, except our sloop...

There were ten or twelve puny, dark complexioned men at Captain Cotton's in uniforms, who I learnt were Mexican soldiers, stationed there to enforce the revenue laws...([Fiske] 1834:9-15)

The single building at the point was most likely the "Brazos Hotel," a "log house at the mouth of the Brazos for the entertainment of travelers" established by G. B. Cotton at the home of Asa Mitchell in March 1831 (*The Mexican Citizen*, March 12, 1831; Webb 1952:1:419). It was probably the first public accommodation available on the coast. Cotton and his partner William Chase advertised their venture in Cotton's former newspaper, published at Brazoria:

Brazos hotel--The subscribers respectfully announce to the public, that the above establishment is now open, at the house of Mr. Asa Mitchell, at the Mouth of the River Brazos—where they hope to merit a share of public patronage. Oysters and fish, and every thing the country affords will always be kept on hand, and no expense or pains will be wanting on their part to render their guests comfortable. The situation bathing is very fine [*The Mexican Citizen*, formerly *The Texas Gazette*, March 12, 1831].

Of all the travelers who journeyed to Texas in its infancy and described the territory for the first time to outside audiences, Mary Austin Holley, a cousin of Stephen F. Austin, was

one of the most astute. Sailing from New Orleans October, 1831, onboard the schooner *Spica*, Holley first visited Texas, and described the speck of land on the east side of Brazos River:

Bolivar , Texas, December, 1831  
 The morning of October 22d, was fair and bright, the mouth of the Brazos lay before us. It was less than three days, since we parted from the levee, in New Orleans. We cast off a boat for a pilot, and to take soundings on the bar. The pilot came on board. He is an American, of gentlemanly deportment, and lives at the point of land, formed by the Brazos with the gulf. Here is a Mexican garrison, and the tri-colored flag is hoisted, the first signal of our approach to a foreign land...  
 On our right, in front of their palmetto-roofed, and windowless barracks, the lazy sentinels were "walking their lonely rounds," without excessive martial parade; nor did the unturretted quarters of the commanding officer, show forth much of the blazonry of a Spanish Don. There was no tree, no cultivation...Nothing marked civilization, save a fabric for making salt; itself an image of desolation, and the solitary house of the pilot, standing high on piles, serving, at once, for a beacon for the mariner, and a refuge from the storm....

...next day...after dinner , the pilot came on board. In a few minutes we were over the bar, for it is not wide, but not without some severe rubs and pitches...

We came to, before the door of the pilot's house, which fronts the stream. The officer of the garrison boarded us, to examine our passports; a ceremony, the Mexicans are very tenacious of, from their known jealousy of foreigners. He was a young man, dark and rather handsome, in a neat Mexican uniform, probably his dress-suit...(Hatcher 1933:108; Holley 1833; Holley Papers, Box 2E247, letters II & III, Bolivar, December 24, 1831).

In 1831 and 1832, a number of Texas notables arrived in Austin's colony, including William H. Wharton, Edwin Waller, Dr. Branch

T. Archer, Henry Smith, and Judge Thomas G. Masterson (Strobel 1926; Webb 1952). These men figured prominently in the events leading to Battle of Velasco in 1832 and in the so-called "war party" which urged independence from Mexico. But 1832 was the year in which Velasco made Texas history. On May 1, 1832, according to Decree No. 196, the Municipality of Brazoria was created by the Mexican government. The municipality extended 4 leagues above the mouth Big Creek and westward to Trespalacios with Brazoria as the seat of government. The alcaldes were Governor Smith, John Austin, and Edwin Waller (Strobel 1926). The most memorable event of the year, both in the annals of the county and in Texas history, was the Battle of Velasco, an incident that some historians consider to be the first hostile exchange in the battle for Texas independence from Mexico. Dr. Branch T. Archer, newly arrived in the region, represented the Municipality of Brazoria at a mass meeting to demand removal of port regulations. Colonists chafed at the Mexican government's attempts to exert customs and tax control over Texas after years of benign neglect, and they were incensed that forts were being manned with convict-soldiers who, after serving their sentences, would be free to settle among them (Ward 1962:221). Citizens in the lower Brazos region repeatedly resisted Mexican officials' attempts to regulate traffic on the river in the spring of 1832, and eventually the friction between the Texans and those in authority erupted in violence, ultimately compelling Colonel Ugartechea and his men to surrender and abandon the fort at Velasco in June 1832.

Several first-hand accounts were recorded by survivors, but they offer few details concerning the disposition of the community as a result of the battle. According to one account, only two buildings, the custom house and an office, were left standing after the battle. Asa Mitchell, whose home and salt works were located just north of the Mexican fort, reported that Colonel Ugartechea sighted his cannon "particularly on every house on the point, marking each sight and position" (Bryan Papers, Box 2Q452, Vol. II, Mitchell to William H. Wharton, June 20, 1832). In the same letter, Mitchell recounted that Ugartechea asked him to move his cowpen, which adjoined the fort, because it was in the line of fire. Mitchell declined to remove the structure,

and presumably it was destroyed along with most other buildings within cannon range. After almost 10 years of continuous habitation, the little community at the mouth of the Brazos was in ruins and Mitchell faced the prospect of rebuilding.

In his memoirs, Major George Bernard Erath, who arrived in Texas in April 1833, mentioned that “the town of Velasco was laid out near the site of the battle” shortly after the incident forced the removal of the Mexican troops (Erath 1923:221). As early as January 13, 1833, Mitchell had obligated himself to sell an eighth of his *labor* (No. 17), on which the town of Velasco was subsequently platted, to Thomas Westall, one of Austin’s original 300 colonists and owner of a large plantation on the west side of the Brazos River (Brazoria County Deed Record C:72). This is the earliest known reference to Mitchell’s relinquishing a portion of his property within the project area.

Shortly after that exchange, a notice dated March 9, 1833, advertised the second sale of lots in the town of Velasco by the Velasco Association, an event that was to take place on June 27, 1833 (*Constitutional Advocate and Texas Public Advertiser*, June 15, 1833). While no references have been found to indicate the date of the first sale of town lots, if Major Erath is correct, it probably occurred sometime between June 26, 1832, the date of the battle, and March 9, 1833, when notice was placed. Few details about the town lots were provided in the advertisement. Prospective buyers had to be bonded, and the terms of sale included a payment plan in 3-, 6-, and 12-month installments. The association further stipulated that no salt wells could be dug nor furnaces erected for making salt within the town limits (*Constitutional Advocate and Texas Public Advertiser*, June 15, 1833). This restriction may have been in deference to Asa Mitchell, who made at least part of his living by distilling salt.

Other announcements in the same newspaper issue show that the association had extensive plans to promote its project. An anniversary ball and a speech by Branch T. Archer, both commemorating the capture of Fort Velasco, were scheduled to follow the public sale in the town of Velasco. In addition, the association announced its intention to construct a major hotel at Velasco to accommodate the many visitors they anticipated. The announcement reveals both

the Velasco Association’s enthusiasm for the project as well as the scope of its members’ designs for the place:

### Hotel At Velasco

The Velasco Association feeling the importance and necessity of a Hotel of extensive accommodations in the Town of Velasco, have determined to open subscription books for the purpose of effecting that object. They believe that a suitable house with Billiard Tables attached, Boats for pleasure and oystering, a Seine for fishing, a Bath House, Livery Stable, &c., &c. would not only add greatly to public convenience, but prove a source of profit to the Stockholders. They are aware of the many inducements that would draw company to this desirable place – it is notoriously one of the healthiest places in the country. Convalescents, men of pleasure, from all parts of the country would pass much time there, lured by the advantages of sea air, sea bathing, the pleasure of sailing, fishing and oystering &c. &c. Many persons from New Orleans and other parts of Louisiana, who would now spend their summers at the north, would find it equally healthy and agreeable, nearer and cheaper to visit Velasco. On the arrival of vessels, passengers would doubtless find pleasure in the comforts and conveniences of a well conducted Hotel, and Being desirous of visiting other sections of the country, would render the Livery Stable very profitable to the stockholders. It is the intention of the Association to keep the subscription books open until such an amount be subscribed as will be sufficient to erect a building equal in every respect to the best Hotels in the U. S. of the North. A large amount of stock already taken, and the Association being desirous of erecting the buildings as soon as possible, requests all those who wish to obtain stock, or to favor the plan, to make early application to the secretary in Brazoria, or N. Townsend, Esq. San Felipe. Public notice will be given as soon as the contemplated amount be taken, and the Stockholders will elect a Committee to draft a plan and superintend the erection of the buildings.

By Order of the Association

L. C. Mason, Sec  
Brazoria, March 23, 1833 [*Constitutional  
Advocate and Texas Public Advertiser*,  
June 15, 1833].

Major Erath passed through Velasco about that time, in late April 1833, on his way from New Orleans to Brazoria. Despite the promising claims of the Velasco Association for the locale, Erath was not impressed with what passed for a town. Erath recalled that it had already been laid out, and he counted about 50 inhabitants whose "houses were mere shanties with one unfinished two-story building—its sides half open" (Erath 1923:221). Erath further noted that "the making of salt from water obtained from salt wells near the beach comprised its business, and this was conducted on a very small scale by the two brothers Porter" (Erath 1923:221). John and William Porter, brothers from Tennessee, immigrated to Texas in the early 1830's. They stayed in Velasco only a short time; John moved to Burleson County where he became a county judge, and William was a lawyer in Bowie County (Erath 1923:223; Webb 1952:II:395). Erath's travels took him farther upriver, and his descriptions of settlers' dwellings appear to be typical for the period and also may be compared with the "shanties" he observed at Velasco. In general, he said that families lived in double log houses with rock chimneys and hand-sawn plank floors. Some were log "cabins with the bark on the logs; one room harbored the whole family, and comers and goers" Erath returned to Velasco and worked for John Porter, "making salt" for a short time. (Erath 1923:223). The production of salt continued under the ownership of Silas Dinsmore:

### SALT

**THE** undersigned having leased the **VELASCO SALT WORKS**, designs carrying them on in such a manner as to be enabled to supply the country with salt; person wishing a supply can be accommodated on application to A. G. & R. MILLS, Brazoria, or the undersigned in Velasco.

SILAS DINSMORE

Velasco, November 21, 1833 [*The  
Advocate of the People's Rights*,  
February 22, 1834]

Unfortunately, although the association described Velasco's healthy locale in glowing terms, cholera broke out within a month of the announcement, taking a terrible toll on the population of the region. Shortly after Erath's arrival, the cholera of 1832-1833 that swept across the southern United States and adjoining areas, decimating the population of New Orleans, reached the tiny settlements along the Brazos. The disease first erupted in April 1833 and wreaked havoc among the colonists along the lower Brazos throughout the summer until about October 1833. The disease apparently came into the lower Brazos region from ships stopping at Velasco where some of the first cases had already ended tragically by May 14, 1833, according to letters written by naturalist Thomas Drummond to William Jackson Hooker from the beleaguered town (Hogan 1969:234). Few families were spared, and many suffered multiple losses. At Brazoria, John Austin, the hero of the Battle of Velasco, his wife, and two of his children died in August 1833. In Velasco, it was reported that of the 20 residents, 11 contracted the disease and 8 died from it, leaving only 12 people at the Brazos River settlement by October when cooler weather prevailed and the epidemic subsided. Among the dead was Asa Mitchell's 5-year-old son, Theodore, one of the first children born in Velasco (Ward 1962:2). Other casualties included D. W. Anthony, editor of the Brazoria newspaper in which the Velasco Association made its hopeful claims for the future of the coastal town, and Thomas Westall, to whom Mitchell had obligated part of his *labor* (Creighton 1940:11). The cholera epidemic was one of the worst disasters suffered by Austin's colony during the Mexican period. Among its casualties were the immediate prospects of the Velasco Association.

At the same time political machinations took some of the most influential residents of the Velasco area to the Convention of 1833, held in San Felipe de Austin on April, 1833. William H. Wharton presided, and Branch T. Archer was delegate at the convention which sent Stephen F. Austin to petition the Mexican government for separation from the State of Coahuila, tariff exemption, and better defense against Indians. From that time forward, land speculation and town building in Velasco became of secondary importance to the events that eventually led to the establishment of the Texas Republic. In fact, there are no

known accounts of Velasco Association activities from its first exuberant announcements in March 1833 until after the conclusion of the Texas Revolution in 1836. This preoccupation with matters of state, however, did not keep interested parties from anticipating the effect Texas independence would have on land speculation. As early as 1832, during her first excursion to Texas, Mary Austin Holley wrote to her daughter: "Certain political changes are hastening on --- the restrictions will be removed and when the north Americans come pouring I without restraint, you can not imagine the value of these lands" (Holley Paper, Box 2E247, letter to Harriette Brand, December 24, 1831, Bolivar, in Holley Letters [1807-1837]). While Holley's letter did not presume independence for Texas, many of these "North Americans" who entered Texas from the United States in the early 1830's became members of the so-called War Party, who agitated successfully for revolution. Prominent among them were William and John Wharton, Edwin Waller, and Branch T. Archer, all of whom owned large tracts of property near the mouth of the Brazos. They were also members of the Velasco Association and had personal financial interest in the future of Velasco as a port city. According to Eugene C. Barker's (1906-1907) research, land speculation was among the principal causes of the Texas Revolution. There can be little doubt that these men aligned themselves with the War Party, at least partially, because of their economic investments.

The period between the Battle of Velasco and the beginning of the Texas Republic did not produce the thriving port city envisioned by the Velasco Association. By 1834, Austin's colonization efforts resulted in a population of 8,000, of whom 3,000 were listed as "negroes," for the entire Department of the Brazos as tabulated by Mexican Colonel Juan Nepomuceno Almonte in an inspection tour conducted in 1834 (Creighton 1940:11; Webb 1952:I:35). Almonte's report listed the Municipality of Columbia (formerly the Municipality of Brazoria and roughly the equivalent of present Brazoria County) with about 2,100 people. The town of Brazoria tallied about 500 citizens, while Velasco counted only 100 souls (Creighton 1940:11). Within a few months of Almonte's inspection, during the autumn and winter of 1834-1835, adventurer and writer Andrew Amos Parker

traveled throughout Texas. He described the town of Velasco in his book *Trip to the West and Texas* and found that "a small town called Velasco is situated on the sandy beach at the river's mouth containing one public house, two stores, four or five dwelling houses, and the ruins of an old Spanish fort" (Parker 1968:220). Mary Austin Holley returned to Velasco for a second time in May 1835 and discovered that the desolate salt works and lone pilot's house of 1831 had been replaced by a town with a lively sea trade and commercial prospects. In her second book on Texas, Mrs. Holley described Velasco as follows:

It is a small town but is well situated, and is in a flourishing state. A collector of customs resides there.

Velasco is the resort, in summer, of great numbers of visitors from the north of the colony, who come to enjoy the delightful sea-breezes, sun-bathing, and the comforts with which they are every where surrounded. Excellent accommodations can always be obtained at boarding houses, which, among other attractions, are always furnished with supplies of oysters and fish of the first quality...A Mexican garrison was formerly stationed at Velasco; at present it is a rendezvous of the patriot troops [Holley 1836:121-122].

It should be remembered that Holley hoped to promote immigration and land sales with the publication of her books. She was somewhat more candid about the place in her letters and diary. In her journal entry of May 7, 1835, Holley said:

I forgot to speak in its place of the change that has taken place in Velasco since my visit in 1831. Then it was a garrison with a few ragged looking Mexican troops, presenting little appearance of comfort. Now it has two good boarding houses for the accommodation of travelers with a domestic look & air of comfort—nothing military in the aspect—no one to demand passports. On the opposite point, as I mentioned, stands McKenny's [sic] ware house to

increase the show of prosperity [Holley 1965:15].

The two good boarding houses mentioned by Holley could be the Velasco Hotel, initially owned by Jeremiah Brown as his residence, and the American Hotel owned by Isaac C. Hoskins and Jeremiah Brown jointly (Brazoria County Probate Record 39). Brown appears to have leased or sold his residence to R. Clokey during 1835 and as this was an early transactions the exact location is not known:

#### **Velasco Hotel**

**R. Clokey** having taken the house formerly occupied by Mr. Brown, is now prepared to accommodate those who may favor him with their custom.

Velasco, January 16-22 [*The Texas Republican* March 14, 1835]

#### **VELASCO HOTEL**

**THE** subscriber having leased the above establishment is now prepared to accommodate all those who may favor him with their custom—Private rooms are now prepared for the accommodation of families who may wish to spend the summer on the coast. He hopes by strict attention to the comfort of his guests, to receive a share of public patronage.

J .C. DOWNER [*Texas Republican* , July 4, 1835.

Promotional events continued for the hotel into the summer:

#### **GRAND BALL ON THE 4<sup>TH</sup> JULY AT VELASCO**

The public are Respectfully informed that their will be a Ball, given at the Velasco Hotel, on the 4<sup>th</sup> July next.

Velasco, June 20<sup>th</sup>, 1835 [*The Texas Republican*, June 20, 1835, Brazoria, Texas]

That summer, on a return trip down the Brazos, Holley gave a colorful overview of Velasco in which she described the scene at the mouth of the river on June 10, 1835:

The fisher men in their red shirts hauled in their last nets—all objects stand out in

full relief—Velasco with its many hovels—huts—boarding houses and signal staffs—on the left—McKenney's [sic] house—warehouse—cotton gin and camp of newly arrived Africans—on the right herds of cattle & horses feeding as far as eye could reach—people lounging or busy every where. The wide prairie, through which the smooth Brazos rolls—the noisy sea before, skiffs & sail boats with the light canoes shooting over the surface in every direction—all these objects—all pretty in the distance—formed a picturesque whole {Holley 1965:29}.

Mary Austin Holley also made three sketches of the town and the mouth of the Brazos in her diary. Her drawing entitled “Velasco 1835 evening” depicts large buildings and outbuildings along the riverfront nearest its confluence with the Gulf. The drawings offer a panoramic view of Velasco, the mouth of the Brazos River, and western bank of the river.

Although no deed records have been located from the period preceding December 20, 1836, subsequent lot transfers indicate that the house sold by Edwin Waller to Thomas Gottchell and by Gottchell to Isaiah Dowling (Lots 4, 5, and 6 of Block 10) (Brazoria County Deed Records C:255) and the storehouse and warehouse of Edwin Waller and Thomas G. Masterson Lot 2, Block 11) (Brazoria County Deed Records A:367, B:186) were constructed by the time of Mrs. Holley's visit. In fact, several other buildings within the riverfront area, the tavern (American Hotel) of Jeremiah Brown and Isaac C. Hoskins (Lots 3, 4, 5, and 6 in Block 11; Brazoria County Deed Record C:222), and H. N. Wolcott's grog shop [Lot 1 Block 11: Brazoria County Deed Record] were probably in place by the time of Holley's visit. Notices in a newspaper published in Brazoria indicate that both a customs house and a hotel were operating in Velasco in 1835 (*Texas Republican*, July 4 and March 14, 1835), and these buildings may also be among those depicted in Mary Austin Holley's sketches of the Velasco waterfront.

Holley's third sketch shows a dismayed ship on Velasco point, which she identified as the schooner *Elizabeth*, and the schooner *American* aground either on the sandbar on the Quintana side. She discussed the

incidence of wrecks on the bar in both her letters and diary. Upon her initial arrival at Velasco during the 1835 trip, Holley described the fate of the *Elizabeth* on May 5, 1835:

The bar was much more formidable than when I saw it before—the breakers with their white caps running high and tumbling with considerable roar. The moment was interesting as, full of gratitude for our safe passage through the perilous entrance into our terrestrial paradise. The schooner *Elizabeth*, which started from N.O. [New Orleans] the night before us & arrived the night before us, in attempting to follow in our wake missed the deepest channel & after ineffectual struggles to escape stuck fast & was much shattered. The crew, ladies & all, escaped by wading to the shore. It is so shallow there is never danger of drowning in failure of swimming. I had no use for my life preserver. This makes the 3d vessel lost here, if she be lost, this season [Holley 1965:15].

The Schooner *Elizabeth* was wrecked in attempting to cross the bar at the mouth of the Brazos, on Wednesday last. We have not understood what amount of damage her cargo sustained. We understand she was insured in New Orleans (*The Texas Republican* May 9, 1835).

The *Elizabeth* was indeed lost, as Holley discovered the following month. On June 12, 1835, she “count[ed] four wrecks in the view [at Velasco]. The *Elizabeth* nearly in pieces lies on the front of Velasco. It is but a month since she was proudly entering the river behind the *San Felipe*” (Holley 1965:29). It is clear from Holley’s 1835 reports, and those of many other observers who followed, that the water on the sandbar at the mouth of the Brazos was too shallow and the surf too strong for reliable and profitable shipping activities, and although the bar did not appear to be life-threatening to Holley at the time, scores of vessels and passengers were lost at the point due to the shifting sand bar at the mouth of the river. Jeremiah Brown and Francis J. Haskins served as pilots for the

harbor at this time and the signal staffs Holley observed in her diary were used to alert incoming schooners of the hazards of the bar:

### NOTICE TO SHIP-MASTERS

**THE** undersigned takes this method of informing the public that another flagstaff has been erected at the mouth of the Rio Brazos and as the bar is very often too rough for boats to board vessels, they might be deceived by seeing both flags flying and in range together; therefore the following signals will be exhibited:

At high water will be hoisted at the flagstaff a white flag with a *Mexican Eagle, in black*, in the middle. If it is half tide or low water the same will be hoisted at half mast only—should she not be boarded and there be plenty of water on the Bar the following rule may be observed:

When the vessel is near down to the Bar the flag on the flagstaff will be hauled down and two smaller flags erected at a suitable distance from each other these flags will be a black Ball on a white ground—and are the range for crossing the Bar without a Pilot. In running down should it be too rough for boats to come out you should lay off and on, taking care not to get to the Westward of the Bar as there is generally a strong current setting in that direction, and unless your vessel sails well it will be almost impossible to come in. Vessels with good ground tackle need not be afraid to anchor off the Bar taking care to anchor in 4 ½ fathoms water in rough weather, and in fine weather they can anchor safely in 3 ½ fathoms. When vessels are off the Bar in bad weather, a fire will be made on the beach every night. I shall still conduct the Pilotage as usual and so do my duty at the hazard of my life.

J. BROWN, Pilot  
Mouth of Rio Brazos, May 23 1835.  
[*Texas Republican*, July 4, 1835]

### PILOTAGE OF THE BRAZOS

**The** undersigned being appointed Pilot by the Illustrious Ayuntamiento of the Jurisdiction of Columbia for the Bar of the Brazos takes the opportunity of informing all whom it may concern that he shall

strictly adopt the following rules—In all cases when vessels approach the Bar, if prudent, they will be boarded if not observe the following signals. The Mexican Flag will be hoisted to the Top of the Staff in high water; and in crossing the Bar being two white Flags with a red Ball in each in a range, should it not be possible to board a Vessel and not prudent for a Vessel to attempt to cross the Bar the Mexican Flag will be hoisted half mast and under no circumstances will the signals be exhibited.

F. J. HASKINS, Branch Pilot  
Velasco, May 9<sup>th</sup>, 1835

P. S. The undersigned has provided two substantial boats & a full crew and is determined to use every exertion in the discharge of his duties.

Q. F. J. HASKINS  
[*Texas Republican*, June 6, 1835]

It appears F.J. Haskins remained the pilot for the Brazos until January 1836:

#### NOTICE

WHEREAS, The General Council have, by a late ordinance and decree reduced the price of Pilotage, I hereby give notice that I resign and give up my commission as Pilot from this date inasmuch as the present rates of Pilotage, will not justify me in keeping a sufficient crew for the Brazos Bar.

FRANCIS J. HASKINS  
Velasco, Jan. 4, 1835 (6) [*The Texas Republican*, March 9, 1836, Brazoria, Texas]

Always keen in her observations, Holley suggested a solution following the destruction of the *Elizabeth* in the form of a question: "Query: might not the drags they use on Lake Erie & other channels thus obstructed at the mouth be profitably employed here?" (Holley 1965:15). Many decades passed and many boats were lost before a viable solution was found, however.

#### REVOLUTIONARY PERIOD

The opening of hostilities between Mexico and the emerging colonists began at Velasco September 1, 1835. Lieutenant Thomas M. Thompson commander of the *Correo de*

*Mejico*, a war schooner, seized the brig, *Tremont*, just after she crossed the Brazos bar and intended to send her to Vera Cruz. The local citizenry had witnessed the seizure from shore and proceeded to man the *Laura*, a small steamer, with a party of volunteers. Small arms fire from the *Laura* made the prize crew withdraw from the *Tremont*. The *Laura* took the *Tremont* in tow and withdrew.

A sail was noted to the east and the *Laura* steamed out only to return with the armed *San Felipe*, loaded with munitions for the colonists and carrying Stephen F. Austin on his return from New Orleans. Cargo and passengers were transferred to the *Laura* and the original band of volunteers boarded the *San Felipe*.

The *Correo* by 8 p.m. maneuvered to within half a cannon shot of the *San Felipe*, captained by W. A. Hurd. A heavy exchange of cannon and rifle fire that lasted more than an hour completely worsted the lighter armed *Correo*. Her two guns were dismantled. Most of the crew was wounded, while Thompson himself was struck twice in the legs by Texan rifle balls.

The *Correo* withdrew under the cover of darkness but was forced to surrender the next morning. Her crew was put beneath hatches and sent to New Orleans as pirates. A court in New Orleans released the crew in January 1836, after a somewhat stormy trial. [Hill 1987:26,27,28]

As tension between the Texans and Mexicans mounted in the late summer and fall of 1835, Thomas McKinney, a merchant in Quintana, reported to friends that:

..we have this evening completed the mounting on our fort at Velasco a most superior long 18 pounders besides some other small pieces which we have part of which are in condition for defence. We have a sufficiency of amunition to make a very considerable defence & we now consider ourselves perfectly able to repel any forces that may come by sea for the purpose of landing here We will in a few days send a load of supplies to be sent out from Columbia to the army in addition to what has already been sent we have received some additional supplies pr

the Schooner *San Felipe*..... (McKinney to Gail Borden and R. R. Royall, October 24, 1835, in Jenkins 1973:211).

Within a few days the Mexican Navy did indeed appear off the coast:

The Mexican cruiser is off this place, has been seen yesterday & the day previous fired one shot at Velasco which fell short of the shore, four were fired at her from shore, none however took effect it has made her become less bold in her movements, yesterday she appeared but at a very respectful distance.

You would doubtless say by all means go & take her, so we say and so we will endeavor to do at all hazards..... (McKinney to R. R. Royall, October 29, 1835, in Jenkins 1973:260).

Thomas McKinney served as an agent for the government in late 1835:

..take charge of & keep all public stores at Velasco—and also an order of the council requiring you “to detain and put in store all the Cannon small arms Ammunition &c &c brought to Velasco by Gen Mexia & not suffer them to be taken out of your possession on any account untill further order from this council”. (James W. Robinson to Thomas F. McKinney, December 17, 1835, Binkley 1936: Vol I, 26,27)

Colonists along the lower Brazos anticipated a Mexican invasion of the Texas interior from the mouth of the river and did what they could to prepare a defense.:

I have been ordered to this point & Galveston for the purpose of fortifying them against the enemy. Captain Turner's Company of Regular Troops & Capt Roman's of volunteers are here one (Turners) 43 strong & Romans, 35 strong—I have received letters from the Citizens beseeching me not to remove the troops from here.....[George W. Poe to Henry

Smith, Head Quarters Velasco, March 3, 1836, Binkley 1936: Vol. I, 479]

On March 6, 1836 a vigilance committee comprised of Reuben M. Potter, Fleming T. Wells, Jeremiah Brown, I C. Hoskins, Robert D. Moore, Joseph Ritchie, and Thomas Jefferson Green , newly arrived from Florida, formed to purchase ammunition, reconstruct the battery, and mount guns (Thomas Jefferson Green Papers 1836). HAVE COPY

Conditions at Velasco changed to a state of confusion by the reversal of fortunes by the Texas army at the Alamo and Sam Houston's retreat:

The Government having determined to fortify Velasco despatched Genl Warren D. C. Hall to that point, instructions, as commandant of the post, to proceed forthwith to establish a Garrison there, and to collect laborers, teams, and materials, for the purpose of constructing with all possible expedition, the contemplated works—on arriving at Velasco Genl. Hall found it impossible to assemble troops or laborers; such was the panic produced by the late retrograde movement of the army that every body was flying, each seeming intent on his own individual safety to the exclusion of the public defense. In the state of things Genl. Hall left Velasco with the view of aiding in fortifying and defending Galveston harbor, despairing of being able to execute the orders he had received to fortify Velasco. Your arrival today however, with a list of brave and patriotic men who have pledged themselves to defend Velasco, clears away the difficulties mentioned and leaves no doubt of our being able to fortify and defend the mouth of the Brasos. . .you are authorised to take command and proceed immediately to collect laborers, teams &c for constructing fortification.... . Col. Edwd. Harcourt an experienced and scientific engineer has been ordered to Velasco and Galveston to superintend the construction of fortifications. . . [Secretary of the Navy Robert Potter to Thomas B. Bell, March 31, 1836, Binkley 1936: Vol. II, 566, 567]

Thomas Bell moved forward with his duties:

We are pressing forward, in the operation of the Fort and find it necessary to call in the outlyers and plunderers as well as our good Citizens who timerously have taken refuge in the bottoms and Cane breaks. . [Thomas B. Bell to Robert Potter, Fort Velasco, April 12, 1836, Binkley 1936: Vol II, 633].

Work continued on the Texas Fort Velasco under the command of Captain Thomas B. Bell. From the few first-hand accounts of this and other contemporaneous forts, Gerald S. Pierce speculated on the appearance of Fort Velasco at the end of the Texas Revolution:

The fort must have been a crude affair, consisting of a few gun emplacements looking out to sea and over the mouth of the river, the emplacements nothing more than semi-circular banks of sand backed by heavy timbers, with wooden platforms upon which the cannons could be swiveled about. Nearby there would have been a magazine, probably made of heavy logs sunk into the sand and covered by several feet of sand and sod. It was impermanent, but it was the best coastal defense work in Texas in May of 1836 [Pierce 1969:164].

Thomas Jefferson Green arrived in Velasco early in 1836 as evidenced by his being member of the "vigilance committee", March 6. (Green had married Sarah Angeline Wharton daughter of Jesse Wharton of Nashville, Tennessee. This was the uncle of William H., John A., and Elizabeth Wharton who raised them after the death of their parents.) It did not take long for Green to make his presence felt:

After leaving Washington myself and the cabinet tarried two days at the house of Jared E. Gross on the east side of the Brasos where some business was transacted. At this point Thomas J. Green made himself known to the Government. Mr Green actuated no doubt by that philanthropic and

chivalrous spirit which has prompted many of the gallant sons of our native country to rush to the rescue of Texas in the day of her disaster, proposed to raise and conduct into the country within six weeks or two months a brigade of Volunteers. . .The proposal was acceded to with avidity and Mr. Green was invested with a commission as Brigadier General in the army of Texas. . .[President David G. Burnet to Senate, Columbia, October, 1836, Binkley 1936: Vol. II, 1085]

Proceeding to New Orleans Thomas Jefferson Green set to work organizing a group of volunteers:

#### BANNER & enlistment agreement

While there are few references to the town of Velasco during this time, a number of Velasco-area citizens took part in the struggle, most notably in the Texas Navy. Jeremiah Brown was listed in Austin's Register of Families as a 30-year-old, unmarried "mariner" from Rhode Island when he arrived the colony in February 1830. He settled near Velasco and married Rebecca B., daughter of Thomas Spraggins, a large landowner in the area. In 1832, Brown captained the *Sabine*, a sloop owned by Edwin Waller that carried the first cotton produced in Gulf Prairie to market from the Brazos River. It was Brown who refused to pay the customs duties imposed by the recently ensconced Mexican garrison at the port of Velasco and instead "ran the blockade" in the first "overt act of resistance to Mexican authority" (Peareson 1900:33). This act was prologue to the Battle of Velasco. Ironically, after the Mexicans were defeated and vacated their fort following the battle, Brown became the customs officer in Velasco. Brown left his duties at the port when his services were required during the Texas Revolution. Robert Calder, who later became sheriff of Brazoria County, brought the news of Santa Anna's surrender to Brown, then at anchor in Galveston harbor. Calder's account, entitled "How the News of San Jacinto Victory was Conveyed to President Burnet [on Galveston Island]," offers a rare glimpse of Brown:

In the harbor were the armed Schooners Independence, Capt.

Hawkins; *Invincible*, Capt. Jere [Jeremiah] Brown; and *Flash*, Capt. Falvel. Also in port was the steamboat *Yellowstone*, which had been brought round from the Brazos to avoid capture by the Mexicans. A few cannon brought from the Brazos [were] mounted...The *Yellowstone*... had brought a number of refugees from the Brazos to Galveston, and had been dispatched up the bay to secure information concerning the Texas army. The messengers had a hard time, the water was rough. They started early in the morning of the fifth day (after the battle), and a few hours rowing brought them alongside the schooner-of-war, *Invincible*, Capt. Jere Brown. Through his speaking trumpet, Brown hailed: "What news?" When I told him, his men literally lifted us on board, and, in the midst of the wildest excitement, Brown took off his hat, gave us three cheers, and threw it as far as he could into the bay. He then shouted to his men: "turn loose Long Tom!" After the guns had been fired three times, he suddenly stopped, and said, "Hold on, boys, or old Hawkins (the commodore) will put me in irons again" [Stuart Papers, Robert Calder account, Box 2, File 2.11].

Three of the vessels mentioned by Calder, the *Invincible*, *Yellowstone*, and *Independence*, hailed from Velasco and their involvement reflects the extent of Velasco's contribution to the war effort.

### TEXAS REPUBLIC PERIOD

Velasco played a significant, if primarily symbolic, role in the formation of the Republic of Texas as the country's first seat of government. On May 14, 1836, following the Battle of San Jacinto, ad interim president David G. Burnet signed a treaty with General Antonio Lopez de Santa Anna from his temporary offices in the town of Velasco. Burnet found that "the entire want of accommodations on the Island Galveston" rendered it necessary to seek some place where ordinary office business could be transacted (Bryan Papers, Box 2Q4523, Vol. II:258), and Velasco was selected for that purpose. Along with Burnet, Secretary of State James Collinworth, Secretary of the Treasury

Bailey Hardeman, Secretary of War Mirabeau B. Lamar, Attorney General P. W. Grayson, and Mexican President Santa Anna, with retinue, sailed to Velasco on the *Independence*. Velasco boasted several boarding houses and two hotels.

General Santa Anna along with several of his officers was held prisoner in Velasco in at least two different locations. Gabriel Nunez Ortega in his diary wrote: "We were given a small house, very dirty and without hope of means of living. In the evening they sent us from a hotel a piece of fried fish, coffee and very ugly bread". [I.C. Hoskins submitted a bill to the Republic of Texas for boarding of the prisoners from May 10 to June 1, 1836, Probate Case] picture of Santa Anna

#### receipt

General Santa Anna and his officers were confident of returning to Mexico after his signing the Treaty of Velasco and had boarded the *Invincible* in anticipation. General Thomas Jefferson Green returning from New Orleans via Galveston in an excerpt from his journal recalled:

June 1, 1836—Arrived at Velasco on board the steamer *Ocean*, in company with the schooner *Pennsylvania* and 230 of my brigade. . . Upon my arrival, I found a large number of the citizens of the country in great excitement about Santa Anna's being sent home to Mexico, he being at that time on board the *Invincible*, in the offing, ready to sail. . . the people of the country believed him faithless, and clamoured violently against his sailing. . .

. . . the next day, he (President Burnet) issued an order to Captain Jeremiah Brown, of the *Invincible*, to bring the prisoner on shore. Santa Anna returned for answer that he would never leave that vessel alive. A second order was issued, and a similar reply provoked. . .

Three o'clock, P. M.—We arrived on board the *Invincible*, where we found the prisoner in a state of extreme agitation, lying in his berth upon his back, alternately raving like a madman and crying like a child; now denying that he had any agency in the massacre at Goliad; anon, threatening

to take his own life sooner than go ashore, to be delivered up. . . The prisoner continued to act this strange part for about two hours; stating meanwhile, that he had largely of opium, and would soon die. . . the prisoner continued lying upon his back in his berth, and his respiration seemed to me exceedingly difficult. After waiting some minutes longer, I called the surgeon of the *Invincible*, and requested him to feel the prisoner's pulse, and report his true situation. He complied with my request, and reported his pulse to be perfectly healthy in it vibrations, when I again intimated to the prisoner the necessity of going ashore. He begged twenty minutes' longer respite; upon which I announced to the captain that it would be necessary to send forward his master-at-arms, and have him ironed without delay. When the irons were brought within his view, the prisoner immediately jumped up, adjusted his collar, put on his hat, and stated his readiness to accompany us. . . I took his arm, desired him to be composed, and conducted him to the captain's gig-boat, into which we descended, in company with Mr. Hardeman, Colonel Almonte, and Captain Brown, and rowed for the shore. . . On reaching the mouth of the Brasos River, Santa Anna took fresh alarm at a body of Texian soldiers and citizens whom he saw collected upon the beach on the Velasco side, and threatened to drown himself if the boat was not pulled over to the western bank. . . We continued our course up the river, passing the schooner *Pennsylvania* and the steamer *Ocean*, from both of which vessels we were cheered. Landing at Quintana, upon the western bank, we met President Burnet, and surrendered the prisoner to him. . .

It was now near night, and having ordered my cabin on board the steamer to be put in readiness for the reception of the prisoner, we continued to walk until our supper was announced. . .

At half past six our supper was served. . . It consisted of an abundance of good beefsteaks and

gravy, served in a bright tin pan, with good bread, and, what was remarkable in this stage of our Revolution, a knife and fork each. The tin pan was set upon a narrow bench, and my august guest and myself straddled said bench—inward face!--with our knees touching, we cutting, sopping, and eating a bountiful meal out of said tin pan! . . . [Green 1845: 484-486]

general order no5 copy

General Green would leave shortly and a force under Captain William Patton took charge of the prisoners. Patton transferred them to Velasco on June 9. Later D. Ramon Martinez Caro Secretary to General Santa Anna described being held "in the second story of a house whose first floor was a restaurant." [Casteneda 1928: ?] This was after June 1<sup>st</sup> and we do not have a subsequent bill from Hoskins but there is the possibility that this is the Brown - Hoskins Tavern. Patton moved the prisoners once again on June 15, 1836 upriver to his plantation near Columbia.

Although later declared void by the Mexican government, the Treaty of Velasco effectively ended the hostilities between Mexico and Texas. Also, because the treaty was signed at Velasco, the town enjoyed the status of being the "first capital," although it was never recognized as such.

Unfortunately, there are no surviving descriptions of the building that served as the first seat of government at Velasco. The only known reference to government offices in Velasco was recorded by a Captain Postlethwaite, who mentioned that he returned to his hotel after meeting with President Burnet at his offices at Velasco, "the seat of Government," on or about July 12, 1836 (Bryan Papers, Box 2Q452, Vol. II:282). Which hotel and whether it also served as "the seat of government" is unknown.

In mid-July Lieutenant Colonel Henry Millard, commander of the regiment of regular infantry, and other officers attempted to arrest and depose President Burnet for his "crime" of failing to provide adequately for the army's needs. The plot failed because of the refusal of Amasa Turner, captain of the regular company stationed there, to carry out Colonel Millard's order to arrest Brunet.

The status of the garrison at Velasco for a couple of months after the arrest attempt is uncertain. In September, after the elections for the first constitutional government of the Republic had been held, Captain Martin K. Snell's<sup>4</sup> Company E, First Infantry moved to Velasco from Brazoria.

After the seat of government was transferred to Columbia, affairs at Post Velasco were mostly routine. The usual garrison at the post seems to have been one company, normally three officers and 56 men. The unpaid, underfed and badly clothed soldiers under Snell's command became unruly in March, 1837. Captain Snell accosted Lieutenant James T. Sprowl outside a Velasco billiard hall and grog shop owned by H. N. Wolcott (Block 11), where he had gone without permission:

Criminal Case 23  
 Republic of Texas  
 vs.  
 Captain Martin K. Snell

Port of Velasco March 25, 1837  
 Testimony of Capt. James T. Boylan

. . .he was standing in the street near the end of the store of Wolcott and Moore 24<sup>th</sup>—with Capt. Thompson and Capt. Snell and Capt. Snell asked the witness if he would hear an order he was going to give to Lt. Sprowl we went in front of the house Capt. Snell asked Ser Ferguson if he would as Lt. Sprowl to come out of the house he done so whereupon Sprowl came out to where were was Snell asked Sprowl if he had executed the order he had given him Sprowl answered he had not but was looking about to see if he could find the men that he was ordered to arrest. Capt. Snell asked Sprowl if detailed the five men that he had ordered him to do he Sprowl said that Snell had ordered him to go by himself. Snell told that he had ordered him to detail five men and to go then and get

them Sprowl said he would not that he was not a corporal he Sprowl asked Snell what he meant if intended to trifle with him. Snell said no but he intended to arrest him Sprowl then struck Snell with his right hand and knock him down and got on Snell with his knees on his breast and his hands about his neck witness states that Snell called for assistance and he the witness took Sprowl off Snell Sprowl at the same time had taken Snell's sword from him and after being separated and some distance apart Sprowl make a jab at Snell with the sword and in coming together Snell fell and Sprowl over him as an \_\_\_\_Snell then called for some person to take the large man off him witness states he took Sprowl by the arm and told him to get up and let Snell alone he Sprowl got up and asked to witness what he mean Sprowl then walked off behind witness while Capt. Snell was in front of the witness after Sprowl had gone behind witness he saw Snell with a pistol pointed towards where the witness was and also Sprowl instantly the pistol fired witness turned his head and saw Sprowl fall and an examination found Sprowl was shot in the head further witness does not state.

(Criminal Case 23, 5 testimonies given, Capt. James T. Boylan, Serg. Lewis Ferguson, James McKnight, Stephen Lynch, and Jared Barton, Brazoria County Court House, Angleton, Texas).

Snell was relieved of command; he was tried and though found not guilty, did not return to Post Velasco. He was succeeded by Captain Adam Clendenin of the First Artillery.

An intriguing article in the *Velasco Herald* of April 21, 1837, reads, "Glorious News!!! The celebration of the first anniversary of the victory at San Jacinto was got up in a very interesting style by the officers and soldiers of this post" (Streeter Collection, Reel 3, Item 224). This reference implies that soldiers were still being billeted at Velasco a year after the war, probably at a Texas Republic fort distinct from the ruined Mexican fort of 1832. The continued military presence at Velasco would explain some of the population increase, and possibly some soldiers bought land in the

<sup>4</sup> Martin K. Snell private in the New Orleans Greys fought at the siege of Bexar and San Jacinto. He commanded a detachment of the First Texas Infantry honor guard at the funeral of Stephen F. Austin [Dixon and Kemp: 105] In 1857 he was the proprietor of the Caldwell Hotel, Caldwell, Texas. Later he was killed in Hempstead, Texas.

town. Several veterans of San Jacinto and Bexar, such as Robert Calder, Henry Parker, and John Sharp, remained in Velasco and became actively involved in the town's development. It is also likely that the post celebration was supported in some way by the Velasco Association, which took advantage of every special occasion to promote its land sales.

Velasco was becoming a significant port during this same period, although some reports revealed its precarious coastal position and shallow bar, possibly foretelling its downfall. For instance, in the *Cincinnati Daily Gazette*, December 8, 1836:2-1, the schooner *Flora* was reported totally lost on the breakers at the mouth of the Brazos on November 16, 1836. The article went on to say that it was only through luck that Captain Appleman, the passengers, and crew reached the shore in safety. Although damaged, the valuable cargo of dry goods and provisions was salvaged. Also in the same edition, the *Gazette* recounted the destruction of McKinney and William's steamboat *Ocean* on a snag. The boat was uninsured and all was lost (Bryan Papers box 2Q452, Vol II:278, *Cincinnati Daily Gazette*, December 8, 1836:2-1.)

Early in 1837 William Fairfax Grey arrived at Velasco recording his harrowing experience in crossing the bar at the mouth of the Brazos, February 21, 1837:

...After standing off and on for some time, the Captain concluded he had passed the Brazos, and put back. About 4 o'clock we descried the houses of Velasco and Quintana, and shortly after we were off the mouth of the river. The wind set strongly on shore, the surf ran high, with a great noise, and we now knew that it was these same breakers we had heard at daybreak, having been off the mouth of the Brazos. The Captain concluded that the pilots could not come out, and determined to run in without one. He mistook the pass, and ran his vessel on the bar, where she thumped awfully. The squaresail sheet parted and the sail fell on the deck, the jib sheet also parted, the vessel rolled on the bar, broached to, and several swells

dashed over her broadside and was near sweeping the decks before the mainsail could be lowered. It was an awful moment; the Captain himself quailed, and the boldest held his breath for many others had been before. The wreck of the *Flora*, of Middleton, lay a few hundred yards from us, having foundered on the same bar a few months before. By great exertion the mainsail was lowered, she obeyed the flying jib, and again got before the wind, and after a few more shakes which made her crack, she passed over the bar, and we floated under easy sail into the Brazos, passed Velasco, and rounded to at Quintana at sunset....[Gray 1965: 209].

Another immigrant to Texas at this time was Henry C. Wilcox. The following letter of Henry C. Wilcox to his parents following his arrival in Velasco in 1837 on file at the Brazoria County Historical Museum Library:

Velasco, July 18<sup>th</sup>, 1837

Kind and Affectionate Parents:

Seated in my tent I improve this opportunity to inform you that our health is remarkably good at present. We landed at Velasco on the 11<sup>th</sup> inst. but I did not get all my goods & provisions on shore until this morning...

...He anchored outside the bar at the Port of Velasco & refused to land our goods until compelled by the passengers. We arrived before Velasco on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of July & I went on shore in a jolty boat with three sailors & the Captain. There is a terrible surf on the Coast of Velasco at this season of the year, owing to the periodical winds blowing directly on shore. I was the first person that set foot on shore from the *Belvidere* & I received much praise for my presence of mind for the sailors were very much frightened & I assure you I was very thankful to get my feet once more on Tera Firma.

The 9<sup>th</sup> of July will be a day long to be remembered by all the passengers of the Brig *Belvidere*. The yawl-boat started for the shore with Mrs. Rawley & her daughter, Mrs. Ward & her father and infant child. The vessel lay about one mile from shore & when they had

gotton one-half that distance the breakers became rough & Mrs. Ward lost her presence of mind & sprang up & stumbled against Mrs. Rawley which caused one of the sailor's oars to catch the boat & the passengers were all drowned.

...the morals of the country are not as good as I wish they were. There have been several murders committed before we arrived & there was a duel fought within 2 rods of our tent & one of the parties was shot thru the breast. He lived a short time & died uttering the most fearful curses...

One of the murders mentioned may be the court martial of Joseph McFifers for the murder of ? Lee aboard the schooner *Pennsylvania* on the night of June 4, 1836. The two men in a state of intoxication had scuffled until McFifers struck Lee twice in the face and then took out his Bowie knife and stabbed him (Thomas Jefferson Green Papers). More likely the murders in reference took place in 1837. Francis Adams was shot by Robert Hodge in the house where they both lived in Velasco March 11, 1837 (Testimony was not on microfilm due to the poor quality of the original documents, Criminal Case 4, Brazoria County Courthouse, Angleton, Texas). On March 24, 1837, Captain Martin K Snell killed Sergeant Sprowl (previously discussed). James McHenry was shot by Moorehouse Hill in Hill's store in Velasco June 15, 1837. Testimony by Thomas P. Crosby states that he heard Hill shout ...get out of my house, you are a thief... before the fatal shot.(Criminal Case 24, Brazoria County Courthouse, Angleton, Texas).

The duel took place on the beach at Velasco, July 18, 1837 between Lt. William Redfield and Dr.Alexander Lynch, both of the Texas Army.

Criminal Case 30  
Republic of Texas  
vs.  
Lieutenant William Redfield

Testimony of Joseph Calahan...Lt. Redfield...threatened to pull Dr. Lynch's nose...Lt. Redfield stated that Dr. Lynch was inattentive to his duty

and there had been five men died for want of his attention...

Lt. Redfield suggested that they go down to the beach and settle their differences. Dr. Lynch replied that he would only upon a formal challenge. Lt. Redfield asked Captain Clendenin (Captain Adam Clendenin of the First Artillery was dishonorably dismissed from the army for allowing the duel to take place.) to be his second and they drew up a written formal challenge which was delivered to M. Washington, Dr. Lynch's second.

Testimony of Franklin C. Gray...he went on the Beach at the Place or within twenty paces of where the fight took place at Velasco on the morning of the 18<sup>th</sup> Inst. On his arrival there he saw Wm. Redfield and Alexander Lynch occupying their stands about ten Paces Distant he further states that he saw the pistols placed in their hands by their seconds they then discharged their pistols at each other and Alexander Lynch fell he further states that he saw Dr. Lynch afterwards and saw that the Ball had taken effect by entering the right side...

Testimony of Robert D. Moore ...morning of the 18<sup>th</sup> he saw Dr. Lynch Wm Redfield in company with several others pass his house going down to the beach After their passing Jas Sovereign came to his house and stated there was going to be a Duel between Doctr Lynch and Lieut Redfield he then states that he saw them on the beach through the spy glass from his gallery that he saw Capt. Clendenin and I M U Washington sitting on a log on the Beach each one of them to appearance loading a Pistol he further states that he saw Doctr Lynch standing on the Beach but could not see Lieut Redfield he occupying a position behind the crowd of spectators he further states that Washington hand Doctr Lynch a Pistol and in a few minutes he heard the report of the Pistols but did not see who was shot until they came of the ground he further states that he saw the wound which Doctr Lynch received being in



Representatives, and the following year he won election to the Senate of the Second Congress, but his seat was declared vacant after the session opened. Thomas J. Green and his brother Charles P. Green operated under the partnership of C. P. Green & Company.

John Sharp immigrated to Texas in 1835 and participated in the siege of Bexar and the Battle of San Jacinto (Webb 1952:II:597). He moved to Velasco after the war, where he married Sarah Jane Wharton Calvit (daughter of Alexander and Barbara Calvit owners of Evergreen Plantation and neighbors of the Wharton's at Eagle Island Plantation) on February 10, 1836. John Sharp operated under the partnership of Sharp & Company whose silent partner was John A. Wharton until his death. Wharton owned 1/3 *league* of land just upriver from the Mitchell *labor* while Fredrick J. Calvit (brother of Alexander Calvit) owned 1 *league* just east of the Mitchel *labor* to the bank of Oyster Creek and reaching the Gulf.

Edwin Waller and Thomas G. Masterson operated under the firm of Waller & Masterson.

Branch T. Archer was the private physician of the Wharton's and become a life long friend of Thomas J. Green. With Giles M. Stone the partnership of Archer & Stone primarily tried to promote the Archer *league*, land on the east side of Oyster Creek with frontage along the Gulf.

#### Map

Because Brazoria County deed records begin with the establishment of the county, no deeds are recorded in the County Clerk's office that predate the creation of the county. Therefore, details about the operation of the Velasco Association and its acquisition of Asa Mitchell's property remain unknown. For instance, there is no deed record which specifically transferred the land from Mitchell to the association, although there are a number of transactions in which Mitchell or subsequent owners transferred interests, usually in eighths or sixteenths, in the town of Velasco to individuals known to have been members of the association.

From Holley's 1835 drawings, narratives by Holley and others (e. g., Parker, Fiske, Austin and Duval), and newspaper accounts, it is well known that property within Mitchell's *labor* was developed by 1835, prior to the establishment of the county and the recording of deeds. It is probable that some of the deeds merely formalized earlier transactions made by "gentleman's agreement"—particularly those lots on which buildings were already constructed. Too, the Velasco Association may not have been as active as its initial notices suggested following the ravages of the cholera epidemic of 1833 and the uncertainties of the revolution.

There is evidence that the town of Velasco was already laid out—certainly town lots were sold and buildings constructed—before William H. Hunt<sup>6</sup> surveyed the town and drew what became the official map of Velasco, early in 1837 ( Brazoria County Deed Record A:302). Again, the Hunt map may have been an effort to legitimize or legalize land sales that had occurred before the Republic was established. In a letter to her daughter, Harriette Brand, Mary Austin Holley discussed the need to reaffirm claims to land granted under the Spanish and Mexican governments after the establishment of the Republic (Hatcher 1933:73). The Brazoria County Board of Land Commissioners first convened on January 11, 1838, to inspect property surveys, ascertain citizenship, and verify land claims following the demise of the Mexican system (Brazoria County Deed Records, Minutes of the Board of Land Commissioners, January 11, 1838). The flurry of real estate transactions that took place in 1837 and 1838, whether an effort to legalize existing deeds or as a refection of actual lot sales, indicates the interest and excitement Velasco citizens invested in their town during a very short period of time—from about March 1837 until economic conditions dampened their spirits at the end of the decade.

During the last month of 1836 John A. Wharton and William H. Wharton began to sell interest in the town of Velasco. James Gholson and William W. Grathney each bought 1/16<sup>th</sup> of the town of Velasco for

<sup>6</sup> Hunt was the County Surveyor in 1837, 1838, and 1839, with his assistant during that period O. Rowley being the County Surveyor from June 3, 1840, until May 1842. O Rowley made a town plat of Quintana during 1837, which was used by the Bryan family to divide Quintana town lots among their family.

\$1200 each. In March C. P. Green purchased 1/16<sup>th</sup> and by mid-March he and Thomas J. Green were in New York City buying merchandise for their partnership, C. P. Green & Co., and promoting Texas and Velasco. Samuel Swartwout wrote to his friend and business associate Colonel James Morgan of Texas:

...Genl. Green and his brother are here-He has purchased the fine Charleston Boat of 500 tons. For 60,000 Dollars to ply between N. Orleans & the Brazos, touching at Galveston. . .Green will leave here with the Steam boat abt. the 10<sup>th</sup> of April..  
[Bass and Brunson 1978:37-38]

It was on this trip that the Green brothers probably had the P. A. Mesier Lithograph made of the city of Velasco in order to promote their business dealings which included dry good sales in Nashville, Tennessee and Velasco.

bills from new york

In the absence of the William H. Hunt plat map, which is not on file with the Brazoria County Clerk or the County Surveyor and has not been located by historians, the most important map of Velasco during the Texas Republic period is the Mesier Co. Lithograph of the City of Velasco printed in New York in March 22, 1837 (Streeter Collection, Reel 26, Item 1283). This promotional map was most likely drawn from the William H. Hunt town plat map, referenced in numerous Velasco deeds beginning July 18, 1837 (e.g., Brazoria County Deed Record A:302). The purpose of the lithograph was to promote lot sales and further advance the investment schemes of the Velasco Association within the United States and abroad.

Lithograph

To a certain extent, such promotions worked. From a settlement of about 20 souls in 1832—a number that was reduced by nearly half in the cholera epidemic the following year—the Velasco of 1837 had every indication of becoming a bustling seaport about to become a fierce competitor for shipping and commercial trade.

Velasco's prospects were intimately tied to its location at the mouth of the Brazos on the Gulf of Mexico. While the year 1837 appears to have been the height of land sales and building activity in Velasco, it also seems to have been a bellwether year for sea trade. The years immediately following Texas independence were generally favorable ones for Velasco, with an average of 425 people arriving at the ports of Quintana and Velasco each year in 1837, 1838 and 1839 (Ward 1962:463). An average of 36 vessels per year entered the port of Velasco during the 9 years of the Texas Republic, with the most, 85 ships, arriving in 1838. Of these 85 ships, 35 sailed from New Orleans and 27 originated in Galveston, Until 1841, when commerce began with Liverpool, England, all foreign ships visiting the mouth of the Brazos were American (Ward 1962:462). Despite its auspicious beginnings following the establishment of the Republic, the number of vessels entering the port at Velasco dropped off dramatically after 1839. The reasons are both complex and vague, but Velasco's decline was not for lack of trying by its promoters.

During the postwar period, the Velasco Association continuously lobbied for the customs house to remain in Velasco instead of moving to Quintana. To forestall the removal of the customs office to its rival across the Brazos, the association donated Lot 1 in Block 14 property owned by Captain Jeremiah Brown for

the purpose of building a custom office, which has been completed by order of the collector [Jeremiah Brown] – I am authorized to inform your department that storage houses are nearly complete and will be so in ten days for the purpose of any custom storage belonging to this collection district, which houses will be furnished by the government free of charge whatever for the above purposes [Thomas J. Green to Henry Smith, August 1, 1837, in Connor et. Al. 1955:I:47-48].

Despite Green's efforts, Quintana merchant Thomas McKinney managed to have the customs house moved across the river, nearer his warehouse, for a short period of time between 1837 and 1839. McKinney's

report to Henry Smith included construction details of the customs house he had already erected on the Quintana side of the river. The carpenter's specifications reveal design and construction practices that should be applicable to similar structures built in Velasco during the late 1830's. In a letter to McKinney and Williams, Jeremiah Brown, appointed customs collector at Velasco by President Sam Houston May 19, 1837, approved the lot in the town of Quintana and instructed McKinney to

please proceed to have a Custom House built on Block 16 in the town of Quintana of the following dimensions {sic} viz: Thirty feet wide and fifty feet long more or less one or two stories high as you may think proper, with an office apartment. You will be governed by the strictest economy in purchasing the lumber, and contracting for the building of the house, for the payment of you are hereby authorized to draw on the Collector of Customs of this port for any money in the office, or due the Government on duties on goods introduced into this port which drafts shall be duly honored (signed Jere{miah} Brown, Collector) [Texas Treasury Papers, Brown to McKinney & Williams, July 6, 1837].

According to McKinney, upon Brown's authorization, he contracted with H. B. Gilley to build the structure

in the town of Quintana wherever McKinney & Williams may desire. They furnishing the lumber for the same a framed house sixty by thirty feet, two stories high with a plain stair case running up the N. West corner and with partitions making the upper floor into three rooms and the lower room with one. Said House to be framed weatherboarded and covered with ten windows filled with glass and blind shutters and thirteen windows filled with glass in the upper story said windows to be eighteen light windows Ten by Twelve Glass with a Batton door to each room and three outside doors Six Feet wide with lined Shutters. The upper floor to be augured and the lower floor to be square jointed and rough.

There shall be a good trough on each side and said McKinney and Williams Shall pay to the Gilley Eighteen hundred and fifty dollars for the work of Building Said House (signed 25<sup>th</sup> July 1837) [Texas Treasury Papers, File 9, "Custom House Building Plans 1837-1838 Quintana"].

From subsequent correspondence and other sources, it appears that Brown moved some of the customs office appurtenances to Quintana but retained an office in Velasco as well. He appointed I. C. Hoskins as deputy collector, George J. Johnston as chief clerk, and Charles Pitt as permanent inspector [Ward: 1962, 424-425]. The rivalry between Quintana and Velasco continued after Jeremiah Brown's death in September 1838.

Most, if not all, of those involved in the promotion of Velasco also owned interests in the town. It is difficult to assess the true value of property in Velasco at that time, but according to 1837 tax records, certain individual owned considerably more property and more-valuable property than others. For instance, W. H. Wharton held an undisclosed interest in Velasco John A. Wharton's interest in the town was valued at \$7,500, M. Williams's interest amounted to half that of Wharton, H. N. Walcott owned a town lot worth \$1,200 and had a bar license, worth \$100, John Sharp owned a lot worth \$2626, F. A. Sawyer had 3 lots worth \$1,500, R. D. Moore owned 3 lots in Velasco worth \$2,000, McKinney and Williams declared 10 lots worth \$1,500, John Little owned a lot valued at \$300, W. H. Jack's 6 lots were worth \$1,000, while I. C. Hoskins's 2 lots (probably his American Hotel and the Velasco Exchange on the riverfront) were valued at \$9,500. Hoskins also owned tavern and bar licenses worth \$100 apiece. F. J. Haskins owned four lots valued at \$2,300, Thomas Jefferson Green's interest in Velasco was valued at \$17,561, and the firm of Archer and Stone interest in the town amounted to \$6,000. J. Golhson's interest in Velasco amounted to \$3,000, but James P. Caldwell's four lots were claimed to be worth only \$300, and A. Clearside had one lot worth only \$75 (Brazoria County Tax Rolls 1837). Property values probably reflected the locations of lots and whether or not they were improved.

In the midst of its revival, Velasco was struck by a formidable hurricane known as the Racer's storm on about October 3, 1837. The storm was first sighted off the coast of Haiti by the *HMS Racer*, for which it was named, before it hit the southern tip of the Texas coast, Racer's storm crossed into the Atlantic and sped up the eastern seaboard wreaking havoc until it finally went out to sea off New York on the 6<sup>th</sup> of October (Bryan 1965:104). Although it must have been an extraordinarily destructive storm for it blew away all the houses on Galveston Island and sent flood waters fifteen or twenty miles inland there is little evidence that it seriously jeopardized Velasco's development plans. James Morgan wrote encouragingly to Samuel Swartwout, who had purchased town lots from Thomas J. Green in Velasco:

Dec. 21, 1837

...Velasco, I think was benefited by the great gale in as much as there was not a general overflowing of this place & there was at Galveston or nearly so--It has strengthened confidence in the friends of Velasco & from the local advantages that place promises, it must go ahead—I am strongly inclined to the opinion that it will be the seat of Govt. at some day... [Bass and Brunson 1978:57]

Mary Austin Holley alluded to the storm in a letter to her daughter the following spring, claiming that "the severe winter prostrated all energies," but she went onto say that planned projects were "beginning to revive" (Holley to Brand, February 21, 1838, in Hatcher 1933:73.). The major project for the Velasco Association at this time was the promotion of their newly constructed Archer House, the first class hotel they had several years previous tried to have contracted.

As in previous years, the Velasco Association continued to promote the town with a grand balls and gala celebrations. On January 11, 1838, "Branch T. Archer and others" sent invitations for the "Velasco Anniversary and Association Balls" to be held at the Archer House in Velasco. The invitations were sent to notables across the land, including the president and vice-president of the Republic, and were signed by the 30 "managers" of the association, most of whom

were well known throughout Texas.. In the Mirabeau Lamar Papers is his personal invitation from the Velasco Association:

The pleasure of your company is respectfully solicited to the Anniversary Ball, Washington's Birth Day, on the 22d, and an Association Ball on the 23d of February next, at the "Archer House" Velasco, January 11, 1838.

MANAGERS

B.T. Archer	A.S. Johnson
W.H. Wharton	F.A. Sawyer
T.J. Green	A. Thruston
James Collinsworth	R.E. Handy
Thos. F. M'Kinney	Henry Austin
Patrick H. Jack	Thos. Wm. Ward
Jeremiah Brown	Wm. S. Fisher
Edwin Waller	M.B. Lamar
Felix Huston	T.J. Rusk
J.A. Wharton	Henry Smith
W.D.C. Hall	W.W. Gwathney
M. Baker	G. M. Stone
Anson Jones	C.L. Durocher
John Sharp	I.W. Burton
W.G. Hill	S.R. Fisher

Not all of those listed under managers were actually members of the Velasco Association but were honorary members. Using the names of influential personages was a promotional technique often used by the association and often attracted families and investors throughout the country. Mary Austin Holley was visiting the Perry family during her third trip to Texas during this same period. She detailed her plans to attend the event in a letter to her daughter, Harriette:

There is to be a great Ball at Velasco tomorrow [February 22, 1838] night—being the period of the races. All the world, who can move, wind & weather permitting are to be there. It rains to day, however. We are going .....in a small covered wagon (without spring seats)..to Quintana—on this side of the river--& stop with our bandboxes, at Mrs. McKinney's. Everything available for dresses in Texas has been bought up for the occasion. Confectionery & ornaments &c&c are to be brought by the Columbia from N Orleans. The gentlemen dress remarkably well—The clothes being

all brought from N York ready made & of the newest fashions. I expect it will be a great occasion one at least I have never seen. The steamboat plying constantly on the Brazos, will fetch and carry the people. They have only to ride to some convenient landing to embark [Holley to Brand, February 21, 1838, in Hatcher 1933:73].

Mary Austin Holley attended the Ball February 22 & 23, 1838 recording her evenings in her diary:

22<sup>nd</sup>

Thursday

Pleasant. Went to Quintana in the wagon—E.—H.—, Mrs. Perry, J. Bryan & myself stopped at Mrs. McKinney's. Met there Mr. St. John & Mr. N. Williams. Ball at Velasco this evening—Went over in a skiff after dark. Returned at midnight—Quite a genteel ball. The first opening of the new house which is in the form of an L – being a long room with wings—one for dancing, the other for supper—at which the ladies, 60 in number, were seated. Supper handsome—dressed cakes & sugar pyramids—other confectionary, oranges brought from N Orleans—much order & taste. The rooms new & painted white, have a neat appearance. The ball room was brilliantly lighted by rows of sperm candles over the doors, windows & all round. Mirrors were ranged at each end under which were hair sofas. Round the ceiling were flags festooned displaying the Texas Star, which also waved from the centre cake on the supper table. Had the music of 2 violins mingled with the roar of the sea, upon which you look from the gallery of the house.

23<sup>rd</sup>

The young ladies returned home after they left Mr. McKenny & the rest determined to attend another ball at the same place this evening. I accompanied them—with Judge & Mrs. Franklin & Miss McConnel. The ball was much the same thing but pleasanter. A piano was in the room,

upon which I, very glad to see one, played for the waltzes. Mrs. Wharton invited me to return home with her tomorrow[Holley 1965:60].

Another who seems to have attended the balls at this time was R. J. Clow. From Jeremiah Brown's Probate Case #39 a bill from R. J. Clow gives a little more information about the cost of the evening. The ball tickets and other bills are from the Brown-Hoskins Tavern.

BILL

Based upon the report of the secretary of the Velasco Jockey Club they also had commemorated President Washington's birthday with a race on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of February.

Secretary's report copyyy

This series of gala events seemed to produce the desired effect for members of the Velasco Association since Thomas Jefferson Green, President of the Velasco Association, sold the Archer House to A. E. C. Johnson and Samuel Early for \$16,000 February 24, 1838. This was by far the most expensive piece of property sold by the Association. Johnson and Early immediately went to work trying to promote their enterprise. Along with an advertisement for horse races at the New Market Course at Velasco.(Located in the big bend of the Brazos just above the mouth of the old river in what is now Dow Chemical Plant A) is their add in *The People*, April 18, 1838:

### VELASCO RACES

The spring meeting over the New Market course, Velasco, (Texas) will come off in the first week in May, with the following Purses, viz:

#### FIRST DAY

Monday—Match Race between Col. Hall's Jack the Devil, and Col. Moore's Tallahassee, for 6000 DOLLARS.

#### SECOND DAY

Tuesday—Jockey Club Purse \$300, two mile heats. Entrance \$50.

#### THIRD DAY

Wednesday—Jockey Club plate, value \$200; best three in five. Entrance \$30.

#### FOURTH DAY

Thursday—Jockey Club Purse \$400;  
three heats. Entrance \$50.

**FIFTH DAY**

Friday—A Brilliant, valued at \$600;  
two mile heats. Entrance  
\$100.

**SIXTH DAY**

Saturday—Handy Cap Purse \$200;  
mile heats. Entrance \$30.....

The undersigned proprietors having purchased the "Archer House," are refitting it in the most costly style, and from the handsome manner in which the experiment meeting of the 21<sup>st</sup> February passed off, they have the fullest assurance that the coming one will challenge the most fashionable "fetes" in much older countries.

A new course will be complete in a few days within the circle of the Brazos, unsurpassed in natural beauty and arrangement by any upon the continent; and steam boats will be in readiness at the lower wharves to convey passengers to the course, one mile up the river.

The members of the club will be furnished by the proprietors with badges of membership, and all members will be entitled to enter for the purse at \$10 less than non subscribers, and have free access to the course.

On Monday, Wednesday, & Friday evenings, will be furnished splendid Balls at their Drawing Rooms, one of the proprietors having gone to New Orleans at present to complete the arrangement for the same.

On the evening of the second day's race, at 4 o'clock, the proprietors have given \$100 for a splendid "Regatta," to come off under the superintendance of a committee of sea captains. The starting place. Brownsville, upon the Brazos, and the gaol at the "Velasco Hotel." Entrance \$10.

The ladies may have a splendid view of this fete from the Archer House Observatory.

The proprietors are determined that nothing shall be wanting on their part to complete the most splendid and refined amusement, and they have the greater assurance of realizing more than public expectation, when assisted by nearly all the prominent gentlemen of this republic; for in

this, all concerned, feel that they do more towards elevating the moral character and dignity of this young people than—any other gain—the most lucky may enjoy.

Johnson & Early  
Proprietors

An additional ball was planned by the Velasco Association for July 4, 1838:

**Banner**

Such events delighted the populace and helped foster interest in the town, but an ominous cloud from the south seemed to always linger. United States naval ships occasionally stopped at Velasco and brought intelligence of the Mexican squadron plying the Gulf of Mexico. Even if just a rumor, the vulnerability of Velasco was exposed. As chairman of the Committee of Vigilance and Safety of Velasco, Thomas J. Green requested of Bernard E. Bee, Secretary of War, a supply of arms to fortify the town in March, 1838 and Jeremiah Brown at the time customs collector for the port requested of George W. Wheelwright, Commander of the Texas Navy, assistance in obtaining a 32 pound cannon from the Galveston [Thomas Jefferson Green Papers]:

two documents

A short reply to their requests from the War Department in Houston giving the usual governmental red tape as excuse provided no assistance and luckily the Mexican squadron did not make an appearance.

Due to its increased population and activity, Velasco was made an official county precinct, along with the settlements of Brazoria, Columbia (West Columbia), Marion (East Columbia), Quintana, and Liverpool, in October 1838.

In addition to the business and social activities of the association, the group also promoted the education of community at this early date:

**VELASCO FEMALE ACADEMY**

The Trustees of this Institution have the satisfaction of informing the public that the Misses WARNERS, (late of New York,) have taken charge of this Institution, and the regular semi-annual session commenced on the 2<sup>nd</sup> day of January last.

⇒Young ladies and boys under 12 years of age, will be instructed in the following branches, viz:

ORTHOGRAPHY	ARITHMATIC
READING	GRAMMER
WRITING	GEOGRAPHY

(with use of the Globes)

HISTORY, NATURAL PHILOSOPHY, RHETORIC, CHRONOLOGY & BOTANY.

TERMS-\$5 per month, payable quarterly

⇒Fancy Needle Work, Drawing, Music, the French and Italian Languages will be taught, and for which an extra charge will be made.

⇒BOARDING can be obtained in private families.

The health of this place being so well established, and this Institution being so liberally endowed by private subscription, and the Velasco Association, the Trustees confidently anticipate that it will prove one of the first Academies in the Republic.

#### TRUSTEES

Branch T. Archer	Thomas J. Green
M. B. Lamar	Andrew Churchill
Bernard E. Bee	Edwin Waller
Wm. H. Wharton	John Sharp
J. C. Hoskins	H. N. Wolcott
Jeremiah Brown	John A. Wharton

FLEMING T. WELLS.

Velasco, Feb. 8, 1838 [*The People*, April 18, 1838]

In 1838, Velasco was apparently at the height of its sea trade and on its way to becoming a thriving commercial and shipping center at the mouth of the Brazos River. According to the Texas Treasury Papers, 85 ships visited Velasco's port in 1838 (Ward 1962:462). John Sharp, now a merchant as well as a Velasco Association manager, advertised the port and its "splendid steamship *Newcastle* to run regularly between Velasco and Mobile," while docking at Velasco "from the 8<sup>th</sup> to the 10<sup>th</sup> of each month and again from the 20<sup>th</sup> to the 22<sup>nd</sup>." Sharp pronounced the vessel, captained by E. Murray, to be, "one of the best sea boats on Southern waters" (Stuart Papers, Box 3, File 2.3).

Based upon deed transactions Thomas Jefferson Green was the President of the Velasco Association from August 1837 through August 1838. Edwin Waller was then elected President of the Velasco and Calvit League Association with the first deed bearing his signature in September 1838. The Calvit

*league* was adjacent to Asa Mitchell's *labor* and seems to be an expansion in the ambitious plans of the local entrepreneurs. Ambrose Crane from St. Marks, Florida (General T. J. Green had immigrated to Texas from St. Marks, Florida, and probably had an influence on Ambrose Crane and his family coming to Velasco) was elected president in October 1839, and issued deeds from November 1839 until October 1840 at which time the association essentially ceased to function.

Early in 1839 Thomas Jefferson Green owned several race horses. Letters from Branch T. Archer and Green to Ashbel Smith indicate their enthusiasm for the sport:

Velasco, Feb 17, 1839

My Dear Dr.

Our spring meeting of the Jockey Club commences on the 29<sup>th</sup> inst—I write you to come to see us on that occasion—our house is yours—Many fine women & horses are in attendance all ready—Be sure to come. Dr. Archer & myself will be certain to expect you—

Your friend truly  
Thos. J. Green

Velasco, Feby 19, 1839

[] Friend

We shall have one week of racing and frolic in this town (commencing on the twentieth of next month) and Genl Green, and myself are keeping first rate bachelors quarters. Enough to say, we shall be extremely happy to have you with us, during the sports of the week. You shall have a bed, a plate, and a stall for your horse—which is enough for a bachelor. Though, if we have other comforts, you shall divide equally

I will assure you a display of fashion and beauty; you may find a wife among our girls.

Respectfully your Friend & Svt  
B.T. Archer

General Green enjoyed success on the racing circuit during 1839:

Winning horses in 1839 at *two mile heats*:

“Coloradian” [Colorado] owned by Gen. Thomas J. Green, prize 250 p., wt 73 lb., beat “Milam” at Houston, Texas , on April 17, 1839. “Coloradian” listed as a 3 year old.

“Colorado” owned by General Thomas J. Green, 3 years old, (prize 400 p., wt. 83. Beat “Kleber” in the time of 3:55-3:56 at Velasco, Texas on April 30, 1839.

“Colorado” owned by General Thomas J. Green, prize 2900s. (?), 97lb. wt., time 4:17-4:12-4:19, beat “Sam Houston” at Galveston, Texas on December 24, 1839 [racing journal *Spirit of the Times*, April 4, 1840].

In June 1839, Peter and Mary MacGreal purchased the Archer House due to financial difficulties of the previous owners. They began to advertise their hotel and the opening of a stage line between Velasco and Galveston:

### ARCHER HOUSE VELASCO

THE public are respectfully informed that the Hotel is now open for the accommodation of boarders.

Families and persons desirous of spending the summer months on the sea shore, will find the situation of the “Archer House” not surpassed by any on the Gulf of Mexico – being but three hundred yards from the sea beach, which affords most delightful bathing.

Travelers will find an excellent STABLE, and well supplied with corn and hay.

Every attention will be paid to the comfort and accommodation of visitors.

#### RATES OF BOARD

\$37.50 per month

10.50 per week     Current money

2.00 per day

The above are the charges for board since the opening of the “Archer House” under the control of the subscriber; and any person who has represented the charges as being greater have *knowingly, wilfully, and maliciously lied.*

PETER MACGREAL

Velasco, July 30, 1838 [*Brazos Courier*, December 3, 1839]

### Velasco & Galveston Stage

THE public are respectfully informed that a Stage will be ready at all times to carry passengers from the Brazos to St. Louis or “West End Galveston”.

The stage will leave Velasco with passengers going on the steam packets, and be at St. Louis on the arrival of the packets, to carry passengers from Galveston to Velasco.

Travelers and persons destined for the City of Austin, (new seat of government) will find this route shorter and speedier than from any other point on the Gulf. Beside the advantage of seeing the richest and finest portion of Texas, Travelers will on the Brazos greater facilities for visiting any part of the interior.

PETER MACGREAL

Velasco, Sept. 10, 1839 [*Brazos Courier*, December 3, 1839]

Velasco’s construction and commercial boom continued into 1839, but Galveston, whose leaders were developing port facilities and shipping trade in earnest, began to siphon trade away from the mouth of the Brazos, and in the years that followed, Galveston surged ahead. An assessment and comparison of sea trade between the two cities in 1839 indicates that, while Galveston attracted more traffic, Velasco’s export value nearly matched that of Galveston. According to journalist Ben C. Stuart, “the arrivals [in Galveston] of seagoing vessels during the year 1839 were three ships, thirty-two brigs, one hundred and forty four schooners, five sloops and forty four steamships and steamboats.” Imports in Galveston that year were valued at \$1,108,238, but exports totaled only \$133,494. Shipments exported from Velasco, meanwhile, aggregated \$120,506 (Stuart Papers, Stuart manuscript n.d.:Chapter XXI).

Whereas John Sharp had been commissioned to inspect the facilities on both sides of the Brazos for the location of the customs house he submitted his report and a follow up letter to Mirabeau B. Lamar:

Velasco July 30, 1839

Your Excellency

Some time last spring I recd. From Hon. R. G. Dunlap thru Secy of th Treasury a commission for the location of the Custom House for the Port of the Brazos. I accordingly reported in favour of

Velasco—not on account of its being in any way naturally a better harbour or having any advantages Quintana did not possess, but that in Velasco there was a great deal more business done than in Quintana, there being but one commercial house in the latter while here at that time there were twelve...

Within a few days I have learned that Col. W. T. Austin has received a similar commission....As this matter has created some little excitement here, I should feel gratified to be informed on the subject.

Respectfully Your Obr. Servt.

John Sharp [Lamar papers

p. 53]

Licenses for retail sales, tavern operations, billiard halls and grog shops

Although Galveston apparently had taken the lead in Texas shipping by 1839, Velasco's continuing trade and building programs promised that it would remain competitive for the import/export markets of the Republic. A major tropical storm in 1839, coupled with a serious worldwide economic depression known as the Panic of 1837 (Hogan 1969:81), appears to have dampened Velasco's aspirations. The intensity and extent of damage from the tropical storm remain unknown. Neither is there a clear record of the depression's effects on planters and investors along the lower Brazos, although Brazoria County deed records indicate that property values were highly inflated after the establishment of the Republic. Following bank closures and credit stagnation in the United States, the Texas government's currency became worthless. Though severe in the United States, the consequences of the Panic of 1837 were not felt in Texas until the end of 1839. In fact, Texans by and large ignored the ill effects of land speculation in the United States and continued to invest their money—or promise of money—in land. By the close of 1839, however, money was scarce and land values crashed (Hogan 1969:87-89). Speculators could not pay their debts, and lands were sold at auction for a fraction of their earlier value. Henry Austin, in an April 1839 letter to his sister, Mary Austin Holley, wrote the he was "a beggar so far as money is concerned" because he could not pay his taxes on his 11 leagues of land valued at \$81,000 the year before (Hogan 1969:87).

Investors throughout the Republic shared Austin's fate. Thousands of acres of land, and a few homes, were lost at sheriff's auctions. In Velasco the economic collapse had a stifling effect on the emerging city as evidenced by the marked reduction in town lot sales and ship visitation after 1839 (Texas Treasury Papers).

Still, some of the principals in the Velasco Association continued to nurture the shipping trade. In 1840, the first steamboat ever constructed in Texas, the *Lafitte* was completed by John Bradbury Follet to run on the Brazos for the Velasco, Galveston, and Sabine trade. It was constructed to ply "on the inland passage in the gulf as there was then an inland canal" (Stuart Papers, Stuart manuscript n.d., box 2, file 3). The vessel was commissioned and owned by McKinney and Williams, merchants of Quintana, and commanded by Captain James E. Haviland, a pioneer Texas steamboatman (Stuart Papers, Stuart manuscript n.d., Box 2, File 3). Mrs. William H. Jack mentioned Captain Haviland in her letters of the early 1840's (Jack Family Papers, Box 70-0483). Haviland regularly brought supplies and mail to and from the Velasco area until 1842 when, in response to tensions between the United States and Mexico, the *Lafitte* was converted into a gunboat (Creighton 1975:158). By that time, most of Velasco's shipping trade had fallen off. Frequent floods and snags on the Brazos, combined with the shallow bar and pounding surf at its mouth on the Gulf, eventually convinced the lower Brazos planters that Velasco was an unreliable and dangerous point of debarkation, and they began to transport their products overland to the market in Galveston by the 1840's.

In January, 1840, a curious traveler, William C. Sheridan, an English diplomat visited Velasco and recorded in his travel diary the intimate detail of the social life of the port before the financial disasters of the year. This provides an insight into the every day life of many of the citizens of Velasco rarely found:

Jan.

20<sup>th</sup>

...We are now in sight of land—houses are to be seen & a schooner at anchor...The boat arrived in due course of time & proved to contain no less personages than the Harbour Master & Pilot M<sup>r</sup> Thompson & his friend a M<sup>r</sup> Metcalfe...they acquainted us with a very

curious fact i.e. that we were not at Galveston—the place of our destination, & we supposed we were, but off a small town called Velasco, having a population of about 300 souls...”The Hardy Pilot” took the ship to about three miles from shore, nearer than w<sup>h</sup> we could not approach, and the anchor being dropped & sails furled amid the usual & general discharge of “damns” & “Blasts”...

23<sup>rd</sup> This was a most beautiful day, & after Breakfast Seymour & I put to sea in the jolly boat. After an animated pull of 3 miles or so & having passed the wreck of a vessel that had bumped on the Bar we got into smooth water & the Mouth of the river Brazos. On landing we were received by the whole male population of Velasco headed by the cheerful Thomson with his coat off & a cigar in his mouth. By him we were introduced to General Green a man of very respectable appearance and intelligent phiz...The General shook us warmly by the hand, as also Mess<sup>rs</sup> Sharp (the Actg American Agent) Potter &c—gentlemen moving in the first circles of Velasco. At the suggestion of our gallant friend, we adjourned to his mansion, where to my intense delight we were speedily roasted before an immense wood fire...M<sup>r</sup> Sharpe was so urgent in his solicitations for our society at his house to dine, that the General who had killed a fatted calf for the like ceremony, waived his claim, & agreed with us to feast at M<sup>r</sup> S’s at half past one—such being the approved feeding hour of Velasco.

Accordingly, after a stroll on the beach, we presented ourselves at Sharpe’s dinner table. There were present M<sup>rs</sup> Sharpe—a young lady, with beautiful eyes & an agreeable expression of countenance, but with a mouth of such dimensions, as entitles it to be compared only with the orifice thr’ w<sup>h</sup> Harlequin jumps in the Pantomimes. With her was associated Miss Warner,—a moderately beautiful maid—with good appetite & a red face—who we afterwards discovered to be the school mistress of the town...The dinner, w<sup>h</sup> M<sup>rs</sup> Sharpe with her own hands, assisted the servants to place on the table, consisted of some fat pork, a wild Turkey, fried liver, turnips, sweet potatoes, pickles, peach jam & other dainties. Everything was very good

particularly the wild Turkey. The practise here--& a very dangerous one—is to feed oneself chiefly with the knife. The size of M<sup>rs</sup> Sharpe’s mouth made me easy enough about her but I trembled for the rest of the company. However practise had made perfect & the repast concluded without an accident. Our drink was water & a wine w<sup>h</sup> they called Sherry, but w<sup>h</sup> tasted something like Chilli vinegar & Bilge water—however it is not fortunately for us the custom to imbibe after dinner—coffee being instantly brought & the table cleared...

Velasco is by no means a gigantic town, as it numbers no more than between 20 & 30 irregularly built huts & houses. Nor does it afford much gratification to a lover of the Picturesque situated as it is on a low sandy beach w<sup>h</sup> soon merges into a flat shrubless, prairie extending as far as the eye can reach. There are a few houses on the left side of the river, one of w<sup>h</sup> is tenanted by no less a person than my friend Thomson, but the greater part locate on the right. Green’s dwelling being by far the best. No church as yet “with silent finger points to heaven”...As some sort of recompence there is a Court House, on the top of w<sup>h</sup> floated the Yankee Colors as well as those of Texas. In front of this is “the Battery” as they think fit to term it, consisting of an old brass 18 pounder with a touch-hole equivalent in circumference to the mouth of M<sup>rs</sup> Sharpe--& 3 other small ones whose united ages amount to a greater number, than my arithmetic will permit me to calculate...

24<sup>th</sup> Friday being a propitious day, Ramsey & I went on shore—and having introduced him to the Velasconians & accepted the Generals invitation to dinner, (as also did Hamilton & Walcot) we fell to at the fashionable hour. The feast at w<sup>h</sup> also my friend Sharpe & a D<sup>r</sup> Smith (with a most horrible twang) was precisely similar to that of w<sup>h</sup> we had partaken at Sharpes—viz.—Pork & Turkey—the drinkables being no better than at that gentlemans house.

There were oysters also...a huge, long, ill-shaped shell-fish--a gigantic species of the Mangrove oysters of the W. Indies...The evening however was destined to be productive of intense

diversion to me, for lo! & behold the hospitable Green had invited all the elite of Velasco to his house.

Before 9 o'clock there were about a dozen women, many of them very pretty & all well-dressed, vulgar & awkward; and about the same quantity of men, with better manners & conversation than I could have anticipated. To every one of the ladies separately were we introduced, after w<sup>h</sup> everybody sat in a circle around the room, the women on one side & the gents on the other. However after a few light pleasantries...The chill was thrown off, & all parties got on very well. And now, after a little pressing, the fair Miss Warner was led to the Piano by the gallant General, & amidst a profound silence performed, & not very badly...Merited applause followed w<sup>h</sup> stimulated Miss W. to further exertion & a duet on the instrument between herself & a dear little German woman named Seffield—(the dancing mistress of Velasco) ensued. Vocal music then took the lead...the Beloved Seffield afterwards sat down & sung two or three songs remarkably well, besides w<sup>h</sup> she rejoices in the possession of a very good voice...

...active exercise was recommended by the General, & various strange quadrilles, cotillions &c were performed. In a moment of temporary insanity I consented, on condition M<sup>rs</sup> Seffield taught me, to be instructed in the mysteries of a Kentuckee Reel—w<sup>h</sup> I at length accomplished amid the roar of laughter of the whole company...At half-past one this agreeable party dispersed, & I discovered that Beds were among the scarcities of Velasco, as I had to share mine with Walcott, who snored like an asthmatic Walruss.

25<sup>th</sup> Went on board after breakfast (at w<sup>h</sup> was the catfish cut in fids & fried) to prepare the banquet to w<sup>h</sup> Ramsay had provoked the first families the place. At 1 ½ they came, & among the fashionables present we observed M<sup>rs</sup> Sharpe, the Misses Warner & Work & two young ladies one with a red nose & the other with a black gown in w<sup>h</sup> she mourned the loss of a brother...The males comprised our distinguished friend the General together with the euphonius firm of Smith, Green, Podder & Sharpe, & the illustrious Thompson...In about five minutes the

ladies began to look Blue & giggle hysterically, a certain sign that the motion of the vessel was anything but a sedative. The[y] fought bravely against the foe, but he was too strong & they were vanquished...

...The fair haired Warner! She, thy lyre Velasco, tunes to melody. The foe advanced, but with White handkerchief she poked him back—Then sent some "bitters" (they whom the fragrant Shaddock & pregnant grape produce) to complete the rout—Alas! Who can controul fate. The brave bitters met an increased & increasing force, & were driven back, retreat disastrous followed & the fair haired maiden yielded ... (McClure)...leads the gulping sufferer to the starboard gangway...Her followed, the maiden of the ruby prow, or red snout, ...I shall content myself with the simple statement that they were all very sick & stowed away in the different births Mess<sup>rs</sup> Work & Smith were also taken "wuss" & refused to be comforted with dinner. To this the survivors did ample justice & after it many cordial toasts were drank...

Feb

3<sup>rd</sup> We lay patiently off Velasco till this day... We found the valorous Green also bound to our destination—Viz: Galveston and crossing the river we embarked on board the Constitution Steamer—Cap Boylan...I had an opportunity of looking at my fellow passengers.

The first that struck me was a gentleman apparently of about 40 years, attired in a frock coat made out of a scarlet blanket with a black edging, & picking his teeth with a Bowie Knife. In this unpretending employment was engaged no less a personage that Mr McKinnie of the firm of McKinnie & Williams, the Barings of Texas...

To return however to the Constitution. She was an old, battered broken Rig {?}-pressure boat, which having been wrecked on the coast near Galveston had been left to the Elements. The Enterprising McKinnie however had redeemed her, patched her up, placed her under the skilful hand of Boylan...& sent her to plough the river Brazos, bringing the cotton there from to Galveston. We brought the largest cargo ever got over

the Bar at Velasco, as they told us—viz. about 300 bales. [Pratt 1954:11-30]

This description of the steamboat *Constitution* by W. C. Sheridan may be more realistic than an add placed in the newspaper by the ship's investors:

### The Steam Boat Constitution

BEING purchased for the purpose, will now ply regularly between San Luis and Columbia, touching at Velasco, Crosby's Landing and Brazoria. The Constitution has been fully over hauled and extensive repairs made in the Engine department, her hull is staunch and strong, being built of LOCUST and offers a safe and speedy conveyance to the inhabitants of the Brazos, and to the public—For engagements of Freight or Passage—apply on board or to

JOHN NABB & Co. San Luis  
Feb. 17<sup>th</sup>, 1840 [*Brazos Courier*, March 24, 1840]

Miss Elizabeth Warner had an ad for the fall semester of 1839, but in February 1840 the Reverend Francis Rutherford took out an add indicating both Miss Warners may have returned to New York by early-1840.

### School for Females at Velasco

THIS institution will be opened for the ensuing session, on the first Monday in September next.

For Reading, Writing Arithmetic,  
and other English branches, per  
session of five months

\$15.00

For the French & Italian languages 20.00

For Music on the Piano 20.00

Good board can be had at from twenty to twenty-five dollars per month.

The trustees have engaged the services of Miss ELIZABETH WARNER as principal of said school, who, from long, experience in teaching, together with a fine education, makes her every way qualified for the station. The trustees will have a strict regard for the management of the school.

Branch T. Archer	T	Wm. H. Jack
Thos. J. Greene	r	Herman Ward
Ths. G. Masterson	u	Wm. T. Austin
W. D. C. Hall	s	Ambrose Crane

H. N. Walcott	t	John Sharp
John Work	e	Wm. R. Smith
Peter MacGreal	e	Mosley Hooker
Philo Hoadly	s	Edwin Waller

Velasco, August 11, 1839 [*Brazos Courier*, December 3, 1839]

### Velasco Institute

THE Trustees have engaged the services of the Rev. FRANCIS RUTHERFORD, assisted by Mrs. RUTHERFORD, in permanently establishing a literary institution of high order, for both sexes.

There will be three Departments—the Primary, Junior and Senior Departments. The studies pursued in each as follows:

Primary Department — Reading, Spelling, Writing the first lessons in Geography, Grammar, History, Arithmetic, Botany, and Astronomy.

Junior Department — Reading, Spelling, Writing, continued—The second lessons in Geography, Grammar, History Arithmetic, Rhetoric, Logic and Elocution—ie elements of the Latin and Greek languages.

The Senior Department—Reading, Spelling, and Writing continued—Geometry, Algebra, Mensuration, Natural Philosophy, Chemistry, Botany, Ancient and Modern History, Latin and Greek, Declamation and Composition.

The first session of the institution will open on Monday the 10<sup>th</sup> of February.

The Trustees have also engaged the services of Col Seffeld and lady, who will give lessons in Music, Drawing, Painting, and the Modern Languages.

Terms—Twenty five dollars per session of five months, in the ordinary branches, and thirty dollars in the higher branches taught.

The teachers come highly recommended.

Ambrose Crane	John Sharp
Joseph Reese	R. M. Potter
Philo Hoadley	H. N. Walcott
John Work	F. J. Haskins
A. P. Caldwell	

Velasco, Feb. 1, 1840 [*Brazos Courier*, March 10, 1840]

Although there is a College Square fronting on East Union Bayou allocated on the 1837 P. A. Mesier map it is highly unlikely that there was ever anything built on the property and the few school children of Velasco were

taught in the homes of individuals. No data has been found on the numbers or names of children attending school in Velasco.

Financial problems also began to trouble Peter and Mary MacGreal, the new owners of the Archer House. The *Brazos Courier*, March 10, 1840 has a for sale add listed from late in 1839:

#### FOR SALE OR RENT

##### The Archer House—Velasco

This establishment will be sold or rented for a term of years, together with all the furniture, stables, &c. &c.

The Archer House is one of the best finished Hotels in Texas—well furnished and prepared fully for the accommodation of boarders. The situation is delightful; and, in consequence of the great immigration to the Brazos valley, the new Seat of Government, and upper country, is one of the best positions in Texas for a hotel.

Terms will be very reasonable. Texas Promissory Notes or Funded Stock will be taken. Possession will be given immediately, if required. For further particulars apply on the premises.

Velasco, Dec. 7, 1839

Again the property is seized by Sheriff R. J. Calder due to suits lost in January 1840 by MacGreal and put up for public auction, *Brazos Courier*, March 3, 1840:

#### SHERIFF SALE

J.H. Polly, adm'r Gerron  
Hinds, Palmer, Baker &  
Co. and Kissam & Co. Dist Court

vs

Peter MacGreal

BY virtue of 4 writs of execution to me directed by the clerk of the District Court of the county of Brazoria, I shall offer for sale at the courthouse door in the town of Brazoria, on the first Tuesday in March 1840, the following property situated in the town of Velasco, viz:

Lots 4, 5, 6, and 7, in block No.13—Also that part of Front or Second Street upon which the

##### ARCHER HOUSE

is situated, between blocks Nos. 13 and 29, together with all the improvements thereon.

Levied on as the property of Peter MacGreal to satisfy four judgments in favor of J. H. Polly, Adm'r. Gerron Hinds, Palmer, Baker & Co, and Kissam & Co.

Terms of sale—Cash, with appraisement  
R. J. CALDER, Sh'ff  
January 17, 1840

The sale in March took place but there was no bidder on the property. Again the property was put up for public auction and was sold May 5, 1840 to Elisha M. Pease for \$300. Peter MacGreal was able to retain the property but the transactions for his ownership have not been located.

The stage line continued to run between Velasco, San Luis, and Galveston with a ferry service at San Luis:

#### Galveston & Velasco Stage Line

P. B. STARKE & Co, have established a regular and permanent line for four horse stages between Galveston and Velasco, so that passengers will be carried through to either place in one day.

A stage will leave Velasco every Monday, Wednesday and Friday—a stage will leave Galveston on the same days.

Travellers will have every accommodation, and may depend on the regularity of the stages. Time of departure, 8 o'clock, A. M.—Arrival, 8 o'clock, P. M.

Velasco, March 2, 1840 [*Brazos Courier*, March 10, 1840]

#### West Pass Galveston and San Luis Ferry

THE Ferries at the West Pass under the charge of Stephen Churchill, are now prepared to cross Cattle, Horses and Waggon. The rates of Ferriage have been materially reduced. The proprietor anxious to afford every facility has made an arrangement with the stage proprietors to cross the Stages to San Luis: passengers will there be conveyed to the West end to meet the Stages from Galveston.

The rates of Ferriage hereafter will be as follows.

From Peninsula to San Luis.

Per Man	37 ½
Man & Horse	62 ½
do do & Wagon	1 25
do double do do	1 75

Cattle per head	1 00
From San Luis to Galveston	
Per Man	1 62 ½
Man & Horse	1 37 ½
do      do    & Wagon	2 00
do double do   do	3 00
Cattle per head	1 50

MATHEW HOPKINS, Proprietor.  
 March 31<sup>st</sup>, 1840 [*Brazos Courier*, April 7, 1840]

After the death of Jeremiah Brown, September 9, 1838, William T. Austin was appointed customs collector for the port on December 27, 1838 by President Mirabeau B. Lamar. He rented Brown's home and appointed Reuben M. Potter deputy collector for the port, Sam Harris as chief clerk, and Thomas M. Thompson as boarding officer. The customs house moved from Quintana back to Velasco after the first of the year.

On December 5, 1939 Austin wrote the Secretary of the Treasury James H. Starr and proposed that new legislation was needed for handling the customs on cargo destined for Columbia and Brazoria. He wrote that of the imported goods on the Brazos River, "only a small portion is landed at this Post, it being mostly consigned to merchants residing at Columbia & Brasoria, while smaller shipments are frequently discharged at Crosby's, a place nearer to this, and cosigned to the Planters in that neighborhood (Perry's Plantation). Austin wanted to dispense with requirements of having the vessels stop at Velasco for manifest check and taking aboard a customs officer. In short, he wanted entry to be made at the point of destination. Starr replied and told Austin that the revenue law passed by Congress in February of 1840 prohibited the collector from altering the procedure and that the vessels would still be required to make the stop at Velasco before proceeding upstream [Ward 1962:449-450]. The following announcement brought wide criticism from the merchants of Columbia and Brazoria, who were unable to make either of their towns a legal port of entry.

CUSTOM HOUSE, DISTRICT OF  
 BRAZOS  
 Port of Velasco, 1<sup>st</sup> April, 1840  
 To the Merchants & Importers  
 of the District

I am directed by the Hon. Secretary of the Treasury, to notify the Merchants and Importers of this District that from and after the 30<sup>th</sup> instant, no entries of merchandise can be made at Columbia, Brazoria, or any Port of delivery but only at the Custom House of this Port where the invoice of each importation, certified as the law requires, must be presented on the vessel's arrival, and the entry of the same be sworn to before the collector by the consignee or his agent; and that no merchandise can be delivered bill entered in the manner above mentioned.

WM. T. AUSTIN, Collector  
 April 7, 1840 [*Brazos Courier*, April 7, 1840]

The Velasco Institute was in business for only the spring semester and at mid-summer Francis Rutherford tried to start his own school:

### Classical School

HAVING resigned the office as Principal of the Velasco Institute and its operations having ceased, I shall open a private School on the 13<sup>th</sup> inst. (2<sup>nd</sup> Monday,) for the instruction of youth in all the English Branches and the elements of Latin and Greek.

The number of pupils will be limited, and we trust not will apply, who will not be willing to be governed by good and wholesome regulations.

The subscription will be \$40 per session (five months) in advance, or any arrangement equivalent.

Three or four little boys can be ac'modated with boarding in a highly respectable family, where every attention will be given as to their orderly conduct and comfort.

FRANCIS RUTHERFORD  
 Velasco, July 4, 1840 [*Brazos Courier*, July 14, 1840]

Samuel H. Perkins wrote to his wife in Bridge Port, Mississippi concerning his mercantile enterprise during this period:

Velasco, Texas, May 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1840  
 ...In the winter season it must be bleak and cold, at this place, as it has the gulf on one side and no timber on the other to shelter it from the northern winds. Times are very dull in Texas and money very scarce. Goods are selling lower in

Galveston and Houston than they can be bought in any part of the United States. I have seen several person whose notes and ....I hold but have been unable to collect a cent from any of them...Ours is the only goods in this place. [Family File 23, Brazoria County Historical Museum, Angleton, Texas]

Another sign of the times for Velasco was an add for the sale of James P. McKinney's home in Quintana and the final removal of all the ties of the firm of McKinney & Williams from the mouth of the Brazos to Galveston:

**FOR SALE**  
TO CLOSE A CONCERN

THE two story house and two Lots upon which it stands formerly occupied by Mr. James P. McKinney at Quintana. The above property is admirably adapted for a family residence, has six rooms and is furnished off in a superior manner, with Stable, Kitchen, and out houses complete, and is located in the most pleasant part of the town of Quintana, justly celebrated for the salubrity of its situation.

For terms which will be made easy, apply to McKinney , Williams & Co.

JONES, UFFORD, & Co.  
Galveston

July 7<sup>th</sup>, 1840 [*Brazos Courier*, July 14, 1840]

Financial shortfalls early in 1840 did not restrict the celebrations and festivities planned as the association invited President Mirabeau Lamar to attend a dinner in Velasco, *Brazos Courier*, July 28, 1840:

Velasco, July 15, 1840

*To his Excell'y M. B. Lamar*

Sir—The undersigned committee on behalf of themselves and the citizens of Velasco and its vicinity, in approbation as well of your administration of the government as your individual worth, heartily welcome your arrival, and desire that you will name a day when it may suit your convenience to partake with them of a public dinner at the Archer House.

The most valued rewards of the patriot who loves his country and respects himself, is—first, the approbation of his own conscience; and next, the gratitude of those

whom he may serve. That it is and will continue to be your Excellency's enviable lot to enjoy both the one and the other, is gratifying in highest degree to your obedient serv'ts.

Thos.J. Green	Ambrose Crane
John Sharp	Wm. J. Russell
Peter MacGreal	R. M. Potter
F. J. Haskins	John W. Harris

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Velasco, July 15<sup>th</sup>, 1840

To Messrs T.J. Green, John Sharp and others.  
Gentlemen

Your very kind note of this morning has been received desiring to know at what time it would suit my convenience to partake with you of a public dinner at the "Archer House," and at the same time in flattering terms expressing your approbation of my administration as well as my individual worth. My anxiety to reach Austin, (from which my absence has been protracted) will constrain me to decline the honor which your kind partiality had contemplated for me.

Be assured, gentlemen, that manifestation of regard and kindness like the present, carry with them a most grateful influence—an influence to confirm in doubt and to inspire in danger; and when relieved from the cares and anxieties of public service, we can recur to them with equal pride and pleasure.

Be pleased, gentlemen, to accept for yourselves individually and for the citizens of Velasco and its vicinity, the warm assurance of my high appreciation of the compliment intended, and my most grateful recollection of their former confidence and regard.

Your obedient servant,  
MIRABEAU B. LAMAR

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Velasco, July 16, 1840

Mr. Weir—His Excellency, President M. B. Lamar, arrived in our town on yesterday, and was warmly greeted by his numerous friends and fellow citizens. You will see from the following correspondence, he declined a public dinner. Several of his old friends and neighbours dined with him at General Green's, and evening was closed with the merry dance by a large party of gentlemen and ladies.

During the evening Gen'l Green being called on for a sentiment, said he would cheerfully give one which he felt confident every person in his hearing would most cordially approve, and proposed:--The continued health, happiness and prosperity of Mirabeau B. Lamar, our patriotic President—who has never failed to exert his opposition to every vice, every abuse, and every species of corruption.

The President being called upon for a response, addressed the company in a most eloquent and feeling manner, which done equal honor to his head and heart. The committee very much regret have not procured a copy for your paper.

Very respectfully,

Your obedient servant.

In addition to a depressed economy, the Velasco Association suffered the deaths of many of its prominent members from 1838-1840, among them Jeremiah Brown, brothers John A. and William H. Wharton, Horatio N. Walcott, John Black, and John Sharp. The Whartons had been among the earliest and largest property owners in Velasco, and they also provided financial support and social standing for the association. Their deaths must have greatly reduced the political clout of the association. On August 17, 1840, the port of Velasco lost one of its staunchest supporters, John Sharp<sup>7</sup> and a little later a newcomer, Mosely Hooker of Tennessee who had recently purchased Edwin Waller's plantation (Mirabeau B. Lamar had appointed Waller to survey the new capitol of Austin in 1839 and he was elected Austin's first mayor on January 13, 1840). Although a later arrival, along with Thomas Jefferson Green, Sharp, like Green, became one of the most adamant and consistent promoters of the Velasco venture. In addition to being a merchant, Sharp served as the U.S. consul at Velasco at the time of his death, and in that post he lobbied extensively for the customs house and other official status for the port. As a county notary, Sharp was one of the most visible members of the land association, and his hand notarized many of the deed transactions for the association. His

<sup>7</sup> According to the bill submitted by his attending physician, Sharp passed away after a month's long illness, but Dr. William T. Sheperd did not give an indication to the cause of death or any symptoms [Probate Case 489, Brazoria County Court House, Angleton, Texas].

death must have been a great blow to the aspirations of the Velasco Association, and with it much of the energy seems to have gone out of the venture. H. N. Walcott and J. Black, both of whom owned property and businesses in common with Sharp, also died the same year leaving a gap in commercial leadership within the community.

#### OBITUARY

Died at Velasco: 17<sup>th</sup> ult. John Sharp, Esq. Notary Public and U. S. Consular Agent for that Port.

Mr. Sharp emigrated to Texas in 1833, and had since been a resident of this county. He served with credit in the Campaign of 1836, and shared in the perils and honors of the memorable day of San Jacinto. On the year following he was a passenger on board the schooner Julius Ceasar when she was captured by the Mexican squadron, and in consequence was taken to Matamoras where he was for some time the prison companion of the late Hon. Wm. H. Wharton. The deceased was well known to the inhabitants of this vicinity, many of whom have witnessed the firm and honorable course he ever pursued through the trials incident both to the early settlement of the country and its struggle for independence; and from the stand he maintained throughout, he claims our remembrance as a specimen of the TRUE TEXAN, a character well know and abounding at home, but never yet duly appreciated abroad.

Died--On the 19th ult. Mr. Mosely Hooker<sup>8</sup>, a citizen of Velasco. [*Brazos Courier*, September 1, 1840]

These factors contributed to the decline in Velasco real estate sales in 1840 from the frenzied buying and selling of 1837-1839. From about 1839 forward, many of the transactions involving Velasco town lots, whole interests in the town itself, and even *labors* and *leagues* of land in the area were the results of sheriffs' sales, auctions, or forfeiture (Brazoria County deed records for 1839-1842). As members of the association brought suit against one another and the local merchants, one by one the managers of the Velasco Association, so optimistic that Velasco would be "the coming New Orleans" in 1837, lost or

<sup>8</sup> Buried in the Wharton family cemetery at Eagle Island Plantation.

forfeited their properties to pay their creditors in the failing enterprise.

Doctor Branch T. Archer had been elected to the Texas congress and while dealing with the problems of the Republic was ultimately caught up in the same embarrassing situation. He at least tried to deal with the situation honestly while others fled to other parts of the Republic or back to the United States:

**To the Public**

PRECLUDED as I am by official duties from immediate attention to private business, and being exceedingly anxious to liquidate the lawful claims against me in the most summary way, I have this day conveyed in trust, to my friend Thomas J. Green, of the county of Brazoria, the whole of my property, real, personal and mixed, for the accomplishment of the above design.

The unexampled deficiency of par funds, combined with the almost unparalleled depreciation of our circulating medium, has had the effect to destroy the value of property, and materially to affect the credit of the country.

These considerations have induced me to surrender the proceeds of ten years exertion in this country for the payment of an amount, which, in ordinary fiscal circumstances, would not have been felt. I therefore respectfully call the attention of buyers to a list of valuable property, which Gen'l Green will sell on advantageous terms, to those disposed to purchase.

B. T. ARCHER

City of Austin, Sept. 23, 1840 [*Brazos Courier*, October 20, 1840]

In the same paper was a call for public auction of the property of Thomas J. Green indicating that things had taken a real turn for the worse for Archer and Green between September and the first part of October:

D. C. Barrett

vs

B. T. Archer, G. M. Stone, County Court  
and T. J. Green

BY virtue of two writs of Execution to me directed by the clerk of the County court of the county of Brazoria, I shall offer for sale at the

court house door in the town of Brazoria, on the first Tuesday in November next

6356 Acres of Land,  
adjoining the lands of Warren D. C. Hall upon the head waters of Clear creek, being the head right of Thos J. Green.

Also,

640 Acres of land,  
situated as above. Also,

1111 acres of land,  
situated as above, being the head right of D. H. M. Hunter. Also,

All the right, title, interest and claim of said Th. J. Green in and to the

Town of Velasco  
including improved and unimproved lots, and the lot on which said Green now resides, known as lot No\_ in block\_. Also, a parcel of Household Furniture, &c.

Also, the following NEGROES:

LUCINDA a mulatto girl, aged about 20, and her infant boy child; one negro woman named PEGGY, aged bout 50 years; one negro boy named JAMES, aged 14 years. Also the

Race Horses,  
known as COLORADO and STAR OF THE WEST, (a bay mare.)

All of the above property of Thomas J. Green to satisfy two judgments in favor of D. C. Barrett vs B. T. Archer, G. M. Stone and Th. J. Green.

Terms-Cash with appraisalment.

R. J. Calder, Shff.

Oct. 12, 1840 [*Brazos Courier*, October 20, 1840]

Thomas J. Green was able to hold on to his home for a few years longer by mortgaging his residence to Francis Bingham. The acute financial problems of all members of the Velasco Association left the few that did manage to hold on to some of their land and lots in Velasco with, in some cases, almost worthless property. Only the lots in the town that had improvements were worth a few hundred dollars, while vacant lots were worth almost nothing.

By 1841 William T. Austin was almost ready to resign his duties as port collector and Thomas G. Masterson wrote to John G. Chalmers recommending Ambrose Crane, the last president of the Velasco Association, for the job. Crane, his wife, and five children were in Velasco without funds. This reiterated the financial situation of all members of the

association. President Lamar asked Austin to stay at his post until the end of his term, which Austin agreed to do. In 1841 commerce with Liverpool, England began with cotton and hide exports from the ports on the Brazos reaching their peak for all the years of the Republic. The value of the cotton exported was \$127,215 with 32% being shipped to New Orleans.

Reuben M. Potter took over the collector's post in October 1841 and in January 1842 his salary was reduced from \$2000 to \$800 a year with A. P. Baker as his clerk. With the building in Velasco becoming dilapidated, Potter moved the customs house back to Quintana by August of 1842.

Beginning in 1842 there was a sharp decline in the imports at Velasco. Galveston with its good harbor and much larger populace had become the major port on the Texas coast. Business declined to such an extent that only coastal vessels from Galveston or New Orleans, entered the port.

The threat of invasion from Mexico was always a possibility and on March 5, 1842 General Rafael Vasquez invaded Texas and captured San Antonio. Again on September 11, 1842 General Adrian Woll captured San Antonio. This prompted the citizens of the Republic to demand a reprisal from the government. Sam Houston, though unofficially opposed to the project, chose Alexander Somervell to lead the army. With the army gathering volunteers in San Antonio, Thomas Jefferson Green saw an opportunity and by mid October was in San Antonio. Another citizen of Velasco Samuel Lyons joined the expedition. Both would later become members of the ill fated Mier Expedition. Green would become an unofficial second in command to William Fisher and Lyons was indispensable with his work on the flotilla that was transporting troops on the Rio Grande. Captured in the Battle of Mier and imprisoned in Castle Perote both men would survive and return to Texas.

Thomas J. Green with sixteen others escaped from Castle Perote on July 2, 1843, made his way to New Orleans and by September was back in Brazoria County. While he was gone his home had been seized and auctioned off.

Commerce for Velasco continued to decline in 1843 and in December the

Steamboat *Lafitte*<sup>9</sup> was lost off the west end of Galveston Island after it had sailed from Velasco loaded with 319 bales of cotton, 59 bales of hides, and 2 bales of deerskins:

The loss of the steamboat will seriously affect the trade with Velasco and the lower Brazos. The planters of that section have suffered severe losses by the repeated shipwrecks at the mouth of the Brazos, and off the neighboring coast. The expense of transporting cotton by land to Galveston via Houston, is about as cheap as the transportation by sea, and as it is much safer, we may expect that the main portion of the cotton raised above Columbia will hereafter be transported to this market, or to Galveston by land [*Telegraph and Texas Register*, Houston, January 4, 1844].

The dangers of the Brazos bar and adjacent waters were also reflected in the high insurance rates on vessels destined for Velasco. The rates were five per cent for Brazos River cargoes as compared to no more than two and one-half per cent for the next highest rate for a Texas port and only one and one-half per cent for Galveston adding still another hindrance to commerce for Velasco.

In 1845 sixty-five ships from Galveston entered Velasco. Reuben M. Potter resigned as collector for the port in January 1845 Robert S. Herndon<sup>10</sup>, brother of John H. Herndon, remained the port collector until Texas was annexed to the United States in 1846.

## STATEHOOD

On December 29, 1845, the United States Congress accepted both Annexation and Texas' state constitution, which formally admitted Texas to the Union as the twenty-eighth state. This time celebration balls were held in Columbia and Brazoria not Velasco.

War with Mexico began on April 23, 1846 and ended February 2, 1848. Whereas many of the men from Brazoria County volunteered

<sup>9</sup> The *Lafitte*, the first steamboat built in Texas, was constructed by John Bradbury Follet near Velasco for the firm of McKinney and Williams of Galveston in 1840, Captain James Haviland.

<sup>10</sup> Robert S. Herndon married Sarah Jane Sharp, the widow of John Sharp and the sister of Barbara Calvit Herndon, wife of John H. Herndon, May 15, 1844.

for the army, the citizens of Velasco seem to have maintained a low profile during this period.

During the late 1840's the planters along the lower Brazos had started to grow sugar cane. Bales of cotton, hogsheads of sugar, and barrels of molasses were in need of safe transportation to market. In 1850 the Galveston and Brazos Navigation Company secured a charter to construct a canal from the mouth of the Brazos to west Galveston Bay. This canal was a project of Brazoria County planters in conjunction with Bob and Joe Hensley, cotton brokers in Galveston. A canal fifty feet wide and only three and one-half feet deep was to be constructed.

Construction began in 1850 and the canal had been completed from West Galveston Bay to Oyster Creek by 1853:

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 dredging was nearing Velasco:

Dredge Boat, near Velasco, Jan. 23d 1854  
Dear Swain—I arrived here today on my way to Galveston having met scarcely an incident on the road which could be manufactured into an item or reduced to paragraph. The roads are, to be sure, the finest ever known since the white settlements have extended this far into the domain of barbarism...I must not, however, forget to mention one thing that I saw which is not so common-place. This

was the sugar crop of Mr. Stephen S. Perry, of Gulf Prairie. He finished grinding last Friday and from one hundred and thirty acres of cane he had made two hundred and fifty-six hogsheads of sugar or nearly two hogsheads to the acre, and at the rate of twelve hhds. to the hand. I should be glad to hear of a better crop in this or any other state.—This is making about double the ordinary average of sugar planters, and a great deal more than double what they have made this year. His sugar appears to be of excellent quality as well as extraordinary quantity.

But 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 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 great improvement of the year that I notice, is the removal of the post office from the neighboring city Velasco, to this town. ...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. Lyons 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 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.—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. ...

I observe there is a good school taught in this town, by Mr. Morrison...

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... [*Columbia Democrat*, January 31, 1854]

Mr. Hitchcock together with P. C. Tucker, Esq., visited the Galveston and Brazos Canal on the 21<sup>st</sup> and 22<sup>d</sup> 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 1<sup>st</sup> 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 [*Columbia Democrat*, April 5, 1854].

The official opening was delayed by the hurricane which struck Matagorda 18<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup>, September 1854, causing heavy damage to the 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]

Later in the year, 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.

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.

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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 steamers<sup>11</sup> 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.]

The great indebtedness and lack of financial backing

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<sup>11</sup> 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].