

Essay IV: Conjecture about the Earliest Settlers

Jim Barnes – 17 March 2009 (with two or three minor grammatical corrections made on 17 April 2017)

Excerpt from: *The History of the William Myers Section, Vol. 12; "Pioneer Histories"* – Dallas Public Library, Jim Barnes Collection

Since presently I do not have time to undertake lengthy additional research, in this essay I would like to stake out an overview of some of the questions and possibilities involved in the future study of the William Myers Section, specifically the future study of the period of history prior to the arrival of William Myers in 1846. I plan for this essay to be comparatively informal, loose, and highly conjectural; so, I hereby advise caution in quoting from it.

For my knowledge of this particular era I am especially indebted to the research and opinion of M.C. Toyer, a descendant of the Beeman family of early Dallas, with whom I have had long and detailed discussions about many of the topics in this volume. M.C. has for many years been engaged in the study of the pioneer days of north Texas.

As we see it today, the earliest activities of recorded history occurring on this western side of the Trinity River in Dallas County include: an 1840-1841 expedition laying-out the so-called "Military Road", and a temporary encampment of a large group of soldiers on their way to the "Battle of Village Creek" in Tarrant County, in July of 1841. These I shall address in detail, following immediately below, but I must first insert a brief comment about a report of an even earlier settlement presence, a stockade fort, described by William Allen Ward in *The Dallas Morning News*, 1948-10-10, page 2, "*Oak Cliff Old As Republic of Texas*"; and also in *The Dallas Morning New*, 1949-10-09, "*Oak Cliff Had Its Origin As Tiny Military Post*". Despite one of the articles' assertions that "most historians" agree about this 1837 fortress site, M.C. Toyer regards this story as singular, inaccurate, and without foundation of fact -- a conclusion for which I have no disagreement.

The Military Road – Spring 1841

Colonel William Gordon Cooke's 1840 expedition to establish the route of a Military Road for the Republic of Texas seems to have advanced northward from Austin, toward the site of modern Dallas, along the west side of the Trinity River, but well to the east of the William Myers Section. An historic marker placed in modern times at the intersection of Ewing and Clarendon streets included a date for Cooke's passing through that vicinity in October 1840. Presumably this was also thought to be (or represent) a reported campsite on the west side of the Trinity where Cooke temporarily left Captain Clendenin with the expedition's heavy freight, the sick, and forty guards, while he advanced ahead with a smaller party of soldiers. Cooke continued to the Red River; Captain Clendenin ran so short of supplies that he retreated back south. Colonel Cooke started his return to Austin in January 1841 and his return route may have taken the ridge-route high-way across modern Oak Cliff. In a separate return trip south, another part of Cooke's expeditionary forces, led by "*John J. Holliday, commanding at Fort Johnston, and [Captain M.B.] Houghton departed for Austin in April 1841 ... The troops crossed the Trinity River at the Cedar Springs post and followed the high ground of present-day Cockrell Hill, Duncanville, Cedar Hill, and Midlothian.*" (*Handbook of Texas Online: Military Road, Morris L. Britton*). It is easy for me to imagine that this second group followed a trail similar to modern Fort Worth Avenue, along the north side of Coombes Creek, before turning south (rather the more popular later ridge-route along the south side of that stream); but I must admit I am skeptical as to how Mr. Britton in modern times was able to locate their 1841 path of travel with such accuracy. Everywhere then the prairie must have had a similar appearance, and places had few unique markers to note in record logs. At any rate this information gives a date of April of 1841 when

the ridge-route south from Cedar Springs to Austin was known and being used by Euro-American settlers. M.C. Toyer, speaking as a former military veteran, once commented to me that he thought Col. William Cooke's strategy might have been similar to one his own Army unit had employed in patrols during the Viet Nam War: they never advanced along well-known trails because of the risk of ambush or accidental encounter with an overwhelming enemy; they only traveled known trails as a path of retreat.

Col. Smith's Encampment – at Kidd Springs? – July 1841

Following some lengthy email discussion, M.C. Toyer sent me the following quotation from Susanne Starling; *Land Is The Cry!—Warren Angus Ferris, Pioneer Texas Surveyor and Founder of Dallas County*; Austin, Texas State Historical Association, 1998:

“Col. Jim Smith arrived on the 19th [July 1841] and organized the men from San Augustine, Nacogdoches, Houston, and Robertson Counties into four companies; then they followed the fresh trail of the [Indian] raiders to the Kickapoo Crossing of the Trinity [at modern downtown Dallas].

The militia swam their horses and rafted their baggage across the river to camp on the wide western prairie near a cool spring, probably Kidd Springs in present Oak Cliff. Here the Indian trail widened, evidencing the passage of large herds of buffalo and many Indians. On July 22, the Texians lounged in camp, killing a “beeve” or steer for rations and cutting “bee trees” for honey. Smith dispatched an express of three men to ride north in search of General Tarrant’s Red River troops. He also sent out a spy company which was to locate the Indian camp and cornfields. Capt. John L. Hall led the scouts, which included Ferris, Reagan, George Lacy, Samuel and Isaac Bean, John L. and Hughes Burton, a Creek Indian named Chaxty, and three others.

When the spy company returned to the encampment on the evening of July 24th, they had located the Indian town on Village Creek, a tributary of the West Fort of the Trinity. At midnight Smith addressed the men and ordered an immediate attack on the village. The troops took up a thirty-mile march in double columns across the rolling prairies and reached Village Creek about noon, attacking the camp from two sides. They found a deserted village. The Indians had gone, abandoning their cornfields and supplies.”

I find it is easy to imagine Col. Smith and troops marching from Dallas up the ancient ridge-route and camping at Kidd Springs, as Starling suggests. Their march westward could then possibly have followed an old Indian trail to the Village Creek site along the route today roughly taken by modern Highway 303, another prehistoric trail that branched westward off the Dallas-Cedar Hill high way (see also: the map on page 16 of this volume).

I found it interesting to see John H. Reagan's name included as one of Smith's scouts.

Captain Mabel Gilbert and his Family—Oak Cliff's First Settlers – 1842?

There seems be ample evidence of John Neely Bryan traveling west to Bird's Fort to enlist settlers who might return and occupy his new settlement on the Trinity River below Cedar Springs. Among the first to accept Bryan's offer and move to Dallas were Captain Mabel Gilbert and his wife Charity, who floated down a flood swollen Trinity River in a dugout canoe, sometime around the end of February 1842. Several historians have theorized that the Gilberts actually were the ones to give the new town its name, in honor of either Alexander Dallas or George M. Dallas, depending on which historian one reads (A.C. Greene, or *Dallas Morning News*: “Dallas Long Ago”; 1941-10-26; Section IV, page 13.) The Gilberts planted in the

bottomlands across the river from Dallas and focused their attention across the floodplain to the high ground beyond.

What is sorely missing is a reliable and thoroughly documented history of Oak Cliff during the next four years, the first four years of settlement on the west side of the Trinity River in Dallas County. In particular, I am frustrated by otherwise delightful historical narratives such as those written by recent authors such as Barrott Sanders, Marlin Gilbert and Vivian Castleberry, where facts are mixed with conjecture without annotation. It is impossible to differentiate between what they have discovered in historical records and what they have invented on their own. Marlin Gilbert authored *A Man Called Mabel*, a copy of which M.C. Toyer provided me in 2002. In a telephone call in which I asked about his references for some of the details in his family history, Gilbert told me that he believed that it was simply impossible for any historian to know all the facts and it was therefore necessary for writers to make knowledgeable guesses about unknown information. The problem with such historical reconstructions is that when one tries to use such histories to find details that can be linked into adjoining threads of other stories, one is left no knowing what to trust.

Let me now fearlessly attempt to quickly summarize local events in the neighborhood of the William Myers Section between 1842 and 1846. Upon the Gilberts' arrival at Bryan's new town in early March of 1842, they occupied a cabin near the site of the Old Red Courthouse. There Charity Gilbert delivered the first baby of Dallas Euro-American history, their ninth child, son Morris. Not long thereafter they moved to the west side of the Trinity River, about "two miles" from Bryan's settlement, where they built a cabin and established land claims. Coombes Creek was originally called Gilberts Creek; and Kidd Springs was originally called Gilbert Springs. Sometime in 1843 or 1844, the Gilberts decided to leave Dallas and move back to Fannin County. They then sold their Oak Cliff claims to William Coombes who had arrived in Dallas (in company with George Leonard) during 1843. The Creek then acquired the Coombes family name. The Overton family arrived the next year. Aaron Overton, its father, lived in a cabin at Gilbert Springs (whose name was not changed to Kidd Springs until some thirty years later). At some unknown point in time, a Peters Colony survey crew came through this district and pinned the boundaries of the various "sections" of land; and at that point the earlier claim boundaries must have been adjusted somewhat, to fit the Peters Colony grid layout. Aaron Overton operated a horse powered mill. William Perry Overton eventually moved his home and business activity south to Honey Springs. William Myers, as discussed in Essay III seems to have arrived in 1846, at which time he bought Caswell Overton's farm; and the history of the William Myers Section can be traced in more accurate detail thereafter.

There are numerous uncertainties and problems imbedded in this story. Let me try to point to some of the difficulties and possibilities. M.C. Toyer theorized that Mabel Gilbert might have heard about the Kidd Springs site during his stay at Bird's Fort during late 1841, from conversation with one of the soldiers who had been among Col. Smith's troops camped there in July of that year. Gilbert then, so this hypothetical theory goes, returned to Dallas intent on finding that particular campsite and its abundantly flowing waters. From the debris the Texan army had left, the Gilberts quickly found the site where the Texans had camped only six months before. The Kidd Springs site is indeed a great campground since it is located along the ridge-route that the Republic of Texas was using as a Military Road and had abundant flow of fresh water, more than enough to take care of Smith's small army. It is further theorized that the Gilberts, including each of Mabel's various grown sons, believed they could file claims for what combined together would have been more than a thousand acres of free new land, under rights granted by the Republic of Texas' Military Road Act. The Gilberts already owned land in Texas and under the rules of colonization they did not qualify for more free land from Peters Colony.

Toyer theorizes that when that Military Road land grant act was repealed by the legislature, and the Gilberts' opportunity for free land in Dallas evaporated, the Gilberts packed up and moved back to their previous homestead in Bonham. Marlin Gilbert's account adds that the Gilberts decided that they did not like farming the black gummy soil of the west Dallas County region. M.C. Toyer thinks that the detail of the Gilberts having built a "blockhouse" in 1842-3 is something Marlin Gilbert picked up from Barrott Sanders' *Dallas—Her Golden Years* and is likely merely another of Sanders' widely quoted inaccuracies. Both Toyer and I feel the placement of Gilberts' cabin at Kidd Springs to be questionable. For all I know now, the cabin that Caswell Overton sold to William Myers in the deed transaction of May of 1846 was in fact the very same cabin that Mabel and Charity Gilbert built in 1842. I don't know.

The Gilbert family land claims of 1842-3 might have never been formally surveyed, or their makeshift markers might have been ignored by the Peters Colony surveyors. So far, I know of no document descriptions of the Gilberts' claim in what is now western Dallas County (what was then Robertson County).

Another thing I don't clearly understand: if William Coombes bought the Gilbert family claims, then how did Aaron Overton wind up living at Gilbert Springs? Did the Overtons actually arrive prior to the Coombes, or did the Overtons buy the Gilberts' claims from the Coombes? Had William Coombes lived originally at the Gilbert cabin at the edge of the floodplain and later shifted his residency up to the roadside hilltop site north of Coombes Creek? The local lore is that William Coombes' final cabin was situated in what is now Fort Worth Avenue right-of-way, just south of the Western Heights Cemetery. With trees then only growing along the stream in the valley, the view from William Coombes' cabin might possibly have extended across what is now Kessler Park all the way to Kidds Springs far beyond. Much more certainly, that location must have had a spectacularly beautiful view south up the valley of Coombes Creek.

The official deed records of Dallas County have few, if any, documents old enough to illuminate this earliest historic period. Old claims might have been filed in the records of early Nacogdoches County or Robertson County (of which Dallas County was part prior to its separate creation in 1846), or the General Land Office in Austin. There is reportedly a biography, or autobiography of William Coombes which I have neither read nor seen. There are perhaps other Coombes, Overton, Leonard family historical records, but I have not checked. Finally, I suspect that there might possibly be cases of early litigation involving the land claims of Coombes, Overton, Leonard family members, similar to the case of *William Myers vs. Milton Merrifield*. Such old court trials might have saved similar ancient treasures of pioneer deeds or transcripts of testimony long hidden within the Case Note files archived by the Texas District Courts (currently deposited at the Dallas Public Library). Slowly finding each pertinent law-suit, opening its file, deciphering its faded handwriting, and compiling an accurate summary of its historical facts, will consume lengthy spans of time.

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- ***American Sketch Book***, Kate Efnor, 1881. -- Efnor states that Gilberts’ cabin was at the edge of the bottoms on the west side of the river.
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