

Sam Houston and his Connections to the Groces at Bernardo by James V. Woodrick

Sam Houston had an early tie to Texas at least a decade before he came to stay and establish his legendary status as the iconic hero of the Lone Star State. He also knew of the Groces at Bernardo before he met them and visited the plantation. Houston was a member of the Texas Association, a group of colonization advocates from Tennessee who competed with Stephen F. Austin in 1822 in Mexico for the rights to the first Anglo colony in Mexican Texas.

A fellow member of this group, Andrew Erwin, had operated a mercantile business partnership with Jared Ellison Groce II in Georgia. When the business failed in the Financial Panic of 1819, Erwin moved to Tennessee where he became active in the Texas Association. Erwin knew that Groce had moved to Texas in early 1822, and probably mentioned this to his partners as they continued to petition the Mexican government for a colonization grant.

Groce family legend indicates that it was at Bernardo that the ground was laid for Sam Houston to come to Texas. Family historian Sarah Groce Berlet, writing around 1930, said: "It was through a personal letter from Wm. H. Wharton, at Groce's suggestion, that Sam Houston came to Texas. It is said that Wm. H. Wharton, who had known Houston in Tennessee, related some anecdotes about him to his father-in-law, Jared E. Groce, one day, when the latter exclaimed, "That's the kind of a man we need in Texas! Write to him and urge him to come!" Wharton did write to him and incidentally reminded him that there was nothing like being on the ground where things were happening."

William H. Wharton and his brother, John, came from their home in Nashville to Texas in early 1827. Both knew Houston in Nashville. And both soon met Jared Groce, who at that time was the largest landowner and the richest man in Texas. Shortly after his arrival, William came to Bernardo to do some legal work for Jared Groce II. There he met Jared's daughter, Sarah Ann, and a rapid courtship followed. It is likely that these two had actually met or at least knew of each other earlier in Nashville, as one of Sarah's closest friends and classmates at the boarding school there was Betsy Wharton, sister of William and John.

William and Sarah married at Bernardo on December 5, 1827. Jared gave his daughter 3 1/2 leagues of his land holdings in Brazoria County, including slaves and a working plantation known as Eagle Island. After their wedding the Whartons returned to Nashville, where William resumed his legal practice. William and Sarah were encouraged to return by personal letters from Stephen Austin and from Jared, who offered to build them a new home if they returned. They finally agreed to move back to Texas, and did so in 1829. The new home promised by Sarah's father was built at Eagle Island and rapidly became another of the grand plantations in Texas.

No letter from William Wharton to Houston as indicated by Groce family lore has been found. It may have been lost, or perhaps the Groce family lore was based on two very similar letters written by John Wharton, very likely with input and strong influence from the Groces. One, dated October 25, 1829, was sent to Houston while he was living with the Cherokees in Indian Territory, having fled Tennessee after his aborted marriage earlier that year. Wharton wrote, "I therefore request you once more to visit Texas. It is a fine field for enterprise. You can get a grant of land, and yet be surrounded by your friends; and what may not be 'coming out of time' to bring about? - I am now on my way to Texas, in company with my brother and his lady, Major Boyd, and Mr. Groce." John's brother was William, whose "lady" was his wife, Sara Ann Groce Wharton, and "Mr. Groce" was Leonard. They were apparently traveling from Tennessee to Texas when the letter was written. The Wm. Whartons were moving back to Texas to stay. Leonard had apparently gone to Tennessee to accompany them home. Although John Wharton was the author of the letters of encouragement to Houston, he may well have been prompted to do so by discussions between Jared II and his son-in-law, William Wharton.

John Wharton wrote another letter to Houston from New Orleans dated June 2, 1832, in which he mentioned Jared Groce: "I gave Dr. Branch T. Archer of Virginia a letter of introduction to you. Dr. Archer has been in Texas for upwards of 12 months, is intimately acquainted with matters and things there, and is in the confidence of all of their leading men. He is of the opinion that there will be some fighting there next fall, and that a fine country will be gained without much bloodshed, he is very desirous that you should go there, and believes that you can be of more service than any other man. He left for Virginia today, and should you fall in with him, I expect that he will put you in the notion of going. Texas does undoubtedly present a fine field for fame, enterprise, and usefulness, and whenever they are ready for action, I will be with them."

Houston was in Washington at this time and had no doubt visited President Andrew Jackson. He forwarded John Wharton's letter to a Mr. Prentiss, writing, "Mr. Wharton is a lawyer of New Orleans of genius -- a young man, and is the brother of William Wharton, son-in-law of Groce of Texas. He can be relied upon and you know Dr. Archer. You can let Mr. Jackson and our friends (such as you wish) see this letter [Wharton's], and send it back to me enclosed to the postmaster here, or Mr. Blair, with any communications to me. If they come to the bar, they are often overlooked. It is important that I should be off to Texas!

Write soon.

16th June

Houston"

And off to Texas he was, soon.

The Handbook of Texas Online indicates that “Houston crossed the Red River into Mexican Texas on December 2, 1832, and began another, perhaps the most important, phase of his career. His “true motives” for entering Texas have been the source of much speculation. Whether he did so simply as a land speculator, as an *agent provocateur* for American expansion intent on wresting Texas from Mexico, or as someone scheming to establish an independent nation, Houston saw Texas as his “land of promise.” For him, it represented “a place for bold enterprise, rife with political and financial opportunity.” Most historians believe that President Andrew Jackson encouraged his protégée Houston to go to Texas to determine when it would be time for annexation. Clearly Houston had several reasons to go to Texas. The seeds of this decision likely were indirectly planted by Jared Groce at the Bernardo plantation in Texas.

Houston initially settled in Nacogdoches where he practiced law, but soon became involved in the events that led to the Texas Revolution. He was a delegate from Nacogdoches to the Convention of 1833, and the Consultation of 1835, both sited in San Felipe. It was on one of these trips that he probably met the Groces for the first time, and perhaps visited Bernardo, a popular stopping-over place for travelers. It was in 1836 that Houston’s interactions with the Groces at Bernardo blossomed.

Among the visitors in early 1836 were both Sam Houston and Pamela Dickinson Mann, one of the more colorful and notorious characters of early Texas, who had arrived in Texas 1834 and settled near San Felipe. She wrote the following letter to Sam Houston from Pleasant Hill:

“Pleasant Hill Feby 3d 1836

Dear Sir

I send to you by my sun a package of letters that governor Smith gave to me and requested of me to send them by Mr Mann or my sun as he was afeared that someone would get them and you would not get them sum gentle men in San Fellipee saw me receive them and offered me one hundred dollars to let them intercept them but I cannot be bought by munney when I see you I will tell you who the persons are the same persons replied that you had designed against them and the Govt and people two but you General doo not drop a hint from me as I am all most afeared of my life we now have our wagons lowdded to move to the neighbourhood of Washington we hope we can get a house in town we send you by my sun fifty dollars to get Corn from Col Groose and you get it and tell Col Groose to delever it to Mr Manns order or mine the independance ticket went the hole hog in this present and the present majority this then was but nine votes for the Constetuiun in San Fellipee votes was nearly eaqul but I believe the Constetution beat a little Forgive bad spelling

Yours with Respect

Major General S. Houston Mrs. P. Mann”

Pamela Mann arrived in Texas in 1834, settled originally at San Felipe, and was an innkeeper at various locations in Texas, including a temporary inn at Washington during the Convention of 1836. In her

letter to Houston she referred to the Consultation of San Felipe held November 7, 1835, in which delegates voted to take up arms in defense of the Mexican Constitution of 1824. After the Convention and before the Runaway Scrape, she was apparently headed from her home at San Felipe toward Washington when she wrote the letter on February 3rd from Pleasant Hill. She apparently came back to Bernardo after leaving Washington, because in mid-April her oxen were impressed at Bernardo to pull the Twin Sisters cannons eastward. One 1837 publication discrediting Houston's role in the revolution states that the General was resting with his head in Pamela's lap in his training camp on the Brazos opposite Bernardo in early April, 1836, when he received word of the massacre of Fannin's men. Startled, he jumped up, causing Mrs. Mann to state that she nearly stuck her comb in his head. When she later learned that Houston was not retreating to East Texas, she personally intervened in the army's march toward Harrisburg and successfully demanded that her animals be released.

She was one of the first residents of Houston, moving her inn, named the Mansion House and including a tavern and brothel, to the newly created town. Sam Houston apparently stayed at her place when he was in Houston during the period that it was the capitol of Texas; they were obviously friends and perhaps lovers. Accused of several crimes ranging from larceny to assault to fornication between 1836 and 1840, she was awarded executive clemency by President Lamar. Sam Houston stood as best man in the 1838 wedding of her son Nimrod. She died of yellow fever in 1840.

A letter from James W. Robinson to Sam Houston is marked by him as "Recd. 2nd Feb. at Col. Groces. All upon the surface. H." This letter thus places Houston at Jared Groce's residence, Retreat, on February 2. At that time both Jared II and Leonard were addressed by the title "Colonel". The Pamela Mann letter to Houston dated February 3 from Pleasant Hill makes it clear that he was not at Bernardo on that date.

It was around this time or slightly later that George Childress was writing the draft of the Texas Declaration of Independence at Retreat. Perhaps Houston even made some suggestions to Childress while they were guests of Groce at Retreat. On the February 3 Houston arrived in Washington and was trying to sort through the debilitating infighting in the fledgling government between provisional governor Henry Smith and the General Council as to who was leading the newly-declared republic. Houston probably had seen Pamela Mann in the previous few days, likely at Bernardo or Pleasant Hill. Houston left for East Texas on Feb. 5, where he completed negotiating a treaty with the Cherokees on February 23. Afterward he immediately departed for Washington, arriving back at the Convention then in progress on February 29. After being named Commander in Chief of the Texian army, Houston went to Gonzales to begin forming his army, then fell back to the Colorado River, being pursued by the Mexican army. Following a several-day standoff across the Colorado below Columbus, Houston pulled back to San Felipe, where he learned that the steamboat *Yellow Stone* was tied up at Groce's landing at Bernardo loading cotton. He

immediately set his army in motion for that location knowing that the steamboat would be a valuable asset in moving his army across the Brazos and that he would find ample food and other supplies for his army at Bernardo. He arrived on the west bank of the Brazos on March 31, 1836, and set up camp on land owned by Jared Groce, where he spent two weeks providing some much-needed training for his army.

During the time Houston's army camped near Bernardo (March 31 to April 14, 1836), Jared Groce III furnished the army with large quantities of food and supplies, including a thousand of bushels of corn, cattle, hogs and ground meal. The attached invoice for \$2,272.25 was presented by Leonard and Jared Groce III for the supplies they furnished to the Texian army. The first mobile hospital of the Texas army had been set up by the main house at Bernardo for several weeks, being supported by several Groce family women who remained there throughout the period.

During the two weeks at his "Camp West of the Brazos," Houston wrote many letters and issued various orders dealing with his army. Here he completely reorganized his army, making it ready for the major battle that he anticipated would come soon. One of these orders written on April 3 entrusts Jared Groce III to keep his favorite horse, Saracen, until he is ready to leave: "Head Quarters, Camp on Brazos, 3rd April 1836. Mr. J. Groce [Jared III] will take charge of my Grey Stallion now on the opposite side of the river [at Bernardo], and hold him subject to the orders of the Commander in Chief of the Army." Saracen was the first horse used by Houston in the Battle of San Jacinto. He was killed during the battle, perhaps by the same bullet that shattered Houston's ankle.

Jared Groce II, who insisted he be brought to Bernardo when he heard that Houston's army was camped nearby, was so weakened by the buggy trip down from Retreat that he spent the whole time in bed. When Houston departed, his children took him back to Retreat, where he never fully recovered his health. On April 12, Houston crossed the river and held his army for two nights at Bernardo. A letter to David Thomas, Acting Sec. of War, was datelined "Camp at Groce's": "Headquarters, Camp at Groce's April 13, 1836. "...On the previous night, in consultation with the secretary of war, we concluded to pass the river to this side. At ten o'clock, A.M. yesterday, I commenced crossing the river, and from that time until the present (noon) the steamboat and yawl (having no ferry-boat) have been engaged. We have eight or ten wagons, ox-teams, and about two hundred horses, belonging to the army, and these have to pass on board the steamboat, besides the troops, baggage, &c. This requires time; but I hope in one hour to be enabled to be in preparation. .."

It was on the front lawn of the main house at Bernardo where Sam Houston first saw his two new cannons, the first he had since leaving Gonzales. The "Twin Sisters," two six-pounder cannons, arrived at Bernardo on April 11. Gifts to Texas from the city of Cincinnati, they had been shipped by water destined for delivery to Houston's army. Due to bad weather and road conditions, after arriving at the mouth of the Brazos at Velasco they were sent by schooner to Harrisburg, where they were entrusted to a Captain Smith.

He left on April 9, hauling the cannons to Bernardo with a team of oxen. Upon their delivery to Bernardo, Sam Houston immediately formed a thirty-man artillery "corps" to service the guns, the only artillery with the Texas army at that time, and placed this unit under the command of Lt. Col. James Clinton Neill. On the morning of April 14 Houston set his army in motion, leaving Bernardo for destiny one week later at San Jacinto.

In the spring of 1837, life on Bernardo plantation resumed its former activities. Noted for its generous hospitality, many visitors coming from the United States were entertained in grand southern style by Leonard and Courtney Ann Groce. Family members noted that there were seldom less than twenty guests at the dinner table each night. Travelers from Houston to the new capital at Austin often stopped for a night or more. General Houston was a frequent visitor and a favorite with the children and a close friend of Leonard Groce. On one of these trips Houston wore a vest which Groce admired. The General promptly gave the vest to his friend, and Leonard took it to Houston to be photographed wearing his prized new vest.

Houston's connection with the Groce family and the Bernardo plantation, which began in 1827, continued for the rest of his life.

Archeologists Excavate Historic Plantation Site

Bernardo Was First and Largest Plantation in Republic of Texas

The sprawling green pasture in rural Waller County that once hosted Texas' largest plantation contains few hints of its historical significance. An old cistern with a tree growing in the center is all that visually remains above ground to tell the story of the Bernardo Plantation, where more than 100 people once lived and worked along the east bank of the Brazos River nearly 50 miles northwest of Houston.

Texas Historical Commission (THC) archeologists recently scoured the 1,500-acre property with ground-penetrating radar and magnetometer survey equipment to detect buried evidence of the structures and physical objects left behind at Bernardo, established in 1822 by Jared E. Groce, one of Stephen F. Austin's Old Three Hundred settlers. The THC's remote sensing work revealed what appear to be intact remnants of the plantation's "Big House." According to THC Archeology Division Director Jim Bruserth, two chimneys were recently confirmed, providing significant evidence to accurately determine the placement and dimension of the building.

These findings validate Bernardo's previously documented structures, including the large 1 1/2-story home (the "Big House") constructed of cottonwood logs, a stand-alone kitchen and dairy, slaves' quarters, a travelers' hostel known as Bachelor's Hall and a cabin for the plantation's resident doctor. Other buildings on the property were used primarily by the field slaves, including family cabins, a communal kitchen, dining hall, day nursery, overseer's house, cotton gin and blacksmith shop.

The historic site was discovered by Wharton pediatrician and avocational archeologist Gregg Dimmick, who has authored two

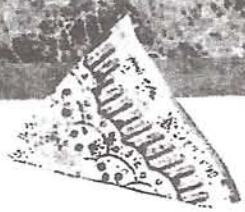


books on Texas history. Dimmick says the site was pointed out to him by fellow Texas history buff Jim Woodrick, who believed it to be the general area where Groce's plantation once stood.

Months later, while being interviewed for the Houston television program "Postcards from Texas" on another topic, Dimmick learned station owner Greg Brown, who is also the publisher of *Cowboys and Indians* magazine, owned the land Woodrick had referenced. Dimmick contacted Brown, resulting in a tour of the property last April.

"The tour was a wonderful day for Jim and me — Greg showed us the old family cemetery, the cistern

for the main plantation home, the old Coushatta crossing and then let us scout around on our own," recalls Dimmick. "I decided this site was way too historically significant for the likes of Jim and me. We felt even more strongly as we began to search the archives and found that Bachelor's Hall had housed Stephen F. Austin, Sam Houston, the Whartons — just about all the big names of Texas history."



Left: THC archeologists (from left) Bill Pierson and Tiffany Osburn conduct magnetometer surveys at the Bernardo Plantation site. Below: A sampling of artifacts unearthed during recent excavations.

The collection of structures was a beehive of activity nearly 200 years ago, with large family gatherings, frequent visitors and ambitious crop production. Bernardo is considered the South's last major cotton plantation and represents the country's farthest westward plantation expansion.

"With regards to Texas' early history, its location in the Brazos Valley is where the South became the West," says Texas State Historian Light Cummins. "Bernardo was where plantation history began in our state with the planting of the first cotton crop in the Austin colony, and in terms of slave numbers, it

remained the largest plantation in the Republic of Texas."

Ten days before the monumental Battle of San Jacinto, the Bernardo plantation

provided the facilities, services and strategic location for Sam Houston and his Texian soldiers to prepare for the Mexican army. Houston's men used the blacksmith shop to make bullets, the slaves' quarters for lodging and the plantation's crops for provisions. Women helped by making sandbags for use in battle and by attending to sick soldiers.

Over the course of this busy week, Bernardo became an epicenter for the Texians' activities. The Twin Sisters cannons arrived at Bernardo from supporters in Ohio and, nearby, the steamboat *Yellow Stone* was waiting to ferry soldiers across

the Brazos River. Meanwhile, large groups of people fleeing Mexican Gen. Santa Anna's approaching troops were arriving in what has come to be known as the Runaway Scrape.

Last summer and fall, THC archeologists and Houston-based Community Archaeology Research Institute, Inc. (CARI) representatives spent several days surveying the property with high-tech equipment. The results are being analyzed by CARI's co-principal investigators, Dr. Carol McDavid and Robert Marcom, who are encouraged by their findings.

"As we began to recover artifacts, we were presented with some of the most poignant experiences an archeologist can have," Marcom reports. "For instance, finding a heavy hoe blade that's more than 170 years old is a reminder of both the economic possibilities that the early settlers hoped to exploit as well as the terrible human cost that enslavement exacted on those who were forced to labor under the hot Texas sun."

Marcom adds that archeologists also discovered wagon and harness pieces, fragments of ceramic vessels and hand-blown glass, all likely freighted in at some expense. These bits of household goods serve as reminders of the everyday life of the people who settled Texas.

In the coming year, archeologists expect to specifically locate and document the plantation's structures and other significant items, including the nearby gravestones related to a subsequent family on the property, historic metal artifacts and the location of the original ferry. With extensive documentation and interpretation, the real stories of this remarkable chapter of the state's rich history will soon be told.

"Given the results of the surveys conducted by the historical commission and the excellent

preliminary work conducted by Gregg Dimmick, Jim Woodrick and many others, we have high hopes for this site," Marcom says. "It's also important to note that the possibility for extensive and intensive research is only possible due to the extraordinary access granted to us by Greg Brown. He has offered a degree of cooperation and assistance that archeologists seldom receive."

McDavid adds that it will be interesting to consider what it was like to live and work in the historic space and to attempt to determine how things changed over time.

"We're interested in the Native American elements that may be present, given that the old Couthatta crossing is located there," she says. "The use of the space may go back into antiquity, and the opportunities for involving a variety of descendant groups is very exciting."

CARI will also continue to manage the Bernardo Plantation Archeology Project founded by Dimmick, Woodrick and Brown. The Bernardo group hopes the site will only be partially excavated, leaving some areas for future experts and techniques.

"Our goal for the project is for the site to be excavated in the most modern, professional and scientifically possible manner," said Dimmick. "I hope we can use the site as a learning tool for archeology classes, field schools, avocational archeologists and the like. I think the main thing we will gain from the excavations and investigations is a much greater understanding of plantation life in early Texas." ★

This article was written by Debbi Head and Andy Rhodes of the THC's Marketing Communications Division.

