

A Man of Many Talents: James Pinckney Henderson

by Scott Sosebee

The East Texas Historical Association provides this column as a public service.

Scott Sosebee is Executive Director of the Association and can be contacted at sosebeem@sfasu.edu.

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(Feb 20, 2023) I would guess that any Texan worth their salt could tell you that Sam Houston was the first president of the Republic of Texas. Most could name at least five, maybe ten, governors of the state, and even more could certainly let you know that Lyndon Baines Johnson and Dwight Eisenhower are the only U.S. Presidents born in the state, even though Eisenhower was not quite two when his family moved to Kansas, where he was raised (George W. Bush was born in Connecticut and did not come with his family to Texas until he was a teenager), However, how many of you know who was the first governor of Texas? Well, if you don't know, let's correct that right now.

Like almost every one of his era James Pinckney Henderson was not born in Texas. He was the second child of Lawson and Elizabeth Henderson, born in 1808 in Lincolnton, North Carolina. The Henderson were landowners and fairly well-off and young James received a good education and graduated from the University of North Carolina in 1828. He studied law and was admitted to the state bar in 1829. James Pinckney Henderson was, however, a man of his time and place, and for many young people who grew up on the western edges of eastern states in the early 1800s, movement west and speculating in land held more interest for them than most professions. Henderson followed just such a path. After practicing law and serving in the North Carolina militia for five years, he moved to western Mississippi in order to acquire and sell land. When he got there, he found most of the land already in the hands of other speculators, but that led him to another plan.

The southern U.S. states in 1835 were full of Texas talk, specifically the potential for an uprising against Mexican rule. For men like Henderson, the probability of a new nation meant new economic opportunities, so in early 1836, Henderson made plans to go to Texas. He traveled overland to New Orleans where he boarded a ship that arrived in Velasco in June 1836. San Jacinto, of course, had ended the Texas Revolution

in April, but the new nation remained in need of men willing to serve in different capacities. Interim Texas President David G. Burnet made Henderson a brigadier general in the Texas Army and he was sent back to the United States to recruit a force for him to command; Texas, at that time, anticipated a potential Mexican reinvasion and were preparing a standing army. Henderson raised a force at his own expense, but he did not get a chance to command. While he was away Texas had held an election and the new president was Sam Houston. Houston needed legal talent more than he needed generals, and he made Henderson the Republic's attorney general in November 1836.

When Stephen F. Austin died in December 1836, Houston made Henderson the second Texas Secretary of State, but he remained in that job an even shorter time than he did as attorney general. What Texas needed in 1837 was recognition of its sovereignty by the European powers, specifically England and France. To help make that happen, Houston gave Henderson another job by making him minister to England and France with specific instructions to help negotiate recognition as well as a trade treaty. He proved his diplomatic skills by securing both by 1838. While he was in London, James Henderson also found something else: a wife. Frances Cox was the daughter of a prominent Philadelphia merchant who was traveling in Europe. She and Henderson met in London and married in October 1839. Henderson and his new bride left England in the spring of 1840 and he returned to San Augustine, where he established a law office.

Henderson was not, however, done with government service. Sam Houston—in his second term as president of Texas—called him once again to use his diplomatic talents to breach the chasm that had developed over Texas becoming a part of the United States. Texas' president sent him to Washington to negotiate the impasse. He succeeded in getting a treaty signed by U.S. President John Tyler in April 1844, but the senate—due to protests by northern states over Texas' allowance of slavery—rejected the document in June of 1844. Henderson wanted to try again, but Houston ordered him home. Angry, Henderson broke with his former friend over his dismissal and the two remained somewhat estranged for the rest of their lives.

Texas was finally annexed by the United States through the unique mechanism of a joint-resolution of Congress (an idea which some historians have suggested originated with Henderson) in December 1845. Texas, secure in the negotiations of the treaty that had lasted almost a year of back-and-forth action by the congresses of Texas and the United States, held an election for state officers in November 1845 and the people of the state elected James Pinckney Henderson the first governor of Texas. He took office in February 1846, but once again, James Pinckney Henderson did not get to serve long. When the Mexican War broke out in May 1846, Henderson asked the Texas legislature to allow him a leave of absence to lead Texas volunteers in the field as part of the U.S. forces invading Mexico. The legislature agreed and he took command of the

2nd Texas Volunteer Regiment that fought in the Battle of Monterrey. He then helped to negotiate the surrender of the city to U.S. control.

Henderson left his battlefield duties in October 1846 and returned to fulfill his two-year term as Texas governor. A popular politician, he could have no doubt won re-election, but he chose not to run and returned home again to San Augustine and his law practice. He and Francis lived a fairly quiet life—at least as quiet as one could in a frontier region—until, once again, Texas called him to service. Henderson's friend and peer Senator Thomas J. Rusk took his own life in July 1857, which meant that Texas needed a new senator. The legislature tapped Henderson to the post and he and Francis moved to Washington. He served in the senate until June 1858 when he caught one of the ever-present summer fevers that often swept Washington and died in his home. He was buried in the Congressional Cemetery where he lay until 1930 when he was brought home and reinterred in the Texas State Cemetery in Austin.

If you would like to learn more about the amazing life of James Pinckney Henderson, and also get a glimpse of the personality of the man, the Stone Fort Chapter of the Daughters of the Republic of Texas will be hosting a presentation of the life of Henderson by Brad Maule at noon on March 18 at the Fredonia Hotel. Tickets and information are available at the CVB, downtown. Please make plans to see this wonderful program. Deadline for ticket sales is March 3.

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