

# An Open Letter to All Members of the Texas State Historical Association from Former Presidents of the TSHA | July 13, 2023

Dear Fellow TSHA Members,

By now you have probably read in the press about J. P. Bryan's lawsuit and injunction against the TSHA board and its president, Nancy Baker Jones. For those of you who have not followed the situation closely, back in October, with the Association facing financial headwinds, Bryan offered his services as interim executive director, promising to apply his business acumen and fundraising prowess to improving the organization's financial situation. The board accepted his generous offer. Over the ensuing months, however, Bryan clashed with Chief Historian Walter Buenger, the board, and the president, all of whom expected Bryan to observe the bylaws, which reserve certain powers for the chief historian and require oversight by the board. After the March annual meeting, Bryan filed his suit, seeking to replace the democratically elected board with a new or enlarged board to be controlled by his own handpicked candidates, an act which, if successful, will constitute a hostile takeover of the TSHA.

In his suit, Bryan charges that the board is in violation of the organization's bylaws, which state that the board must be "balanced substantially" between academic and nonacademic members. Bryan then applies his own idiosyncratic method of counting who is or is not an academic, a count that contradicts the bylaws and the traditions of the TSHA and ignores the judgment of the several nominating committees (themselves composed of academics and nonacademics) who nominated those board members for their respective slots.

TSHA members familiar with the governance of the Association know what the general practice has long been: Academics are full-time or retired history professors, generally with PhDs; nonacademics are everyone else. By this practice, the present board remains "substantially balanced," although we recognize that there are some gray areas in the bylaws that could be clarified, such as how one counts a K-12 teacher; how one counts someone whose principal career was outside of academia but who did some part-time college teaching; or how one counts an educational administrator. Over the TSHA's long history, nominating committees—acting in good faith—have sometimes classified such people as academics and sometimes as nonacademics. Bryan's injunction also prevents the board from meeting, disrupting the Association's governance and violating not only our bylaws (which require the board to meet) but also the rules and procedures governing nonprofits in Texas.

Bryan's complaint, however, is not really about the technical means by which the board's makeup has been determined. No, this is about politics and ideology; Bryan, in a number of recent interviews, has echoed today's far-right-wing talking points, setting his sights on what he thinks is the out-of-control wokeness of the Association. His appointment as interim executive director, then, has turned out to be a classic case of a Trojan Horse: Appointed to the TSHA staff under the guise of helping to improve the Association's finances, he has instead made the TSHA the latest front in the culture wars, a development that few in the organization wanted and that threatens the very survival of the TSHA as we know it.

Bryan, a descendant of Stephan F. Austin's nephew William Joel Bryan, is a passionate devotee of a certain version of Texas history—he typically begins speeches by proclaiming that Texas “has the greatest history of any state.” In a recent interview, Bryan charged academic members of the TSHA board with promoting a narrative “that demeans the Anglo efforts in settling the western part of the United States for the purpose of spreading freedoms for all.” Does Bryan seriously contend that his pioneer great-great-grandfather settled on his Brazoria County plantation with his thirty-eight slaves in order to secure “freedoms for *all*?” In that same interview, Bryan cherry-picked selected quotes from Chief Historian Buenger—himself a fifth-generation Texan—to demonstrate Buenger's and other historians' alleged demonization of Texas heroes. “If we keep on this path, we're going to lose it all,” Bryan declared, “There's nothing inspiring when everyone's a villain or crook or usurper of wealth. I don't just want a seat at the table. I want to make sure all who have different views have a seat there, too.”

For those of us who love Texas history and the TSHA, this is disheartening, especially coming from someone who has contributed much to our organization over time. Bryan may think that all the nonacademic members of the TSHA share his disdain for the academics in the Association, but he is wrong about that. Nonacademics in the Association enjoy the friendships of the professors and love learning about their work. Likewise, academics in the Association have long taken pride in the fact that we are a big-tent organization, and those of us who have been members for many years have made lifelong friends—and sometimes have found scholarly collaborators—in our nonacademic fellow-members. The pages of the TSHA's publications remain open to all whose work meets its scholarly standards.

It is certainly true that TSHA publications often reflect current trends in the broader historical profession, including articles, presentations, and books devoted to various topics relating to race and gender. But contrary to Bryan's claim that the TSHA only presents “one side of Texas history,” a quick look at the programs of the two most recent annual meetings reveals much that is traditional: In those meetings, one could hear presentations, by academics and nonacademics alike, on “Screwworm Eradication in West Texas,” “Texas State Banks and the Great Depression,” “Presidential Life in Eighteenth-Century Texas,” “The American Legal System and the Plains Indian Wars,” “The Legal Origins of Sam Houston's 1833 Draft Constitution,” “Southern Plain Folk Migration to Post Reconstruction Texas,” “Influenza and War in Advertisement,” “The Texas Catholic Conference of Health Facilities: Christian Witness to Health Care Ministry,” and “Lutcher Stark and the 1910 University of Texas Football Season.”

*Southwestern Historical Quarterly* articles since 2020 include “La Salle's Texas Enterprise and Louis XIV's Imperial America,” “Explosions and Fires at the Ports of Texas City and Houston,” “Enlightened Catholicism and Colonization on the Texas Frontier,” “The Treason Case of Erasmo Seguín: A Story of Texas's First War of Independence,” and “The January 1866 Filibustering Raid on Bagdad, Mexico.” Recent books published by the TSHA Press include *A Busy Week in Texas: Ulysses S. Grant's 1880 Visit to the Lone Star State*, *Inside the Texas Revolution: The Enigmatic Memoir of Herman Ehrenberg*, *Tejano Patriot: The Revolutionary Life of José Francisco Ruiz, 1783–1840*, *Texas and World War I*, and *The Old Army in the Big Bend of Texas: The Last Cavalry Frontier, 1911–1921*. This hardly qualifies as wokeness run amok, and it certainly refutes the claim that those who do traditional topics have been denied “a seat at the table.”

The problem with Bryan's attack on academics in the TSHA is that it displays a fundamental misunderstanding of what the study of history *is*. When Bryan complains that academics are guilty of "demonizing Texas heroes," when he worries that academic history may fail to "inspire" readers, when he trumpets the "greatness" of Texas's history, he is criticizing scholars for doing—or failing to do—things that fall outside the purview of serious historians. The historian's task is to help us *understand* the events of the past by researching the facts, however pleasant or unpleasant some may find those facts, and to offer informed interpretations about what the facts mean. It is *not* the job of the historian to glorify—or demonize—people in the past. "Hero" and "villain" are moral judgments, not historical interpretations.

Recent legislation in Texas and elsewhere has sought to ban the teaching of history that might make students feel "guilty" about the past, a concern that Bryan clearly shares; he has criticized the TSHA Annual Meeting for addressing "emotionally painful topics." But of course, nobody can tell anyone else how they should *feel*, be it guilty or proud. It is not the job of the historian to "inspire" others, as Bryan insists it should. If people read history and find inspiration (or guilt, or pain, or pride) there, that is up to them. Historical works that avow the "greatness" of a state or a historical figure is not really history at all; it's propaganda.

Real history is complicated. Historians tell us that Juan Seguín, the most celebrated Tejano officer in the Texas Revolutionary army, fled the state in the 1840s and fought against the United States in the U.S.-Mexican War. One can decide whether or not he was a Texas "hero." Sam Houston, a slaveowner whose private life included three marriages and struggles with alcohol, defended the rights of Indians and fought against the secession of Texas in 1861, acts which ultimately destroyed his political career and made him a traitor in the eyes of many of his contemporaries but which historians have praised as politically courageous. Hero or villain? Prior to coming to Texas and dying at the Alamo, James Bowie made a fortune illegally smuggling slaves and peddling forged land titles. Can a proven con man also be a hero? William Joel Bryan, J. P.'s wealthy slave-owning ancestor, later helped to finance the founding of Bryan, Texas, which was named in his honor. His legacy, like so many others, is complex.

The point here is that it is not "demonizing" our state's "heroes" to tell their complete stories, warts and all. It's what historians do. When historians research such figures' lives and examine their motives, they are neither demonizing them nor celebrating them; they are just being historians. Scholars understand that historical figures cannot be judged by today's standards. Nor do we suggest that anyone bears responsibility for things their ancestors did or didn't do. For those who want to honor and celebrate their ancestors—and there is nothing wrong with that—there are heritage groups like the Daughters of the Republic of Texas or the Sons of Confederate Veterans.

J. P. Bryan recently said of professional historians, "I don't like their history, and I don't believe their history." It is certainly his right to disagree with the conclusions, or to dislike the subject matter, of any particular historian. But Bryan's statement is telling: According to him, *all* academic historians apparently march in lockstep with one another, using their scholarship to spread liberal propaganda. Yet anyone who has read much professional history or attended many professional conferences knows that academics vigorously disagree with one another on just about everything. Indeed, we understand that this is what academic history really is: ongoing arguments about the meaning of the past. Bryan's idea that there are two "sides" to Texas history—a true, patriotic one, told mostly by nonprofessionals,

which celebrates the past, and a false, unpatriotic one, told by professional historians in order to vilify our heroes—is itself profoundly ahistorical.

It is also dangerous. History shows that the first thing authoritarian governments do when they come to power is shut down the archives, censor what is taught and written, and produce propaganda glorifying a mythical past that they promise to restore. For 126 years the Texas State Historical Association has provided multiple platforms for serious historians of *all* ideological or methodological persuasions, be they professionals or nonprofessionals, to explore our state’s astounding history. We call on all TSHA members to resist the current effort to fundamentally change the way the TSHA operates, to politicize it, and to remake it into a heritage group or, worse, a propaganda organ. As the old saying goes, “If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it.”

Signed,

*Patrick Cox, TSHA president, 2021-2022*

*Emilio Zamora, TSHA president, 2019-2020*

*Paula Mitchell Marks, TSHA president, 2017-2018*

*Lynn Denton, TSHA president, 2015-2016*

*Gregg Cantrell, TSHA president, 2013-2014*

*Merline Pitre, TSHA president, 2011-2012*

*Robert A. Wooster, TSHA president, 2005-2006*

*George N. Green, TSHA president, 2003-2004*

*Jerry D. Thompson, TSHA president, 2001-2002*

*Alwyn Barr, TSHA president, 1992-1993*