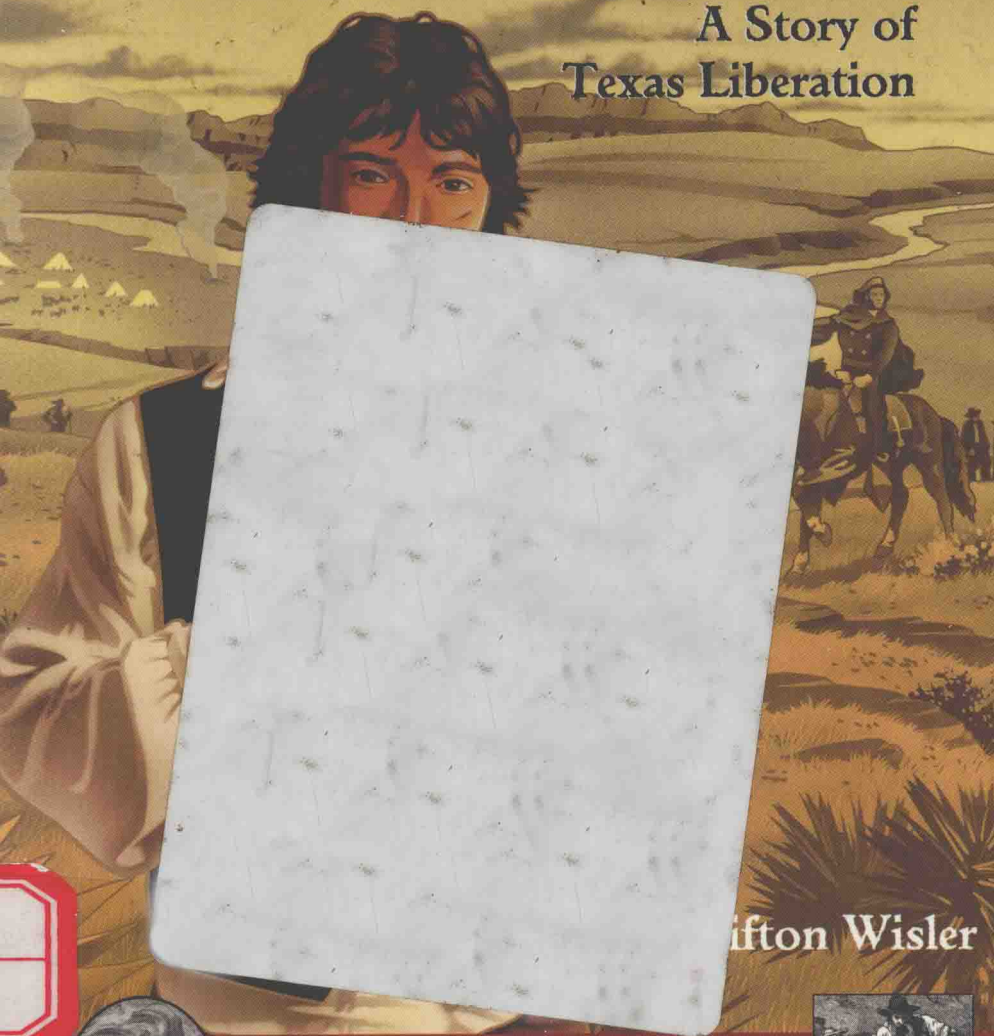


ALL FOR TEXAS

A Story of
Texas Liberation



ifton Wisler



1828
Andrew
Jackson
elected
President

1837
Republic
of Texas
is formed



1849
Gold Rush begins
in California

JAMESTOWN'S AMERICAN PORTRAITS

All for Texas

A Story of Texas Liberation

G. Clifton Wisler

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and especially Joan Jackson, who taught the love of learning.

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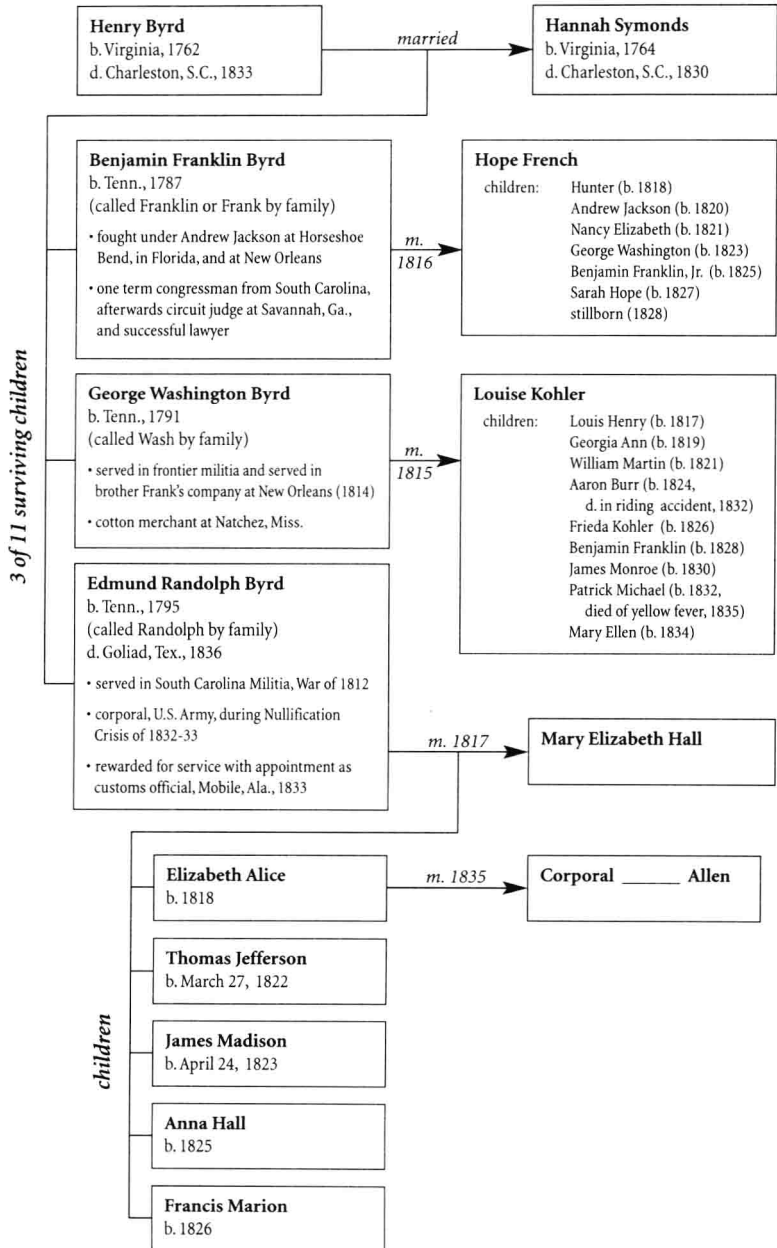
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BYRD FAMILY TREE



Texas 1836



Chapter 1

Itchy Feet

I suppose you could say that the urge to move started with Grandpa Henry. He was, as Pa liked to say, the first of the Byrds to take flight. Not that they were much for running away. Henry Byrd fought the British at Cowpens, and he had kin fighting redcoats and Indians from Chesapeake Bay to the Ohio Valley. Two of Pa's brothers were with Andy Jackson himself when he thrashed the British Army outside of New Orleans. Pa, being the youngest, missed that fight, but he served in both the militia and the regular army later on. So you see, we Byrds may tend to have itchy feet as far as settling down is concerned, but we're not shy on backbone.

Once, a few years back, when we were living in Charleston, South Carolina, three boys chased me five city blocks toward the docks. Each one of them was a head

taller and three years older than I was, and I confess to being a little scared. The tallest one, Rufe Keller, had a stone big as my head in his hand, and he was plum determined to crack my skull with it. Now, I wasn't 10 years old at the time, but even then I wouldn't be chased for very long. I turned a corner, stopped, and picked up a cobblestone out of the street. When those three boys made the turn, I hurled my rock right past old Rufe's ear.

Well, Ma said that wasn't the smartest thing a boy had ever done, but it did get their attention. "I'm not afraid of you!" I hollered as I picked up a second rock. My aim was better this time, and I clipped Alfred Murdock's right elbow. He gave a yelp and beat a hasty retreat, dragging his brother Sam along. I'd like to say I set Rufe to running too, but the truth is that he pounced on me and pounded me proper. He didn't stop until my right eye was growing purple and blood dribbled out of the corner of my mouth.

"Who's right now?" Rufe shouted.

"I don't know for sure, but you *aren't*," I answered.

The funniest thing happened then. He rolled away, stood up, and helped me to my feet. I was bumped and bleeding, but he hadn't won anything. We both knew it too.

"Well," Rufe told me, "a fellow who'll take a whipping for what he believes ought not to lose more than a little blood."

Afterward, nobody bothered me much. My sister Beth told me it was because Rufe let it be known he would thrash anybody who did. I didn't understand why until

much later, after the fray at Goliad. I'm getting ahead of myself, though.

I passed the first 10 years of my life in Charleston, and they were mostly happy years. Pa was a corporal in the United States Army, stationed at Fort Moultrie. That's the fort where the Colonials had given the British a drubbing during the Revolution. He met Ma right after joining the regulars, back in 1817. She was a sergeant's daughter, and she told us a few tales of how they had to sneak past her father's post to pass time together. Beth was born a year after they were married. Then on March 27, 1822, I—Thomas Jefferson Byrd—saw the light of day.

Ma said I came out squawking and have been doing so ever since. Well, I don't know that I'd agree to that. But I do know that it took all the will a boy could muster to survive Beth's torments those first few years. I can't really blame her, though. She had had the run of the little wooden house that Pa rented until the rest of us started arriving. James Madison was next, a year and a month after me. Anna Hall, named after Ma's grandmother, came two years after that. A year later Francis Marion Byrd, whom we call Frank, finished out the family. He was named for the Swamp Fox.

If I came out squawking, I don't know what you would say about my brother Frank's arrival. There was hollering and shouting and plenty of running around. Ma was in bed for close to a month afterward. She called his birth a rough hatching, and the whole family was worried about her and little Frank both. That was the time when

Grandpa Henry and Grandma Hannah came to help look after us.

“Sure, it’s mighty crowded, but it’s crowded in a good way,” Beth remarked.

I was just four at the time and wouldn’t have known one way or the other. Ma’s hard time mellowed Beth considerably, though, and afterward she treated us more like an old mother hen watching over some scrawny chicks.

Like I said, Charleston was a pretty good place. There was always something going on. If it wasn’t a carnival, it was a fair. If life at our little house got too peaceful, you could wander down to the waterfront and watch the ships sailing in or out of the harbor. Grandpa Henry took us down to the wharf and taught us all how to fish. Grandma Hannah took on our education. She died just before Christmas 1830, and Grandpa followed her the day after I turned 11. I had never felt crowded in our little house, even with two brothers sharing a bed that I could have filled on my own. The place felt different after Grandma Hannah died, and it was downright empty when Grandpa Henry left us.

“It’s time we moved on,” Pa announced that May of 1834. “I’ve seen enough of army life to know I’m ready for something different.”

Twenty years was a long time to stay at anything, to my way of thinking, so I wasn’t all that surprised. The truth was that Pa had sort of worn out his welcome in Charleston. Andy Jackson, who had been elected president

of the whole country then, had used the army to enforce a new tariff law. South Carolina had almost gone to war over it. The hotheads said that any state that didn't like one of General Andy's laws didn't have to obey it, and South Carolina came close to pulling itself right out of the country. After a lot of talk and a little shooting by the grown-ups, not to mention a few fights by us youngsters, the whole thing was sorted out. The President collected his customs duties, Pa got his sergeant's stripes, and South Carolina kept its star on the flag.

People, even some of the soldiers, looked on Pa as a turncoat of sorts, though. While the soldiers who were born up North were mostly ignored, Pa and a handful of Southern-born regulars were treated with taunts, insults, and worse. The final straw came when old Mrs. Hawkins, our landlady, turned us out of the house we'd been renting since Beth was born.

"Like I said," Pa declared when he got the news, "time to move on."

So Pa resigned from the army and took a new job with the customs office down in Mobile, Alabama. I figured the president owed him a favor. We sailed around the tip of Florida and arrived there three weeks before Christmas 1834. Pa's new job gave him enough money to buy us our own house, and he even managed to send Madison and me to a proper school.

Now I ought to explain about the name business right here. Grandpa Henry liked to name his children after famous folk, but he had the odd habit of calling them by

their middle names. Pa had two brothers, Benjamin Franklin Byrd and George Washington Byrd, but I'd never in all my life heard either man called by his first name. It was always Uncle Frank or Uncle Wash. It was no different with my brother Madison and me. Using my first name, Tom, would have saved considerable time when I was scribbling my name on school papers, but the best I could arrange was for my siblings to call me T. J. Ma wouldn't abide anybody calling himself by initials, though. She also wouldn't have a son of hers called Marion, either. When I said that Francis wasn't much better than Marion, little Frank escaped the family curse and got to have a normal name. As for the girls, Beth did what she liked, and little Annie benefited from Frank's breakthrough.

Mobile was a strange sort of place compared to Charleston. The southern part of Alabama had been a part of Spanish Florida, and a lot of Spanish traditions hung on. Some of the people spoke Spanish or French better than English, and Pa picked up a smattering of each language working at the customs office. It was in Mobile that I learned about Mardi Gras, which is French for "Fat Tuesday." It was the big celebration that Catholics had before the Lenten season started. Lent had to do with the way Catholics sacrificed before they celebrated Easter, and I never did figure it all out. Mobile celebrated the day in high fashion, though, with parties and masked parades. Mardi Gras was almost as good as Christmas was—a sort of holiday from school, full of fun and games.

I would like to have seen more than one Mardi Gras

celebration, but it wasn't to be. Mobile, being on the Gulf of Mexico, was subject to strong storms and seasonal fevers. In the short time that we lived there (just over a year), somebody was always sick. Also during that summer of 1835, yellow fever swept through the Mississippi delta country and plagued the coast. My little cousin Patrick—who lived up in Natchez, Mississippi—died of it. Ma was never comfortable in Mobile after that, and Pa was talking about moving on too. His work was tiresome, and there was a lot of talk about free land to be had in the American settlements in Texas.

Texas was a place that excited the imagination. Even Aaron Burr, who had been a vice-president of the United States, had thought to carve himself an empire out of the place. Texas had long been part of Spain, but then so had Florida, Mobile, and even New Orleans for a time. The eastern part of Texas was mostly wild forest and prairie before a Missourian named Moses Austin had the notion to settle Americans there. His son Stephen put the plan into action, though. And, following its own Revolution back in 1821, the new nation of Mexico allowed the Americans to settle there.

Pa first spoke of Texas that July of 1835, but Ma wasn't interested in leaving a little gulf port like Mobile for a wilderness full of hungry bears and savage Indians. She had cousins living in Montgomery, the Alabama capital, and that was where she wanted to move.

"And what would I do to support us?" Pa asked. "Be a clerk in your cousin's law office? Mary, it's lawyers that make my job here so hard!"

I knew what Pa meant. Half of my classmates at Mr. Peterson's little school were lawyers' sons. Mr. Peterson himself once said that half the lawyers in creation had come to Alabama. In the fall of 1835, one of those lawyers, also a South Carolinian by birth, came to Mobile. He changed my world forever.

James Butler Bonham wasn't even 30 years old when he appeared in Mobile with a letter asking for volunteers to go to Texas to protect the American settlers from the cruel threats posed by Mexico's new dictator, Antonio López de Santa Anna. Pa took me to hear Lieutenant Bonham talk, and I confess that when he was finished I was ready to go to Texas myself. He painted a wonderful picture of Texas, a land of green valleys and wide rivers, where horses and cattle wandered freely and where Americans had planted rich crops of cotton and wheat and corn.

His brow was knitted as he described the merciless Santa Anna, who had seized authority, jailed Stephen Austin, and sent a Mexican Army to take possession of Texas. The lieutenant spoke glowingly of his old friend Colonel Buck Travis, who was determined to defend the settlements and was already marching on the key Mexican army at San Antonio de Bexar. With a flourish, Lieutenant Bonham snatched off his fine beaver hat and waved it westward.

"Are there men here with the spirit of Washington, of Marion, of Greene?" Bonham called. "Are there men cut from the cloth of Andrew Jackson, willing to stand up to

the rockets and cannons of a merciless enemy? Are there men here prepared to risk all for a chance to build a new nation out of the rough and untamed West?"

Bonham added that each volunteer would be furnished with transportation and that grants of land almost beyond imagination could be won by joining the fight.

"Did you hear that, Jefferson?" Pa asked. "Land of my own! A fair and honorable fight followed by a future for my family."

Well, Ma didn't see it that way, and she was dead set against any such nonsense as Pa marching off with the band of men Lieutenant Bonham was organizing. He only had a couple dozen men in all, and that made for a mighty small army. On top of that, Ma argued that the promise of land wouldn't mean a thing if Bonham and Travis and the rest of them lost. "How many men have gone into Texas set on conquering the place and have found only a grave?" she shouted.

I didn't know what she was talking about, but Mr. Peterson did. It seemed that Aaron Burr wasn't the only would-be king of Texas. Before Mexican independence a handful of others had tried to take control of the place. Each time they tried, a Spanish army had marched out, fought them, and shot those who survived the battle.

"But there's a difference this time," he told me. "This isn't a matter of some fool trying to steal a country. What Lieutenant Bonham wants are volunteers to help protect peaceful settlers from an oppressive government."

"Are you thinking of going?" I asked him.

"I have a young wife and two little girls, Jefferson," he answered. "I would, but who could shoulder my responsibilities here at the school? Who would take care of my little girls if the unthinkable occurred and I were killed?"

I pondered those same questions that night as I followed Pa through the front door and out onto the veranda.

"Mr. Peterson says Ma's right," I told him. "You only get the land if you win. Twenty men aren't enough to stop an army. Andy Jackson didn't stop the British by himself, you know."

"Look up there, son," Pa said, pointing to the sky. For days the whole country had been alive with talk of a wondrous comet streaming across the evening sky. It was up there, all right, just as that English fellow Halley had predicted. Most everyone thought it was an omen of great things to come.

"You think it's a sign, Pa?" I asked.

"Your grandpa would have seen it that way." He motioned me closer, and I moved over so that he could rest his hands on my shoulders. "Sometimes a man sees an open door that offers him a chance to play a part in making history. Oh, I don't mean he'll be a great general or even a leader at all. History may seem to be made solely by generals and presidents, but it's really the individual men and women who make things happen. Did your grandpa ever tell you how he and his neighbors picked up their rifles, marched through the mountains, and defeated

the British and the Tories at King's Mountain and the Cowpens?"

"No, sir," I answered.

"It isn't a pretty story and it's not so well known as Yorktown or Saratoga. But in the end it's the small fights that make the victory possible. Your grandpa and others like him—boys really—left their homes and came out of the hills that are now Tennessee to join Virginians and Carolinians. Together they made up a few hundred untrained mountaineers, but they did what two Continental armies had been unable to do: they stopped the British and their Tory friends cold. Most of them went back home afterward, but the deed had been done. Lord Cornwallis had to move north, and Washington trapped him at Yorktown."

"How do you know so much about all that, Pa? I don't think I've ever seen you pick up a book."

"I didn't have a school to go to when I was a boy," he explained. "Truth be told, I can't read very well in spite of all my ma's efforts. But I listened to my own pa when he talked of what he'd done and what he'd seen. I listened when the old-timers gathered around our fire to chat. And I've seen one or two things myself."

"Are we going to Texas then?"

"I sense a door opening, son. I don't entirely trust in signs, but I know my heart. If there are people in trouble, people struggling for freedom, then I think I should do what I can do to help. Maybe no one will know that Randolph Byrd was there, but I would know if he wasn't."

“Yes, sir.”

“You’ll feel a considerable burden yourself, Jefferson. You will have to see your mother and brothers and sister safely to Texas—maybe do the first planting yourself. You’ll be the man of the family.”

I hadn’t considered that, and I shuddered. Pa noticed, and he lifted my chin so that I could see the comet overhead.

“It’s a wondrous thing, don’t you think?” he asked.

“It’s bright, all right.”

“Something is bound to come of such a sight, Jefferson. And I feel the need to be a part of whatever that is.”