

Lewis Harvie Blair: Texas Travels, 1851-1855
Author(s): Charles E. Wynes
Source: *The Southwestern Historical Quarterly*, Vol. 66, No. 2 (Oct., 1962), pp. 262-270
Published by: Texas State Historical Association
Stable URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/30236244
Accessed: 19-06-2022 07:53 UTC

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Lewis Harvie Blair: Texas Travels, 1851–1855 *

Edited by CHARLES E. WYNES

SEVENTEEN-YEAR-OLD LEWIS HARVIE BLAIR LEFT RICHMOND, Virginia, by ship, for Texas via New Orleans early in March, 1851. The boy's father, John G. Blair, who had long been cashier of the Farmers' Bank of Virginia in Richmond, had just died. William Blair, an older brother of Lewis, recently had been promoted to the rank of captain in the United States Army and assigned to San Antonio, Texas, as chief commissary of the Eighth Military Department. He appointed Lewis his clerk, at the then magnificent salary of $75 a month—a plain sinecure by Lewis Blair's own admission. For the next four-and-one-half years, Blair lived first in San Antonio and then in Corpus Christi—where he did the little work which was expected of him—read, hunted, and met many of the junior officers who later were to achieve general-rank on both sides in the Civil War—James Longstreet, George E. Pickett, Joseph E. Johnston, Don Carlos Buell, Alfred Gibbs, and William F. Smith. Sixty years after leaving Texas, Blair, at the age of eighty-one, wrote in his unpublished autobiography a remarkably vivid and accurate description of the parts of Texas which he traversed and lived in between 1851-1855. He recounted how he arrived at Galveston, then a mere village but one noted for its oleanders and roses; how he proceeded south down the coast to Indianola, unattractive and sand-flea ridden, he said; next overland to San Antonio, with a brief description of that lusty town and its river; and then to Corpus Christi on the Gulf and the real body of his travel memoirs.

In 1855, Blair returned to Richmond, Virginia—by ship to New Orleans and up the Mississippi and Ohio rivers to Wheeling, and

*This article and another to be published elsewhere, also concerning Blair, are the result of two summer research grants, one each from the American Philosophical Society (372—Johnson Fund), and the Agricultural and Mechanical College of Texas Fund for Organized Research. To the Society and the Agricultural and Mechanical College of Texas the editor expresses his gratitude.

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then overland by train the remainder of the way home. Tarrying in Richmond only a few months, Blair soon rejoined the governmental service, this time as clerk to the engineer superintendent of lighthouses on the Great Lakes, at a salary of $120 a month. From there, Blair returned to Richmond in time to volunteer for artillery service with the Confederacy, where the contacts he had made in Texas paid off, and ere long, as a private, he was doing headquarters and adjutant work normally assigned to officers. Entering the army as a private, he emerged as one, in spite of his high-placed contacts—a moot tribute to his dislike for authority and penchant for engaging in camp fights, which more than once led to his acquaintance with the interior of a stockade.

Blair returned to an almost destroyed Richmond in 1865, as financially bereft as that city, and opened a small retail business in nearby Amelia County on faith and a shoestring. Within four years he had amassed sufficient capital to return to Richmond and enter the wholesale grocery business. From there, he branched into shoe manufacturing and also amassed large real estate holdings. He became one of Richmond's leading citizens in civic and philanthropic enterprises.

A reformer and a liberal at heart, and a non-conformist by nature, Blair took up the pen to condemn high protective tariffs in *Unwise Laws* (New York, 1886), and to champion the rights of the South's Negro population in *The Prosperity of the South Dependent Upon the Elevation of the Negro* (Richmond, 1889). The basis of his argument for Negroes' rights was, that it was to the advantage of the entire South, black and white, to elevate the Negro. Only by elevating the Negro, he said, would the South ever know prosperity. Richmond and nearly all of white Virginia regarded him as an apostate, but they could not bring themselves to disown him, for resurrected Richmond had to look to him in gratitude for much of her restoration.

Blair lived until 1916, dying at the age of eighty-two. His first wife, Alice Wayles Harrison, by whom he had seven children, died in 1894. Nearly five years later he married Martha Redd Feild, who survives him at age ninety-five as the mother of four of his children. Mrs. Blair and her daughter, Mrs. Pierre Daura, both

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of Rockbridge Baths, Virginia, loaned the editor the unpublished autobiography from which the following selection was taken.[1]

My father dying early in March 1851, my brother William[2] having been promoted to Captain in the United States Army, and assigned to San Antonio, Texas, as Chief Commissary of the Department, appointed me his clerk at the princely salary of $75 per month—wealth beyond my fondest fancy.

But, there being no railroads hereabouts, except the R. F. & P. extending, through its connections, to Wilmington, N. C., and ten miles of the R. & D.,[3] the question was how easiest to get to Texas. From New York we could have taken steamer to New Orleans, and thence, by another steamer, to the port of Indianola, but that was too expensive, and fortunately we had a more convenient and cheaper route, near at hand. In those primitive days, there was a line, consisting of one barque, known as the *Major Barbour,*[4] trading between Richmond and New Orleans, transporting to the latter principally stationary engines, and bringing back raw sugar (which is now wholly unknown), and New Orleans molasses consigned to Dunlop, Moncure, & Co., and sold at public auction at their warehouse—Northwest corner of 11th & Cary Streets. . . .

We took ship at Rocketts,[5] and a tug took the ship and left us in Hampton Roads, where I had my first taste of *mal de mer,* and which assails me whenever salt water is reached, or, I might add, whenever lake water is tempted.

Bad weather detained us in the [Hampton] Roads, but, with the advent of fair weather, out we glided into the blue sea, crossed the Gulf Stream, and were well on our way to New Orleans.

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[1]Information for the above sketch of Blair was taken from his unpublished autobiography and from Lyon G. Tyler (ed.), *Men of Mark in Virginia* (5 vols.; Washington, 1906-1908), IV, 30-34.

[2]Blair's brother William was a graduate of West Point in the class of 1838. He was breveted captain on April 18, 1847, for gallantry at Cerro Gordo. On June 14, 1861, he resigned from the United States Army and served as a major in the quartermaster department of the Confederate Army throughout the Civil War. He died on March 23, 1883. Francis B. Heitman, *Historical Register and Dictionary of the United States Army, 1789-1903* (2 vols.; Washington, 1903), I, 222.

[3]The R. F. & P. Railroad was the Richmond, Fredericksburg, and Potomac, while the R. & D. was the Richmond and Danville.

[4]The *Major Barbour* was a sidewheel steamer of 133 tons built in Shippingport, Kentucky, in 1848. She was probably named for Philip N. Barbour of Kentucky, who was breveted major in 1846 for distinguished service against the Mexican forces. In 1852, the year following Blair's voyage, the *Major Barbour* was abandoned. William M. Lytle, *Merchant and Steam Vessels of the United States, 1807-1868* (Mystic, Connecticut, 1952; Steamship Historical Society of America, Publication No. 6), 119.

[5]Rocketts was a south suburb of Richmond—the port area of the city along the James River—frequently referred to as Rocketts Landing. Libby Prison, of Civil War renown, was located there.

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In six or eight days, the discolored sea told us that we were near the mouth of the Mississippi, and, ere long, the spider-like tug took us in charge, and soon we were speeding up the river; and here it was that I had my first sight of an ocean steamship, which was hurrying down the pass, and out to sea.

What a contrast greeted us! Hardly a week had passed, and we had left Richmond with winter firmly rivetted in the lap of spring, while now, as we passed up the river with the green sward coming to the water's edge, with a great alligator here and there basking in the sun on the right; and on our left, Nature was smiling in her renewed dress of tender green, and the air was redolent with the perfume of the flowers of the China[berry] tree.

Remaining but a short time in New Orleans, we boarded an outgoing steamer for Indianola via Galveston, then scarcely more than a village,[6] but beautiful from its wealth of oleanders and roses. Having discharged freight, we were off to our destination, Indianola[7] —long since abandoned as a port of entry—and my! what a swell over the bar; had the pilot missed his way by but a hair's breadth, we should have been pounded to pieces in a few minutes—evidence of which were several wrecks staring us in the face. In one of these wrecks was Lieutenant William E. Jones[8] (afterwards General of Cavalry in our army) and his bride, returning from his wedding trip, but, as fate would have it, she, poor lady, found a watery grave.

Indianola was a much smaller and far less attractive village [than

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[6]In 1850 the population of Galveston was 4,177. United State Census Office, *The Seventh Census of the United States: 1850* (Washington, 1853).

[7]Indianola, presently a ghost town, was located on the west shore of Matagorda Bay. It was originally called Powderhorn and later Karlshaven by the German immigrants. For the period 1850-1861, all United States Army posts in Texas were supplied through Indianola. Before the Civil War, several cattle slaughtering plants were located there, as were plants for processing turtles and wild turkeys. On September 17, 1875, the town of six-thousand was nearly destroyed by a hurricane. In the succeeding years more and more of the ocean traffic was diverted to Galveston because of its better rail connections. On August 20, 1886, Indianola was struck by another disastrous hurricane, after which the remaining inhabitants abandoned the town and the county seat was returned to Port Lavaca, from which it had been moved in the 1850's. Dermat H. Hardy and Ingham S. Roberts, *Historical Review of South-East Texas and the Founders, Leaders, and Representative Men of its Commerce, Industry, and Civic Affairs* (2 vols.; Chicago, 1910), I, 366-367.

[8]William Edmondson "Grumbles" Jones (1824-1864), a native of the Holston River area of southwestern Virginia and a graduate of West Point in the class of 1848, resigned from the army in 1857. Upon secession, he joined the Confederate forces and served under J. E. B. Stuart until a disagreement led to his reassignment as commander of the Department of Southwest Virginia and East Tennessee. Promoted to brigadier general, effective September 19, 1862, Jones was killed instantly at the battle of Piedmont in the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia on June 5, 1864. Union forces returned his body to his friends, and he was buried in the yard of the Old Glade Spring Presbyterian Church near the place of his birth. Ezra J. Warner, *Generals in Gray* (Baton Rouge, 1959), 166-167.

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Galveston], and, to add to its unattractiveness, its sands were the camp of armies of fleas which, during their season, allowed newcomers no rest, either by day or by night. But the fleas were not peculiar to Indianola, for, until mid-summer or later, they held high carnival over all of Western Texas[9] with which I was familiar. . . .

Travelling in Texas in those early days, when a mile of railroad was not to be found,[10] was both slow and tedious, and everyone, pretty much, had to supply his own transportation; so, to get to San Antonio—our Ultima Thule—the Government furnished us with an ambulance (a word quite unknown, in those days, outside Texas) a carryall drawn by four mules—and we took our weary way through the primitive wilds, for San Antonio, about a hundred and forty or fifty miles distant; and on this trip, I had my first experience with the prairie chicken, once as abundant as the leaves that strewed the brooks in Vallambrosa, but now numbered with the dodo and the great auk—over which, however, we need not shed bitter tears, because the land over which they ranged is now devoted to corn, cotton, wheat etc.[11] Our road passed by the tomb—inclosed by a neat railing—of David Crockett,[12] noted, in early days, as a Congressman from Tennessee, and killed, if not murdered, by the Mexicans in the war for the liberation of the Lone Star State.

San Antonio had been a strategic point for many years, and there was the Alamo, a kind of fortress where the garrison, composed of

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[9]Blair never saw the area that is known as "West Texas" today (1962). During the period of which Blair was writing—the 1850's—the San Antonio area was commonly referred to as western Texas.

[10]Blair was probably right about there not being a mile of railroad track in Texas in the spring of 1851. On February 11, 1850, the Buffalo Bayou, Brazos, and Colorado Railway was chartered, but construction was not begun until 1851, from Harrisburg. The first engine was placed on its tracks in 1852.

The Houston and Texas Central Railway Company, originally chartered as the Galveston and Red River Railroad on March 11, 1848, commenced construction in 1853. During the next two years it built only two miles of track, from Houston running toward Cypress twenty-five miles away. No engine was placed on its tracks till January 22, 1856. Hardy and Roberts, *Historical Review of South-East Texas*, I, 191-193.

[11]In 1915, the area between the coastal point where Indianola had been located and San Antonio raised primarily corn and cotton and engaged in truck and fruit farming. *Texas Almanac, 1914* (Dallas and Galveston, 1914), 245, 252, 266, 279, 297, 342, 348.

[12]Blair did not see the tomb of David Crockett. After being killed at the Battle of the Alamo on March 6, 1836, the body of Crockett, along with the bodies of the other Texan defenders, was supposedly burned by the Mexican forces. Blair may have seen an early monument to James Walker Fannin and the other Texans massacred near Goliad on March 27, 1836. Here, as at the Alamo, the slain men were burned. Frederick C. Chabot, *The Alamo: Altar of Texas Liberty* (San Antonio, 1931), 57; Hardy and Roberts, *Historical Review of South-East Texas*, I, 126-127.

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Americans, were massacred by the Mexicans, and, round about it, at some distance, were a number of missions designed for the Christianization of the Indians, all ruined and decayed except that of San Jose, which was occupied by Mexicans, but moribund. . . .

In 1851, San Antonio was a mere village[13] of adobe huts and American buildings of very cheap grade; with two plazas—one military, and the other civil, with a Mexican cathedral on the latter; a beautiful stream (of the same name as the village) which, like Venus from the sea, sprung full-blown from the earth a few miles above the city, through which it meandered before hastening to the Nueces River,[14] and thence to the Gulf.

The Commanding General of the Department,[15] preferring Corpus Christi, on the sea for headquarters,[16] we, after residing in San Antonio for eighteen months, again took ambulance, and travelled through a wilderness more complete than that from Indianola to San Antonio, seeing fewer signs of life except an occasional deer, a wild turkey or a covey of partridges.

In time, Corpus Christi was reached, but, except for its hunting and fishing, it had nothing to recommend it except its extreme beauty of position: and, although sixty years have passed since I crossed, in a sloop, the seething and raging waters of its bay, on my return to Virginia, I yet see its whole surroundings as vividly as if it were yesterday. The situation was a moderate bluff, on which were the few residences, while the business portion was on the bay. To the South, the bluff, at a distance, closed in upon the bay in a sweeping curve, finally hugging the bay close, and covered with dense chaparral or jungle, while, to the North, the bluff receded

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[13]In 1850, San Antonio had a population of 3,488. United States Census Office, *The Seventh Census of the United States: 1850.*

[14]Blair is mistaken, of course, about the San Antonio River emptying into the Nueces River. It joins instead the Guadalupe River shortly before that stream empties into San Antonio Bay.

[15]At that time, the commanding general of the Eighth Military Department was Major General Persifor Smith. A native of Pennsylvania, Smith had been commissioned a colonel of Louisiana Volunteers in 1836. During the Mexican War he was breveted brigadier general for gallantry at Monterrey, and major general for display of the same courage at Contreras and Churubusco. He died on May 17, 1858. Heitman, *Historical Register and Dictionary of the United States Army,* I, 902.

[16]Headquarters of the Eighth Department of the United States Army were moved from San Antonio to Corpus Christi in 1852, where they remained until 1855, when they were returned to San Antonio. Charles P. Roland and Richard C. Robbins (eds.), "The Diary of Eliza (Mrs. Albert Sidney) Johnston," *Southwestern Historical Quarterly,* LX, 494n. Apparently the only reason for the move was the belief of Major General Persifor F. Smith, departmental commander, that his ailing health would be benefitted by the sea air. M. L. Crimmins (ed.), "W. G. Freeman's Report on the Eighth Military Department," *Southwestern Historical Quarterly,* LI, 167.

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entirely, leaving a broad shell beach. To the South, the water was shoal, and the surf broke, though feebly, far from shore, but to the North, the deeper water enabled the surf to dash madly upon the shore; and, every summer afternoon and evening, the surf would dash wildly, and with a roar, upon the beach until far into the night.

The mornings usually broke with a perfectly clear sky, but, no sooner had the sun arisen than great cumuli would attend his coming, which he would convert into temples of frosted silver of every imaginable character. A profound calm of some hours would follow, when the whole bay would be as one vast mirror, unruffled save by schools of fish seeking to escape a prowling porpoise. About eleven o'clock, a faint zephyr would fan the fevered brow, and, from hour to hour, this zephyr would increase until it became a raging gale, when the whole bay would be converted into a seething, tumultuous waste of waters, which would also continue long into the night. Meanwhile, the heavens would be covered with a beautiful mantle of purple and gold. With the approach of night with a near-full moon, the prosaic, though beautiful, aspects of the day are idealized, and the tumultuous waves, irradiated by the moon, are as tens of millions of dancing miniature mirrors, and the tenor of the surf, near at hand, is accompanied by the deep boom of the surf dashing upon the coast twenty miles distant.[17]

Corpus Christi was the paradise of the sportsman; on land, wild ponies to be lariated; deer, partridges, turkeys, and, in season, plover and English snipe; on the water, red fish, sheep-head, trout, pompino and the game but inedible tarpon, seldom caught, however, because its ivory jaws supplied little holding ground for the hook. Indeed, fish and game of every kind were so abundant that sportsmen soon wearied of them, and ceased to hunt.

Mocking birds were as abundant as sparrows are with us, and, in the morning, 'twas a pleasing sight to see them pirouetting from the top of the shrub, and singing, as they pirouetted, as if in the abandon of happiness; and, throughout moonlit nights, their songs were almost incessant—which, sometimes, like the talk of a garrulous man, was rather too much of a good thing when one wanted to sleep.

But, though so highly favored by a gracious Heaven, Corpus Christi was not without its troubles and trials; one summer, the hostile Indians shot up the town,[18] and, the next summer, yellow-

[17]Natives of the Corpus Christi area, as well as those less familiar with it, will recognize Blair's description as a remarkably accurate one, whose vividness is only heightened by the author's somewhat flowery pen.

[18]Blair would seem to be in error about the Indians shooting up Corpus Christi at anytime during the period 1852-1855, when he was there. See J. W. Wilbarger, *Indian Depredations in Texas* (Austin, 1889). With memory faded by the passage of sixty years, Blair was undoubtedly recalling an incident concerning the

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fever—from New Orleans, probably—visited it.[19] In meeting the Indians, Lieutenant [George Blake] Cosby,[20] of the United States Rifles, was shot in the arm by an arrow, from which he suffered greatly; and Captain [Michael E.] Van Buren,[21] of the Rifles, attempting to cut down an Indian youth, received an arrow through the body, from which he died, in my quarters, a few days later. The yellow fever carried off the surgeon of the post, Dr. [George F.] Turner,[22] and the paymaster's clerk, and invaded our home, taking off our Irish maid, and prostrating our Irish gardener; but naught being never in danger, I escaped.

The time for returning to Virginia having arrived, the only feasible way of getting back into the busy world was by the mail sloop that plied between Corpus Christi and Indianola. Boarding the sloop we sailed through the bay, stirred to fury by the usual summer gale, and anchored for the night around the headland which we had always watched anxiously, on mail days, for the return of the sloop to bring tidings from home. . . .

In the morning we were greeted by a sea of glass, ruffled only by the momentary sight and snorts of numberless heads of great sea turtles, which appeared to be playing a game of hide and seek: a novel sight. The route was inland, *i.e.,* in the smooth waters between the outer islands and the land. Our party (my brother William's wife, my sister Peggy—afterwards the wife of General Alfred Gibbs[23]—and myself) reached the wharf where, next morning,

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Comanches near San Diego on July 11, 1854, in which some of the garrison at Corpus Christi were involved. See note 21.

[19]In 1854, there was an outbreak of yellow fever in Corpus Christi, brought not from New Orleans as Blair says, but from Mexico by a Mexican fruit vessel. Coleman McCampbell, *Saga of a Frontier Seaport* (Dallas, 1934), 20.

[20]George Blake Cosby (1830-1909), a native of Kentucky and a graduate of West Point in the class of 1852, resigned his commission on May 11, 1861, to join the Confederacy. He served with the cavalry in Mississippi, Alabama, and Louisiana, ranking as a brigadier general from January 20, 1863. After the war he took up farming in California, where he committed suicide on June 29, 1909. He was cremated and is buried in City Cemetery, Sacramento, California. Warner, *Generals in Gray,* 64.

[21]Michael E. Van Buren, a native of Maryland, was breveted captain on August 20, 1847, for gallantry at Contreras and Churubusco. He died on July 20, 1854, of wounds received on July 11 in action against the Comanche Indians near San Diego, Texas. Heitman, *Historical Register and Dictionary of the United States Army,* I, 980.

[22]George F. Turner, a native of Massachusetts, was appointed assistant surgeon in the Army on July 23, 1833. He was promoted to major on January 1, 1840, and died in Corpus Christi on October 17, 1854. *Ibid.,* I, 974.

[23]Alfred Gibbs, a native of New York and graduate of West Point in the class of 1846, was breveted first lieutenant on April 18, 1847, for gallantry at Cerro Gordo, and captain on September 13, 1847, for gallantry at Garita de Belen. During the Civil War, he served with the Union Army in Virginia and was promoted to major general on March 13, 1865. He died on December 26, 1868. *Ibid.,* I, 452-453.

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we were to take steamship for New Orleans, and, while sleeping on deck that night, I had somewhat the experience of the miller who was awakened by the stopping of his mill—I was awakened by the darkness caused by the total eclipse of the moon:[24] my first experience with an event of that kind.

In those days, Mississippi steamers were spacious and palatial: boarding one—the *Robert J. Ward*[25]—we steamed up the muddy and turbulent stream into the Ohio, a most ladylike stream compared with the one we had just left—and then, past Louisville and Cincinnati, to Wheeling. Entering a Baltimore & Ohio train, we were whirled by Washington, and thence to Richmond, which we reached nearly four and a half years after leaving it in early March 1851.[26]

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[24]Total eclipses of the moon occurred twice in 1855—on May 1 and October 24. The first one was visible in the eastern and southern United States, while the second one was visible throughout North America. Blair could have witnessed either one of them. He was probably describing the first eclipse, that of May 1, 1855, however, inasmuch as he recorded that nearly four and one-half years had elapsed between his departure from Richmond, Virginia, in early March, 1851, and his return sometime in 1855. If he had been describing the second eclipse, that of October 24, nearly four and three-quarters years would have elapsed. *The American Ephemeris and Nautical Almanac for the Year 1855* (Washington, 1852), 367, 371.

[25]The *Robert J. Ward* was a sidewheel vessel of 731 tons. She was built at New Albany, Indiana, in 1852, and was abandoned and dismantled in 1860. It is not known for whom she was named. Lytle, *Merchant and Steam Vessels of the United States, 1807-1868,* p. 204.

[26]The above selection was taken from pp. 26-38 of the unpublished autobiography of Lewis Harvie Blair.

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