BURRILL FRANKS: A LAFFITE MAN
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Burrill I. Franks was over six feet tall, remarkably expert with shooting a rifle, and one of Jean Laffite's (the corsair), men (1). He was basically a hunter who helped augment the Galveston commune's larder with meat and supplies. A few of Laffite's men stayed or returned to Texas after Laffite sailed away, among those was Franks who got a land grant on Bolivar and remained in the Galveston area the rest of his life.

Burrill was the son of Andrew Franks and his wife Celia McKenzie. Andrew, a North Carolinian of German ancestry, had served in the Revolutionary War as a drummer in the North Carolina Continental Line. Burrill was born in North Carolina in 1789 and moved with the family to the Cape Girardeau District, now Missouri, by 1798. The Franks were in Louisiana by 1810 living on a tract of land in the neutral strip on Bayou Piedra twenty-one miles from Natchitoches (2).

September 1, 1814 in Quachita Parish Louisiana, Burrill Franks married Mary Irvin (3). Moving to St. Landry Parish he applied for a land grant and received 640 acres of land on the west bank of Calcasieu Lake at a place called Hackberry Island. William V. Smith swore before the board of land commissioners in Natchitoches that the Franks had occupied the land and grew vegetables there prior to February 22, 1819. He further stated that the Franks' improvements embraced about one quarter of an acre, and that the family lived there continuously from 1819 until the present, i.e; 1824. The land was granted to Franks as a third class claim (4). During this same period Burrill testified for many of his neighbors on the west bank of the Calcasieu so that they could also claim land. The neighbors included, Elias Blunt, James Barnett, Rees Perkins, Jacob E. Self, Hardy Coward, George Smith and George Orr. Several of these men settled in Texas in the Liberty area.

Hackberry Island is not an island but a relatively high ridge of land bordered on the east by Calcasieu lake and on the west by marsh to Sabine Lake. Here Burrill undoubtedly met and joined the adventurers and marine marauders moving down the coast into Spanish Texas.

Reminiscing in 1883, Mark Franks said they joined Governor Louis Aury and went to Texas in 1817, landing at Galveston Island. Aury was supplanted by Jean Laffite as the commander of Galveston and the Franks remained until Laffite was expelled in 1821. Mary claimed that she bore the first white child on the Island and kept a boarding house near Laffite's storehouse. The child would have been William, their second son. The family returned to Louisiana in 1821, stated Mary, but came back to Texas in 1828 (5).

The 1820 census of St. Landry Parish, Louisiana lists the Burrill Franks family as living in the Parish and having one male over 45 years, one male 26 to 45, one male 18 to 26 and two males under 10. There was only one female listed; she was 16 to 26 years of age. Three persons in the household were engaged in agriculture. Members of the family probably moved back and forth between Louisiana and Galveston during their sojourn on the Island, so Mary's statement about returning to Louisiana in 1821 was probably not inconsistent with the facts.

Burrill made a statement before the land commissioners of Liberty County that he had emigrated to Texas with his family in 1826 (6). He probably was reluctant to admit that he had been with Laffite, although it was generally known at the time.

George Orr, the Alcalde (Mayor) at Atascosito (Liberty, Texas) wrote to Stephen F. Austin on May 23, 1827 saying that he and Henry Munson had examined Burrill Franks, who lived on the Neches River near the lower crossing, about thefts from

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Atascosito. This must have been the first home site of the Franks family after they moved back to Texas. Franks told Orr and Munson that the thieves were two men named Hawkins and Clement. Hawkins had been at Franks house and he learned that they had a herd of stolen horses on the Trinity River, above the San Antonio crossing (7).

A visitor in Texas in the spring of 1831 reported seeing Franks. He wrote, “The famous pirate Laffite, as is well known, made his rendezvous in Galveston Bay. Two of his men I found at Anahuac. They were named Roach and Franks. Franks is above six feet high, and remarkably expert in shooting a rifle. A man who knew him well did not hesitate to hold a board for him to shoot at from a considerable distance” (8). Franks was undoubtedly living on Bolivar Peninsula at this time and visiting the new military settlement at Anahuac.

Shipwrecked on the coast of Texas in 1831, David L. Kokermot describes the house and children of Burrill Franks on Bolivar Peninsula. “In short time I saw a small house to the southwest, which was Bolivar Point, I then left the beach and took a straight course for the house, going through the salt marsh, which was quite muddy. Covered with mud, I reached the house and found three small children, the oldest being twelve years. There were two boys and one little girl seven or eight years old. They were the children of Burrell Franks, the great hunter” (9). The children said that their parents had gone up the Trinity River to get supplies. They gave Kokermot food and water and the little girl gave him a mixture of goldenrod boiled in milk and sweetened which cured him of a fever. The oldest boy was Elijah and his brother was William. Kokermot does not name the girl except to say that she later married a Bloodworth (10). This episode must have taken place in the fall of the year, as that is when the goldenrod is in bloom, and not in the spring as Kokermot reported.

The 1834 Census of the Anahuac Precinct in the Atascosito District listed the Franks family as: Burrell Franks, 45 years, a farmer, his wife Mary, 37, his son Elijah, 19, his son William, 16, their daughter, 13, their son, 8, and their daughter, 3. The last three children were not named (11). The three oldest children certainly appeared younger to Kokermot that they really were.

In 1838 Burrill applied for a land grant for citizens who had been living in Texas on March 2, 1836, and before. His witnesses were Martin Dunman and Hugh B. Johnson, and his request was approved. He received one league and a labor of land which he located partially on Bolivar Peninsula where he had been living. Elijah, as a single man received 1/3 of a league of land, and located it at Roll-Over Pass on Bolivar Peninsula (12).

During the deposition for Burrill’s grant Martin Dunman said that Burrill left Point Bolivar in April 1836 leaving about nine head of cattle and twenty hogs in his care until he, Burrill, could return. Dunman was at Burrill’s house in Louisiana in February 1837 and Burrill and his wife were very sick and had just buried a daughter. Burrill stated that he would move back to Texas as soon as he was able (13).

Gail Borden, Jr. reported in September of 1837 that Elijah Franks had presented himself at the Galveston Custom House in his vessel, the sloop Reindeer. The sloop was laden with sundry cargo from the wreck of the Schooner Mary. This vessel was stranded some thirty-two miles east of Point Bolivar (14).

Galveston District Court Records (Vol. A) for May 9, 1839 recorded that Elijah and Burrill Franks and Frederick Devore were indicted for grand larceny by the Republic of Texas. Martin Dunman their friend and neighbor put up a $10,000 bond to guarantee their appearance in court. It has not been discovered why the charges were made, but a strange entry in the District Court Minutes of November 27, 1839 (vol. 2, pg. 131) reveals that the States Attorney dropped all charges against Elijah Franks, “it being suggested that the defendant is dead”. One wonders who made the suggestion as Elijah Franks was listed for the next three years in the tax rolls of Galveston county and was living with his mother in the 1850 Census of Lavaca County, Texas. The charges against Burrill Franks and others were dismissed on March 1, 1840 (15).

The 1840 tax records of Galveston County list Burrill Franks as living in the county and being taxed

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for 4,605 acres of land, 75 head of cattle and one wooden clock. Elijah was also in residence and was taxed for 147 acres. By 1841 Burrill had only 2,310 acres, two saddle horses and a four wheel pleasure carriage. Elijah increased his land holdings to 1,180 acres and had 25 cattle, and a carriage. William Franks is listed this year on the tax roll for the first time. He owned five cattle. In 1842 Burrill had 35 head of cattle and a pleasure carriage. Elijah and William had each ten head of cattle and William had a silver watch. The 1843 tax roll is the last roll in which the Franks family is listed in Galveston county. Burrill had 2,337 acres of land and 57 head of cattle. Elijah paid only $1.00 poll tax and owned no property and William had 11 cattle and the silver watch.

Burrill and his wife sold 1,922 acres of land on Bolivar to Martin Dunman in February, 1846. They signed the deeds with their marks as they were not literate (16). Elijah Franks was living in Limestone county in 1846 as was the William J. Bloodworth family. Elijah's oldest sister, Emalin, was married to Bloodworth (17).

The next trace of the Franks family is in the 1850 Census of Lavaca County. Burrill is no longer listed with the family which consists of Mary Franks, age 52, born in Virginia, Elijah, 33, born in Texas, and Mary E., 11, born in Texas. The son William was not found.

Many years later several law suits were filed to reclaim the Louisiana land that Burrill had (18). In November of 1942 an heir, O. L. Stocks of Arizona, claimed that Burrill Franks died about the year 1857. It is more likely that he died between 1846 and 1850 when the family moved to Lavaca County. The outcome of the law suits is not known.

Mary Franks lived with her daughter, Mary E., and her son-in-law, Louis Bully, in Aracosa County during the 1860 U.S. Census. She was 62 years of age and listed as a midwife. Mary was living on Matagorda Island in 1883 where she had been for fifteen years. Her obituary in The Galveston Daily News of August 1, 1885 said that she died in Alvin, Texas on July 30 in her 88th year.

Burrill Franks and his family are significant as they typify the early pioneer coastal families who emigrated to Texas and endured many hardships, but stayed.

NOTES
1. Anonymous. A Visit to Texas in 1831. (Houston: Corvoldan Press, 1975), 82. Burrill's name was sometimes spelled Burrel or Burrell. He was apparently illiterate and signed his name with an X.
6. Liberty County Board of Land Commissioners' Minutes, 1838-1841, #241.
8. Anonymous, A Visit to Texas in 1831, 82.
10. Ibid.
12. Liberty County Board of Land Commissioners' Minutes.
13. Ibid.
17. The Republic of Texas Poll List for 1846.
18. Gail Felts Davis, German Carolinians, 59-63.