John McHenry, born in Antrim County, Ireland, on March 22, 1798, left Ireland in 1811, stowing away on a ship at age 13 to avoid conscription in the British army (1). He came to America and led a long adventure filled life. At eighty years of age, he died in Texas.

Arriving in New Orleans in 1812 he stated, that he took part in the coasting trade until the British invasion, then he volunteered as a soldier under General Jackson in the battle of New Orleans. Another source places him on an American gunboat during the battle. (2)

Next, McHenry appears with the privateer Jean Laffite on the Texas coast and recalls sailing directly over Galveston Island into the bay when it was inundated by the 1818 hurricane. “At that time the top of only one tree was visible”, he declared (3).

McHenry was in the Galveston commune in 1818 and 1819 where he was a trusted aide, and was mentioned by Laffite as being very sincere and loyal (4). Little is known about his time with Laffite, but he later told a neighbor that he and forty other men left for New Orleans on the brig General Victoria supplied by Laffite after learning that Laffite’s privateering commission had expired and they were virtually pirates on the high seas. (5)

He then joined the ill-fated General James Long expedition, returned to Galveston, and participated in the capture of La Bahia. Here he was taken prisoner and jailed by the Mexicans. When released in December, 1821, ten months after his capture, he returned to New Orleans. (6)

His thirst for adventure not yet quenched, he enrolled in an expedition to aid Simon Bolivar in South America. He was assigned to the sloop of war Eureka under Captain Pelott and took part in the siege and capture of Porto Caballo. He was taken prisoner at Santo Domingo, escaped in six weeks and returned to New Orleans. (7)

McHenry bought a sailing vessel and entered the coasting trade between Texas and New Orleans. The name of the vessel was unknown, but could have been the sloop Juno which visited Lavaca Bay in April, 1823. (8)

John McHenry
Photo courtesy of Mc Henry descendant Dorthea Woodruff of Bellaire, Texas.
In Stephen F. Austin’s Register of Families, McHenry declared that he arrived in Texas to settle in 1828. He was listed as one of the original forty-one settlers of the Martin DeLeon Colony and the first Chief Justice of Victoria County.

On December 2, 1829, McHenry married Mary Keamon. Two children were born to the union: Thomas on September 2, 1830, and Catherine Ann on September 2, 1831. A third child was rumored to have been buried at sea. Mary McHenry died June, 1832. (9)

A league of land on the west side of the Lavaca River was granted to McHenry on October 26, 1832.

McHenry married Rachel Douglas in 1834. Eleven children were born to this union. (10)

Settling on his land grant, McHenry became a farmer and a rancher. His cattle brand JH was registered in Victoria County in 1838.

During the Texas Revolution McHenry participated in the Grass Fight and the Battle of Gonzales, and was a signer of the Millican Gin Declaration of Independence.

John McHenry was respected and warmly remembered by his neighbors and contemporaries. One friend described him as “a true-hearted son of Ireland, a man utterly incapable of deception or falsehood”. McHenry died in 1878 and is buried near where his home was on the Lavaca River in what is now Jackson County.

Notes

3. Ellis, Michael J. The Hurricane Almanac. Dallas, Texas Edition, 1987, 57. Ellis states that McHenry sailed over the flooded Galveston Island in 1815. This is incorrect. The storm of 1815 was not a hurricane and would not have completely flooded Galveston Island.
8. Ibid. 78
9. Information from Cora Lee Gott of Pearland, Texas. She is a descendant of McHenry from his first marriage.
10. 1840 and 1850 U.S. Census of Victoria and Jackson Counties: Family Bible of Kate Flanagan, dated 1855, Jackson County, Texas.