

The Lake Jackson Slave Ditch or
The Hamilton-Jackson Canal
by James L. Smith

Most older residents of the Lake Jackson area know the location of the old slave ditch as it once crossed Hwy 2004 near our favorite Buckee's on the Old Angleton Road and made its way down to Southern Oaks Drive and connected with Oyster Creek. Portions can still be seen today although the local drainage district has improved upon its course somewhat. Ever wonder what was the master plan for this difficult task? Guess no more!

The Brazos Canal Company was incorporated January 3, 1842, by an initial group with interest in the development of the port of San Luis, located on an island across the pass from the west tip of Galveston Island:

...the said company shall have the right to effect a communication, by water between the Brazos river and the harbor of San Luis; and shall also have the right to make such improvements in the different bays, bayous, creeks, &c., lying between the Brazos river and the harbor of San Luis...may charge such tolls for passing through said communication...

...the capital stock of said company shall be one hundred thousand dollars, and be divided into one thousand shares of one hundred dollars each...

...James F. Perry,¹ William T. Austin,² Matthew Hopkins,³ Fernando Pinckard,⁴

¹ James F. Perry was married to Emily M. Austin Perry, sister of Stephen F. Austin.

² This should be William H. Austin. In 1830 William Henry Austin, usually called Henry, came to Brazoria County in his steamboat *Ariel*. He was a cousin of Stephen F. Austin and brother of Mary Austin Holley [James A. Creighton, *A Narrative History of Brazoria County* 1975: 49].

³ Matthew Hopkins moved to Galveston after the financial collapse of the San Luis Company.

⁴ Fernando Pinckard was editor of the *San Luis Advocate* until it was sold to a group from

and George L. Hammekin,⁵ are hereby declared to be directors of this company...[H. P. N. Gammel, ed., *The Laws of Texas, 1822-1897*, Vol. II: 698-701]

Emily M. Perry and Eliza H. Hill⁶ had inherited San Luis Island from Stephen F. Austin and gave their husbands, James F. Perry and William G. Hill⁷ along with Ferdinand Pinckard and Matthew Hopkins the power to sell and allot the property for the benefit of the San Luis Company stockholders. Four hundred and fifty lots were appropriated for the opening of a communication between the Brazos River and San Luis Harbor [James F. Perry Papers, Deed, March 2, 1843].

The Brazos Canal Company was essentially taking over the assets left over by the Galveston and Brazos Rail-road Company.⁸ A petition signed by forty-one citizens of Brazoria County was submitted by George B. McKinstry, Patrick C. Jack, and George L. Hammeken to build a railroad from Galveston Bay to the Brazos River. This company, chartered on May 24, 1838, had "the right to make turnpikes and rail-roads, from the main channel of Galveston Bay to the Brazos river" and "capital stock of said company shall be five hundred thousand dollars, and be divided into five thousand shares of one hundred dollars each" [H. P. N. Gammel, ed.,

Galveston and removed from San Luis in April 1842.

⁵ George L. Hammeken (several spellings of his last name in various documents) was a business associate and close friend of the Perry family. He moved to New Orleans after the collapse the San Luis Company and remained close to the family for many more years.

⁶ Eliza M. Hill was the wife of Stephen F. Austin's deceased brother James E. B. Austin. She married Zeno Phillips 2nd and William G. Hill 3rd.

⁷ William G. Hill owned Osceola Plantation.

⁸ In this same time frame two more competing groups, the Houston and Brazos Rail Road Company (Houston to Hempstead route) chartered January 26, 1839 and the Harrisburg Rail Road and Trading Company (Harrisburg to Richmond route) chartered January 9, 1841, tried to construct railroads and failed in a short time.

The Laws of Texas, 1822-1897, Vol. I: 1507-1512]. The main purpose of the company was to promote the town of Austinia located at Dollar Point on the north side of Galveston Bay. This property was again owned by the Perrys'. The construction of the railroad was to be financed by the sale of stock and donation of lots in Austinia and Bolivar⁹ for the stock subscriptions. The railroad would then run from Austinia to Bolivar on the Brazos River. The charter was amended in January, 1840, by substituting "canals" for "turnpikes" [H. P. N. Gammel, ed., *The Laws of Texas, 1822-1897*, Vol. II: 391-392].

By this time, the group was interested in promoting their fortunes at San Luis; and Emily Perry sold Austinia to William J. Bryan and George L. Hammeken. Hammeken gained financial backing for the San Luis Company in New Orleans from Victor Massieu and A. Compagnon & Company in July, 1840 [Brazoria County Deed Records A: 399-409]. At first, a railroad between San Luis and Velasco at the mouth of the Brazos was envisioned, then routes for a possible canal were surveyed:

Wm. H. Austin has returned—we left N. Orleans together on the 1st August--& has since been engaged in reconnoitring West & Bastrop Bays—the result of his investigations thus far is, that a canal will cost at least 3 times more than a rail road—

He & his assistant Engineers left here yesterday, provided with tents, provisions &c. & c. and 3 negroes to make the final surveys, so as to furnish their report early in October—both as to Canal & Rail Road routes...[James F. Perry Papers, Letter George L. Hammeken to James F. Perry, San Luis, September 16, 1840].

At its height, San Luis was a bustling community anxious for its competition with Galveston to be the leading

⁹ Bolivar was located on the east bank of the Brazos several miles above Columbia and was laid out by Henry Austin.

seaport on the coast of Texas. In a letter from Mary Austin Holley to Harriette Brand, November, 1840:

...It is a lovely spot by nature, & the houses, about 20 of them, are in every stage of progression, from the skeleton frame to the neatly finished edifice. Carpenters, surveyors, wharf-builders, and boatmen are all active. There are no idlers here...Mr. Bennett, keeper of the Hotel...The house is large & spacious—My room is in the second story—has four windows, all looking on the sea[Mattie Austin Hatcher, *Letters of an Early American Traveller* 1933: 79-80].

By 1842 San Luis was beginning to wane. The harbor was silting up and most of the inhabitants moved to other locations. The Brazos Canal Company was, however, still struggling forward. An attempt in making a "cut" to Oyster Creek was started by Frederick Lemsky,¹⁰ although we do not know the exact area of his work, upwards of \$3000 and much labor had been expended on the canal by December, 1843 [Memoranda and Official Correspondence, Anson Jones 1966: 274-275, Letter George L. Hammeken to Anson Jones, December 6, 1843]:

The Brazos and San Luis Canal

We understand from Mr. Lempsky that (he des)igns commencing again on the Canal. (We we)re not fully informed of his plans, but (k)nowing him to be a practical man, we (h)ave great reliance on his efforts. If Mr. Lempsky can succeed in making the cut to Oyster creek so as to give general confidence in the work, we are convinced that he

¹⁰ Various spellings of last name in several different documents Lemsky, Lempsky, Lemkey, and Lemky. Frederick Lemsky was a veteran of the Battle of San Jacinto and was one of the musicians that played "Come to the Bower" as the Texan troops charged [James A. Creighton, *A Narrative History of Brazoria County*, 1975: 179]. Frederick Lemkey was given 50 lots in San Luis for building a bridge from the mainland to the San Luis Island, January 27, 1841 [James F. Perry Papers].

will find no difficulty in procuring the requisite aid for the balance of the work. The efforts of Mr. Lempsky at a former period were unsuccessful, in consequence of the invasion,¹¹ he marched his men to the frontier but did not succeed in again obtaining their services for the Canal. He has now ample provisions for the year, good dwellings and implements and when we take into consideration the character of his former subscriptions—which were in orders on stores, cattle &c., not intrinsically worth more than half the amount at which they were estimated—and take into consideration the work done—He has produced results out of the means placed at his command of the most favorable character. We do not know how long a time it will take Mr. Lempsky to cut the Canal—but *he will cut it* if he lives, help or no help [*The Planter*, November 18, 1843].

The words of the editor of *The Planter* held an ominous ring as an article in the spring of 1844 relates to the death of Lemsky:

We regret to learn the death by drowning of Frederick Lemsky and his partner Mr. Franke—They left San Luis, some weeks since with a flat of corn for Galveston. During the night, it blew a hard norther, and is believed the flat filled and sank, as nothing has been heard of it. The body of Mr. Lemsky was discovered some days afterwards near Virginia point. The body of Mr. Franke has not been found. Mr Lemsky was favorably known to our citizens, as an enterprising and industrious man. Alas! Poor fellow, his restless spirit, sleeps the sleep that knows no waking! Though many will sorrow over his untimely end, there are none to weep [*The Planter*, March 22, 1844].

¹¹ The invasion was most likely the capture of San Antonio by General Adrian Woll of the Mexican Army, September 11, 1842.

The canal construction remained at a standstill until James Hamilton¹² of South Carolina, a close friend and half owner with Abner Jackson of the Retrieve Plantation, wrote to James F. Perry February 2, 1845, requesting information about the canal:

...I would have been much gratified to have had some conversation with you in regard to the proposed communication between the Brasos & Bastrop Bayou, which I hope during the next Summer Major Jackson will be able to commence & finish the communication between Bastrop & Oyster Creek by the Spring.

Should Mr. Hammekin have left with you any of Major Austins¹³ Profiles or Surveys I will thank you to hand them to Major Jackson or inform him where they are to be found...[James F. Perry Papers]

Jackson had to transport any produce overland several miles from his plantation headquarters located on the bank of Oyster Creek east to a steamboat landing on Bastrop Bayou. From this location a small boat could travel down Bastrop Bayou to Bastrop Bay (San Luis Bay) and then to Galveston Bay. The opening of a canal between Oyster Creek and Bastrop Bayou would open the way for shipping directly from his plantation.

On November 13, 1845, James F. and Emily Perry with William G. and Eliza Hill under the charter granted the Brazos Canal Company next entered into an agreement with Abner Jackson to complete a series of canals that would connect Bastrop Bayou and Bastrop Bay with the Brazos River. Jackson was “to dig or cause to be dug a canal not to be less than twenty four feet at the

¹² James Hamilton had been Governor of South Carolina and also, the United States Senator representing that state. While serving the Republic of Texas he secured the acknowledgment of Texas Independence by England, France, and Belgium.

¹³ William Henry Austin was the surveyor for the San Luis Company and platted the city of San Luis.

bottom with a slope of not less than one foot to one on the banks & to contain not less than three feet of water to connect the River Brazos with Bastrop Bayou & San Luis harbor to commence the first day of May next & to complete the first section between Bastrop Bayou & Oyster Creek¹⁴ within two years from the above named time and the second section between Oyster Creek and the Brazos¹⁵ within four years” [Brazoria County Deed Record D: 36-37. Figure 2.] Jackson was to receive stock bonuses for completion of each section of canal and agree to purchase stock in the San Luis Company.

Construction on the first section of canal connecting Bastrop Bayou and Oyster Creek was begun using slave labor from Jackson’s plantation and oxen to pull the Fresno’s. Jackson wrote James F. Perry requesting some oxen to help with the canal April 15, 1847:

...we are trying to get up some oxen for the canal and you will oblige me if it suits your convenience to let me have some that will answer well for that purpose...[James F. Perry Papers]

During this same period Abner Jackson was under severe financial distress. In 1844 he had purchased the lands for the Retrieve Plantation from Emily M. Perry secured by heavy mortgages [Brazoria County Deed Record B: 404-406]. He also owed several other mortgages for slaves and additional lands. James Hamilton wrote several letters to the James Perry trying to convince him that it was in his best interest that he should help keep Jackson from being foreclosed on and that he would help secure financing in the United States:

March 26, 1847

I beg leave to say that I have every expectation of obtaining from New York by the 1st June an account equal to

¹⁴ This section of canal is what is locally known as the “Slave Ditch” or “Hamilton-Jackson Canal”.

¹⁵ The exact location of the canal between Oyster Creek and the Brazos was not disclosed.

lift my encumbrance on our Oyster Creek Lands...

...You must not disturb Jackson this Summer. Any injury to his credit would event an operation on the Court & might be very injurious to your own interests at San Luis—Indeed Dear Sir you have a great Stake in sustaining a man of his decision & energy in our Enterprise...[James F. Perry Papers]

Perry was being advised by Jonas Butler of Galveston that it was time to foreclose on Jackson and make him settle his debts:

February 16th, 1847

I wish to foreclose the mortgage taken by you from Abner Jackson to secure the note now held by Reed and in Judgment—It is the best & surest way to get the money out of Jackson...The time for court is coming round rapidly...[James F. Perry Papers].

The Perrys and Hills brought suit against Jackson; and he was forced to sell the property on April 1, 1848 [Brazoria County Deed Record D: 634-635]. While the Hamilton family retained control of the Retrieve Plantation, Jackson moved south of the Retrieve Plantation to an area near a small oxbow lake named Lake Jackson and established a new plantation, Lake Place or Lake Jackson Plantation. The continuation of the canal system by the Brazos Canal Company was brought to an end, although James Hamilton had wanted to extend the charter for the canal until 1852.¹⁶

General Greenberry Harrison, along with two other men, was employed to conduct a survey of the Brazos River from Washington-on the Brazos to the Gulf to determine the cost of removing obstacles and improving the channel. During the course of the survey, he did observe the work already done on the canal and gives us an insight into the course the Brazos Canal

¹⁶ James F. Perry Papers December 29, 1847 Letter Guy M. Bryan to James F. and Emily Perry.

Company had chosen to connect the Brazos with Galveston Bay:

The *Pioneer* is a small boat built at Washington expressly for the purpose of making an accurate survey of the Brazos River...three men on board, employed to make this survey, namely, Gen. Harrison, Mr. Tarvir, and Mr. Burke...The *Pioneer* then pursued her way under the direction of Gen. Harrison. She reached the mouth of Buffalo Bayou¹⁷...This bayou connects the canal, now in the progress of construction with the Brazos. They proceeded up the bayou about four miles and had their boat carried over land three fourths of a mile to Oyster Creek. This is the route for the canal. They then followed Oyster Creek to the point intersected by the canal from Bastrop Bayou. Thence they pursued the canal and the channel of Bastrop Bayou to its entrance into Galveston bay opposite San Luis Island; and there sounded out the main channel to this city where they arrived last night, being just 16 days from Washington...

Buffalo Bayou connecting with the channel has an easy entrance from the river, and has a perfectly straight channel for about four miles with two feet depth in extreme low water, and on a soft mud bottom. The first part of the canal from this bayou to Oyster Creek is three fourths of a mile. The second part from Oyster Creek to Bastrop Bayou is one mile. This part is more than half complete.¹⁸ Gen. H. examined the soil where excavations have been made to the full depth, and finds it a strong stiff clay the whole distance, the best quality for a canal. He also sounded down Bastrop Bayou, and found the shallowest places 2 feet 3 inches, 2 feet 6 inches, 2 feet 10 inches, and 3 feet deep with a soft mud bottom. The shoal not far from the mouth has been cut

with a channel of three feet.¹⁹ From Bastrop Bayou to this city, the channel is generally 6 to 8 feet...[*Galveston Weekly News*, April 21, 1848].

The canal saw a renewed interest in 1856, but the feasibility of the Hamilton-Jackson Canal was also brought to an end due to the untimely death of James Hamilton. On November 15, 1857, Hamilton was on board the steamship *Opelousas*, from Berwick Bay to Galveston, when it was in collision with the steamship *Galveston* of the same line, off the coast of Louisiana and sank during heavy weather. The crews of both vessels were accused of manslaughter for the deaths of 20-25 passengers, Hamilton among them:

...Mr. R. B. Allen, of Bastrop, who was so fortunate as to preserve his whole family, consisting of his mother, brother and two servants, reports that, when the hurricane deck was under water, as he was engaged in fastening a life-preserver on his mother, Gen. Hamilton, one of whose arms was disabled by paralysis, came to him with a life preserver and requested him to buckle it on him. This he promised to do as soon as he had attended to his family; but the General went off in quest of other assistance, and was not seen afterwards... [*Galveston Weekly News*, December 1, 1857 & December 15, 1857].²⁰

¹⁹ The clearing of the shoal at the mouth of Bastrop Bayou may be the work that Frederick Lemsky started.

²⁰ Abner J. Strobel had related in his work that the boat went down off Florida in a hurricane: "when all had put on their life belts, there was one lady on board who had none. General Hamilton immediately gave her his and went down with the ship. Such was the end of that gallant, courtly gentleman." [Abner J. Strobel, *The Old Plantations and Their Owners of Brazoria County Texas* 1930: 33].

¹⁷ Buffalo Camp Bayou.

¹⁸ It is still not understood whether this canal was ever completely finished or ever used for its original purpose.