

BOONVILLE JAIL

I. CONTEXT

Boonville was once a bustling pioneer town located in the center of Brazos County between the Brazos and Navasota Rivers. Although its lifespan was a mere 25 years, from 1841-1866, it formed the foundation of Brazos County. This area was traversed by Europeans in the late 1600s who built El Camino Real – the King’s Highway – through Texas along today’s northern border of the county. This area would eventually become known as Boonville and in 1841 became the county seat of Brazos County. When the Houston and Central Texas Railway located two miles west of Boonville in 1861, residents left for the newly formed community of “Bryan.” County offices and businesses moved from Boonville to Bryan, sealing the fate of the little town. ¹

The town of Boonville saw many structures built to accommodate the needs of the citizens. One of the most notable and imposing structures was the county jail. It gained the reputation as being the "strongest jail in the Texas Republic" and for good reason, which we will learn later. ²

II. OVERVIEW

Daniel Boone’s connection to Brazos County began in 1751 with his marriage to Rebecca Bryan in the Yadkin Valley of North Carolina. The Boones (sometimes spelled Boon) and Bryans were also friends and neighbors of the Moses Austin family. Two of the Austin children, Stephen Fuller and Emily, would play an important role in Brazos County’s history. Stephen F. Austin eventually continued his father’s colonization of Texas, including Brazos County. Emily Austin would marry James Bryan and have a son, William Joel Bryan. He would eventually donate land inherited from his uncle to the railroad, which led to the town of Bryan bearing his name. ²

During the year of 1821, the first of Austin’s “Old Three Hundred” arrived in the area of Boonville, a beautiful piece of land where the Navasota and Brazos Rivers met. With gently rolling hills and dark, rich farmland, it was only natural that what is now Brazos County would attract some of the earliest settlers from the United States. ¹

This was still a wild, untamed area even as the colonization of Texas began under Mexico’s control. The settlement of Boonville and surrounding areas was open to Indian attacks and constantly in danger of being invaded by small Mexican armies that captured citizens and spread destruction. Mexico still saw Texas as its territory and attempted to retain control. As more and more settlers began making their homes in Texas, they were finally able to muster together armies of their own, aided by volunteers

from Tennessee and led by General Sam Houston, who became the first President of Texas. Brave young settlers continued to move into the area along the Brazos and Navasota Rivers and began building cabins and growing crops. ¹

Meanwhile, in 1821, when the “Old Three Hundred” were entering Texas territory, a young man named Harvey Mitchell was born in Cornersville, Tennessee. Young Harvey was educated in a public common school and, at the age of eighteen, decided to join a wagon train heading for Texas, where he planned to “kill Indians and Mexicans, procure land and grow up with the country.”⁷ Mitchell would settle in an area known as Boonville, named after Mordecai Boon Sr., a nephew of Daniel Boone.² Upon his arrival, Mitchell set about working hard to aid fellow citizens in everyday life. He would lead the town into the future by serving as Boonville’s tax collector, surveyor, postmaster, chief justice, school teacher, justice of the peace; operator of the gristmill, blacksmith shop and dry goods store; hotel clerk, and a member of the Masons and the Minute Men. Mitchell would also go on to lead the way for the Agricultural and Mechanical College (Texas A & M University) to be located in this area in 1872. His many duties in Boonville were evidence of its growth and importance to the area. He became known as the “Father of Brazos County.”⁷

Life in the settlement of Boonville began to thrive and Hiram Hanover, Richard Carter, and John H. Jones laid out plans for a town square of 150 acres. Small lots faced a public square, while 10-acre lots around them were used for growing crops or keeping animals. The town was laid out so that the points of the square matched the points of the compass.⁷ The 1829 survey regulations placed upon Austin's Colony stated that land fronting on rivers and bays should run back perpendicular, so as not to give unfair riverfront advantage to landowners.⁴ Auctions were held to sell the small lots and raise money for the new functioning government, and to pay off the \$150 per acre of land. Lot one never sold and became the Boonville Cemetery.⁷

By 1841, Boonville became the county seat of Brazos County and a log cabin courthouse was built on the town square. This was the first of three Brazos County courthouses. ⁵ A cedar tree which grew at the site of the courthouse was transplanted to the downtown Bryan courthouse and allegedly still grows there today.

A jail, the second most important building in a county seat, was built in 1843 by John S. Crawford at a cost of one thousand dollars in county bonds. Referred to as a “super jail,” the structure was built on a foundation of hewn post oak logs one foot square, two tiers deep, one tier placed across the other. The walls were thirty-two inches thick and of solid oak timber. The two rooms of the jail were placed one over the other; the lower room, known as the dungeon, was twelve feet square. A trap door thirty inches square in the middle of the upper room furnished the only possible means of entrance or exit from

the room ten feet below. The roof and gable ends of this building (the attic) formed a room on the second floor, which was reached by an outside stairway from the ground. It was considered impossible for anyone to escape from this structure without help, especially from the lower room or dungeon. Some historians have said that the upper level was intended for the confinement of female prisoners, should there ever have been any.⁷

Although it was considered a physical impossibility for anyone to escape from this structure unaided, and it was said to be the strongest jail in the Republic at that time, there were several escapes. One of the most interesting was that of an accused murderer brought to the jail from another county. One night, about midnight, one of worst storms ever experienced in the county hit Boonville. When the sheriff took in the prisoner's breakfast next morning, he found the doors wide open, and the locks to both doors shattered. Nothing more was heard of the prisoner until the first day of the next term of court when he suddenly appeared before the judge and pleaded for trial or bail crying, "Please, shoot me, hang me, but just don't send me back to that jail! Those fleas are drivin' me outta my mind!" The jail was also said to be infested with lice.

After that, the prisoner was acquitted and swore that the lightning on that stormy night shattered the door locks and placed the ladder below the trap door for him. Prisoners from other counties continued to be brought to this jail for safekeeping, despite this escape. Only five of Boonville's citizens were ever kept in the jail for crimes. In the twenty-five years of its existence, the county paid out less than one hundred dollars for the feeding and care of its prisoners. The jail definitely appeared to be a deterrent to crime in Boonville!²

In 1861, Boonville appeared destined for a bright future with the announcement that the Houston and Central Texas Railroad would pass through the county seat. This would mean commerce and prosperity for the town, but alas, it was not meant to be. William Joel Bryan, who lived two miles west of Boonville, donated land to the railroad so that it would cross his land and bring life to a new settlement, one that came to be known as Bryan.¹

Citizens began leaving Boonville for Bryan. Some who were too poor to rebuild simply disassembled their log cabins, loaded them onto wagons, and rebuilt them in Bryan.⁷ In 1866, Bryan became the county seat of Brazos County.¹ Government offices and businesses moved from Boonville to Bryan, including the cedar tree allegedly transplanted from the earlier Boonville courthouse. Harvey Mitchell, the "Father of Brazos County," selflessly told his fellow citizens to "Go to Bryan because that's where the future is!"

In 1870, a yellow fever epidemic swept through what remained of Boonville, taking five of Harvey Mitchell's family members in one week, as well as many other citizens, all of whom were buried in Boonville Cemetery. Boonville was soon deserted, except for an orphanage, which was eventually abandoned.⁷

Today a lone oak tree is all that stands at the site of the town square of Boonville. The town well is thought to be located near the tree, but has yet to be discovered.⁷ Two car dealerships occupy much of the area that once comprised the town square and surrounding lots. In addition, a new office building – the Boonville Building – now sits on the location of the old jail. A nearby school bears the name Harvey Mitchell Elementary and FM 158 is also known as Boonville Road. The beautiful Boonville Cemetery is still lovingly maintained and holds the many citizens who brought Boonville to the brink of greatness, only to fall to the path of the railroad.

III. SIGNIFICANCE

The history of Boonville is significant because it provides a background for the historical development of Brazos County. In 1821, it was one of the earliest settlements in the area. Named after descendants of the Daniel Boone family, Boonville became the county seat.² Originally, Brazos County was created as a part of Washington County, with the county seat located at Mount Vernon, a short distance from present-day Brenham. Because the Brazos River was prone to flooding, it proved too difficult to get back and forth from the county seat. The residents east of the Brazos River petitioned the Texas Congress for their own county in the triangle formed by the two rivers and El Camino Real, or the Old San Antonio Road, to the north. The petition was granted on January 30, 1841, and the new county was named Navasota. A year later, its name was changed to Brazos after the river.¹

With the establishment of the new county came the need for a county seat. Since Texas law required county seats to be within five miles of the geographic center of the county, Boonville proved to be the perfect location.¹ The “founding fathers” of Boonville would eventually map out the town and go about the business of leading it into the future. The stagecoach from Houston began regular runs through the county in 1850 with stops in Boonville.¹ The town grew slowly, but eventually outgrew its first two courthouses, which prompted Harvey Mitchell to build a two-story structure 30 feet by 40 feet at a cost of \$1700 in 1854. It would serve the needs of the county until Bryan became the county seat twelve years later.¹

Along with the need for a county seat came the need for a county jail. The Boonville jail was indeed known as a “super jail” by citizens across the Texas Republic.⁷ It was not for the faint of heart and appeared to serve as a deterrent to crime in the Boonville area, if

not for more distant ones. Those less familiar with it might have done well to take note. Its imposing design, which made escape seemingly impossible, has never been replicated. It would likely have not passed a humanitarian inspection, which made it one of a kind. This ominous structure is worthy of historical significance in the early days of Texas history. Citizens should be made aware of this most unusual, but most interesting aspect of the historical town of Boonville.

An excerpt from an historic source describes the many leadership skills Harvey Mitchell possessed:

"A story from that period tells of a young man and woman from Washington who arrived at Mitchell's general store. They asked for a hotel and Mitchell took them to his home. The man's horse needed shoeing and Mitchell shod it for him. The couple asked for the county clerk and Mitchell took them to the courthouse and told them he was the deputy county clerk and in charge. They said they wanted to get married and deputy justice of the peace Mitchell said he would perform the ceremony. The man appeared skeptical, but Mitchell showed him his commission from the governor and the couple agreed to let him perform the ceremony."¹

When the railroad bypassed Boonville for Bryan, it became clear that Bryan was now the center of commerce in the county. In 1866, Bryan was named the county seat of Brazos County. Many names of the leading citizens of Boonville became names of streets and landmarks in Bryan. Harvey Mitchell, the "Father of Brazos County," is responsible for locating Texas A&M University near Boonville in 1876 with his historic 48-hour land deal; in that short timeframe, he secured enough land rights from surrounding citizens to bring the first land-grant college and public institution of higher learning to the area.⁵ Brazos County's roots began in Boonville and eventually led to Bryan.

Each year, the Brazos County Museum of Natural History sponsors a "Boonville Days" celebration, which includes historical exhibits, demonstrations, and a 5K run known as the "Buffalo Stampede." Residents flock to visit the exhibits because they are the only tangible evidence of the existence of Boonville.

IV. DOCUMENTATION

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