

Joseph Bonnell:

The Forgotten Texas Leader

Truman Dowdy

Junior Division

Lone Star Leadership in History

"May it be said, 'Well done; Be thou at peace'" Captain Joseph Bonnell.¹

There are many people throughout time who have shown great leadership qualities, but have gone unnoticed; some of these unknown heroes have made a huge difference in history. One of these people was Joseph Bonnell.

Joseph Bonnell was born on August 4th, 1802, in the city of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. He enrolled at the United States Military Academy at West Point in 1821, and graduated in 1825. Bonnell was promoted to Second Lieutenant of the 3rd Infantry Regiment. In 1831, he was promoted to First Lieutenant, and served the Regiment for eleven years.

Following graduation, his regiment was assigned at Fort Jessup, Louisiana. The reason that troops were at the fort was the Mexican skirmishes in Texas. The United States wanted to keep the war from spilling into their land. In addition, Indian tribes inhabited Texas at the time, adding another potential threat to the United States.

In 1825, *(actually 1835)* Bonnell was ordered by Edmund Gaines, the United States Major General in command *(Gaines didn't assume command until 1836)* at Fort Jessup, Louisiana, to act as witness to a treaty signing between the United States and Caddo Indians. The treaty had the Caddoes selling all of their land in the current United States (The Kadohadacho Caddoe's land in Texas was not included in this deal). Before the signing, Bonnell asked to read the document aloud, so that both sides heard and understood the treaty. However, Jehiel Brooks, the United States agent sent to participate in the negotiations, refused to allow Bonnell to read it. This, of course, made Bonnell suspicious of Brooks' intentions. Bonnell later found that Brooks had added an extra provision in which Brooks and his associates would receive profits from the deal *(actually only his associates*

were enriched by the deal). Bonnell notified the United States Government of Brooks' deceptions. He subsequently gave a testimony that supported the Kadohadacho Caddo Indians in the court case *U.S. vs. Brooks*.

Bonnell's actions earned him great respect from the Caddo Indians and United States Government. Word of Bonnell's trustworthiness spread among the local tribes, and got to Sam Houston, as he had many Native American allies.

In late 1835, General Houston chose Bonnell to be his Aide-de-Camp, his most trusted personal assistant. Although Bonnell left Fort Jessup to assist General Houston, the United States army rejected his request for a leave of absence. General Gaines allowed Bonnell to leave, without reporting his absence to the United States army. If the United States formally sent Bonnell to Texas, this would be interpreted by Mexico as a contradiction to the United States' neutrality in the war. So instead, General Gaines quietly, or unofficially, allowed Bonnell to go.

January 11, 1836, Sam Houston requested that Joseph Bonnell would be enlisted (*commissioned, not enlisted*) into the Texas army as a Captain. This request was granted. The List of Officers, which was a list of Texas Soldiers who are considered important, was issued in March of that same year, and named Joseph Bonnell as a Captain in the Texas army.

At this time, President Santa Anna was on a long stride of victories, including the capture of the Alamo. The Mexican army chased the Texas army, and the many settlers, eastward across Texas. Sam Houston was desperately in need of help.

Santa Anna was getting aggressive and underhanded in his tactics. He sent Manuel Flores to the Kadohadacho Caddo Indian tribes to convince them that the Texas army was

planning to attack their villages and seize their land. Although these bold statements were not true, Manuel succeeded in his goal to alarm the Indians. The warriors of the tribes then set out to ambush Sam Houston's army. Such an event would force Houston to divide his efforts between the Indians and Santa Anna, giving the Mexican army the upper hand.

Realizing what was at stake, General Gaines sent Bonnell alone to meet with the Caddo Indian army, 1,700 strong. Gaines placed all of his hopes of stopping an Indian attack in Bonnell's hands. He knew Bonnell's previous experience would prove useful in the mission.

Upon arriving in the Kadohadacho Village, Bonnell found only women and children. He learned that the warriors had left to prepare to ambush Houston's army, a threat that would prove fatal to the Revolution. Bonnell used information from the women to find the warriors. The Caddo chief was with his warriors, and recognized Bonnell from the negotiations between the United States and the Caddo tribes that took place the year before.

Caddo Chief Cortes remembered Bonnell's good character and honesty, so he was willing to talk to him. Chief Cortes told Bonnell about Manuel Flores' visit and what he claimed. Bonnell convinced Chief Cortes that Flores had lied, which made the chief very relieved. Cortes had the warriors return peacefully to their homes. Bonnell then asked Chief Cortes what he should report to General Gaines. Chief Cortes said to, "Tell General Gaines, the great chief, that even should the Caddoes see the Americans and Spaniards fighting, they would only look on, but not take a part on either side; tell him that I will send and let our chiefs and warriors know what you have said through him; the Caddoes were all very friendly to the whites (Americans) when they left here for the prairies to hunt; they are now

very friendly; they had no corn; they went to hunt meat to eat; every thing that he said to me was true; and that he was very glad that I had come among them, as now they knew the truth; that they had heard so many reports they did no know what to believe; now they were satisfied, and plant corn and hunt as usual.”²

Bonnell returned to Fort Jessup on April 20, 1836. He had single-handedly prevented an ambush on Sam Houston’s army, allowing safe passage to San Jacinto, where the Texas army had its final triumph. General Sam Houston defeated and captured President Santa Anna in the Battle of San Jacinto, winning Texas its independence from Mexico. Joseph Bonnell was a hero of the Texas Revolution. Had he not stopped the Caddo Indian attack, Sam Houston’s army would not have been strong enough to fight Santa Anna’s army.

Bonnell was the only officer to serve the Texas army *and* the United States army at the same time. Had Bonnell been granted a leave of absence from the United States army, he would have been awarded with a large piece of land as a thank you gift from the Texas Government for participating in the Texas Revolution. Furthermore, if Bonnell had received this land grant, his heroic story would likely have been passed down. His name may have been eventually known in the same way as Sam Houston, Stephen F. Austin, William Travis, and Davey Crocket are known today.

Instead, the United States army sent Bonnell to New York to a post on the Canadian border. Bonnell took sick leave from the United States army, and died on September 27, 1840 at his brother’s house in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Because little of the United States army or the people of Pennsylvania knew of his importance to Texas, Bonnell received no recognition or even a gravestone to mark his burial site.

Slowly, more Texas historians learned of Joseph Bonnell's story. The Texas House of Representatives formed a resolution on March 3rd, 2005, stating that "...he successfully quelled an uprising of 1700 Caddo warriors through a peaceful negotiation with Caddo Chief Cortes; his efforts helped enable General Sam Houston to focus the full strength of his army on defeating Mexican troops led by Antonio Lopez de Santa Anna at the famed Battle of San Jacinto, effectively securing the independence of the Republic of Texas."³

In 2005, a dedication ceremony to Capt. Joseph Bonnell was held at the Laurel Hill Cemetery of Philadelphia, PA, for his heroism, bravery, and dedication to his country. During the ceremony, a historical marker was placed at Bonnell's grave site. The plaque describes his contributions to both the United States and the Republic of Texas. The end of the inscription reads, "Captain Joseph Bonnell, who died on September 27, 1840, was the only active duty U.S. army officer who was a Hero of the War for Texas Independence."⁴

After May 1839, the mountain near Austin was given the name of "Mount Bonnell," by Albert Sidney Johnston⁵, a friend of Bonnell's. It is quite possible that the mountain was named after Joseph Bonnell, but evidence is still being collected. Bonnell deserves the privilege, as he performed a mountain's worth of achievements in his short life.

Although many do not know of Bonnell and his contributions, those who are familiar with his story consider him as deserving of recognition as the likes of Texas heroes, such as Davey Crocket or Sam Houston. He showed honorable character when he stood up for the Caddo Indians, when they were almost cheated by Jehiel Brooks in the treaty with the United States. Bonnell showed tremendous courage when he alone confronted a whole army of Caddo Indian warriors. He chose to go back to serve the United States army, even

though he would have gained great fame and fortune if he had stayed in Texas. Joseph Bonnell exhibited traits of a great leader: courage, respect, dedication, trustworthiness, integrity, and loyalty.

Endnotes

¹QUOTE ON J. BONNELL FROM U.S. MILITARY ACADEMY HISTORIAN SELDON B. GRAHAM'S REPORT "*JOSEPH BONNELL: A TEXAS HERO IGNORED BY HISTORY.*"

²FROM A LETTER FROM LT. BONNELL DIRECTED TO MAJOR GENERAL EDMUND P. GAINES

³FROM THE BIOGRAPHY OF JOSEPH BONNELL ON
<WWW.WEST-POINT.ORG/JOSEPH_BONNELL/BIOGRAPHY>.

⁴QUOTED FROM AN IMAGE OF JOSEPH BONNELL'S HISTORICAL MARKER FROM
< [HTTP://WWW.HMDB.ORG/MARKER.ASP?MARKER=29786](http://WWW.HMDB.ORG/MARKER.ASP?MARKER=29786) >

⁵FROM "LIEUTENANT JOSEPH BONNELL, HERO OF THE TEXAS REVOLUTION, AND MOUNT BONNELL IN AUSTIN, TEXAS," FOUND ON WWW.WEST-POINT.ORG

Annotated Bibliography

I. Primary Sources

1. Bonnell, Joseph. Letter to Major General Edmund P. Gaines. 20 Apr. 1836. *West-Point.ORG, The West Point Connection*. Web. <www.west-point.org>. This was a report written by Joseph Bonnell directed to General Edmund P. Gaines, explaining the events that occurred while he was negotiating with the Caddo warriors.
2. *Joseph Bonnell*. 2008. Photograph. Philadelphia, PA. Web. <<http://www.hmdb.org/marker.asp?marker=29786> > This was a photo of the historical marker at Bonnell's grave.
3. Houston, Sam. "Sam Houston Autograph Letter Signed." Letter to Major Joseph Bonnell. 2 Jan. 1836. Web. <historical.ha.com>. This is a letter requesting that Joseph Bonnell be made an officer in the Texas army.
4. "H.R. Resolution No. 615." *Texas Legislature Online*. Web. 06 Feb. 2011. <<http://www.capitol.state.tx.us/>>. This is a resolution from the Texas Legislature recognizing the contributions of Joseph Bonnell.

II. Secondary Sources

1. "Bonnell, Joseph." *Texas State Historical Association (TSHA) | A Digital Gateway to Texas History*. Web. 06 Feb. 2011. <<http://www.tshaonline.org/>>. This was a biography of Joseph Bonnell.
2. "Home | Joseph Bonnell: Hero of the Texas Revolution." *West-Point.ORG, The West Point Connection*. Web. 06 Feb. 2011. <http://www.west-point.org/joseph_bonnell/>. I found the letter from Joseph Bonnell to Gaines, a

summary of Bonnell's life, an assembly report describing the 2005 ceremony recognizing Bonnell's contributions to the Texas Revolution, and a 22-page biography by Seldon B. Graham, a U.S. Military Academy historian, about Joseph Bonnell, and a documentary about Joseph Bonnell, titled "The Story of Joseph Bonnell."

3. "Lieutenant Joseph Bonnell, Hero of the Texas Revolution, and Mount Bonnell." *KBSB Home - Bonnell*. Web. 06 Feb. 2011.

<<http://www.kbsb.com/>>. This is the genealogy of the Bonnell family. The web site gives information about Joseph Bonnell's life and his burial in an unmarked grave until the West Point Society of Central Texas worked to have his grave marked and honored with a historical marker.