

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

Forgotten Texas Hero

"Born on a mountaintop in Tennessee,
Greenest state in the land of the free,
Raised in the woods so he knew every tree,
Kilt him a b'ar when he was only three."

"The Ballad of Davy Crockett" (King of the Wild Frontier) was sung out loud and clear at the 1955 graduation at the Sam Barthe School for Boys at the grand City Park residence once owned by William Harding McFadden. Disney's first episode of this television series had recently aired the previous October, and the craze for this Tennessee backwoodsman swept over the kindergarten graduating class (at Barthe they called it the "primer"). The boys all wore crepe paper coonskin caps as they made the official transition into the first grade. Davy himself would have considered it a "sockdolager" of a ceremony.

Through the years New Orleans has had a special kinship with the state of Tennessee. Tennessee native son Andrew Jackson successfully orchestrated the defeat of the British at the Battle of New Orleans, and many Tennesseans fought alongside "Old Hickory" in this historic conflict. So did many Kentuckians who came down the river to New Orleans by keelboat. The Creoles called them "Kaintocks".

One such soldier was William H. Christy, born in Georgetown, Kentucky, on December 6, 1791. Orphaned at age fourteen, he was studying law at the outbreak of the War of 1812. He joined the staff of General William Henry Harrison where he distinguished himself fighting Tecumseh's Indian forces at Fort Meigs, at the falls of the Maumee River in Ohio. As "hero of Fort Meigs", he was commissioned a second lieutenant and met Sam Houston along the way. Christy served under Andrew Jackson at the Battle of New Orleans. Resigning from the army on October 1, 1816, he decided to make Louisiana his home. New Orleans was then the closest significant city to Spanish-controlled Texas.

Christy became a successful tobacco merchant in New Orleans, but in 1818 lost his investment to a dishonest partner. That same year, he married Catherine Baker Cenas, daughter of the Mayor of Philadelphia and widow of New Orleans' Postmaster General. Christy participated in Dr. James Long's filibustering expeditions to Texas in 1819-1820, which landed him in prison. Back from Mexico City after his release (arranged by U.S. envoy Joel R. Poinsett, for whom the poinsettia is named), Christy gained admission to the Louisiana bar in 1823. In 1826 he completed a digest of Louisiana Supreme Court decisions. In addition to his law practice, he served as a New Orleans alderman until 1833.

David Crockett "went to Congress and served a spell" and died in 1836 at the Alamo. Populist frontiersman Crockett (with his larger-than-life folklore image) was cleverly promoted by the Whig party to counter the appeal of Andy Jackson. Christy was a staunch Whig who supported the presidential candidacy of his old commander William Henry Harrison (who served just over a month in office in 1841). In 1850 Christy was appointed Surveyor of Customs at New Orleans, a position he held until 1854. He is remembered by some in New Orleans as one of the founders of the city's first orphan home. But none of these accomplishments brought him the admiration he received from his old acquaintance, Sam Houston.

Sam Houston wrote that the people of Texas would never utter Christy's name "unaccompanied by a prayer for his happiness and prosperity". On October 22, 1836, in his inaugural address to the Republic of Texas' first Congress, he singled Christy out for his contributions:

"There sits a gentleman within my view whose personal and political services to Texas have been invaluable. He was the first in the United States to espouse our cause. His purse was ever open to our necessities. His hand was extended to our aid. His presence among us, and his return to the embraces of his friends will inspire new efforts in behalf of our cause."

With a great flourish, Houston presented Christy his sword. It was for help Christy helped arrange back in New Orleans the year before. Christy presided over an October meeting called to raise money and volunteers for Texas. The men who responded were organized as the "New Orleans Greys". The following January, Christy used his influence to secure two loans totaling \$250,000 to help Stephen F. Austin, Branch T. Archer and William H. Wharton in Texas' revolutionary effort. That would be over \$5 million today.

After the Battle of San Jacinto, Houston presented Christy with the bridle and saddle captured from Mexican General Martín Perfecto de Cos. Christy, to help Houston out, put him up at his house on Girod

Street in New Orleans while he recuperated from the gunshot wound he suffered in the April 21, 1836 defeat of Santa Anna. Houston is the only person to serve as governor of two states (Tennessee and Texas).

Texas became the 28th state of the union in 1845. Christy saw that day and survived through the Civil War. He died November 7, 1865. His son George W. Christy, was a Harvard educated attorney who fought for the Confederacy. George and his wife Josephine Meline Hoskins (of Mobile, Alabama) had four children: Harold, Arthur, Edith and Edgar A. Christy. Edgar was architect for the City of New Orleans.

But Edgar's grandfather was architect of a revolution, and a most important forgotten Texas hero.

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