

**Lieutenant Joseph Bonnell,
Hero of the Texas Revolution,
and Mount Bonnell in Austin, Texas**

In early 1836, as General Sam Houston was forming his small Texas Army to defend against President Santa Anna's Mexican Army, a large body of Indians assembled on the Trinity River.¹ The military commandant of Nacogdoches reported Indians prepared for hostilities about 60 miles away.² The town of San Augustine appointed two men, Colonel P. H. Sublette and Dr. G. Rowe to go to Fort Jesup, Louisiana in order to make the U.S. Army aware of this Indian threat.³ An individual who had observed the Indian camp reported the number to be about 1,700 warriors from various tribes with very hostile feelings.⁴ It was the intention of these Indians to make war upon the Texans when the right opportunity presented itself.⁵ This "army" of Indian warriors was much larger than the entire Texas Army.⁶ These Indians were a clear and present danger to the ongoing struggle for Texas Independence.

This Indian threat to the security of the new Republic of Texas was extremely serious. U.S. Major General Edmund P. Gaines, commander of the Southwestern Military Division, after arriving at Fort Jesup on April 4, 1836, sent the U.S. Secretary of War a message stating that as soon as the Mexican Army arrives in the section of Texas occupied by the Indians, they will unite with Santa Anna in his war of extermination.⁷ During the movement of General Houston's army to the east, the Secretary of State of the Republic of Texas, Sam P. Carson, went to Fort Jesup, Louisiana to discuss the Indian threat with General Gaines.⁸

The United States, because of diplomatic relations with Mexico, had to remain neutral. General Gaines could not take any action in support of the Texas Revolution. Notwithstanding United States neutrality, General Gaines took the bold step of dispatching First Lieutenant Joseph Bonnell of the 3rd U.S. Infantry Regiment across the international border into Texas to confront the Caddo Indians.⁹ Reports were that the large force of Indian warriors in East Texas was "conducted" and "piloted" by Kadohadacho Caddo Indians.¹⁰

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General Gaines' written order to Lieutenant Bonnell was on April 7, 1836, only three days after the general had arrived at Fort Jesup.¹¹ However, General Gaines must have issued verbal orders to Lieutenant Bonnell two days earlier—the day after the general arrived at Fort Jesup—and followed up later with written orders.¹²

Lieutenant Joseph Bonnell had prior experience with the Caddo Indians. The year before, he had been an official witness to the Caddo Treaty of July 1, 1835 between U.S. Indian Treaty Commissioner Jehiel Brooks and Chief Tarshar of the Kadohadacho Caddo Indians in which all of the Caddo lands in the United States were sold to the United States.¹³ The 1835 treaty boundary ran north and south through the Kadohadacho Caddo village, that boundary being well within the present borders of the State of Texas.

At the 1835 treaty signing, Lieutenant Bonnell acted with great integrity and wisdom, asking to read the treaty before the Indians signed, but was refused by Commissioner Brooks. It later developed that Brooks had not read a secret provision to the Indians which allowed Brooks to swindle the Indians.¹⁴ Undoubtedly, Joseph Bonnell's highly ethical position in this controversy was recognized and appreciated by the Caddo Indians. The prosecution of Jehiel Brooks, with Joseph Bonnell as a deposed witness, ultimately reached the United States Supreme Court in 1850, ten years after Joseph Bonnell had died.¹⁵

In 1836, the Caddo Indians only had land in Texas. The four villages of the Kadohadacho Caddos were on the central northern tip of Caddo Lake, just south of the present town of Smithland, Texas.¹⁶ The Nadaco Caddo village was on the Sabine River south of the present city of Longview, Texas; and the Hasinai Caddo village was on the Angelina River 15 miles west of Nacogdoches, Texas.¹⁷

All of the Caddo lands and villages were in Texas. When General Gaines sent Lieutenant Joseph Bonnell to the Caddo Indians on April 7, 1836, only eleven days after the Goliad massacre, he sent Lieutenant Bonnell into Texas—a Texas at war.

In General Gaines' written order to Lieutenant Bonnell, the general wanted to know, among other things, whether the Caddo warriors were in Texas, at what place, and what may be their object, their temper, or disposition toward the white inhabitants.¹⁸ The general asked Bonnell to urge our Red friends to be peaceable, to stay at home, and to not allow bad news or bad talks to disturb them.¹⁹ Bonnell was authorized to employ an interpreter, and the Quartermaster was authorized to pay the necessary expenses.²⁰ Surely, this expense authorization would allow Bonnell to purchase two horses in the event he could not borrow two for his mission.

When Bonnell entered Texas on or about April 7, 1836, the Texas Army was still in camp near Groce's Landing on the Brazos River.²¹ Bonnell could provide early warning of any Indian movement toward the Texas Army and other intelligence, provided, of course, he was not killed. Sending a U.S. Army officer across the U.S. border into a foreign country was a most unusual and risky course of action for General Gaines to take. Being sent alone into a war zone was particularly dangerous for Lieutenant Bonnell.

On the way to the Caddos, Lieutenant Bonnell ascertained from many sources that a Mexican by the name of Manuel Flores had been with the Caddos about two months earlier urging the Caddos to join him in fighting the white inhabitants of Texas.²² Bonnell reached a Caddo village on April 14, 1836, but found it deserted except for a few children and two or three squaws who told him that all the warriors had gone to the prairies in consequence of what Manuel Flores had told them.²³

Bonnell proceeded to a second Caddo village about 12 miles away where he found Chief Cortes, "a very intelligent Indian ... said to have great influence with his nation," and some warriors.²⁴ We can only imagine the surprise of the Indians seeing a U.S. Army officer in their midst—in Texas, where the U.S. Army was not supposed to be. Likewise, we can only imagine the bravery of Lieutenant Joseph Bonnell, alone, except for an interpreter, in a foreign country among potentially hostile Indians.

From the closeness of the Caddo villages, it is reasonable to conclude that Joseph Bonnell met Chief Cortes in one of the Kadohadacho Caddo villages north of Caddo Lake and south of the present town of Smithland, Texas. This was the only Kadohadacho Caddo land and the only Caddo land with multiple villages.

Bonnell told Chief Cortes that he came as a friend, that Americans were their friends, and that he wanted the warriors to return to their villages and live in peace and hunt on their usual grounds.²⁵ “[T]he Indians appeared very happy and very glad” upon hearing this from Bonnell.²⁶

Chief Cortes told Lieutenant Bonnell that he would send to the prairies and inform the chiefs and all the warriors of what Bonnell had said.²⁷ Bonnell asked Chief Cortes what should be said to General Gaines, and the Chief replied, “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.”²⁸

Chief Cortes was glad that Joseph Bonnell had come, for now the Caddos had learned the truth after Manuel Flores had been telling them lies.²⁹ Clearly, Joseph Bonnell’s reputation of honesty with the Caddos, which he had earned the year before, paid great dividends for the cause of the Texas Revolution. Joseph Bonnell single-handedly defused the massive Indian threat against the Texas Army.

On April 20, 1836—*the day before the Battle of San Jacinto*—Lieutenant Bonnell returned to Fort Jesup from his encounter with the Caddo Indians in East Texas to report to General Gaines that the Indians would not make war against the Texans in spite of the best efforts of Mexican agent Manuel Flores.³⁰ Lieutenant Joseph Bonnell’s timing could not have been better in helping to prevent General Sam Houston’s small army from being blind-sided by a surprise Indian attack during the Texas Army’s march toward San Jacinto.

On May 2, 1836, after General Gaines learned of the Texas victory at the Battle of San Jacinto, he sent Lieutenant Joseph Bonnell's report to the U.S Secretary of War for the information of the President of the United States, expressing a hope that the President would approve of his [General Gaines'] conduct.³¹ It is significant that the report of Lieutenant Joseph Bonnell went to the President of the United States and is today filed among the executive documents of the United States Congress. At the time, the exploits of Lieutenant Joseph Bonnell in Texas immediately before the Battle of San Jacinto received considerable notice and attention in military circles, both in the United States and in the Republic of Texas. Joseph Bonnell subsequently was promoted to Captain in the U.S. Army.³²

Joseph Bonnell was truly a hero of the Texas Revolution. But, because he was a U.S. Army officer, he could never receive Texas land grants or similar awards for his outstanding service to Texas.

Joseph Bonnell, a graduate of the United States Military Academy ('USMA') Class of 1825, had friends and comrades-in-arms in the Texas Army during the Texas Revolution. Lieutenant William S. Stilwell, USMA Class of 1827, was a Texas Regular Army officer who commanded one of the Twin Sisters artillery pieces during the Battle of San Jacinto.³³ Lieutenant Joseph Cadle, USMA Class of 1824. was a Texas Regular Army artillery officer.

Hugh McLeod, USMA Class of 1835, served with Joseph Bonnell in the 3rd U.S. Infantry Regiment at Fort Jesup, Louisiana. At Fort Jesup, Bonnell and McLeod not only served together, they partied together off duty.³⁴ Colonel James W. Fannin, an ex-cadet of the West Point Class of 1823 and Commander at Goliad, mentioned Hugh McLeod by name in a letter dated February 22, 1836, calling attention to some of the best qualified men he had ever seen.³⁵

On March 7, 1836, McLeod took a leave of absence and left for Nacogdoches which was under threat of Indian attack, to join the Texas Army and defend that town from the Stone Fort with about thirty of his former enlisted men from Company B.³⁶ In Nacogdoches, McLeod stayed in the Rusk home.³⁷

Albert Sidney Johnston, USMA Class of 1826, knew Joseph Bonnell for three years at West Point. Johnston arrived in Nacogdoches on July 15, 1836, where he met with General Sam Houston who was recovering from his San Jacinto wound.³⁸ Major McLeod of the Texas Army met General Houston on his return to Nacogdoches.³⁹ Houston, Johnston and McLeod were in Nacogdoches during the summer of 1836. It is quite likely that these three warriors got together to talk about Indian threats to Nacogdoches, both past and present, and the great contribution made to the Texas Revolution by Lieutenant Joseph Bonnell.

Johnston would rise rapidly in the Texas Army from private to commanding general and later Secretary of War of the Republic of Texas.⁴⁰ McLeod would become Adjutant General of the Republic of Texas.⁴¹

Three years after Joseph Bonnell's mission into Texas, the site of the new capital of the Republic of Texas was selected and work began on the City of Austin.⁴² At this location, protection was badly needed against Indians who were in the area.⁴³ For this reason, the Republic's two top military leaders, Secretary of War Albert Sidney Johnston and Adjutant General Hugh McLeod, were two of the first residents of Austin.⁴⁴ Both Johnston and McLeod are considered to be co founders of the City of Austin.

Professional military men are trained to first make a terrain reconnaissance at any new location, paying particular attention to any high ground.⁴⁵ One of the Maxims of Napoleon was addressed to the advantages of high ground.⁴⁶ American military history is filled with examples of the importance of high ground—Bunker Hill, Cemetery Ridge, Little Round Top, Missionary Ridge, San Juan Hill, Monte Cassino, Mount Suribachi, Pork Chop Hill, to name but a few.

Secretary of War Johnston had personal combat experience at the Battle of Wisconsin Heights in the Black Hawk Indian War of 1832 in the military advantages of high ground and the fighting ability of Indian warriors.⁴⁷ Johnston was keenly aware of the importance of high ground in the defense against Indians.

Albert Sidney Johnston had the duty, as Secretary of War of the Republic of Texas, as soon as he arrived in Austin, to make a terrain reconnaissance, with particular emphasis on the high ground. The military security of the Republic's new capital required that this be his duty. Johnston was never a person who would ignore his duty.

Johnston's terrain reconnaissance would have necessarily focused on the high ground four miles to the northwest which overlooks Austin. This peak is a key military terrain feature, tactically critical to the defense of Austin. Control of this peak would be absolutely necessary in defending Austin. Planning for the defense of Austin had to include this peak.

Indians were the immediate threat to Austin, The control of this peak would be vital in the contingency planning against Indian attacks. In an emergency, military units might have to be ordered to this peak. For identification purposes in military planning by the Republic's War Department, this peak needed a name.

It would be only natural for Secretary of War Albert Sidney Johnston to think of his comrade-in-arms, Joseph Bonnell—Texas' protector against Indian attacks—when seeking a name for a peak for the protection against Indian attacks. Likewise, it would only be natural for Adjutant General Hugh McLeod to endorse the naming of the peak for his comrade-in-arms, Joseph Bonnell.

Thus, there is much evidence to suggest that *military necessity required* that the peak four miles northwest of Austin be given a name as soon as possible, either during or immediately after the building of the capital. Further, there is much evidence to suggest that the *military* named the peak or at least had great influence in naming the peak.

Military protocol required that Secretary of War Johnston be consulted prior to the naming of this key military terrain feature. Johnston probably named the peak himself, but if he did not initiate the naming, his advice certainly should have been sought in the naming process.

On December 12, 1839, Secretary of War Johnston sent a report to President Lamar outlining the defense of the new capital of the Republic. His report stated that, at this time, there are four companies on the Colorado above this city.⁴⁸ There are two words in this brief report which are significant. First, four companies of infantry constitute a relatively large force of battalion size. Second, use of the word above suggests that this large military force was situated exactly where it should have been situated, on the high ground on Mount Bonnell.

The peak overlooking Austin was given the name "Mount Bonnell" before April 1840.⁴⁹ It was probably named sometime after May 1839 when Edwin Wailer, agent for the new city, left Houston to build Austin.⁵⁰ Circumstantial evidence suggests that, during this ten month period, it was named by Albert Sidney Johnston, possibly upon the advice and suggestion of Hugh McLeod, for Joseph Bonnell.

In the early 1840s, Mount Bonnell was a safe haven against Indians for the citizens of Austin.⁵¹ Bonnell was still protecting Texans against Indians, even in the 1840s. What a great tradition Joseph had started in April 1836!

Joseph Bonnell was born in Pennsylvania on August 4, 1802.⁵² His father died when he was three and his mother died when he was thirteen.⁵³ He was raised by an older brother, Samuel, who was twelve years older than Joseph.⁵⁴ He also had a brother, George, who was six years older, and a younger sister, Lydia.⁵⁵

The Register of Graduates of the United States Military Academy shows that Joseph Bonnell entered the Academy on July 1, 1821 and graduated in 1825 to become a Second Lieutenant in the 3rd Infantry Regiment. Joseph was promoted to First Lieutenant in 1831 and to Captain in 1838. Captain Bonnell died in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania on September 27, 1840.

Joseph Bonnell's greatest accomplishment during his lifetime of only 37 years was to single-handedly protect the Texas Army against an Indian attack during the Texas Revolution. Joseph Bonnell was a true hero of the Texas Revolution.

- 1* Papers of the Texas Revolution, 1835-1836, John Holland Jenkins, Presidential Press, Austin, Texas 1973, Volume 5, page 153, Document 2388, Archibald Hotchkiss Report, San Augustine, March 21, 1836.
- 2* Papers, *supra*, Volume 5, pages 459 and 460, Document 2747, John T. Mason, Military Commandant of Nacogdoches, to General Gaines, April 13, 1836.
- 3* Papers, *supra*, endnote 1
- 4* Papers, *supra*, Volume 5, page 429, Document 2703, Deposition of C. H. Sims, James and Ralph Chesher to Committee, April 11, 1836.
- 5* Papers, *supra*, endnote 1.
- 6* General Houston estimated 783 on the field at the battle of San Jacinto, Documents of Major General Sam Houston, Commander in Chief of the Texian Army, to his Excellency, David G. Burnet, President of the Republic of Texas, containing a detailed account of the Battle of San Jacinto, John Cox & Co., printers, New Orleans, 1836.
- 7* Papers, *supra*, Volume 5, pages 373 and 374, Document 2638, General Gaines to Lewis Cass, Secretary of War, April 8, 1836.
- 8* Papers, *supra*, Volume 5, page 468, Document 2755, Sam P. Carson to David G. Burnet, Natchitoches, Louisiana, April 14, 1836.
- 9* Letters sent by the Western Department, Volume 7, Record Group 393, Records of the U.S. Army Continental Commands, Part 1, Entry 5568, pages 278 and 279, Gaines to Bonnell, April 7, 1836. Also see *The Caddo Indians*, F. Todd Smith, Texas A&M University Press, College Station, Texas, 1995, page 129.
- 10* *The Caddo Indians*, *supra*, page 128.
- 11* Letter, Gaines to Bonnell, *supra*, endnote 9.
- 12* Report of Lieutenant Joseph Bonnell to Major General Edmund P. Gaines, April 20, 1836, U.S. Serial Set, Microfiche 4904, U.S. and Mexico, 1828-38, 25th Congress, 2nd Session, No. 332, House Documents, Volume 12, Number 351, Fiche 9, Document 351, pages 774 and 775; Lieutenant Bonnell states: "In obedience of your order dated 5th instant," indicating a verbal order earlier than the April 7 written order.
- 13* *The Caddo Indians*, *supra*, page 122
- 14* *The Caddo Indians*, *supra*, pages 122 and 123.
- 15* 51 U.S. 445, 449 (1850); also cited as 10 Howard, Reports of Decisions in the Supreme Court of the United States; Testimony of Captain J. Bonnell, March 31, 1842 [date of a court proceeding rather than the date of the testimony since this is after Bonnell's date of death], HR 1035, pages 58 to 60, Journal of the proceedings at the agency house, Caddo Nation.
- 16* *The Caddo Indians*, *supra*, map on page 105.
- 17* *The Caddo Indians*, *supra*, map on page 105.
- 18* Letter, Gaines to Bonnell, *supra*, endnote 9.
- 19* Letter, Gaines to Bonnell, *supra*, endnote 9.
- 20* Letter, Gaines to Bonnell, *supra*, endnote 9.
- 21* *Eighteen Minutes: the Battle of San Jacinto and the Texas Independence campaign*, Stephen L. Moore, Republic of Texas Press, Dallas, 2004, Chapter 8, pages 162 to 189.
- 22* Report of Lieutenant Joseph Bonnell, *supra*, endnote 12.
- 23* Report of Lieutenant Joseph Bonnell, *supra*, endnote 12.

- 24 Report of Lieutenant Joseph Bonnell, *supra*, endnote 12.
- 25 Report of Lieutenant Joseph Bonnell, *supra*, endnote 12.
- 26 Report of Lieutenant Joseph Bonnell, *supra*, endnote 12.
- 27 Report of Lieutenant Joseph Bonnell, *supra*, endnote 12.
- 28 Report of Lieutenant Joseph Bonnell, *supra*, endnote 12.
- 29 Report of Lieutenant Joseph Bonnell, *supra*, endnote 12.
- 30 Report of Lieutenant Joseph Bonnell, *supra*, endnote 12.
- 31 Papers, *supra*, Volume 6, pages 150 and 151, Document 2952, Gaines to Secretary of War; also U.S. Serial Set, Microfiche 4904, U.S. and Mexico, 1828-1 838, 25th Congress, 2nd Session, No. 332, House Documents, Volume 12, Number 351, Fiche 9, Document 351, pages 784 to 786.
- 32 Marches of the Dragoons in the Mississippi Valley, Louis Peizer, State Historical Society of Iowa, Iowa City, Iowa, 1917, page 80: In April and May 1839, Captain Joseph Bonnell traversed the entire 140 mile length of the southern section of the western frontier road from Fort Towson to Fort Smith with fourteen oxen in eight and a half days.
- 33 Papers, *supra*, Volume 5, pages 41 to 43, Document 2287, List of Officers of the Regular Army; Eighteen Minutes, *supra*, pages 263, 313 and 436; and Papers, *supra*, Volume 6, pages 10 to 14, Document 2823, Rusk to Burnet, April 22, 1836, Report of the Battle of San Jacinto: Our two six-pounders, under the command of Colonel Hockley, Captains Isaac N. Moreland and Stilwell, were drawn up on the right of the center division.”
- 34 <http://www.smu.edu/swcenter/FairfaxGray/wg_226.htm>, Diary of William Fairfax Gray, page 76, Wednesday, January 27, 1836, Fort Jesup, Louisiana: At Lt. Macrae’s social party, Gray met Lt. Bonnell and wife. Lt. McLeod has sent up his resignation.
- 35 Papers, *supra*, Volume 4, pages 398 to 400, Document 2146, Fannin to Robinson, February 22, 1836.
- 36 Forgotten Texas Leader, by Paul N. Spellman, Texas A&M University Press, College Station, Texas, 1999, pages 20 and 21. Also see The “Sabine Chute”: The U.S. Army and the Texas Revolution, by Bill and Marjorie K. Walraven, Southwestern Historical Quarterly, April 2004, page 578.
- 37 Spellman, *supra*, page 21.
- 38 Albert Sidney Johnston: Soldier of Three Republics, Charles P. Roland, University of Texas Press, Austin, 1964, pages 54 and 55.
- 39 Spellman, *supra*, page 23.
- 40 Roland, *supra*, pages 58 and 82.
- 41 Spellman, *supra*, Chapter 3.
- 42 Southwestern Historical Quarterly, Volume 10, Number 3 , January 1907, The Seat of Government of Texas, Ernest William Winkler II, The Permanent Location of the Seat of Government, page 216 and page 227.
- 43 Winkler, *supra*, page 235; Edwin Walker: “[O]r labors were liable every moment to be interrupted by the hostile Indians, for whom we were obliged to be constantly on the watch.”
- 44 Winkler, *supra*, page 234; Albert Sidney Johnston led the parade on October 17, 1839 which met President Lamar and the rest of the cabinet about two miles beyond the city boundary. Also Winkler, *supra*, page 232; the War Department occupied Lot 3, Block 84, in the new capital; the Adjutant General’s Office occupied Lot 6, Block 84. See Roland, *supra*, page 82 and page 99. Also see Southwestern Historical Quarterly, Volume 1, No. 1, July 1897, Expulsion of the Cherokees from East Texas, John H. Reagan, pages 38 to 46.

45 U.S. Military Academy Catalog, 1822, in the Special Collections, U.S. Military Academy Library, West Point, New York: Military Art and Tactics Chapter, there are 70 texts in the curriculum many of which emphasize the value of high ground.

46 Maxim of Napoleon No. 14, Advantages of High Ground.

47 Roland, *supra*, pages 31 to 43.

48 Report of the Secretary of War to the President, December 12, 1839, Texas Archives, Box 401 -1306, Folder 9.

49 Topographical Description of Texas to which is added an account of the Indian Tribes, George W. Bonnell, Clark, Wing & Brown, Austin, April 1840, page 66: "Four miles above the city, upon the east side of the river, is a high peak, called Mount Bonnell."

50 Winkler, *supra*, page 227.

51 Southwestern Historical Quarterly, Volume 1, Number 2, Reminiscences of Austin and Old Washington, J. K. Holland, page 93.

52 Application letters and documents of Joseph Bonnell on file in the U.S. Military Academy Library, West Point, NY 10996.

53 Application letters and documents of Joseph Bonnell, *supra*.

54 Application letters and documents of Joseph Bonnell, *supra*.

55 Application letters and documents of Joseph Bonnell, *supra*.