

Joseph Bonnell

A Texas hero ignored by history

Four remarkable soldiers were in the small village of Nacogdoches, Republic of Texas, during the summer of 1836. It was only a few months after the Battle of San Jacinto in which Texas won its independence from Mexico.

One was Major Hugh McLeod of the Republic of Texas Army, the military commander of Nacogdoches. In March, McLeod had taken a leave of absence as a U.S. Army Lieutenant in the 3rd Infantry Regiment at Fort Jesup, Louisiana to defend Nacogdoches.¹ He never returned to the U.S. Army and was discharged from it in June. Major McLeod was well-known in Nacogdoches.

One was Albert Sidney Johnston who arrived in Nacogdoches on July 15.² Johnston had recently resigned his commission as an officer with ten years of experience in the U.S. Army and had come to Texas to talk with General Houston about joining the Texas Army.

One was Sam Houston who arrived in Nacogdoches on August 1 to be greeted by McLeod.³ Houston was the greatest hero and most prominent individual in Texas at the time, being the victorious general at the decisive Battle of San Jacinto. He had returned home to Nacogdoches after convalescing in New Orleans, then later in San Augustine, from his wound at San Jacinto.⁴

One was Lieutenant Joseph Bonnell, a U.S. Army officer. Bonnell had been sent by the U.S. Army on official business to Nacogdoches to help Texans with the Indian threat.

Joseph Bonnell is an individual who has been lost in history. Although Joseph Bonnell is unknown to the public—even to history scholars—he was well-known to Major Hugh McLeod, Albert Sidney Johnston, and General Sam Houston. These were four old friends and comrades-in-arms.

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During the previous year, Bonnell had experienced a series of events like no other military officer. The year before, in July 1835, Bonnell had been an official witness to the U.S. - Caddo Indian Treaty in which the Caddos sold all of their lands in the U.S to the U.S., retaining only lands in Texas which was then a part of Mexico.⁵

In 1835, the exact boundary between the U.S. and Texas was largely undetermined since it had not been surveyed. The 1835 Caddo treaty boundary was an arbitrary line running north and south through the center northernmost tip of Caddo Lake.⁶ The shape of the lake being somewhat like a "W," the arbitrary boundary can be better visualized as a vertical line running through the center of the "W." The Caddo tribe sold all of their lands east of this arbitrary line to the United States. This 1835 treaty boundary line is some seven miles inside the current Texas border. Thus, the 1835 treaty boundary and the remaining Caddo lands were about seven miles inside the present borders of the State of Texas.

The treaty signing did not turn out to be routine. Lieutenant Bonnell asked to read the treaty before the signing, and the U.S. Agent, Jehiel Brooks, refused to allow Bonnell to read the treaty.⁷ This, of course, raised the suspicions of both Bonnell and the Indian chiefs. As it turned out after the signing, a hidden provision inserted by Brooks improperly and unjustly led to the enrichment of Brooks.⁸

From this 1835 treaty incident, the Caddos trusted the honesty and integrity of U.S. Army Lieutenant Joseph Bonnell. Bonnell gave a deposition to be used in a court of law which was favorable to the Indians. Bonnell's 1835 experience with Caddo Indians is recorded in the United States Supreme Court case of *U.S. v. Brooks*, 51 U.S. 445, 449 (1850), the court case against the dishonest U.S. Agent.

Not only were the Caddo Indians impressed with Bonnell, the U.S. Army was impressed. So was "Co-lon-neh," the Indian name given to Sam Houston who had been adopted by a Cherokee Chief.⁹

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In the fall of 1835, General Sam Houston selected Joseph Bonnell to be his Aide-de-Camp. The fact that Houston and Bonnell were in different armies was a small detail to them which could be worked out later. On November 22, 1835, the provisional government of Texas issued a Resolution approving this appointment which was signed by the Governor and Lieutenant Governor, making Lieutenant Joseph Bonnell of the U.S. Army the Aide-de-Camp to Major General Sam Houston, the Commander-in-Chief of the forces in Texas.¹⁰ This Resolution was never rescinded or amended.

Joseph Bonnell was so valuable an officer that his U.S. Army colonel refused to grant him a leave of absence to join the Texas Army. In a December 30, 1835 letter marked “private,” Joseph Bonnell explained this to Sam Houston.¹¹ This private letter was no ordinary letter, however. It was a “How-to-start-an-army” letter. It contained detailed explanations and enclosed example documents pertaining to uniforms, military administration, logistical supply, pay, promotions, ordnance, ammunition and rations. This letter was a blueprint for building the Texas Army. Bonnell signed this letter, “Your sincere friend, J. Bonnell.”

On the same day, Bonnell sent Houston a short and concise “official” letter declining the appointment due to circumstances over which he had no control.¹² This official letter was clearly for the public records. Bonnell’s thoroughness in providing two letters demonstrates his bent for efficiency, an attribute recognized and appreciated by his superiors.

On January 11, 1836, General Houston wrote Governor Robinson to urge the appointment of Joseph Bonnell to the rank of Captain in the Regular Army of Texas.¹³ Perhaps Houston thought a commission as Captain in the Texas Army might lure Joseph Bonnell into resigning his U.S. Army commission. It was clear that Sam Houston thought highly of Joseph Bonnell.

The List of Officers of the Regular Army of Texas, issued March 10, 1836, included Joseph Bonnell as a Captain.¹⁴ This list is a “who’s-who” of Texas heroes, with names such as Travis and Fannin.

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93 By the time the List of Officer was issued, some on the list were dead. The
94 Texas Revolution was going poorly. Four days earlier, General Santa Anna’s
95 Mexican Army assaulted and captured the Alamo, with none of the military
96 defenders surviving.¹⁵ From Gonzales, three days after the list was issued, General
97 Sam Houston ordered an immediate retreat of both civilians and military personnel
98 to the east bank of the Colorado River.¹⁶ The ensuing rush eastward was a mass
99 chaos which became known in Texas history as the “Runaway Scrape.”¹⁷

100 The Mexican Army attacked Refugio in a furious battle on March 14.¹⁸ The Goliad
101 massacre came on March 27.¹⁹ Yet, Texans had problems other than the Mexican
102 Army.

103 The threat of war between Indians and Texans hung over Texas through most
104 of 1836.²⁰ Prominent members of the convention which declared Texas to be
105 independent on March 2, and which subsequently established a constitution, were
106 against granting land to Indians.²¹ This nullified the peace treaty which Sam
107 Houston had negotiated with the Indians the month before and resulted in the
108 Indians being angry toward Texans.²²

109 The Kadohadacho Caddo Indians were formidable, not because of the size of
110 their tribe, but because of their influence with other tribes, particularly their
111 traditional ties with the Wichitas.²³ In 1835, Texans had unsuccessfully attempted to
112 enlist the Cherokees and their allied tribes to “act against” the Kadohadacho
113 Caddos, Kichais, and Wichitas.²⁴ Mexicans also realized the influence of the
114 Kadohadacho Caddos with other tribes and had commissioned an agent, Manuel
115 Flores, to enlist Caddo warriors to fight Texans by offers of money and free
116 plunder.²⁵

117 After the March 2 convention, Indians in Texas seemed to be united against
118 the Texans because of the refusal of the Texas government to recognize land grants
119 to Indians. By March 7, it was reported that Kadohadacho Caddo warriors, along
120 with Nadacos, Hainais, Kichais, and Wichitas, were roaming the area north of the

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124 white settlements in East Texas and stealing horses.²⁶ On the same date, General
125 Sam Houston requested that, for the safety of the frontier, the Cherokee treaty be
126 ratified.²⁷ Garrison Greenwood warned the convention that, unless the convention
127 acted to recognize Indian lands, the frontier faced danger from Indians.²⁸ G. B.
128 Franks warned the convention of Indian depredations.²⁹ These concerns fell on deaf
129 ears at the convention. Houston's treaty with the Indians was not ratified.

130 Cherokee Chief Bowles assembled his warriors on the San Antonio road, east
131 of the Neches, for the purpose of attacking the Texans if they should be defeated by
132 the Mexican army.³⁰ President of the Republic David G. Burnet commissioned M.
133 B. Menard on March 19 as an Indian agent to secure the neutrality of Indian tribes in
134 general, and especially those moving down from the north.³¹ Significantly, Burnet
135 instructed Menard to avoid any treaty relating to boundaries.

136 Henry Raguet reported to the chairman of the San Augustine vigilance and
137 safety committee that he believed there was imminent peril of attack from various
138 tribes of Indians.³² Archibald Hotchkiss of San Augustine reported that large bodies
139 of Indians had gathered at the three forks of the Trinity whose known intentions
140 were to make war upon the inhabitants of the frontier.³³

141 John T. Mason sent a letter to U.S. Major J. S. Nelson at Fort Jesup,
142 Louisiana warning of Indians assembling to attack Texans and requesting, "Is it not
143 in your power to send a messenger to them, particularly the Caddoes, to make them
144 keep quiet?"³⁴ This most interesting request for a U.S. military mission to the
145 Caddo Indians to avert the disaster of an Indian war would later be considered by
146 the U.S. commanding general upon his arrival at Fort Jesup.

147 From the banks of the Colorado River, General Houston ordered a further
148 retreat eastward on March 26 to San Felipe on the Brazos.³⁵ From San Felipe,
149 Houston retreated north, up and across the Brazos River, to an encampment on the
150 west bank opposite Groce's Landing.³⁶

151 It would have been foolish for any competent military commander to ignore
152 the Indian threat. If the Indians were to aid the Mexican army, the Texans would be
153 caught between two foes.³⁷ Indians were a clear and present danger to the struggle

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157 for Texas independence. General Sam Houston was valiantly trying to organize his
158 motley rabble into an army at the Brazos River camp during the first days of April
159 1836. During this same period, reports on Indians continued to pour into various
160 Texas locations and to the U.S. Army garrison at Fort Jesup, Louisiana. William B.
161 P. Gaines traveled to Fort Jesup to carry a letter regarding the Indian threat and to
162 explain the details.³⁸

163 U.S. Major General Edmund Pendleton Gaines arrived at Fort Jesup on April
164 4 to take command of the critical international border situation.³⁹ The United States,
165 because of diplomatic relations with Mexico, had to remain strictly neutral. General
166 Gaines could not take any action in support of the Texas Revolution. One of the first
167 actions of General Gaines after reaching Fort Jesup was to send for Lieutenant
168 Joseph Bonnell, the experienced expert in dealing with Indians.

169 Joseph Bonnell was born in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania on August 4, 1802.⁴⁰
170 His father died when he was three and his mother died when he was thirteen.⁴¹ He
171 was raised by an older brother, Samuel, who was twelve years older than Joseph.⁴²
172 He also had a brother, George, who was six years older, and a younger sister,
173 Lydia.⁴³

174 Joseph Bonnell entered the United States Military Academy at West Point,
175 New York on July 1, 1821 at the age of 18.⁴⁴ He graduated four years later in the
176 Class of 1825.⁴⁵ Upon graduation, he was promoted to Second Lieutenant and
177 assigned to the 3rd Infantry Regiment.⁴⁶ Joseph was promoted to First Lieutenant in
178 1831.⁴⁷ He married Anna Elizabeth Noble in Adams County, Mississippi on April
179 23, 1831.⁴⁸ Bonnell had served in the 3rd Infantry Regiment for eleven years.

180 General Gaines ordered Lieutenant Bonnell to go to the Caddo Indian villages
181 of East Texas to persuade them to remain at peace.⁴⁹ This order may have been
182 issued vocally to Bonnell at an earlier date, followed by the written order dated
183 April 7. Verbal orders later followed by written orders were and are standard
184 procedure in the U.S. Army.

185 Lieutenant Joseph Bonnell was ordered to go by himself on a dangerous
186 mission into a foreign country to quell an Indian uprising. Few military missions

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190 could be so hazardous and difficult. Few officers have ever been assigned such a
191 daunting mission. As for General Gaines, sending a U.S. Army officer across the
192 U.S. border into a foreign country was a most unusual and risky course of action to
193 take.

194 In General Gaines' written order to Lieutenant Bonnell, the general wanted to
195 know, among other things, whether the Caddo warriors were in Texas, at what
196 place, and what may be their object, their temper, or disposition toward the white
197 inhabitants.⁵⁰ The general asked Bonnell to urge our Red friends to be peaceable, to
198 stay at home, and to not allow bad news or bad talks to disturb them.⁵¹

199 Bonnell was authorized to employ an interpreter, and the Quartermaster was
200 authorized to pay the necessary expenses.⁵² Surely, this expense authorization
201 would allow Bonnell to purchase horses in the event he did not already own horses
202 or could not borrow two for his mission. A horse was the mode of transportation in
203 the 1830s just as the automobile is the mode today. Bonnell's military training gave
204 him additional familiarity with horses in the event that he would be assigned to
205 horse-drawn artillery or dragoons. Even though Bonnell was an infantryman, there
206 is no doubt that he was also a proficient horseman. Although there is no record that
207 Bonnell used horses on his mission, it is probable that he did.

208 When Bonnell left on his mission to the Caddo Indians in East Texas, the
209 Texas Army was still in camp opposite Groce's Landing on the Brazos River.⁵³
210 Bonnell could provide early warning of any Indian movement toward the Texas
211 Army and other intelligence, provided, of course, he was not killed.

212 Clearly, Lieutenant Bonnell was highly regarded by the U.S. Army and highly
213 qualified for his mission into East Texas. Unbeknown to anyone, when Lieutenant
214 Joseph Bonnell of the U.S. Army set out on his lone mission, he was also,
215 technically and officially, a Captain in the Regular Army of the Republic of Texas
216 and Aide-de-Camp to its Commander-in Chief, General Sam Houston.

217 In 1836, the Caddo Indians only had land in Texas. The four villages of the
218 Kadohadacho Caddos were at the northern tip of Caddo Lake, just south of the
219 present town of Smithland, Texas.⁵⁴ The Nadaco Caddo village was on the Sabine

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223 River south of the present city of Longview, Texas; and the Hasinai Caddo village
224 was on the Angelina River 15 miles west of Nacogdoches, Texas.⁵⁵ All of the
225 Caddo lands and villages were inside of Texas.

226 Reports were that the large force of Indian warriors in East Texas was
227 "conducted" and "piloted" by Kadohadacho Caddo Indians.⁵⁶ Considering all of the
228 intelligence available to Fort Jesup at the time, it is probable that Lieutenant Bonnell
229 set out on his mission with Caddo Lake as his destination. Kadohadacho Caddo
230 villages were near the center northern tip of the lake and nowhere else.⁵⁷

231 During the course of Bonnell's mission into a foreign country at war,
232 concerns about the gatherings and the hostility of Indians continued. M. B. Menard
233 visited Shawnees, Delawares and Kickapoos living 75 miles north of Nacogdoches
234 and found that Cherokees had asked them to take up arms against the Americans.⁵⁸
235 There were two estimates of the number of Indians which had gathered, both
236 estimates were made in sworn statements, called "depositions" at that time. C. H.
237 Sims, in his deposition, stated that there was a large body of Caddoes, Kechies,
238 Inies, Towackanies, Whacoes and Comanches which he estimated to be 1,700
239 warriors; that Cherokees had killed Brooks Williams; and that the Cherokees gave
240 every intention of joining the other tribes.⁵⁹ William Sims, in his deposition, stated
241 that he lived near a Cherokee village, that he had no doubt of the hostile intentions
242 of the Cherokees, that he expected the Cherokees to join the other tribes, and that he
243 estimated the number of Indians to be from 1,400 to 1,700 warriors.⁶⁰

244 With these two sworn estimates as the only intelligence about the number of
245 Indians, a prudent military commander should base plans on a strength of 1,700
246 hostile Indian warriors. This "army" of Indian warriors was much larger than the
247 entire Texas Army.⁶¹ This gathering of Indian warriors, estimated to be 1,700
248 strong, was within 75 to 200 miles of Houston's army. Lieutenant Bonnell, himself,
249 noted that an Indian brave had traveled 150 miles in two days across the East Texas
250 terrain.⁶² At that speed, Indians could move to attack the Texas army in a matter of
251 from one day to a little over two and a half days. In less than three days, this
252 powerful Indian force could potentially strike a fatal blow to Houston's tiny army.

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General Houston was so concerned about the Indian threat that, on April 13, he took time out of his hectic schedule to write Cherokee Chief Bowl.⁶³ This letter is notable in two respects: (1) It grossly misrepresents the strength of the Mexican army, and (2) It makes a promise which is impossible for Houston to keep. Houston tells Chief Bowl that there are not many of the enemy now in the country. He also says that you will get your land as promised. Included to make the deceptions more acceptable were words of brotherly love. This duplicity was uncharacteristic of Houston. It suggests that the purpose of his letter was to deliberately mislead a potential “enemy” — a sign that the commanding general recognized that the Indian threat to his army was real and imminent.

During the movement of General Houston’s army to the east and the journey of Lieutenant Bonnell to East Texas, Sam P. Carson, the Secretary of State of the Republic of Texas, went to Fort Jesup, Louisiana to discuss the Indian threat with General Gaines.⁶⁴ Clearly, the government of the Republic of Texas considered the Indian threat to be very serious and of the highest priority.

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.⁶⁵ Bonnell later made a deposition regarding Manuel Flores.⁶⁶ This was the same Manuel Flores who, as an agent of Mexico in 1839, was killed by Texas Rangers on the banks of the North San Gabriel River while carrying war supplies to the Indians.⁶⁷

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.⁶⁸ 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.⁶⁹ 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

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290 hostile Indians.
291 From the closeness of the Caddo villages, it is reasonable to conclude that
292 Joseph Bonnell met Chief Cortes in one of the Kadohadacho Caddo villages north of
293 Caddo Lake and south of the present town of Smithland, Texas. This was the only
294 Kadohadacho Caddo land and the only Caddo land with multiple villages. Bonnell
295 told Chief Cortes that he came as a friend, that Americans were their friends, and
296 that he wanted the warriors to return to their villages and live in peace and hunt on
297 their usual grounds.⁷⁰ “[T]he Indians appeared very happy and very glad” upon
298 hearing this from Bonnell.⁷¹

299 Chief Cortes told Lieutenant Bonnell that he would send to the prairies and
300 inform the chiefs and all the warriors of what Bonnell had said.⁷² Bonnell asked
301 Chief Cortes what should be said to General Gaines, and the Chief replied, “Tell
302 General Gaines, the great chief, that even should the Caddoes see the Americans and
303 Spaniards fighting, they would only look on, but not take a part on either side; tell
304 him that I will send and let our chiefs and warriors know what you have said
305 through him.”⁷³

306 Chief Cortes was glad that Joseph Bonnell had come, for now the Caddos had
307 learned the truth after Manuel Flores had been telling them lies.⁷⁴ Clearly, Joseph
308 Bonnell’s reputation of honesty with the Caddos, which he had earned the year
309 before, paid great dividends for the cause of the Texas Revolution.

310 Lieutenant Bonnell’s “pow-wow” with Chief Cortes was on April 14, 1836.
311 The Chief sent messengers who would have arrived at the Caddo war chiefs and
312 warriors in the field at least by April 16, the day Houston’s army packed up, left
313 McCarley’s plantation, and hit the road which eventually led to San Jacinto, five
314 days away.⁷⁵

315 The Indian threat during the Texas army’s critical march toward San Jacinto
316 was substantially abated due to the actions of Joseph Bonnell. He single-handedly
317 defused a massive Indian threat against the Texas Army.

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321 On April 20, 1836—the day before the Battle of San Jacinto—Lieutenant
322 Bonnell returned to Fort Jesup from his mission to the Caddo Indians in East Texas
323 to report to General Gaines that the Indians would not make war against the Texans
324 in spite of the best efforts of Mexican agent Manuel Flores.⁷⁶ Lieutenant Joseph
325 Bonnell's timing could not have been better in helping to prevent General Sam
326 Houston's small army from being blind-sided by a surprise Indian attack during the
327 Texas Army's march toward San Jacinto.

328 On May 2, 1836, after General Gaines learned of the Texas victory at the
329 Battle of San Jacinto, he sent Lieutenant Joseph Bonnell's report to the U.S
330 Secretary of War for the information of the President of the United States,
331 expressing a hope that the President would approve of his [General Gaines']
332 conduct.⁷⁷ It is significant that the report of Lieutenant Joseph Bonnell went to the
333 President of the United States and is today filed among the executive documents of
334 the United States Congress. At the time, the exploits of Lieutenant Joseph Bonnell
335 in Texas immediately before the Battle of San Jacinto received considerable notice
336 and attention in military circles, both in the United States and in the Republic of
337 Texas.

338 Major General Alexander Macomb, stationed in Washington, D.C., was a
339 jealous and severe critic of Major General Edmund Gaines. Attempting to diminish
340 the importance of General Gaines' critical assignment at the border during the Texas
341 Revolution, General Macomb claimed that the Indian threat was a fake, using a
342 letter from John Darrington of Nacogdoches as his proof. Darrington's letter, dated
343 April 10, 1836, invited the Texas government to move to Nacogdoches, but made no
344 mention of Indians.⁷⁸ Darrington's letter merely alleged that rumors were
345 exaggerated, probably referring to rumors about the Mexican Army and the
346 Runaway Scrape.

347 Joseph Bonnell had accomplished his mission into Texas in an outstanding
348 manner. His mission rendered a valuable service to the Republic of Texas. Joseph
349 Bonnell should certainly be considered to be a hero of the Texas Revolution.
350 Because he was a U.S. Army officer, he never received the recognition given to
351 Texas soldiers which included land grants and other awards for military service.

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Joseph Bonnell had friends and comrades-in-arms in the Texas Army during the Texas Revolution. He had served at West Point with Lieutenant William S. Stilwell, West Point Class of 1827, a Texas Regular Army officer who commanded one of the Twin Sisters artillery pieces during the Battle of San Jacinto.⁷⁹ He had also served at West Point with Lieutenant Joseph Cadle, West Point Class of 1824, a Texas Regular Army artillery officer.⁸⁰

But, after the Texas Revolution, when the U.S. Army dispatched Bonnell to Nacogdoches, Republic of Texas, on official business to gather intelligence about the Indians in the summer of 1836, it was a wonderful opportunity to renew old friendships.⁸¹ Hugh McLeod, West Point 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.⁸²

Albert Sidney Johnston, West Point Class of 1826, had known Bonnell for three years at West Point. Johnston's class had only 41 cadets and Bonnell's class only 37.⁸³ With such small classes, cadets grew to know each other very well after working and living together for three years.

Houston obviously had great admiration for Bonnell, having selected him to be his Aide and having gotten him a commission as Captain in the Texas Army. Bonnell, in turn, admired a general officer so astute as to do that. Bonnell and Houston were close dedicated friends.

Undoubtedly, talk among the four friends—McLeod, Johnston, Houston, and Bonnell—would have gotten around to talking about Indian threats, past and present, for that was why Bonnell was in Texas. M.B. Menard was trying to employ a secret agent to report only to Bonnell or to him.⁸⁴ It would be only natural that when Bonnell's friends—Houston, Johnston, and McLeod—thought of Indians in the future, they would think of Joseph Bonnell.

Houston would become the first elected President of the Republic of Texas. Johnston would rise rapidly in the Texas Army from private to commanding general and later Secretary of War of the Republic of Texas.⁸⁵ McLeod would become Adjutant General of the Republic of Texas.⁸⁶ Bonnell would be promoted to

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Captain in the U.S. Army.⁸⁷

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.⁸⁸ Edwin Wailer stated, “[O]ur labors were liable every moment to be interrupted by the hostile Indians, for whom we were obliged to be constantly on the watch.”⁸⁹

Secretary of War Johnston had made a military terrain reconnaissance of the new site for the capital as soon as it was selected. In an April 21, 1839 letter to a friend, Johnston said:

“My agent will set off in a few days to commence the building of the City of Austin at the foot of the mountain on the Colorado. His escorts will be sufficient to protect the workmen and materials.”

This communication is very significant. Use of the singular word “mountain” indicates that Johnston had made a thorough terrain reconnaissance of the area, that he had done what military commanders have done for ages — select the high ground for military defense—choose the one mountain which overlooks Austin for the defense of the new capital of the Republic, and that he realized military protection was needed against Indians. Johnston was thinking about Indians. Of what friend would that remind him?

Johnston had personal knowledge of the importance of high ground in Indian warfare. He had combat experience at the Battle of Wisconsin Heights in the Black Hawk Indian War of 1832 and knew the advantages of high ground and the fighting ability of Indian warriors.⁹⁰ A “maxim” of Napoleon was on the advantages of high ground.⁹¹ Johnston was keenly aware of the importance of high ground in the defense against Indians.

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418 In military operations and planning, high ground needs to have a name, for
419 example: Wisconsin Heights. Military high ground has always had a name,
420 otherwise there could be confusion, blunders and disaster. History is filled with
421 names of high ground: Bunker Hill, Cemetery Ridge, Little Round Top, Missionary
422 Ridge, San Juan Hill, Monte Cassino, Mount Suribachi, Pork Chop Hill, Hamburger
423 Hill, to name but a few.

424 General Johnston was too good of an officer not to have named the mountain
425 he selected for the defense of Austin. He would not send troops to an unnamed and
426 unidentified mountain, thereby risking military disaster. He would not allow
427 subordinates to take that risk, either. No doubt Johnston would be thinking about
428 Indians when he or his next in command, McLeod, decided on the name for the
429 mountain.

430 The Republic’s two top military leaders, Secretary of War Johnston and
431 Adjutant General McLeod, were two of the first residents of Austin.⁹² A bronze
432 plaque on the Paramount Theater in downtown Austin marks the location of
433 Johnston’s log cabin. Johnston led the parade on October 17, 1839 which met
434 President Lamar and the rest of the cabinet about two miles beyond the city
435 boundary.⁹³ Both Johnston and McLeod should be considered to be among the co-
436 founders of the City of Austin.

437 On December 12, 1839, Secretary of War Johnston sent a report to President
438 Lamar outlining the defense of the new capital of the Republic. His report stated
439 that, at this time, there are four companies on the Colorado above this city.⁹⁴ There
440 are two words in this brief report which are significant. First, *four* companies of
441 infantry constitute a relatively large force of battalion size. Second, use of the word
442 *above* suggests that this large battalion-size force was located exactly where it
443 would be expected to be located—on the mountain (1) overlooking Austin, and (2)
444 upstream on the Colorado River.

445 Although Johnston did not mention the name of the terrain which the
446 battalion occupied, rest assured that it had been given a name for the troops to use.
447 Johnston’s penchant for avoiding the written word is illustrated in his response to an
448 inquiry from Captain George W. Cullum who had asked in 1850 for his biography.

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452 Johnston condensed his entire life of 47 eventful years into eighteen handwritten
453 lines.⁹⁵ It was characteristic of Johnston not to put very much in writing. Action was
454 his strong point, not the written word.

455 The mountain selected in April 1839 by Johnston for the defense of Austin
456 had a name in print one year later. A book published in April 1840 stated:

457 "Four miles above the city [of Austin], upon the east
458 side of the river, is a high peak, called Mount Bonnell."

459 Johnston's mountain finally had a published name, Mount Bonnell. That same year,
460 Captain Joseph Bonnell of the U.S. Army died.⁹⁶

461 Normally, this would be the end of the story of Joseph Bonnell. The reader
462 would assume that Joseph Bonnell, hero of the Texas Revolution, had finally gotten
463 some of the recognition which he so richly deserved, thanks to two of his friends
464 and comrades-in-arms, Albert Sidney Johnston and Hugh McLeod. But, that was not
465 to be.

466 By the most unusual set of circumstances, the 1840 book which first provided
467 the name of "Mount Bonnell" was written by ...

468 ... a George Bonnell.⁹⁷ This book does not disclose for whom or by whom
469 the mountain was named. This omission strongly suggests that George did not know
470 and was puzzled by this strange occurrence involving his own last name.

471 The *circumstantial* evidence supporting Joseph Bonnell as the name-sake of
472 Mount Bonnell is extremely strong. But, obviously, Joseph Bonnell never set foot in
473 Austin. George Bonnell was actually *in* Austin, at least for a few months. In fact, the
474 *only* Bonnell in Austin during the first three years of the city's existence was
475 George.⁹⁸

476 George William Bonnell was a native of Onondaga County, New York.⁹⁹ He
477 was an editor in Alabama and in Mississippi. He traveled to Texas in the summer of
478 1836. In 1837, he was living in Houston. During Sam Houston's first term as

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482 President, George Bonnell was commissioner of Indian Affairs and advocated a
483 harsh policy against them. In 1839, he moved to Austin where he and Jacob W.
484 Cruger were selected as government printers on December 6. On January 15, 1840,
485 he started publication of the Texas Sentinel, but sold his interest in December 1840.
486 He took part in the Santa Fe expedition [June 1841] and was released from prison in
487 Mexico in the summer of 1842. He joined the Mier expedition and was killed near
488 the Rio Grande, probably on December 27, 1842.

489 Such are the highlights of the official biography of George W. Bonnell. In
490 addition, George Bonnell's printing press did not arrive in Austin until sometime
491 after January 29, 1840.¹⁰⁰ In 1840, George Bonnell was a Private in the Travis
492 Guards.¹⁰¹ In May and June 1840, George Bonnell was with the Travis Guards at
493 Camp Cazneau, two and a half miles east of the present site of Round Rock,
494 Texas.¹⁰² George W. Bonnell spent only a few months in Austin, even fewer as a
495 newspaperman.

496 Both Johnston and McLeod died in 1862 as Confederate officers during the
497 Civil War.¹⁰³ Apparently, at some point after the Civil War, someone asked the
498 question, "For whom was Mount Bonnell named?" George W. Bonnell was the only
499 person named Bonnell who lived in Austin during the first three years of its
500 existence. For those without relevant knowledge of military affairs, George W.
501 Bonnell would be a reasonable guess. John Henry Brown, Frank Brown, Mary Starr
502 Barkley, James Mulkey Owens, and Nat Henderson have been some of the writers
503 who have speculated about how and for whom Mount Bonnell was named.

504 The official historical marker of the Texas Historical Commission on Mount
505 Bonnell states, "Mount Bonnell ... was named for George W. Bonnell who came to
506 Texas with others to fight for Texas Independence." The marker fails to mention the
507 fact that George W. Bonnell did not arrive in Texas until four months after the War
508 for Texas Independence.

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Postlude

In 2004, the grave of Captain Joseph Bonnell was found unmarked in Laurel Hill Cemetery in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. On Memorial Day weekend 2005, an Honor Guard from his former unit, the 3rd Infantry Regiment, now the "Old Guard" ceremonial unit which guards the Tombs of the Unknowns in Arlington Cemetery and leads Presidential Parades, gave Captain Joseph Bonnell full military honors to dedicate his grave marker and historical marker.

"May it be said, 'Well done; Be thou at peace' " Captain Joseph Bonnell.¹⁰⁴

Seldon B. Graham, Jr.
Colonel, U.S. Army, Retired

Austin, Texas

February 9, 2006

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Endnotes

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