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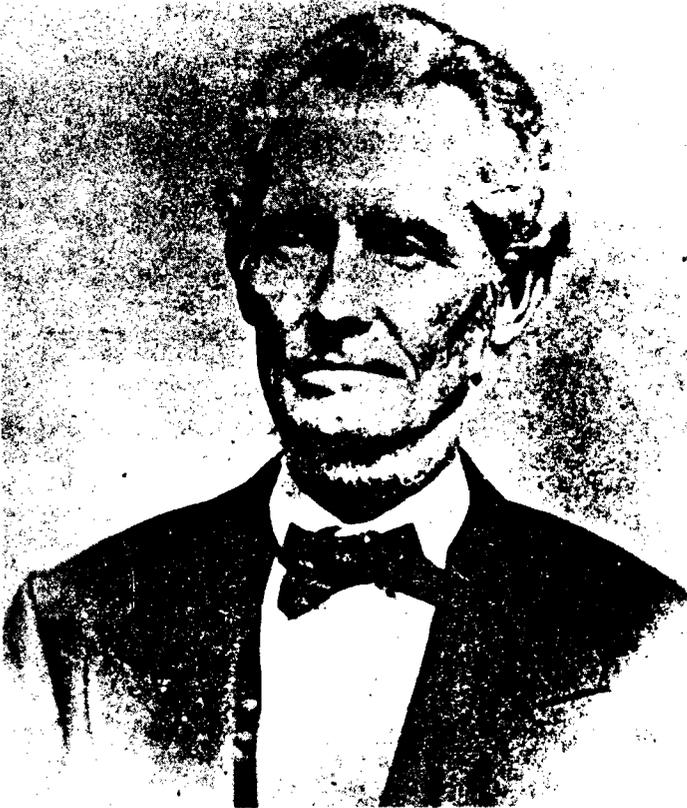
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A. A. NELSON: SAILOR, SURVEYOR, AND CITIZEN:

A PERSONAL PROFILE

JAMES C. DICKSON, JR.

The siren magnetism of the great impetus toward the West and its clarion call to restless spirits in the border states and the Tidewater regions of the Southeast ranks among the list of eventualities to which we can point with reasonable certainty. The exodus westward and southward did occur, and Texas drew most heavily upon those who were impelled by whatever forces out of these areas. But what a range and piercing quality there was to the Lorelei song of the Southwest. Its call penetrated the proverbial rockbound coasts of Maine and the inward spirit of Albert Aldrich Nelson.



Nelson was born in Milford, Massachusetts, on May 15, 1814, and came to Texas in 1838, stopping at Crockett until 1839, near his relatives, the

Aldrich family.¹ During much of his youth, he had been a sailor on whaling ships, first as a cabin boy, then as a deck hand. He left for Texas at the end of his sailing days, settling ultimately in Nacogdoches, where he remained for fifty-three years, dying at the age of seventy-six on September 25, 1892.² He was a man of great physical vigor until a few years before his death, when a stroke and a lingering fever slowly exhausted him.³ He was a man of quiet and steady demeanor, well-read, and fond of a wide variety of choice literature.

He made an imprint upon the late Republic of Texas and on the young state, both as a citizen of good repute and as a surveyor. In the latter role, he was like many other "first settlers," who were practical surveyors.⁴ As one of the first surveyors to locate in the state, he developed such a proficiency that he retained an incumbency as district surveyor in Nacogdoches County for many years, retiring as an old man.⁵ If the faculty for surveying is transferrable from one generation to another, even widely separated ones, his craft came honestly. He was a lineal descendant of Thomas Nelson, who had done some "ground work" surveying in Milford, Mass., almost exactly two hundred years before Albert Nelson performed some of the first survey work at the city of Crockett, Texas, in 1838.⁶

The public confidence in his abilities to administer the office of district surveyor with dispatch and efficiency reflected itself in consistent pluralities at the elections for the office. His own confidence in reelection manifested itself early in his public life. In a letter to his brother Charles, he wrote:

The election for County Surveyor comes on again this fall. I am a candidate for the same and have not as yet any opponent. That is very comfortable. Someone might even at this late hour happen out and give me a pretty tight race, but I have no fear. The people generally, as far as I can learn, express themselves entirely satisfied with my conduct while in office, and they neither sob nor sigh for a change.⁷

His surveying skill and knowledge of the land business in general caused him at one time to be urged for the post of Texas Land Commissioner.⁸ In 1841, he prepared a Nacogdoches county map which was recognized as one of the most correct and largest county maps at the time. He had asked remuneration for the work to the tune of one thousand dollars in American money or six thousand dollars in Texas money, but he received only about half the sum, much of which he asserted he had to pay to assistants, though he did receive a number of patents for his work.⁹ For other routine surveying jobs early in his career, he often received as much as five hundred dollars a job.¹⁰

All of these early experiences in an aggressive young republic and in an incipient state had been preceded by a colorful and eventful career as a sailor. During one period from 1833 to 1838, he took a series of cruises aboard New England whaling vessels; excursions which kept him away from home and family for the better part of these years. During these voyages, though they occurred during the span of only a few years, he

underwent the gamut of experiences possible for a whaling sailor, including the ultimate: shipwreck.

During most of this period, he kept a diary, in which he recorded the events of the day; subjects nautical, personal, and reflective. He entitled his personal log: "A Scrapbook Containing the Most Remarkable Incidents That Occurred During a Voyage to the Pacific for Whales."¹¹

His "sea diary" is a potpourri of experiences and events which are simultaneously mundane, exciting, and poetic. This is neither contradictory nor inapposite, for the man himself was apparently a person of variegated hues and whims. This is reflected in his diary and personal correspondence. He writes descriptively in brief, concise sketches of islands, land, and conditions at sea. It is a very "salty" journal.

There are times when the diary becomes almost conversational as he inserts some afterthought on the day's duties and experiences. This applies whether he is recounting something exciting or unusual, or it may be used to express the most routine sailor talk. For example:

I forgot to mention, among other things, that we have lately bent up main-royal mast and also the yard and sail, which, being hoisted back up aloft forms quite a shady retreat for the man stationed there on the lookout.¹²

Interspersed throughout such references are periodic reports of latitudinal and longitudinal positions of his ship, wind velocities and directions, weather conditions, fluctuations of sails, and other matters of daily pertinence. As a result, his diary often reads like a ship's log, and so at times is of but little interest to the average landbound reader. There are, however, frequent flights of literary style, couched in fanciful and imaginative language, which give the reader a trenchant insight into the man and his way of life. In whatever he wrote, he displayed an unusual ability to switch belletristic gears and soar from the "banal to the beautiful, from the petty to the poetic." There is a wit, a whimsical flair, a tongue-in-cheek, sometimes roguish tinge to his writing, both in his journal and in his letters. He knew when a situation demanded that the scribe be puckish, earthy, or majestic.

The seasoning he received during his long exposure to rigors of mid-Pacific chases of the elusive sperm whale admirably fitted him for the personal and economic uncertainties of life in a new, frontier state. His diary presents the spectrum of experiences and hazards of a sailor's life and trade during the era of "ships of wood and men of iron." His entries began on December 23, 1833, and ran intermittently through January 17, 1836.

His cruise in 1833 began on a dramatic note almost from the start, with a confrontation with a pirate ship. The piratical brig trailed his ship for several hours, but the whaler escaped the encounter with only a verbal exchange between the vessels. Nelson and his captain never knew the nationality of the pirate ship; yet both were thankful enough to be left ignorant of that fact.

The romance of a life at sea was tempered with excursions ashore for replenishing ship's stores and other mundane tasks. One such incident is recounted for April 12, 1834:

Our object in stopping at the Island was to recruit ship with potatoes and terrapin. We succeeded in getting about 300 of the aforesaid animals, which we did with a good deal of trouble and caution, . . . traveling miles under a scorching sun, over sharp rocks and through briar bushes, without hats and many times without even a refreshing breeze. After suffering all this, we were generally repaid by finding two or three of the confounded animals, which we lugged or backed down to the boat. This kind of work was without exact exception the most fatiguing that ever I was engaged in, or ever wish to be.¹⁴

There is nothing to show that he ever relinquished his impressions of this necessary but difficult project. In fact, three of his shipmates were so impressed with its difficulty that they jumped ship some five months later. The culprits were summarily dealt with, and in the words of Nelson: "They were all of them taken by the Spaniards and put into the calaboose."¹⁵

He often exercised the "enlisted man's prerogative" and registered complaints in his diary concerning the sins of omission and commission allegedly perpetrated by his captain. In one instance, he complained of the faulty condition of some of the rigging in which he and his mates must climb, predicting a dire end for some of them, if immediate repairs weren't made.¹⁶ However, he once records in his diary a spoof of the captain as being "old and fidgety" when the captain seemed to be quite concerned about what later proved to be a defective rudder.¹⁷ He later confided bitterly to his diary, with the historic resignation of the man in the ranks; this time over the captain's unseemly pace toward home:

Cruising, or rather bugger-lugging for a few days, . . . and what is it all for, is my opinion and of some others on board . . . It is a vain attempt to make up for the time which was squandered away during the former part of the voyage. Alas!! This habit of procrastinating never was beneficial for anyone, and it has been fraught with the most unhappy consequence to all of us.¹⁸

Though by no means unusual or infrequent for ocean-going vessels, gales, hails, rains, and snows are portrayed with a vivid precision and lucidity by Nelson in his informal, yet dramatic prose.

The wind at last burst out in all its fury, blowing tremendously, accompanied by thunder, lightning was so vivid, and by its light we could distinguish, once in a while, objects about deck; though without its light, we were scarce able to discern an object at the distance of about 8 feet. At this time she made a violent pitch, and away went her three sails.¹⁹

His accounts of encounters with icebergs and the blanketing of the entire

deck of the ship with snow while rounding the Horn induce involuntary shivers in the reader.

His accounts of catching and processing whales, while not rivaling Melville, at least have a first person freshness in depicting the dramatic adventure of the trade before steam caught up with it. A perfunctory reader of the diary might wish that he had been more profuse in details of these operations, but it is a diary and not a blow by blow account. In one place, he does extend the portrayal to include this salty dialogue:

The sound of "There she blows" is heard from the mast head. "Where away?" is the sound from the deck. "Three points above starboard beam, Sir." "What does she look like?" "Sperm whales, Sir." We immediately hauled wind and stood for them . . . lowered away 3 boats. The chief mate's boat fastened, but the iron drew out and we lost her.²⁰

To further compress his seafaring experiences into a short span of time, Nelson's ship sailed into a sort of Flying Dutchman experience in August, 1837, when it encountered a ghost ship. That is, a ship completely deserted, abandoned, and drifting. Indulging their curiosity to the extent of trying to make out her name on her hull, Nelson's ship passed the floating derelict unboarded.²¹

By far the most exciting experience recorded in the diary is his shipwreck and eventual recovery. This last, great dramatic experience at sea seems to have occurred in December, 1835, as a result of a shifting of the wind, about which the captain wasn't informed. Twenty-two men survived the disaster, with Nelson officiating as a ship's carpenter during their efforts to get back to civilization. He had also acquired a rudimentary knowledge of navigation during the voyage, making himself an even more valuable member of the party.

His description of the landing on a desert island and the crew's herculean efforts to effect the voyage to the nearest inhabited landing in the ship's small boats forsakes the "ship's log" quality the diary had hitherto manifested and becomes more dramatic and gripping. A case in point:

We prepared for the worst and put up a petition to our heavenly Father to protect us in our distressing situation and prepared for whatever might await us. Never shall I forget the feeling that pervaded my heart. The storm cloud moved rapidly . . . as if already on its errand of destruction. The night approached dark and dreary. The sea moaned as under its agitation, while each wave threatened to send us into the dark abyss.²²

Having sailed almost 1,000 miles on rations at times dangerously short, his party reached their destination and safety. In spite of the excessive exposure they had endured, the general health of the crew was remarkably good. Some months later, off the coast of Japan, Nelson was to transcribe a poem (written by someone else) in his diary; whose last verse was no doubt consumed with a deeper gravity for him than it might have been before his harrowing experience with the wreck:

Sweet vale of Ovoca! how calm could I rest
 In thy bosom of shade with the friends I love best;
 Where the storms which we feel in this cold world should cease
 And our hearts like thy waters be mingled in peace.²³

One more recording in Nelson's diary is of significance, because of the insight it gives into the development of the man's character for the many years that remained to him. It is a statement of "rules for rising to eminence," recorded somewhere off the coast of Japan. Without doubt, Nelson's precepts would have received the approbation of Benjamin Franklin himself, and there are frequent passages in the diary which point to the effort which Nelson made to live up to his standards of excellence; determining to strive so that no shipmate would get ahead of him in anything that pertained to his work aboard ship. Within the confines of his chosen community and profession in later life, there is ample evidence that he was to achieve an eminence commensurate with his efforts. Here are his rules for rising to eminence:

1. Maintain honesty in everything and with every person.
2. Form habits of strict temperance and total abstinence from the use of ardent spirits.
3. Cultivate cleanliness in your person and in everything around you that is under your care.
4. Always treat everyone with kindness and courtesy and show an obliging disposition.
5. In every station, let it be your first concern to make yourself master of your business and then learn as much about the ship as you can.
6. See that everything is done promptly and faithfully that is committed to your charge.
7. Endeavor to improve your mind and increase your knowledge by every suitable means.
8. Seek daily the blessing of God upon all your efforts and all your ways.²⁴

His eventual immigration to Texas may have been motivated in part by economic reasons. His straitened financial condition after his last cruise perhaps impelled him to ship out on a different type of adventure in order to recoup. It was at this time that the siren call of the frontier and Texas intruded itself upon his consciousness. His brother Charles Henry had preceded him into Texas, settled in the Houston area, and opened the way for him by uncovering several job opportunities. In his own words to his father:

Henry writes in good spirits. Says the opening is remarkably good there for young men, more particularly for himself and me.²⁵

With this, he was off to Texas.

The hoped-for eminence he had spoken of in his journal didn't cast its mantle on him immediately. The crimped financial circumstances that had sent him southward continued to plague him in his early years in Texas. There were job opportunities, but none of them were exceptionally remunerative, and the costs of living forced him into contracting debts. These were minor obligations, but pesky. He unburdened himself to brother Charles, with whom he carried on a lively correspondence until Charles' untimely death.

I think I told you before Lacy offered me \$100 per month on condition that I board myself. It is all he can afford. . . Texas money at this place is \$3 to \$1. You can hardly go into the state and look around short of a dollar. Charles, clothes are so damned high here that it is impossible to keep up a respectable appearance. They charge \$100 for a common kind of a coat.²⁶

After recounting his current debts, he asked Charles to sell him a coat; no doubt hoping to get a cut rate and a warm coat from his brother.

His letters to his brothers and other relatives give evidence of his rapid adjustment to his new setting and his assimilation into the environs of Nacogdoches County, where within 20 years his would be noted among the prominent families of the city.²⁷ His achievement of the eminence he had spoken of as a young man occurred in an era graced with names like Haden Edwards, Frost Thorn, Sam Houston, Thomas Rusk, Kelsey Douglass, and Adolphus Sterne; all of whom are mentioned in passing references in his letters. During his bachelor days, he boarded at the home of Adolphus Sterne (now the Hoya Library) and slept in his office. At the Sterne home, he met socially and professionally with some of the preeminent personages of his day.

Nelson is mentioned a number of times in the personal diary of Adolphus Sterne, in practically every instance respectfully as "Mr. Nelson." Sterne's entry for June 14, 1841, records why he took Nelson as a boarder on that day:

I took him because he is a decent young man, and we always have more on the table than we want for the family. He lodges in his office.²⁸

Sterne developed such a confidence in Nelson's business sense that he gave him his power of attorney, for the purpose of acquiring some important property.²⁹ An enlightening entry in Sterne's diary for Thursday, February 16, 1843, illustrates Nelson's growing prestige among the best people of his community as a young man:

Had conversation with Gen. Rusk about getting Mr. A. A. Nelson to teach our children. Hope he may accept for he is very capable, more so than anyone I know of in the county.³⁰

Nelson emerges from his personal letters as one of the gay blades of Nacogdoches society in those early bachelor years. His unwed state in no way indicated a lack of appreciation for the distaff charms of the community. His brother Charles chided him about one local beauty and received this response:

A certain Miss Culp of whom you speak does indeed engross my attention when she condescends to favor us with her presence in town. When the young lady visits our town she takes up quarters in our house, and so I am necessarily compelled to be more or less in her presence, and I assure you it is not at all against my inclinations so to do. She is indeed beautiful, surprisingly beautiful, a bright and peculiar star whose beams shed a halo of sighs on all within her benign presence.³¹

His sister, far away in Maine, was skeptical about the quality of the young women of Texas and expressed the hope that her brothers would not marry in Texas, unless they found someone to compare with the fair girls of New England (which she doubted).³² Within four years from this sisterly admonition, Albert had found such a girl in Jane Caroline Simpson, and on October 9, 1845, they were married in the home of her father, John J. Simpson, some eight miles east of Nacogdoches. Of their seven children, all survived to adulthood save the first born son.³³

There are several indications that Nelson had begun to tire of his bachelor life within a few years of his arrival in Texas, in spite of his flippant references to his squiring the local belles from one gala to another. A case in point:

Well, Charlie, I am no nearer marrying than ten years ago, but am still really in hopes that the Gods may smile propitiously and there will yet be some hope.³⁴

Brother Charles had teased him occasionally about his being a ladies' man, to which Albert replied in kind:

You occasionally razz me on my frequent amours, affairs de cour, but no one idol claims my exclusive homage. . . . You have compared me to a towboat, for it's always my good fortune to find some fair one to take in tow and away I go, snorting and steaming in gallant style.³⁵

Clearly noticeable beneath the facade of youthful spirit is a deep-seated and profound attachment to his widely separated family; a separation made more poignant by the limited media of communication and transportation. He frequently inquired of his brother concerning anything he might have heard from kinfolk in Maine or elsewhere. In at least three instances, he becomes quite animated over his failing to receive a box of books and shirts supposedly sent by his sister in Maine and made by her and his mother. He anticipated much gratification from wearing anything made by the hands of a sister or brother.³⁶

Financially it was not long after he arrived in Nacogdoches before he became secure. His early chagrin over the cost of a coat and dismay over vexing financial problems were replaced by a growing pride in his town and in his mounting position of dignity and importance in it. This was an era in which politics was almost entirely personal, and elected officials were popular favorites, or men whose revolutionary exploits endowed them with an aura of legend, or who had a special ability for a job which attracted votes. Nelson's entry into Texas local politics came after the

Revolution, but he qualified for the franchise of his townsmen under two of these criteria. He became a factor in the Democratic Party and was quite active in civic and political affairs, serving as city alderman for many years, with one stint as mayor of Nacogdoches.³⁷ Pursuant to item eight of his rules for rising to eminence, he and his family were prominent members of Christ Episcopal Church in Nacogdoches, where he served long and faithfully as one of its officers.³⁸

Nelson had lived in Texas for twenty years before the beginning of the Civil War and cast his lot with the Confederacy. His previous experience enabled him to give valuable service in both the naval and ground forces. He served both; for a time as a paymaster in the navy and later under General Sibley in New Mexico, conducting himself with distinction at Valverde and Glorieta. In the latter battle, he was wounded. He was captured once, and for a time languished in a federal prison. Before the war ended he had been released from prison and obtained an important position in Richmond. After the war, he participated actively in the Texas Veterans Association.³⁹

There emerges from the limited extant sources on the life of Albert Aldrich Nelson an intriguing image, which comes through with great clarity. The development and distribution of the land bore his imprint, through his long tenure in the district surveyor's office. A street in one of the oldest cities in the state bears his name, as for many years do the official records of the policy making organs of his city's government. His numerous progeny and their issue have served the state and their communities with dignity and dedication, which would no doubt have pleased the old gentleman immensely. It was said of him at the end that he had a certain facility for making money but no particular inclination to keep or accumulate it, and so he died poor. No matter! Shakespeare would have had Antony declare over the bier of Albert Aldrich Nelson, as he did over that of Brutus:

His life was gentle, and the elements
So mix'd in him that Nature might stand up
And say to all the world "This was a man!"

FOOTNOTES

¹Robert B. Blake Research Collection, East Texas Collection, Stephen F. Austin State College, Nacogdoches, Texas, Vol. LIX, 236-237.

²Frank W. Johnson, *Texas and Texans*, American Historical Society, Chicago and New York, 1914, Vol. III, 1380.

³Obituary, *Galveston News*, September 27, 1892.

⁴George Louis Crocket, *Two Centuries in East Texas* (Southwestern Press, Dallas, 1932), 97.

⁵Johnson, *Texas and Texans*, 97.

⁶Robert B. Blake Research Collection, Vol. LIX, "An Old Timer Gone:

Capt. Albert A. Nelson of Nacogdoches Joins the Great Majority," September 26, 1892, 236-237.

⁷A. A. Nelson to Charles H. Nelson, August 6, 1844; A. A. Nelson Papers, East Texas Collection, Stephen F. Austin State College, Nacogdoches, Texas.

⁸Robert B. Blake Collection, East Texas Collection, Vol. LIX.

⁹A. A. Nelson to Charles H. Nelson, A. A. Nelson Papers, East Texas Collection, Nacogdoches, Texas, October 25, 1841.

¹⁰A. A. Nelson to Charles H. Nelson, May 23, 1842.

¹¹A. A. Nelson Papers, East Texas Collection, Stephen F. Austin State College, Nacogdoches, Texas.

¹²Sea Diary, A. A. Nelson Papers, Stephen F. Austin State College, Nacogdoches, Texas.

¹³*Ibid.*, 1, .2

¹⁴*Ibid.*, 7.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, 7.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 8.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, 5.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 15, 16.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, 2.

²⁰*Ibid.*, 6.

²¹*Ibid.*, 19, 20.

²²*Ibid.*, 26.

²³*Ibid.*, 34.

²⁴*Ibid.*, 29.

²⁵A. A. Nelson to Saumel Nelson, January 30, 1838.

²⁶A. A. Nelson to Charles Nelson, September 20, 1839.

²⁷Crocket, *Two Centuries in East Texas*, 290.

²⁸"Diary of Adolphus Sterne," Harriet Smithers (Editor), *The Southwestern Historical Quarterly*, Vol. XXXII, July, 1928-April, 1929, No. 2, October, 1928, 165.

²⁹*Ibid.*, 172.

³⁰*Ibid.*, 172.

³¹A. A. Nelson to Charles Nelson, November 11, 1842.

³²Caroline Nelson to A. A. Nelson, February 23, 1841.

³³Emily Griffith Roberts, *Ancestral Study of Four Families*, Regional Press, Dallas, 1939.

³⁴A. A. Nelson to Charles Nelson, October 25, 1841.

³⁵A. A. Nelson to Charles Nelson, September 25, 1843.

³⁶*Ibid.*

³⁷Minutes of the Corporation of Nacogdoches, East Texas Collection, Stephen F. Austin State College, Nacogdoches, Texas.

³⁸Johnson, *Texas and Texans*, Vol. III, 1380.

³⁹Blake, *Research Collection*, Vol. LIX.