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A TOWERING EAST TEXAS PIONEER: A BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH OF COLONEL ALBERT MILLER LEA

by *W.T. Block*

In a remote corner of the Trinity Episcopal Cemetery in Galveston, Texas, a plain marble head stone marked the last resting place of a United States naval officer, killed at the Battle of Galveston. The inscription reads: "Edward Lea, Lieut. Commander, U.S.N., Born 31st January, 1837, Killed in Battle January 1, 1863. 'My Father Is Here.' " The casual observer might suppose that the last words referred to the Heavenly Father, but in reality, the young commander died in the arms of his earthly father, Confederate Major Albert Miller Lea. The mental image of the Confederate officer embracing his dying son was to grip Galvestonians for decades thereafter and point out one of the horrors of the American Civil War.¹

At a remote distance in southern Minnesota, the breadth of the nation away, there stands a modern city, a rail junction of 25,000 population, and its large, neighboring lake, both of which bear the name "Albert Lea," namesakes of the same Confederate major.² Likewise, Lee County (Fort Madison), Iowa, was also named for Albert Lea, although the spelling of the county's name was later altered.³ However, at the time that each received its name, Lea was a young United States Army lieutenant who had just graduated from West Point and was stationed at Fort Des Moines, on the far western frontier.

Albert Lea visited the Minnesota site only twice, the first time when he led a United States army expedition that discovered the lake and camped out on the townsite, at that time an expanse of trees and prairies, in July 1835. The second visit occurred in June 1879, when the municipal officers of Albert Lea, Minnesota, invited the ex-Confederate Colonel Lea to be their honor guest at their fortieth anniversary celebration. Albert Miller Lea was a man who walked with the presidents (Andrew Jackson, Martin Van Buren, John Tyler, and Millard Fillmore), who knew and corresponded with the Confederacy's leaders (Jefferson Davis and Robert E. Lee), and was a personal confidant and relative by marriage of General Sam Houston.

Albert M. Lea was born on July 23, 1808, at Richland, Grainger County, Tennessee, a few miles northeast of Knoxville and near the Kentucky-Virginia border. At age thirteen, he entered East Tennessee University at Knoxville (now the University of Tennessee) and became one of its youngest graduates.⁴ In 1827, he received an appointment to West Point, where he was graduated fifth in his class in 1831.⁵ One of his classmates was John Bankhead Magruder, who later became Lea's commanding officer in Texas during the Civil War.⁶

W.T. Block lives in Nederland, Texas.

Lea was commissioned a lieutenant in the Thirteenth United States Artillery, but because he was gallant enough to wish to please Magruder's fiancée by trading assignments, Lea ended up in the Seventh Infantry Regiment at Fort Gibson, a post at the time considered to be on the extreme western frontier. Likewise, Lea lost all opportunities for a rapid promotion, and earned frequent transfers on the outer frontier that would take him from Massachusetts to Iowa and from Detroit to New Orleans. On two occasions, he encountered pestilence epidemics which annually plagued the Mississippi Valley and threatened to include him among the casualties. In 1833, he was assigned to pick up \$96,000 in silver coins in New Orleans at a time when a virulent yellow fever plague was in progress there. He delivered the money by steamboat to army authorities in St. Louis for distribution as annuities to Missouri's Indian tribes. Later, he was aboard a Mississippi steamer when several soldiers accompanying him contracted cholera and one of them died. Also in 1833, he was ordered to Detroit to participate in an engineering survey of the Great Lakes.⁷

Late in 1833, Lieutenant Lea, by then a member of the army's Topographical Engineers, was appointed by the Department of War as chief of engineers on the Tennessee River, with orders to design navigational and flood control improvements along that watercourse. In April 1835, Lea was transferred to the First Regiment of United States Dragoons (cavalry) at Fort Des Moines, soon to become the Iowa Territory, but at that moment a part of the Wisconsin Territory.⁸

In June 1835, Lieutenant Lea received orders to command a topographical expedition consisting of three detachments of sixty men each, to explore the territory between the Des Moines and Mississippi rivers as far north as the Minnesota River. He was likewise instructed to map all lakes and watercourses encountered en route, to take periodic celestial bearings, and to keep a daily record of his expedition. Lea led his men "up the divide between the Des Moines and Mississippi Rivers to Lake Pepin, thence the column turned west and headed for the source of the Blue Earth River in Kossuth County, Iowa." On that march, the column traced the present-day Shell Rock River to Freeborn County, Minnesota, and to its head waters in a large, horseshoe-shaped lake, which he named Fox Lake. They camped on the site of forested uplands and prairies which later became Albert Lea, Minnesota. Unknown to Lea, the lake had long been called Lake Chapeau by the French fur traders. Captain Nathan Boone, a son to the famed Kentucky pioneer, served as a scout for the expedition.

Lea led Companies B, H, and I of the Dragoons over 1,100 miles of unexplored territory in Iowa and Minnesota for almost three months without the loss of a single man, wagon, horse, or mule. Lea recalled in his autobiography in 1879 that while Joseph N. Nicollet was mapping his first surveys of the Upper Mississippi River in Washington, D.C., in 1841, he suggested to Nicollet that the beautiful, horseshoe-shaped lake be listed as Lake Chapeau, the name given to it by the French fur traders. Instead,

Nicollet responded, "Ah, magnifique! But Lake Chapeau ees no longer ze name. It ees now Lake Albert Lea." That is the name it continues to bear.⁹

Lea was introduced to President Andrew Jackson at the home of a friend in Philadelphia in 1833. In 1836, Lea resigned his commission, to become effective on June 1, 1836, and returned east to Philadelphia, where he married Ellen Shoemaker on May 5. During the months while he was on army leave, Lea wrote a book-length treatise, *Notes On The Wisconsin Territory* (based on his journal), which was published by H.S. Tanner of Philadelphia in 1836. Lea's book had suggested that the name of Iowa be given to the new territory (and subsequently the state), which at that moment was being debated in the United States Congress.¹⁰ The book also attracted the attention of President Martin Van Buren and the War Department, and the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, in its article on the State of Iowa, observed that "Albert Lea, who wrote an early book on the area, suggested the name."¹¹ His book also was credited with encouraging much of the immigration to all of the regions west of Lake Michigan, which once comprised the Wisconsin Territory.

On January 31, 1837, Lea's son Edward was born in Baltimore. Soon afterward, the young couple resettled briefly in Rock Island, Illinois, after President Van Buren appointed Albert Lea as chairman of the Missouri-Iowa Boundary Commission, which was charged with surveying and marking the order between those states. Also in 1837, Lea platted a townsite in the "Iowa District," named Ellenborough after his wife, and made plans to operate a Mississippi ferry and an immigration company. Reputedly, Lea was once offered \$30,000 for his interest in the venture, but refused. Later he had to return to the east in a hurry due to his wife's ill health, and the land was eventually sold for taxes.

Late in 1837, the president chose him as the chief engineer for the State of Tennessee. In 1838, the couple returned to Maryland for three years, while Lea served as chief engineer and track builder for the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad, and where his young wife Ellen died. Embittered and in despair following her death, Lea accepted another presidential appointment that took him to Washington, D.C., in 1841 as chief clerk in the War Department.

In September, the holdover secretary of war from President W.H. Harrison's cabinet, John Bell, resigned, and President John Tyler appointed Lea as acting secretary of war for six weeks until John McLean took office. After three years in Washington, D.C., Lea returned to Knoxville in 1844, where he taught for seven years as professor of mathematics at East Tennessee University. In 1848, he married Catherine Heath of Knoxville. In 1850, Albert Lea spent three more months as acting secretary of war in the cabinet of President Millard Fillmore. After his return to Knoxville, Lea left the university in 1851 to become a glass manufacturer in the same town, an industry in which he invested most of his assets, but success con-

tinued to evade him. He often said he could make good glass, but no profits. From 1851 until 1856, he was also chief engineer for the City of Knoxville, and he also operated on occasion the family plantation.¹²

In 1857, Albert Lea followed other members of his family to Texas and settled at Aransas. Lea family members who had preceded him included his cousin, Margaret Moffette Lea Houston, wife of General Sam Houston, and his older brother, Pryor Lea, who had been a prominent politician and lawyer in Tennessee and who resided at Goliad.¹³ Pryor Lea chartered the Aransas Railroad Company, later the Central Transit, in 1858 and 1859, and served as its president. Albert Lea served as chief engineer of the Aransas Railroad Company, as well as the Rio Grande, Mexico and Pacific Railroad Company of Mexico.¹⁴ According to one Texas historian, the Aransas Railroad Company had completed most of its grading along the route from Aransas Pass to Goliad, but construction ended early in 1861 when Northern financing was withdrawn.¹⁵

In an article in *Southwestern Historical Quarterly*, another Texas writer referred to Pryor and Albert Lea as "confidants of Governor (Sam) Houston" and suspected that they were members of the Knights of the Golden Circle, a secret, jingoistic society that appears to have been plotting a filibustering expedition against Mexico. Early in 1860, Colonel Robert E. Lee of the United States Army arrived in San Antonio as commander of the Eighth Military District, and Albert Lea carried on an extensive correspondence with both Colonel Lee and Governor Houston. A letter from Robert E. Lee to Houston, which acknowledged receipt of Albert Lea's three letters of February 24, 25, and 26, "is now framed and housed in the Archives of the Texas State Library." Also, on February 24, 1860, Albert Lea wrote a letter to Governor Houston, as follow:

... Colonel Robert E. Lee would not touch anything that he would consider vulgar filibustering; but he is not without ambition and under the sanction of the government, might be more than willing to aid you to pacificate Mexico; and if the people of the U. States should recall you from the 'Halls of the Montezumas' to the 'White House,' you will find him well fitted to carry out your great idea of a Protectorate.¹⁶

When Albert Lea came to Texas in 1857, his son Edward remained in Maryland to attend the Naval Academy. The last letter Albert Lea received from his son arrived in Aransas shortly before the American Civil War began, and it came from Cherbourg, France, where Lieutenant Edward Lea's ship, the United States steam frigate *Harriet Lane*, was docked. Later, the *Harriet Lane*, named for President James Buchanan's niece and official White House hostess, sailed to the China coast, but was back at Fort Sumter when war broke out in April 1861. In 1862, the steam frigate served as Admiral David Farragut's flagship for several months. In March 1861, the father wrote his son that he had to follow the dictates of his own conscience in choosing which side to fight for if war began. Like his friend, Sam Houston, Albert Lea opposed secession, but his older brother, Pryor Lea, was a major voice for secession in Texas and a member of the

Secession Convention. Soon after the shelling of Fort Sumter, Albert Lea applied for a Confederate commission. He was soon breveted a major of artillery, and was ordered to report to General Felix Zollicoffer in Knoxville, Tennessee.¹⁷

A letter of Major Lea, dated August 31, 1861, was published in *Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies in The War of The Rebellion*. In this letter, Lea requested permission to raise a company of "sappers and miners" (construction engineers), which was granted. He also warned that the areas of Northeastern Tennessee and Southeastern Kentucky contained a large number of people with pronounced Union sympathies.¹⁸

In February 1862, Major Lea's engineers were commanded to fortify the Cumberland Gap, a famous passageway through the Cumberland Mountains, where the boundaries of Tennessee, Kentucky, and Virginia converge. He also was ordered to build breastworks and similar defensive fortifications around nearby Fort Pitts. Lea took a philosophical, "did-my-duty" attitude toward the fact that his engineering achievements were ignored by superiors in Richmond, whereas an opposing Union general paid him the highest of compliments. Union General G.W. Morgan, who at that moment was assigned to the Cumberland Gap, observed:

... Before the arrival of our siege guns, Engineer Lea, of the Rebel forces, constructed a strong breastwork, protected by rifle pits, upon the summit, to the right of Fort Pitts, and convinced that the position could only be carried by immense loss of life, I abandoned any idea of attacking the place from the front...¹⁹

Although no evidence can be found in Civil War correspondence, it appears more than coincidence that his long-time friend, Major General John B. Magruder, was transferred from Virginia to Houston, Texas, to assume command of the Military District at Texas, New Mexico, and Arizona on December 1, 1862, and that Major Lea was transferred to Texas only two weeks later. The writer also believes that Lea's transfer to Texas was sped along with the help of Lea's military friends in Richmond. By December 15, Lea was back in Texas, visiting with his wife, a daughter, and two sons who were staying with relatives in Corsicana, Texas.

Major Lea quickly learned that one of the Union vessels occupying the harbor of Galveston was the *Harriet Lane*, on which he believed his son was still serving. Lea hurried on to Houston to General Magruder's headquarters, where he soon learned that a plan to recapture Galveston Island was to be executed within a week.

Although Major Lea was reassigned as chief engineer of the Southern Sub-district of Texas in General H.P. Bee's command at Brownsville, he was temporarily detached to Colonel C.G. Forshey's staff of engineers while plans for the recapture of Galveston were pending. During the pre-dawn hours of January 1, 1863, Lea helped move the six brass cannons of

Captain M. McMahon's battery across Galveston Island's rail causeway. Afterward, Colonel Forshey placed Major Lea in the town's tallest church steeple, where he could observe the naval battle in progress in the bay. Lea quickly discerned that the Confederate gunboat *Bayou City* had rammed the *Harriet Lane* near the wheel house, after which the Confederates scampered aboard the Union vessel to subdue the crew.²⁰

Major Lea soon went aboard the *Harriet Lane*, only to find that its commander, Captain Wainwright, was dead and Lieutenant Commander Edward Lea, the second in command, had been shot through the navel. Aware that his son's wound was mortal, Lea went ashore to arrange his son's removal to the Sisters of Charity Hospital. He told General Magruder about his son's wound, and the general offered his own quarters for the son instead. Upon Major Lea's return to the *Harriet Lane*, he was told that his son Edward was dying, and as Lea cradled the young Union officer's head, he said, "Edward, this is your father."

"Yes, father, I know you," the young commander responded, "but I cannot move."

Upon being advised that his death was near and asked whether he wished any special disposition made of his body, Edward Lea replied, almost with his last breath, "No, my father is here."

The following day, Major Lea, in the absence of any ordained minister, delivered the obsequies above the coffins of both Captain Wainwright and Commander Lea, before the Union officers were buried in a common grave. In his report of the battle, General Magruder praised Major Lea as being "one of the most distinguished and scientific officers of my staff."²¹

In 1866, the body of Captain Wainwright was reburied with honors at the Naval Cemetery in Annapolis, Maryland. A wealthy relative sought permission to reinter Commander Edward Lea's remains beside those of his mother in Green Mount Cemetery in Baltimore. However, Albert Lea refused, stating that his son would have preferred to remain where he had fallen in battle – "in sight of the sea, in sound of the surf."²²

After the battle of January 1, 1863, when Major Lea reported to General H.P. Bee as chief engineer of the Southern Sub-district of Texas, General Magruder wrote of him that "Major Lea is a graduate of West Point and is well-known to His Excellency, the (Confederate) President (Jefferson Davis)." Indeed, Lea, Jefferson Davis, Robert E. Lee, and a number of other Confederate and Union generals had been classmates at West Point. And as secretary of war in the Cabinet of President Franklin Pierce, Jefferson Davis would certainly have been well-acquainted with Albert Lea's record at the War Department. Soon Afterward, Major Lea led a contingent of engineers that fortified the mouth of the Rio Grande at

Bagdad; and later, the approaches to Fort Brown at Brownsville.²³ Late in 1863, Major Lea was promoted to lieutenant colonel.²⁴

In November 1863, a Federal invasion force occupied the lower Texas coast, and General Magruder evacuated most of General Bee's command from Fort Brown. Colonel Lea was ordered inland and was appointed chief engineer of the Western Sub-District of Texas. Soon afterward, he led a contingent of soldiers and slaves while fortifying the approaches to Gonzales, Texas. Colonel Lea's last service to the Confederacy came in 1864 when General Magruder assigned him to head the Confederate cotton bureau at Eagle Pass, Texas, where he bartered cotton for gunpowder and muskets.²⁵

Throughout his lifetime, Albert Miller Lea was a prolific letter writer as well as a writer of scientific and historical treatises. And as soon as he arrived in Texas in 1857, he showed a renewed interest in writing, especially in the field of science. During his retirement years at Corsicana, Lea kept up a perpetual correspondence with the *Freeborn County Standard*, which published many of his articles between January and May, 1890, as well as with the Minnesota and Iowa historical societies. His "Report Made By Lieutenant Albert Miller Lea on The Des Moines River" and "Report Made By Albert Miller Lea on The Iowa-Missouri Boundary," along with his lengthy biography by Ruth Galleher, appeared in the *Iowa Journal of History and Politics* in July 1935. E.W. Winkler described two of the Albert Lea Treatises in the Texas State Library concerning the Gulf of Mexico and Aransas Bay, written while Lea was chief engineer of the railroad.²⁶ Another of his articles, "The Gulf Stream and Its Effect on The Climate of Texas," appeared in the *Texas Almanac* for 1861.²⁷

According to one biography, Albert Lea designed and sketched the plans for the first "iron horse" ever manufactured by the Baldwin Locomotive Works. S.W. Geiser, an early scientific writer, described Albert Lea's contributions to science in Texas in an article written in 1939.²⁸ Several of Albert Lea's letters are in the Texas State Archives, two of which (one from Robert E. Lee and one to Governor Sam Houston) were reprinted by *Texana* in 1966. And a Galveston editor observed that "Colonel Lea was a man of large and varied information, who for many years was a frequent contributor to Galveston *News* and other publications, generally under his 'nom de plume' of Sanex."²⁹

After the Civil War, Albert Lea moved his family to Galveston, where he resided for the next nine years. In the Summer of 1865, he opened a book store there, also an unsuccessful venture. He became Galveston's city engineer in 1866, a position he held for four years. In 1870 he began trading in real estate and acquired valuable property as a result. In 1874, when

he decided to retire from public pursuits, he purchased a farm from a relative and moved his family to Navarro County. He and his sons, Albert Lea, Jr. and Alexander M. Lea, engaged for many years in a cotton buying enterprise.³⁰ ()

Albert Lea and his family were active members of St. John's Episcopal Church at Collin and 14th streets in Corsicana, where "a large stained glass window still bears the name of Lea." Albert Lea is also credited with having drawn up the plans for the first St. John's Church. It appears that Colonel Lea lived his last years on his farm rather quietly.³¹ In 1879 he wrote his family's history, manuscript copies of which are deposited in the Rosenberg Library in Galveston and at the Barker Texas History Center in Austin, as well as published elsewhere. In the same year, he revisited Albert Lea, Minnesota, at a celebration of which he was the honored guest.

Lea's last years at Corsicana were marked by feeble health and family misfortunes. His son, Alexander, died in 1878, followed by his wife, Catherine, in 1884. By 1890, his son Albert, Jr., was experiencing financial reverses in the cotton business. On the morning of January 16, 1891, Lea's lifeless body was found in a sitting position in an arm chair in his bedroom, an apparent victim of heart failure. A Galveston editor noted that "Colonel Lea was the friend and associate of many of the political dignitaries of antebellum days, but of late years, he had been very feeble.... He has always been highly respected and esteemed by all."³² Perhaps the nicest compliment came from Lea's old friend, W.P. Doran of Hempstead, Texas, who called Albert Lea "one of nature's noblemen."³³

It is ironic that today Albert Miller Lea is much better remembered in his native state of Tennessee or in the midwestern states he explored (Iowa and Minnesota) than he is in East Texas where he resided for nearly half of his life, built railroads, fought at the Battle of Galveston, and operated his businesses. Lea was an uncommon man in many respects. He charted and explored the wilderness and made it attractive to the East Coast land emigrant to whom Horace Greeley advised - "Go west, young man." Albert Lea punctured that wilderness with his rail trackage, enabling the land emigrants to reach the West more easily via the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad. Lea walked and talked with the political elite of his day in Washington, D.C., and commanded their respect. He also knew many of the Union and Confederate generals of that day who had been his West Point classmates. He cast his lot with the Confederacy and lost, but after he was paroled, he sought to rebuild his fortunes within the same nation he previously had fought against. And he left the frontier state of Texas all the richer because of his thirty-five years of residence there.

NOTES

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¹⁰"History of the Lea Family," abstracted in (Galveston) *Daily News*, July 30, 1922; "Honor To An Old Galvestonian," (Galveston) *Daily News*, June 19, 1879; State Historical Society of Iowa, *The Book That Gave Iowa Its Name* (Iowa City, Iowa: 1935); also Curtiss and Wedge, *A History of Freeborn County, Minnesota* (Minneapolis: 1911), p. 44.

¹¹*Encyclopaedia Britannica*, (Chicago, 1970), XII, 501.

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¹³Pryor Lea previously had been United States Attorney for the State of Tennessee; Congressman, 21st and 22nd United States Congresses; member of the Texas Secession Convention; and in 1866, Texas state superintendent of public instruction. See Webb, *Handbook of Texas*, II, p. 40; also Neal O'Steen, "The Leas of Tennessee," serialized in two parts, "The Antebellum Years," *Tennessee Alumnus* (Fall, 1977) and "A Civil War Tragedy," *Tennessee Alumnus* (Winter, 1978), pp. 26-28.

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¹⁶*A Compilation of The Official Records of The Union and Confederate Armies in The War of The Rebellion*, 128 Volumes (Washington, D.C.: 1880-1901). Series I, Volume IV, p. 406.

¹⁷*Official Records, Armies, in The War of the Rebellion*, letter of Major A.M. Lea, Series II, Volume I, p. 827.

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¹⁹"Sioux," pen name for W.P. Doran, "Reminiscences of the War- Battle of Galveston," (Galveston) *Daily News*, August 6, 1876; C.C. Cumberland, "The Confederate Loss and Recapture of Galveston," *Southwestern Historical Quarterly*, LI (October, 1947), p. 125.

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²¹Doran, "Gallant Major Albert Lea," (Galveston) *Daily News*, January 21, 1891.

²²*Official Records, Armies, in The War of The Rebellion*, Series I, Volume XV, pp. 238, 936.

²³*Official Records, Armies, in The War of The Rebellion*, Series I, Volume XXVI, Part 1, pp. 299-300.

²⁴*Official Records, Armies, in The War of The Rebellion*, Series I, Volume XXXIV, Part 2, pp. 839, 1079.

²⁵E.W. Winkler, ed., "A Check List of Texas Imprints," *Southwestern Historical Quarterly*, XLIX (1945-1946), pp. 543, 569; A.M. Lea, "Report Made By Lieutenant Albert Miller Lea on The Des Moines River" and "Report Made By Albert Miller Lea on The Iowa-Missouri Boundary," *Iowa Journal of History and Politics*, XXXIII, No. 3 (July, 1935), pp. 242-259.

²⁶Webb, *Handbook of Texas*, II, p. 40.

²⁷W. Geiser, "A Century of Scientific Exploration in Texas," *Field and Laboratory*, VII (January, 1939); Typescript, "Colonel Albert Lea," (n.p.:n.d.), p. 3, City of Albert Lea Public Library, copy owned by writer.

²⁸Obituary of Colonel Lea," (Galveston) *Daily News*, January 17, 1891; James M. Day, "Texas Letters and Documents," *Texana*, IV (Spring, 1966), pp. 48-49, appearing as Plate E.

²⁹Webb, ed. *Handbook of Texas* (Austin: 1952), II, p. 40; Neal O'Steen, "The Leas of Tennessee: A Civil War Tragedy," *The Tennessee Alumnus* (Winter, 1978), p. 28.

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