Kenneth L. Anderson, Last Vice President almost First Governor of Texas

Leslie H. Southwick
KENNETH L. ANDERSON  
LAST VICE PRESIDENT  
ALMOST FIRST GOVERNOR OF TEXAS  
by Leslie H. Southwick

The number of modern-day Texans who have heard of Kenneth L. Anderson and the number of Texas history books that even mention him are few. This North Carolina native arrived in Texas after the Revolution. His public offices were meager — a few local positions in San Augustine, a term in the House, and finally truncated service as vice president of the Republic. No meaningful collection of personal papers was left behind, nor has a picture been discovered. It is not surprising he has been forgotten. The irony is that he was at the time of his death among the four or five most powerful politicians in Texas. What illness killed Anderson at the age of thirty-nine, at the height of his influence and on the verge of likely election as the state’s first governor, is unknown. What is clear is that death thrust into obscurity a man who deserved a far better fate.

Anderson’s father and grandfather fought in the same New Jersey militia regiment during the American Revolutionary War. Family tradition holds that the pair finished their service at the Battle of King’s Mountain, North Carolina, in 1780, and remained there to live. The younger veteran, named Kenneth, married Nancy Thompson on June 12, 1801. The couple’s son, Kenneth Lewis, was born on September 11, 1805, in Hillsborough. Catherine was born in 1807, and another son and daughter completed the family. Kenneth Lewis was said to be “of humble Scotch parents,” and had to rise “from the position of shoemaker.” It is unclear whether this means it was the father or the son who was a shoemaker. The Reverend William Bingham’s school in Orange County, famed in nineteenth century North Carolina, provided the boy his education.

The youthful Kenneth Lewis Anderson travelled over the Appalachians and settled in Shelbyville, Tennessee, by 1824. By February 1826, he had become a deputy sheriff for the county. He foreclosed on land, sold slaves at execution sales, and otherwise helped enforce the decrees of the local court. In January 1829 he bought a slave woman and her four young children. Later that year Anderson purchased eighty-six acres north of town, on which he may have farmed. The Anderson family included his wife, Patience Burditt. Their first son, Malcolm Gilchrist, was born in August 1826. Kenneth, Jr. arrived around 1830, and died by 1847 shortly after his father’s death. Daughter Jane Bell was born in 1833, and their final child, Theophiles, was born in 1834.

Anderson was a prominent Shelbyville citizen. By 1830 he had become the High Sheriff for Bedford County, and retired by 1832. Anderson was elected a colonel of the militia. He apparently also made some enemies. In

Leslie H. Southwick lives in Alexandria, Virginia.
1835 an arsonist tried to destroy Anderson's house. A fire burned down the kitchen and almost engulfed the main house. The volunteer help of many neighbors controlled the blaze. In 1836 he was active in the local presidential campaign for Hugh L. White, Tennessee senator and recent foe of Andrew Jackson. It had been a rapid rise for the young man. Yet something made him decide to move on.4

The Texas Revolution was the subject of long articles in many issues of Tennessee newspapers in 1836. Patience Anderson's relative, Joseph Rowe, may have sent firsthand reports to the family about Texas affairs. In late 1837 any letters from Rowe would have seemed more authoritative, as he was elected speaker of the Texas House. An additional inducement for leaving may have been the severe national financial panic of 1837. Regardless of the reasons, in September 1837 the Andersons sold their house and three adjacent lots in Shelbyville they had owned since 1831. The family left for Texas in a wagon.5

The Andersons settled in San Augustine, where Rowe had lived for five years. Anderson was soon drawing on his Tennessee experience. At the opening of Probate Court on May 28, 1838, Anderson attended as deputy sheriff of San Augustine County. By August he was sheriff. He was seeking more significant office, however, and taking steps to achieve it.6

In May 1838, Anderson attended a public meeting in San Augustine that nominated Mirabeau Lamar for president and Joseph Rowe for vice president. Later in the year, after Lamar's election on September 3, Anderson sought help from the new president. Some of Lamar's East Texas confidants wrote the president, stating that Anderson would like to be appointed either chief justice or collector of customs for San Augustine. Lamar was informed that the applicant was "well qualified to execute the duties of the office — and a man of steady habits [and] of undoubted integrity."7

Anderson did not get an immediate appointment. Rowe gave Lamar a personal endorsement on March 8, 1839, calling Anderson a "gentleman of great moral worth, and good business habits, with whom I have had the pleasure of being intimately acquainted for the last twenty years." The president appointed Anderson as collector of customs for the San Augustine district, beginning on September 5, 1839. The San Augustine newspaper commended Anderson on June 11, 1840, for his large recovery of revenues and his general supervision of his office.8

This young Texas politician's identification with Lamar, if it ever existed in the public's mind, was removed by early April 1841. Anderson was listed first among fifty-one San Augustinians named in the local newspaper requesting Sam Houston to attend a public dinner in his honor. They praised the former president's accomplishments and criticized those "venal partisans called into political existence by fortuitous circumstances." That was
Anderson announced for one of two seats in the House from San Augustine. Addressing his constituents in a circular distributed July 1, 1841, he discussed in detail the issues of the campaign. Somewhat against the common prejudice, the circular supported a national bank. Many political careers had been ended a few years earlier because of the bank issue. Even so, Anderson argued that the sound currency provided by a bank was needed desperately. Anderson won on September 6 with the largest majority so far gained in the county. The Redlander described Anderson as "the champion of the constitution and the uncompromising opponent of the executive. . . . Col. Anderson has not his superior in point of eloquence in the Republic, and, for the soundness of his views as a statesman, we need only point to his circular... ."\(^9\)

The new president, Sam Houston, wrote one of his advisers that his "particular friend K.L. Anderson" should be consulted on all things. Houston reported that Anderson could be convinced to run for speaker, "although he [Anderson] has manifested no wish on the subject." If he was nominated, Houston said there could be no abler or worthier speaker. The new House of Representatives opened on November 1, 1841. Anderson received eighteen votes to eleven for W.N. Porter of Bowie County and was elected. The victor gave a short address to thank his peers for the honor. Retrenchment, a policy voiced frequently by the incoming president in the campaign, was also the watchword of the speaker's address.\(^{11}\)

On December 6, a week before Houston's inauguration, a committee proposed the impeachment of outgoing President Mirabeau Lamar. The charge concerned alleged misappropriation of funds by Lamar for the disastrous Santa Fe expedition. The report also advised impeachment of Vice President David G. Burnet for related offenses. Anderson, Isaac Van Zandt, and George T. Woods, three powerful congressmen, initiated this attack on Lamar. Without a vote of impeachment being taken, Anderson administered the oath of office to Houston on December 13, in ceremonies at the rear of the capitol under a covered platform. On December 17 the resolution of impeachment was taken up, posthumously as it were. Anderson was one of thirteen voting to impeach, while twenty-five opposed.\(^{12}\)

The freshman congressman had won the Speaker's chair, but already there was speculation that he was in line for higher honors. Houston had five Cabinet positions to fill. In a letter written on November 24, 1841, Houston asked Anson Jones to be secretary of state. Jones endorsed it, meticulously filed away for posterity, that Anderson urged him to accept, and would take the Treasury Department himself if Jones did so. "His persuasions, more than any other man's, induced me to accept ...." Jones then wrote his wife that Anderson was to fill the Treasury office. The president, however, made no appointment to the Treasury until the congressional session was over. Anson Jones' biographer, Herbert Gam-
brell, theorized without apparent firm evidence that Houston was considering both Anderson and Senator William Henry Daingerfield for the cabinet post. Some important measures were before Congress, and having both men anxious for the promotion probably proved advantageous for Houston. Just before Congress adjourned on February 5, 1842, Houston named Daingerfield to the post. 13

The crucial foreign policy issue of early 1842 was the appropriate response to a Mexican army raid led by Rafael Vasquez. In March Vasquez captured San Antonio, then retreated to Mexico. When Congress convened in Houston on June 27, 1842, the dominant sentiment was for action. Congress passed a bill giving Houston the power to draft one-third of the military-age men into the army, and to sell ten million acres of land to fund an invasion of Mexico. 14

Despite Houston's reluctance for war, it was assumed he would sign the bill. "Rip" Ford, a Texas Ranger who left lengthy memoirs of the period, gives Anderson credit for Houston's eventual veto:

"It is the opinion of gentlemen who had opportunities to know the truth, that a long conference between Gen. Houston and Hon. Kenneth L. Anderson caused him to change his views. Col. Anderson convinced him of the inability of Texas to furnish capital to defray the expenses of an army prosecuting a war upon foreign territory. The danger of the war degenerating into a robbing expedition was placed in bold relief. The disgrace arising from such hostile movement was dwelt upon. Events had not been favorable to Texas, and a false move would damage the reputation of her people for chivalry and high toned sense of honor." 15

Houston's veto subjected him to some of the worst verbal abuse of his career. Even so, the action saved Texas lives, money, and honor, since an inglorious defeat deep in the heart of Mexico was likely. Surprisingly, the following year Anderson advised Houston that war with Mexico was the only, though detestable, alternative to anarchy. Anderson felt that the popular sentiment for war was so powerful in 1843 that to oppose it could bring down the government. Fortunately, Anderson was too pessimistic. 16

Two weeks before Congress adjourned on July 23, 1842, the San Augustine Redlander said it was "authorized and requested to announce the Honorable K.L. Anderson as a candidate for reelection...." Two months earlier the same paper had demonstrated its continued support for Anderson by requesting that he run. Soon after the Redlander announced Anderson's candidacy, he decided not to run. On August 27 the Clarksville Northern Standard lamented Anderson's withdrawal, saying the "retirement from public life of such a man is a loss to the country." In a letter to President Houston on August 6, Anderson explained his reasons. "Doubtless you will be somewhat surprised when I tell you I have declined being a candidate," Anderson wrote, but the reason is "Poverty, Poverty." 17 Membership in Congress required him too often to be absent from home.
Anderson retired to San Augustine. His home, located about half a mile southeast of town, was said to have been built initially for Sam Houston. Patience Anderson, the three boys and little girl, and several slaves were left behind frequently as Anderson journeyed to the capital or travelled the legal circuit as a practicing attorney. Anderson may have become a lawyer while still in Tennessee, since soon after arriving in San Augustine he was seeking appointment as a judge. By March 1842 he and Vermont native Royal T. Wheeler were tending to all legal business "that may be entrusted to them with promptness and fidelity." Three years later, when Wheeler became a district judge, Anderson established a partnership with J. Pinckney Henderson and Thomas J. Rusk. Anderson's two partners would become governor and a United States senator in 1846.18

On December 13, 1842, Anderson was appointed prosecuting attorney for his district by Houston. He was unanimously confirmed by the Senate the next day. A lawless rampage was then occurring in East Texas, often referred to as the Regulator—Moderator War. How Anderson could be enticed from political retirement to become embroiled in so demanding and dangerous a task can be explained only by a selfless devotion to his adopted community, and perhaps by the steady salary that could be earned at home. Anderson's predecessor was Royal T. Wheeler, his law partner.19 The new district attorney owed his position to the friendship of Sam Houston. The correspondence between the two appears intimate and mutually respectful. Houston had instructed him to send news of events whenever he could. Anderson frequently assured his mentor that the local citizens were supportive of Houston's policies. Anderson also handled at least some of Houston's personal business matters in San Augustine.20

Though somewhat removed from the political mainstream in East Texas, Anderson's stock rose in the capital. In early July 1843, Anderson wrote Houston's part-time secretary, Washington D. Miller, in response to Miller's letter suggesting that Anderson run for the presidency. Perhaps Miller had been relaying Houston's wishes. Anderson called himself "greatly flattered by the high estimate you place upon me." He said that he could not be induced to run for president, "however flattering my prospects should be thought to be." If a western or southern man were named for president, Anderson might consider himself a suitable ticket balancer.21

Other people thought Anderson would be a suitable running mate for several possible candidates. Future governor and Anderson's law partner, J. Pinckney Anderson, felt that Sam Houston's friends were in disarray. Anson Jones was the logical choice, but many feared he was unelectable. Henderson suggested that Abner Lipscomb be substituted if necessary, with Anderson for vice president. President Houston himself injected order into this confusion. In August 1843, he, Anderson, Henderson, and others met in Crockett for what Houston called "a large assembly of the sovereigns." Apparently this meeting sorted through the political
situation, and resolved upon a choice. On October 1, Henderson reported to Jones that the controversy had been settled. A San Augustine nomination meeting was scheduled for a few days later. That meeting, as did one on October 28, 1843, in Independence, chose Jones for president and Anderson for vice president. Speeches were given praising the candidates, with resolutions memorializing the reasons for the nominations. On May 13, 1844 in Red River County, Jones and Anderson were chosen by a 149-1 vote. The Houston party was organizing for victory.

Jones' regard for his runningmate was evident. Jones wrote in his memoirs that he had solicited Henderson, Rusk, and Abner Lipscomb to run for president, but each had refused. Jones also had asked Anderson to run. "In fact," Jones said, "Col. Anderson after General Houston would have been my first choice. But it was decided otherwise," presumably by Houston and other influential men.

Edward Burleson was the nominee of those opposed to Jones. Even so, Anderson was also named as his running mate in several newspaper endorsements and public meetings. When a new editor took over the Telegraph and Texas Register, he found the Burleson-Anderson ticket already endorsed by his predecessor. Though supporting Burleson and agreeing that Judge Patrick Jack of Galveston was now normally paired with him, the new editor said Anderson was acceptable and would continue to be endorsed.

All semblance of a contest ended in early August when Jack died of yellow fever. The election on September 2 was close. Jones received 7307 votes, and Burleson 5668. Anderson's victory was anticlimactic. He gained his office with 9941 votes, the most ever garnered by a candidate in the Texas Republic. There were 391 scattered for others.

For the inaugural ceremonies, a rough wooden platform was constructed in front of the building in which a republic had been declared eight years earlier in Washington-on-the-Brazos. On December 9, Anson Jones and Kenneth Anderson became the fourth president and vice president of Texas. After Jones' address was delivered, Anderson rose and humbly thanked the voters for the honor given San Augustine by his election. He refused to comment on specific issues, as opinions were unbecoming a vice president.

Opinions Anderson definitely had, however. As early as July 1843, he told the unsympathetic Sam Houston that the capital should be returned to Austin, particularly since an armistice with Mexico had been announced. In February 1844 he told Houston that he warmly endorsed annexation, even if Texas initially was admitted solely as a territory. What was critical was that Texas' public debt be assumed by the United States, and a "reasonable amount" of public land be kept by the state to satisfy soldiers' claims and to fund a system of common schools. Should these events occur, Texans would be "the most fortunate people on the earth."
told Houston that to acquire the necessary assurances, a "confidential friend in whose good sense and prudence you could rely," should be sent to Washington with secret instructions to act when appropriate.²⁷

Vice President Anderson got an opportunity to assist in negotiations between the governments of Anson Jones and John Tyler. The American minister to Texas, Andrew Jackson Donelson, corresponded with Anderson and advised him of events. Anderson was said to be less willing than Jones to appear coy with England and France in an attempt to coax the United States into annexation. Statehood was Anderson's goal, but without the pretense. The American Congress obliged in February 1845. A special session of the Texas Congress convened in Washington-on-the-Brazos on June 16, 1845, to consider the proposal of annexation. Anderson presided over the Senate and annexation was adopted unanimously by both houses.²⁸

Few contemporary accounts of the early speculation on the candidates for the first governor's race have been discovered. Anson Jones barely had settled into his three-year term when annexation was approved in late June 1845. Thus one chief executive had just been chosen, but now contenders for a new race had to be selected. By the close of the special session, statehood was certain and thoughts were being directed to the governorship. Rip Ford stated it "was understood by many ... that Anderson would be the first governor of the new state." Anderson was said to have "a strong following, especially in east Texas, and was generally known as one of the foremost lawyers of the Republic." The Reverend Homer Thrall, in his History of Texas (1889) called the San Augustine statesman "a prominent candidate for Governor in 1845." The eventual winner, J. Pinckney Henderson, was Anderson's law partner. They were from neighboring towns in North Carolina, and settled in the same Texas town. Henderson was less well known than Anderson, and may have been reluctant to run against him. Ford called Anderson "[n]ext to Henderson in point of ability, but his superior in oratory... ." The third law partner was Thomas J. Rusk. "Anderson was, perhaps, the most eloquent of the three, before juries and mixed assemblies... ." There was at least one suggestion that Houston should be governor, and Anderson and Jones be the United States Senators.²⁹

If Anderson's "election to be the first Governor of Texas was generally conceded," fate intervened. Anderson had been ill at Washington-on-the-Brazos. His friends advised him not to travel after the Senate adjourned. Anderson's insistence was too strong, and for that matter his condition was not considered critical. Twenty miles from Washington, at Fanthorp's Inn, the exhausted traveler had to rest. This old tavern, a frequent lodge for early Texans, proved Anderson's last stop. His fever flared and a rapid decline began. He died at 3:15 P.M. on July 3, 1845. He lay in state in the tavern's parlour, and then was buried six days later in the Fanthorp cemetery. Later the city was renamed in his
honor. The service was attended by Masonic and state officials, who gathered from nearby Washington and elsewhere. Henderson eventually announced for governor, and defeated Dr. James Miller. 10

Anderson's sudden death stunned Texas. The convention in Houston that was drafting the first state constitution recessed for a day in his honor. The public eulogies were plentiful, sentimental, and sincere. The comments followed enough of a pattern to be accepted as fair estimates. One paper noted his "clearness of intellect and quickness of perception, tempered but not concealed by great modesty of mien, and deference to the views and feelings of others..." He had integrity, tact, eloquence, and a sharp mind. Another newspaper commended "in the class of public men there are very few who possess so many virtues, allied with capacity, as did our departed friend." 31

Anderson did not leave wealth behind for his family. His estate was insolvent, and the family home had to be sold to pay debts. Patience remarried soon after her husband's death to Leonard Friend of San Augustine on April 29, 1846. 12

Kenneth Lewis Anderson was "a rather tall, red headed Scotchman of fine appearance, inclined to be a sportsman; not adverse to a game of poker in good company, but a man of good principles, honest and honorable in his dealings, and with a high moral character, a church-goer and supporter of religion." 13

Doubtlessly he was not perfect. Indeed, at least once he was involved in a brawl that resulted in both men having to appear in court. Still, few of what blemishes there must have been were recorded for posterity. That he would have enjoyed a premier public career in the early period of statehood seems beyond doubt. Ill health robbed him of a significant place in Texas history. As Rip Ford phrased it, Anderson "was taken off in the full tide of a successful career, before he had an opportunity to exhibit to the world the full extent of his intellectual powers, his rare gift of eloquence and energy, and his capacity as a statesman." 34

NOTES

1 The author would sincerely appreciate contact, in care of the Journal, from anyone who does know of a picture of Anderson.


3 Every previous published reference to Anderson's arrival in Shelbyville has dated that event as 1829. However, the grantee in deeds in 1824, 1826, and 1827, and the deputy and sheriff of the county in 1826 and 1828, are all referred to as "Kenneth L. [or Lewis] Anderson of Bedford County." Bedford County Deed Book U, p. 334 (September 10, 1824); Book

Bedford County Deed Books FF, p. 286 (March 1, 1831); GG, p. 217 (June 26, 1831); GG, p. 223 (September 23, 1837). Patience Burditt Anderson and Lavina Burditt Rowe, Joseph's wife, were either sisters or, more likely, cousins.

San Augustine County (Tex.) Probate Minute Book A, pp. 32, 40, 51, and 64.


San Augustine Journal and Advertiser, April 8, 1841.

San Augustine Redlander, July 1, 1841, in Thomas W. Streeter, comp., Texas as Province and Republic: 1795-1845, microfilm collection, document # 431. San Augustine Redlander, September 9, 1841.

Houston to Washington D. Miller, October 12, 1841, in Amelia Williams and Eugene C. Barker, eds., The Writings of Sam Houston, 1813-1863 (Austin, 1838-43); Harriet Smither, ed., Journals of the Sixth Congress of the Republic of Texas (3 vols., Austin 1940-45) II, pp. 3-5.


Anderson to Houston, June 2, 1843, A.J. Houston Collection, Texas State Archives, Austin, Document # 2480.

San Augustine Redlander, July 9, 1842, May 19, 1842; Northern Standard, August 27, 1842. Anderson to Houston, August 6, 1842, A.J. Houston Collection, Texas State Archives, document # 2928; and Anderson to Houston, May 5, 1842, document # 2480.

George L. Crockett, Two Centuries in East Texas (Dallas, 1962), pp. 115, 238. Gifford White, ed., The 1840 Census of the Republic of Texas (Austin, 1966), p. 171. Anderson may instead have first become a lawyer in Texas, as none of the Shelbyville nor any of the San Augustine newspapers prior to 1842 include among the many attorney ads any by Anderson. San Augustine Redlander, July 7, 1842; October 26, 1844; May 8, 1845; April 2, 1846.

There are many Anderson to Houston letters in the A.J. Houston Collection, Texas State Archives, Austin: October 18, 1841, document # 3497; May 5, 1842, document # 2480; August 6, 1842, document # 2928; August 22, 1842, document # 2818; June 2, 1843, document # 2480; Houston to Anderson, March 29, 1844 in Williams and Barker, Writings of Sam Houston, IV, p. 283.

Jones, Republic of Texas, pp. 233-236, 241-242, 257-258, 265-267; Northern Standard, October 21, 1843; Telegraph and Texas Register, November 8, 1843 and June 12, 1844.


 Telegraph and Texas Register, June 26, 1844.

 Telegraph and Texas Register, September 25, 1844; Texas National Register, December 7, 1844.

 Texas National Register, December 14, 1844.

 Anderson to Houston, July 8, 1843, A.J. Houston Collection, document # 1997; and February 10, 1844, document # 2073.

 Oates, Rip Ford's Texas, p. 49; Gambrell, Anson Jones, p. 438; Texas National Register, July 3, 1845.


 Clarksville Northern Standard, July 26, 1845; Texas National Register, September 26, 1845.

 L.S. Friend to Charles Eppes, June 9, 1847, San Augustine County Deed Book G, p. 120.

 "Kenneth L. Anderson," typescript in L.W. Kemp papers, Eugene C. Barker History Center, University of Texas, Austin.