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WILLIAM GOYENS: BLACK LEADER IN EARLY TEXAS

By Linda Ericson Devereaux

William Goyens, a light-skinned mulatto businessman, arrived in Texas early in 1820. He was born a free man in North Carolina in 1794, probably to a mulatto named William Goings and his wife Elizabeth. William Goings fought in the Revolutionary War and received a pension for his services. North Carolina was so threatened during the war that colonial officials there offered freedom to any slave who would fight. If William Goings had not already been a free man, he may very well have gained his freedom by virtue of his service in the war.¹

William Goyens obviously lived with a family that valued learning. He may not have had any formal education, but as a young man he learned to read and excelled at scholarly pursuits. He was fascinated by philosophy, theology, and astronomy. He learned geometry, rhetoric and logic, and later in Texas he acquired a working knowledge of the law. Goyens indulged in no vices or vain pleasures. He spent his time industriously and did his best to enlighten himself so that poverty would not prevent him from being happy. He learned to read and write in two languages (Spanish and English) and he understood the Cherokee language well enough to serve as an interpreter between Cherokees and officials of Mexico and the Republic of Texas.²

When Goyens was about twelve years old he received a letter from a friend who had moved to Texas and determined that he would make the journey as well. This friend told him of the freedoms that Black men enjoyed in this Mexican state, much different from those allowed in his native North Carolina. In North Carolina, men of color were deemed incapable of being witnesses except in a case against other Blacks. Those involved in racially mixed marriages in that state were subject to fines based on a law dating from 1741. Free Black men did have the right to a writ of habeas corpus, the right to own property, and the right to bequeath estates to their heirs. But free Negroes had to wear a piece of cloth on their left shoulders that said "Free;" and social and economic opportunities were scarce. Free Negroes were believed by many to be a danger to society, not only in North Carolina but across the South. Some states forbade carrying of firearms, others prohibited buying and selling of liquor, and still others imposed stiffer penalties for crimes than the penalties for White people.³

Goyens' trek to Texas was complicated by the War of 1812. He served as a private in Captain James B. Moore's Company and in Captain Jacob Short's Company of U. S. Mounted Rangers. He also served in Captain Samuel Judy's Company of Mounted Illinois Militia, and by 1814 he was living with the Cherokees in Texas, which may very well have been natural to the young man since he had lived with Indians in North Carolina. After returning to the war and participating in the Battle of New Orleans, Goyens may have joined the pirate Jean Lafitte to avoid being forced into slavery and then jumped ship in

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Galveston and made his way to Nacogdoches, his original destination. Goyens never tried to hide his skin color. Erasmo Seguin once commented that this was a great free man who accepted a man for what he was, regardless of the color of his skin.⁴

When he applied to the Texas Congress for a league and a labor of land in 1840, Goyens claimed to have arrived in Nacogdoches in 1820. According to Stephen F. Austin, Nacogdoches around the time Goyens arrived there was practically deserted following Spanish retaliation for filibustering expeditions launched from the area, the Long expedition being the most recent. There were only five houses and a church standing in Nacogdoches in 1821. While Austin was there that year residents held a town meeting and only thirty-six people attended. But the scenery reminded the young Goyens of North Carolina, and since this was the first town of any size in Texas for those arriving from Louisiana, it was a good place for tradesmen and craftsmen, and Goyens chose to stay.⁵

The first record of William Goyens' presence in Nacogdoches is an account of remarks that he made in support of a candidate for *alcalde* in September 1824. Goyens spoke for Encarnacion Chireno, but Chireno was defeated after receiving only eight votes to an opponent's twenty. Despite backing the losing candidate in that race, Goyens' fame as a scholar grew steadily in his new home. A friend said, "In Nacogdoches there are five or six men who are acute scholars in both tongues, Spanish and English, and Goyens is one of these." Goyens' literary skill and productivity won him fame and the patronage and esteem of prominent men such as Thomas J. Rusk and Sam Houston.⁶

Every free Black man lived with the fear of enslavement by unscrupulous White men, and Goyens, despite his light skin, was no exception. In 1826 Goyens was carrying a load of freight between Nacogdoches and Natchitoches when his liberty was threatened by a man named Bele English, who claimed Goyens as his property and threatened to sell him. Goyens was forced to purchase his freedom by purchasing a slave woman for English from a Mr. Llorca for 500 pesos and signing a note for some additional property. English accepted the female slave and note as payment – ransom, essentially – but Goyens was soon in danger again. Llorca, who had sold Goyens the female slave, then himself decided to claim Goyens as his property and take him to New Orleans for sale at the slave market. While trying to get together a ransom for Llorca, William Goyens petitioned the *alcalde*, who intervened and cleared up the matter. This was the last time that Goyens was threatened by attempts to enslave him.⁷

Goyens began working as an interpreter to Indians in Texas by 1826. He served as intermediary between Chief Richard Fields and the *alcalde* of Nacogdoches. The Indians were Cherokees and associated bands of Delawares, Shawnees, Kickapoos, Quapaws, Choctaws, Biloxis, Lawanias, Alabamas, and Coushattas. All were sedentary and depended mainly on agriculture for their livelihoods. Titles to their lands were important to them, since they depended upon the land for their continued existence.⁸

On May 7, 1826 Goyens paid Pierre Mayniel seventy pesos for a lot in Nacogdoches, the same lot on which the Nacogdoches County courthouse presently stands. Goyens built a home and operated a hostelry on the lot, meeting his future wife in the process. Mary Pate Sibley and her son, Henry, boarded with Goyens beginning in 1829, and in 1832 Goyens and Mary Pate were married. The ceremony was performed by a Catholic priest, Father Deus, and witnessed by Juan Jose Sanchez. Mary was a White woman from Georgia, and she and Goyens lived together quite happily but produced no children together.⁹

Goyens had extensive business and personal operations. He operated a blacksmith shop in which he did blacksmith and gunsmith work. He operated the hostelry, made and repaired wagons, and carried on a freight-hauling business between Natchitoches and Nacogdoches. He bought, sold, and traded land, with more than fifty transactions recorded. He was also active in the courts, being involved in more than thirty cases. He often sued his White neighbors when they failed to repay loans or when they tried to take his land. He had a good working knowledge of the law, and may have practiced as a lawyer in the *alcalde* court in Nacogdoches. He borrowed, loaned, and traded money and goods of all kinds. Goyens was also active in civic life and was involved in tracking down criminals, including those of his own race.¹⁰

In his blacksmith shop, William Goyens employed both wage-earning white men and slaves. Goyens began purchasing slaves in 1826 to escape enslavement himself, and continued the practice later in his life. On January 3, 1829 he purchased a twenty-six-year-old male slave named Jerry from John Durst for 700 pesos. Later that same year Goyens bought a Negro woman named Salle, age thirty-five, and her six-year-old daughter, Luisa, from Susan Calier. He also lost a legal battle over another female slave and her six or seven children, who were claimed as property by both Goyens and Elijah Loyd. Loyd triumphed in court, but by 1830 Goyens owned at least three slaves, possibly more. In 1829 one of Goyens' slaves, named Jake, was punished after being implicated in the poisoning of a local family.¹¹

Local legend connects Goyens with rumors of buried treasure in Nacogdoches. Shortly before the Battle of Nacogdoches in August of 1832, Colonel Jose de las Piedras, the Mexican commander at Nacogdoches, asked Goyens to forge two large cans with lids out of two large copper pots. This the blacksmith did, and Piedras dismissed him. The next day, Piedras again summoned Goyens and instructed him to solder the lids on the cans, but not to look inside. Goyens sealed the cans, but not before determining that one can held gold and silver coins and the other jewels and church valuables. Goyens also overheard Piedras telling his men to hide the cans; both were buried on the banks of the Ysleta Creek. After the Battle of Nacogdoches, Piedras was unable to return for the cans, and according to Goyens, they were never found.¹²

By 1832 Goyens had purchased more than 1,000 acres about four miles west of Nacogdoches on *El Camino Real*. He built a two-story home on the highest hill in Nacogdoches County, where he and his new wife lived the rest of their lives. Goyens operated a gristmill on Ysleta Creek, probably about a

mile south of his home, as well as a sawmill on his property. A clear spring at the base of "Goyens' Hill" was an Indian watering hole, and Goyens remained hospitable to all in his new home. But he complained in a letter to Sam Houston that he did not have time to study,

for while in pleading and hearing and deciding causes, or working in the blacksmith shop, or running the grist mill, in waiting on some men about business, and others out of respect, the greatest part of the day is spent on other men's affairs. The remainder of it must be given to my family at home so that I can reserve no part to myself, that is, to study. I must gossip with my wife and chat with my children and find something to say to my friends. For all these things I reckon a part of my business unless I were to become a stranger in my house, for with whatsoever either nature or choice or chance has engaged a man in any relation of life, he must endeavor to make himself as acceptable to them as he possibly can. In such occupations as these days and months and years slip away. Indeed, all the time which I can gain to myself is that which I steal from my sleep and my meals and because that is not much, I have made but a slow progress.

Goyens, who became a Roman Catholic in 1831, did not mention the long hours that he spent in prayer nor the time that he spent reading the Psalms aloud to members of his household. He made numerous pilgrimages and studied the Bible whenever he found the opportunity.¹³

Goyens had a better grasp of the differences between Mexican officials and Anglo immigrants into Texas than many of his contemporaries. Mexico suspected the United States, and Anglos looked down upon Mexicans. Any effort to enforce the laws would eventually lead to revolution. When tensions increased in the years following the confrontations at Anahuac and Nacogdoches in 1832, Goyens was so admired that he was elected to the Consultation of 1835 by the people of Nacogdoches. Goyens refused to serve, however, fearing prejudice. Goyens was not far wrong in his thinking, either. With Anglos – most of whom were natives of the American South – achieving power in Texas, Goyens faced trouble. Although he was Indian Agent during the revolution and later for Sam Houston and an interpreter for the Forbes-Houston Treaty with the Cherokees, Goyens was not appreciated by many Anglo residents of the Republic of Texas. After independence freedoms for Texans of African descent were curbed. On January 5, 1836 the Grand Council, fearful of a Negro coalition with Mexico, forbade immigration of free Negroes into Texas while granting citizenship to those already in Texas. But the Constitution of 1836 required all free Negroes to secure congressional approval to remain in the Republic. This requirement was lifted in June, 1837, but in February 1840 congress passed the Ashworth Law, which gave free persons of color two years to leave the Republic, secure congressional approval to stay, or be arrested and sold into slavery. Thomas J. Rusk drafted a petition asking congress to allow William Goyens to stay in Texas, and fifty-four other citizens of Nacogdoches signed it. Most of the leaders of the town, including Adolphus Sterne, Charles S. Taylor, Bennett Blake, L. M. Orton, H. H. Edwards, and Henry Raguét, signed in support of Goyens. Congress approved the petition on November 25, 1840, and then on December 12, 1840 passed

another law that allowed all free Negroes who were in Texas when independence was declared to remain.¹⁴

But neither of these actions ended Goyens' troubles. He had applied for a league and a labor of land as a married man in 1835. The revolution intervened, however, and he was unable to get the land surveyed and his title remained in dispute. He eventually sued the Board of Land Commissioners but without success. After Texas joined the United States, Goyens tried again. The U.S. Senate tabled his bill and it was never acted upon. He seemed to have every qualification necessary except white skin.¹⁵

Mary Pate Goyens died sometime in February 1856. From George Clevenger Goyens purchased lumber, a shovel, and spades, all of which might have been used for a burial. He also bought a bottle of brandy, a record of which was found accompanied by the notation "wife's death." That same month Goyens received a bill from P.S. Eastman for ten dollars to construct Mrs. Goyens' coffin. Goyens himself did not have long to live. He became ill in June 1856. Dr. William Tubbe attended Goyens three days and four nights and administered medications that indicated some kind of congestive fever. Goyens died on June 20, 1856, and was buried beside his wife near a large cedar tree in a Mexican cemetery on the Moral Creek, about three miles from his home.¹⁶

Goyens left an estate that suggests he had achieved a significant amount of financial success during his life in Texas. At the time of his death he owned 12,423 acres of land in Nacogdoches, Houston, Cherokee, and Angelina counties, and his estate was estimated to be worth \$11,917.60 in 1856. Several claims were filed against the estate, many of which were probably spurious. Goyens had been a good businessman who would not have left his affairs in a mess; nevertheless, the estate paid claims of \$2,094.38 while disallowing claims of \$4,260.05. Hadley Goyens, who claimed to be a nephew of Goyens, tried to claim the entire estate. Henrietta and Martha Sibley, minor daughters of Henry Sibley (deceased) successfully claimed, through their guardian William C. Pollock, their grandmother's half of the estate.¹⁷

William Goyens had left the restrictive environment of North Carolina to seek his fortune in Texas. He was a friend to all. He was honest and conscientious in business and treated others, as he wanted to be treated. Sam Houston described Goyens as "one of the greatest persons of integrity known to Texas during the 1800s." He possessed in good measure the qualities of industry, responsibility, gentility and integrity. "He lived his life as a free man among free men."¹⁸

NOTES

¹⁴Goyens was lighter than most mulattos because he was a quadroon. His father had a white mother, as did he. See Diane Elizabeth Prince, "William Goyens, Free Negro on the Texas Frontier," MA thesis, Stephen F. Austin State College, July 1967, p. 3; *Revolutionary War Period Bible Family and Marriage Records Gleaned From Pension Applications*, Vol. 14, p. 62; William Goings married Elizabeth October 1793, in Caswell County, North Carolina. He died on August 23, 1827, in Hawkins County, Tennessee. Rassie E. Wicker, *Miscellaneous Ancient Records of*

Moore County, North Carolina (Moore County Historical Association, 1971), p. 307. On pages 117-118 Mr. Wicker comments on the Goings family: "Racial origin of the Goings ... is as mysterious and debatable as that of the Robeson county (Lumbree) Indians. These people have much in common, in both physical appearance and social habits. Within the recollections of the writer ... they are a people apart; a clannish set who married within their own tribes, and seldom associated with either whites or Negroes. In later years, there has been extensive intermarriage with the Negro race, to the extent that some families bearing those names are as black as pot, while others would be classified as light mulatto, and still retain the distinct physiognomy of their ancestors. This is especially true of the Goingses."

Wicker also implies that William Goyens may have been connected to a mysterious clan in rural Tennessee: "Some years ago there appeared an article in the *Saturday Evening Post* concerning a band of people living in the Clinch River area in north-central Tennessee in exactly the same manner as the Robeson county Indians. These people called themselves Malungins (from the French Melange, a mixture?), had their own schools and churches as did the Lumbees at that time. Two of the families listed were the Goingses and the Chavises."

¹Daniel James Kubiak, *Monument to a Black Man* (San Antonio, 1972), pp. 9, 18-19, 26-27.

²Joe Tom Davis, *Legendary Texians*, Vol. III Chapter V: "William Goyens: a True-blue Black Texian," p. 112; Prince, "William Goyens," pp. 5, 8-9.

³Kubiak, *Monument to a Black Man*, pp. 16, 31.

⁴Prince, "William Goyens," pp. 1, 13-15.

⁵Prince, "William Goyens," p. 1; Kubiak, *Monument to a Black Man*, pp. 26-27.

⁶Prince, "William Goyens," pp. 24-27. Goyens had been determined by a commission from San Antonio to be a free man, but this did not deter English or Llorca.

⁷Prince, "William Goyens," pp. 36-38.

⁸Prince, "William Goyens," pp. 20, 22, 30-32. The Melungeons claim William Goyens as one of their own. See *Melungeon Newsletter*, Vol. 1, No. 4, December 1989, "William Goyens, Melungeon, Becomes Texas Millionaire") These modern descendants of that early group in Tennessee claim that two brothers of Mary's from Louisiana were only persuaded to allow the marriage because they learned that Goyens was not Black but that he was Melungeon. The Melungeons claim to be descended from Portuguese sailors or Portuguese soldiers left behind on exploring expeditions of the Spanish in the 1500s. They do not claim any Black blood.

⁹Goyens signed his name as William B. P. Goines in several instances in 1837, both as witness and as grantee. See Kathryn Hooper Davis and Linda Ericson Devereaux, *This I Convey - Deed Book A Nacogdoches County, Texas 1837* (Nacogdoches), pp. 258, 288, 325-326, 328, 330-332, 334, 336; Davis, *Legendary Texians*, pp. 114-115; Prince, "William Goyens," pp. 21-22; Kubiak, *Monument to a Black Man*, p. 28.

¹⁰Prince, "William Goyens," pp. 29-30.

¹¹Prince, "William Goyens," pp. 27-29; Kubiak, *Monument to a Black Man*, pp. 52-53.

¹²Davis, *Legendary Texians*, pp. 114-116; Kubiak, *Monument to a Black Man*, pp. 37-38.

¹³Kubiak, *Monument to a Black Man*, pp. 41-44, 61; Prince, "William Goyens," pp. 38-54, 61-66; Davis, *Legendary Texians*, p. 118.

¹⁴Prince, "William Goyens," p. 66-70.

¹⁵Prince, "William Goyens," pp. 71-72; Davis, *Legendary Texians*, p. 120.

¹⁶Prince, "William Goyens," p. 77.

¹⁷Prince, "William Goyens," pp. 78-79; Kubiak, *Monument to a Black Man*, pp. 3-4.