Dallas: The Man Behind the Name

Harry E. Wade
DALLAS: THE MAN BEHIND THE NAME
by Harry E. Wade

Dallas is a name familiar to many people throughout the world. The city is known as an international center for trade, fashion and technology, the Dallas Cowboys are known for their winning ways, and now the television serial “Dallas” has become a world-wide sensation. With the name Dallas being a household word with many people, one might naturally wonder about the origin of the name. Who was the man behind the name of a city, a football team and a television series?

This question has perplexed historians for years. Answers to the question are not lacking, but none is convincing. One answer put forth is that the city was named after George Mifflin Dallas, the running mate of James K. Polk in the presidential election of 1844. Since the Polk-Dallas ticket had supported annexation of Texas to the United States, this answer seems plausible. Also, John Neely Bryan, Jr., the son of the founder of Dallas, claimed in a 1906 interview, that “My father named the city and the county for George M. Dallas, vice-president under James K. Polk.”

The main difficulty of assuming that George M. Dallas is the man behind the name is that Bryan’s village was called Dallas as early as 1842, two years before the presidential election. A diary of a pioneer identified only as W.A.F., published in the old Dallas Herald, states:

In the spring of 1842, streams again flooded; worked below Dallas on the Trinity; visited Dallas in May 1842; found Colonel John N. Bryan and three or four others encamped on the present site of Dallas; there was one solitary log cabin constructed.

Since it is not known when this was written and the use of the word “present” leads one to believe it was written after 1842, this is not conclusive proof that the city was named Dallas as early as 1842.

However, the family memoir of John B. Billingsley who came to Dallas in 1842 lends more credence to that date. Billingsley wrote:

We had heard a great deal about the Trinity and the town of Dallas. This was the center of attraction. It sounded big in the far-off state. We heard of it often, yes, the place, but the town where was it? Two small log cabins, the logs just as nature found them, the walls just high enough for the door boards and the covering of clapboards held to their place with poles, chimneys made of sticks and mud and old mother earth serving as floors; a shelter made of four sticks for a smith shop, a garden fenced in with brush, and mortar in which they beat their corn into meal. This was the town of Dallas and two families; ten or twelve souls were its population.

Harry E. Wade is an Associate Professor of History at East Texas State University, Commerce.
By 1843 the name appears in Texas newspapers. On September 28, 1843, the *Clarksville Northern Standard* contained a letter signed "An Emigrant." The letter was probably written by one of the agents for the Peters Colony since it contains a description of all the settlements in the colony. The author states:

> It is my opinion that Dallas, or mouth of Elm Fork, may be considered as the head of steamboat navigation, and as a good crossing is now established at Dallas, by its enterprising proprietor (Col. Bryan), I will make that a point from which to give distance to other places, and a further description of that portion of the country.

The November 16, 1843, issue of the *Houston Morning Star*, in speaking of the Peters Colony, mentioned Dallas:

> We have recently learned that the number of families now settled within the limits of Peters' Colony is only twenty-five. These are settled along the east bank of the Trinity near the mouth of Elm Creek and the houses are scattered from Bird's Fort a distance of seventeen miles. Bird's Fort is situated about twelve miles above the mouth of Elm Creek and Dallas 5 miles below it.

If Bryan's village was called Dallas two years before George M. Dallas became nationally known, how could Bryan have had him in mind? Prior to 1844 George M. Dallas was known in Philadelphia as a lawyer and rising political figure, but his reputation had not spread much beyond his home town, much less to the forks of the Trinity.

Did Bryan possibly know Mr. Dallas before he came to Texas? Frank M. Cockrell, who was born in Dallas in the 1850s and knew Bryan in his later years, said that Bryan told him "The town was named for my friend Dallas." Cockrell speculates that Bryan must have meant the vice president and that possibly Bryan knew him in his youth. However, research on Bryan's life before he came to Texas has led to the conclusion that Bryan could not have known George M. Dallas before the 1844 election.

If Bryan did not name Dallas after Polk's running mate, then for whom did he name it? Colonel J. M. Morphis in his *History of Texas*, published in 1874, states that Dallas was named for Commander Alexander James Dallas, the brother of George M. Dallas. Morphis gives no evidence to substantiate his claim except to state that Commander Dallas was for a time stationed in the Gulf of Mexico and might have been in the Dallas area in 1846. Since Dallas was named four years prior to 1846, this position cannot stand.

There is one theory that does not assume that John Neely Bryan was the person who named the village Dallas. Sam Acheson, long-time historian of Dallas, argues that promoters of the Peters Colony who resided in Philadelphia might have been influential enough to have a
settlement in the Colony named after their friend, George M. Dallas. He does not mention who these Philadelphia investors were and Seymour V. Connor in his authoritative work on the colony makes no reference to Philadelphia promoters.

It is the thesis of this article that Sam Acheson is partially correct; Bryan's village received its name from the promoters of Peters Colony. However, Acheson is probably incorrect in thinking the promoters were residents of Philadelphia and that the village was named after George Mifflin Dallas. If Bryan had started calling his settlement with "two small log cabins" in 1842 Dallas, how could the Billingsley family have heard so much about Dallas before they came to Texas in 1842? This can be explained if we assume that the promoters of the Peters Colony were using and publicizing the name.

Who among the promoters of the Peters Colony selected the name and who was the man behind the name? To answer this question it will be necessary to sketch briefly the early history of the Peters Colony. On February 4, 1841, the Fifth Congress of the Republic of Texas adopted an important land and colonization law entitled "An Act Granting Land to Emigrants." This law was the result of a memorial which had been submitted to Congress by the promoters of the future Peters Colony. The law authorized the President of the Republic to enter into a contract with the twenty men who were listed on the memorial for the purpose of colonizing and settling a portion of the public domain. This act, and the contract which was signed by Samuel Browning for the colonizing company and President Mirabeau B. Lamar for Texas on August 30, 1841, cleared the legal grounds for establishing Peters Colony.

Among the twenty petitioners whose names appeared on the memorial were eleven Englishmen and nine Americans. The Englishmen were relatively unimportant in the early development of the colony, and in December, 1842, they transferred their interest to a second group of Englishmen. Concerning the question of the origins of the name Dallas both groups of Englishmen were unimportant. They were distant investors who were only interested in the scheme as a profitable investment.

Of the nine Americans one family stands out preeminently, the family which gave the name to the colony. The founder and chief promoter of the colony was William S. Peters, who along with his three sons, John, William C. and Henry J., and his two sons-in-law, Samuel Browning and William Scott made up the majority of the American petitioners. Of the other three, Timothy Cragg was a piano manufacturer who in 1840 lived in Louisville, next door to William C. Peters and later Thomas P. Cragg, his brother, became associated in the music
business with Henry J. Peters." Phineas J. Johnson also lived in Louis­
ville in 1840 but unfortunately nothing is known about his occupation." Nothing at all is known about the last petitioner, John Bansamen. Perhaps he was another son-in-law of William S. Peters since in 1830 Peters had five teenage daughters living with him," and in one of his letters to Robert Owen, the English socialist, he mentions that six of his sons joined him from the commencement of the colony." He prob­
ably meant three sons and three sons-in-law. From the above, it is clear that the Peters family played the most important role during the early years of the colony, especially up to 1844 when the company was reorganized and other investors joined this venture."

William S. Peters was an Englishman who came to the United States in September, 1827, with his wife, Agnes, and six of his children" and settled near Blairsville, Pennsylvania," a small but rapidly growing town located on the Pennsylvania Canal. The canal was not completed until 1829 but Blairsville was already benefiting from its construction.

The two oldest sons, John and William C., came to the United States prior to their father. John, the oldest son, had arrived in 1824 and settled in Blairsville, Pennsylvania," where by the 1830s he was a successful businessman running a general merchandise store, a saw mill and a boat yard." William C., the second oldest son and eventually the most promi­nent and successful of the three sons, came to the United States in June of 1825." He located first in Troy, New York, where he was a music teacher and bandmaster, then moved to Pittsburgh two years later. From 1827 to 1833 William C. taught music," gave concerts," organ­ized and led the Polymnian Society," and established his own music store." During this time he also entered into a partnership with John J. Mellor and W. D. Smith which lasted until April, 1833."

It was while he was in Pittsburgh that William C. Peters put Thomas Dartmouth Rice's song "Jump Jim Crow" into shape and pub­lished it." "Daddy" Rice, the "father of American minstrelsy," became internationally famous because of his "Jim Crow" performances. Also while in Pittsburgh William Peters taught music to Stephen C. Foster's older sisters and became a friend of the family." It was later in Cincinnati that Stephen gave the family friend, W. C. Peters, a song he had written entitled Oh, Susanna. William Peters gave Stephen one hundred dollars for the song and, according to R. P. Nevin, who knew Foster, it was the receipt of this one hundred dollars which "had the effect of starting" Foster on his "vocation of songwriter." Peters later declared that he was "one of the first to discover the extraordinary talent of Mr. Foster," and that he was "from first to last his firm friend and advisor.""
William C. Peters moved to Louisville, Kentucky, early in 1833 and established a music store and publishing house, having sold his interests in Pittsburgh. In the fall of 1840 he moved to Cincinnati where he lived until his death in 1866. By that time W. C. Peters had the largest music publishing business in the West with branch houses in Louisville, Kentucky, and Baltimore, Maryland.

William C. Peters was not the only son of William S. Peters with musical talent. Peters' youngest son, Henry J., who had come to the United States in 1827 with his father and mother, was also an accomplished musician. Sometime during the late 1830s he moved to Louisville and taught music in W. C. Peters store. Later he established his own music store and in 1841 he was the director of the Louisville Brass Band. It is this Peters who in 1877 moved to Texas to settle on his land from the Peters Colony.

William S. Peters, the father of these three successful sons and founder of Peters Colony, was also an accomplished musician. He had been a bandmaster in Canada before coming to the United States. Sometime between 1831 and 1836 William S. moved to Pittsburgh. In December, 1836, he and William D. Smith, the person who had been in business with his son, organized the Pittsburgh Sacred Music Society, and in November of 1836 he was listed in the *Pittsburgh Mercury* as having taken out a license as a retail dealer in foreign merchandise for the year 1836. The Pittsburgh business directories for 1837, 1839 and 1841 list him as a grocer on the corner of Washington and Coal Lane.

Thus, from 1827 to the 1840s the Peters family was closely associated with the city of Pittsburgh. During this time Pittsburgh was a small city with a population that grew from 21,000 in 1830 to 36,000 in 1840. William and William C. were both prominent members of the community giving concerts, leading musical organizations and running businesses. William C. even published the *Pittsburgh March* in 1832. It is reasonable to believe that they knew most of the other prominent business and professional people of the city.

One such prominent member of the community was a lawyer and judge, Trevanion B. Dallas. Trevanion B. Dallas was a close friend of the Foster family. William B. Foster, Stephen's father, and T. B. Dallas were both staunch supporters of Jacksonian democracy. Foster while serving two terms in the Pennsylvania legislature from 1825 to 1829, became an ardent supporter of Andrew Jackson. T. B. Dallas supported Van Buren for President in 1836 and unsuccessfully ran for congress in the same year on the Democratic ticket.

William C. Peters was also a friend of the Foster family, teaching the older girls music. Possibly he also taught the three children of
T. B. Dallas. "The Peters were also undoubtedly staunch Democrats. John Peters was a delegate from Indiana County, Pennsylvania, to a "Democratic Mass Meeting" which was held at Saltsburg in 1844. William S. Peters' political views can be inferred from his letter to Owen. His views on aristocracy and society in general would certainly place him in the Democratic camp.

On April 7, 1841, only two months after the Texas Congress passed "An Act Granting Land to Emigrants," Trevanion B. Dallas died of scarlatina. The Pittsburgh Mercury commenting on his death stated that "It is seldom, indeed, that the announcement of a death has caused such widespread and unaffected sorrow, as was visible on the occurrence of this melancholy event." Even the Pittsburgh Gazette, a Whig paper, remarked that "in his death, society has lost a valuable member, the judicial branch an upright and improving incumbent, and his family a kind and affectionate parent." What would be more natural than for the Peters family to select the most important settlers in their colony to name after their friend, Trevanion B. Dallas.

This would account for the widespread use of the name in 1842 and 1843 and also explain why confusion would soon arise. Trevanion B. Dallas was not known outside of Pittsburgh and people would naturally assume that George M. Dallas was the man behind the name.

This leads to an interesting conclusion: the city of Dallas might have been named for one man, Trevanion B. Dallas, and the county of Dallas named for another, George Mifflin Dallas. The county was not created until 1846, and by then George M. Dallas was definitely the person in mind when Dallas County was named. However, the evidence strongly suggests that Trevanion B. Dallas was the man behind the name of the city of Dallas.

NOTES

1 Sam Acheson, Dallas Yesterday (Dallas, 1977), 3.
2 John William Rogers, The Lusty Texans of Dallas (New York, 1951), 42.
3 Rogers, Lusty Texans, 42.
4 Clarksville Northern Standard, September 28, 1843.
5 Houston Morning Star, November 16, 1843.
6 Rogers, Lusty Texans, 45.
7 Acheson, Dallas Yesterday, 4.
8 Rogers, Lusty Texans, 45.
9 Rogers, Lusty Texans, 45.
10 Seymour V. Connor, The Peters Colony of Texas (Austin, 1959), 22.
11 Connor, Peters Colony, 26.
12 Connor, Peters Colony, 35.
13 Connor, Peters Colony, 27.
14 Blairsville (Pennsylvania) Record, March 25, 1835.
15 Sixth Census of the United States, 1840, City of Louisville.

Sixth Census of the United States, 1840, City of Louisville.

Fifth Census of the United States, 1830, Black Lick Township, Indiana County, Pennsylvania.

Owen Papers (University of Wisconsin, microfilm 1,090), piece #1529.

Connor, Peters Colony, 73.

National Archives Microfilm Publications; Index to Passenger Lists of Vessels Arriving at New York, 1820-1840.

Fifth Census of the United States, 1830, Black Lick Township, Indiana County, Pennsylvania.

John Alexander Caldwell, History of Indiana County, Pennsylvania (Newater, Ohio, 1880), 355.

Blairsville (Pennsylvania) Record, November 19, 1834 and December 3, 1834.

National Archives Microfilm Publications; Index to Passenger Lists of Vessels Arriving at New York, 1820-1840; and The New York Evening Post, June 17, 1825.


Baynham, “Music in Pittsburgh,” 82.

Pittsburgh Gazette, June 29, 1830 and July 16, 1830.

Baynham, Music in Pittsburgh,” 85; and Pittsburgh Gazette, September 29, 1829.

Pittsburgh Gazette, October 4, 1831.


Cincinnati Daily Gazette, January 22, 1857.

Cincinnati Enquirer, May 15, 1841.

Walter Sutton, The Western Book Trade (Columbus: Ohio, 1961), 83.

Louisville Public Advertiser, March 15, 1841.


Pittsburgh Gazette, December 8, 1836.

Pittsburgh Mercury, November 16, 1836.


Pittsburgh Mercury, May 28, 1835.

Howard, Stephen Foster, 12.

Pittsburgh Mercury, July 6, 1836.

Morneweck, Chronicles, vol. I, 82.

Fifth Census of the United States, 1830, North Ward of City of Pittsburgh.

Pennsylvania Argus, August 30, 1844 and Clarence D. Stephenson, Indiana County, 175th Anniversary History (Indiana, Pa., 1978), vol.1, 247.

Owen Papers, piece #1447.

Pittsburgh Mercury, April 14, 1841.

Pittsburgh Gazette, April 8, 1841.