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TEXAS WHIGS AND THE Gubernatorial
ELECTION OF 1853

by Ronald Coleman Ellison

"Where you see a Whig you see a rascal . . . The first Whig was
the devil."

While these words were spoken in the eighteenth century by
Samuel Johnson and applied to the politics of Great Britain, many
Democrats in Texas during the 1840s and 1850s would probably have
agreed.

The Whig party in the United States emerged in the mid-1830s
as a vehicle for those opposed to Andrew Jackson and the policies of
his Democratic administration. Historians Charles G. Sellers, Jr., and
Glyndon G. Van Deusen have pointed out that the main elements of
the Whig party in the northeastern United States included many former
National Republicans and business-minded Democrats who had deserted
Jackson on the Bank issue. They were supported by a majority of
planters who were economically dependent on banking and commercial
facilities. The business-banking class and western farmers were attracted
to Whiggery because they favored liberal internal improvements and
governmental aid in the expansion of the economy.

Since the national Whig party had opposed Texas annexation and
the Mexican War, most Texans became Democrats and remained so
throughout the antebellum period. The first Whig organization in Texas
was in East Texas. Harrison County was reported to have had a Whig
club as early as April, 1846. Several Whigs held various places of
leadership in early Texas legislatures as well as other offices of responsi­
bility. A few of the more prominent early Texas Whigs included Gen­
eral E. H. Tarrant of Navarro County; Ben Epperson of Red River
County, who ran unsuccessfully as the Whig candidate for governor
in 1851; James W. Throckmorton of Collin County, who served in the
legislature and who was governor of Texas briefly during Reconstruc­
tion; James Reiley of Harris County, land speculator and former diplo­
mat of the Republic of Texas; and David G. Burnet of Harris County,
former ad interim President of the Republic of Texas.

The major voice of Texas Whigs in the early days of organization
was the Galveston Journal, which published its first issue in early
February, 1850. For the next five years the Journal carried editorials
and news stories relating to the fortunes of the Whig party in the Lone
Star State.

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Although the Whig party supported a candidate for governor of Texas in the 1851 elections and for President in the 1848 and 1852 elections, the party made its major bid for support in the state in 1853. In that year, William Beck Ochiltree from Nacogdoches County, already a well-known figure in early Texas, became the party's candidate for governor. Born on October 11, 1811, in Cumberland County, North Carolina, Ochiltree moved to Florida and then to Alabama, where he practiced law. In 1839, Ochiltree came to Rusk County, Texas, and later settled in Nacogdoches. He became an outstanding attorney and associate justice of the Texas Supreme Court during the period of the Republic, and served as Secretary of the Treasury in 1844 and as Attorney General in 1845. He was a member of the Constitutional Convention in 1845 and received appointment as one of the first District Judges of the state in 1846.

As long as the state was not divided into political parties, Ochiltree, a Whig, fared well politically, but when formal parties began to take shape, Ochiltree was unable to win the congressional seat from the Eastern District of Texas in 1846.

Ochiltree remained active in Whig affairs in the state, and when the party attempted to "draft" him to run for governor in 1853, he stated in a letter of declination on January 10, 1853, that it would not benefit the Whigs to run a candidate for governor, and furthermore, he added, "No man having the least particle of the odor of whiggery attached to his skirts could hope to be elected." Ochiltree felt that the Whigs would be throwing away their votes on a Whig candidate, and could better utilize their votes by electing a Democrat whom they felt would serve the best interests of the state.

Ochiltree seemed to leave the door open for a "draft," but stated he was not sure that the Whigs would back his measures. He advocated paying all of the liabilities of the state, since Texas had almost boundless resources, but opposed a division of the state since this would dilute its resources. He favored amending the constitution to repeal the anti-banking clause, and eliminating the clause in the constitution that prohibited the state from engaging in works of internal improvements. Ochiltree believed that these views would cause strong opposition and that he probably would not even receive the Whig vote. He, therefore, declined to become a candidate and asked that no Whig run for governor. He did indicate, however, that he would support a candidate nominated by the Texas Whigs. But in July, 1853, Ochiltree bowed to repeated appeals from Texas Whigs. He listed the following planks in his gubernatorial platform: (1) he opposed a division of the state, (2) he favored an increase in the number of Supreme Court justices and raising their salary, (3) he wanted to retain the monies in the
Educational fund and not disperse them for any other purpose, (4) he advocated the passage of laws requiring the surveying and location of all lands belonging to the state, (5) he opposed "the indiscriminate granting of railroad charters to every applicant" in conjunction with some thoroughly integrated plan of internal improvements, (6) he wanted to build a great railroad line across Texas to connect with the Opelousas and Vicksburg lines, (7) he favored adoption of an amendment to the constitution to permit the state to contract debts and repeal the section that prohibits the state from having interest in corporations, and, finally (8) he supported a constitutional amendment to allow banks to operate in the state.¹⁴

Several Democrats also entered the governor's race, including Elisha M. Pease of Brazoria County, who was supported by the *Austin State Gazette* and was a warm advocate of railroads and public education;¹⁵ John W. Dancy of Fayette County, another Democratic candidate, believed in a system of state works that would give the state a network of railroads sooner than any other plan;¹⁶ and Judge Lemuel D. Evans of Harrison County, who favored railroad development rather than developing rivers and harbors. According to Evans, the main issue was not Whigs or Democrats but whether or not to build railroads.¹⁷ General Thomas Jefferson Chambers, who had been quite active in events in Texas before, during, and after independence, and who had been defeated for governor in 1851, was the fourth Democrat to enter the race.¹⁸ He asked that the readers of the Texas press become acquainted with his policies, although none could be found in print.¹⁹

Former Governor George T. Wood (1847-1849) of Liberty County, ran again and favored internal improvements while opposing any change in the state constitution and opposed banks in every shape or form.²⁰ M. T. Johnson, a Tarrant County Democrat who had made an unsuccessful bid for governor two years previously, also entered the 1853 race. His platform included the support of a just settlement of the Texas debts without interference by the general government, an education fund and common schools, and complete sovereignty of Texas over the Indians.²¹

In view of the gubernatorial election, the Whig press in Galveston called for the party to remain unorganized and try to elect a Whig as the opportunity presented itself.²² The *Journal* charged that the members of the legislature, who were mostly Democrats, were appointed as delegates to their state convention since their mileage and *per diem* would be paid out of the treasury of the state. The Whigs wanted an explanation of this expenditure since they had to pay their own way to their conventions.²³

A Democratic convention scheduled for Austin on February 22, 1853, proved a failure. Another state Democratic meeting called for
in June at Washington-on-the-Brazos, also drew few representatives and those who attended merely reaffirmed the Democratic principles that had been adopted at the last state party convention.\(^\text{16}\)

The *Galveston News* considered the Whig candidates for governor and lieutenant governor to constitute "...a very respectable ticket, and one that will probably unite the whig [sic] vote and tell its strength."\(^\text{17}\) The editor of the *Journal* felt that Ochiltree had no superior in the state as a stump speaker and felt that the Democrats were afraid to debate him. Even some Democrats admitted that Ochiltree would make an excellent governor and that he was qualified in every way for that position.\(^\text{17}\)

The editor of the *Journal* felt confident that Ochiltree and J. E. Kirby of Austin County, running on the Whig ticket for governor and lieutenant governor respectively, would triumph over the divided opposition. The *Journal* editor urged that "... every Whig turn out to the polls and deposite [sic] a vote for Whig men..." and predicted that "... Whig principles, and the overthrow of Locofocoism with its iron-heeled constitution will be near at hand—their days will then be numbered."\(^\text{17}\)

The editor of the Austin *South Western American* disagreed with the *Journal* editor. He felt that there were at least two Democratic candidates for each office who would get more votes than all the Whig candidates. The *American's* editor further stated that in the past Whigs were elected to various state offices along with Democrats but if Ochiltree won election, it "... would so wound the democracy, [sic] that it would be the signal forever after for not presenting a Whig for any office." The *American's* editor believed that the best men in the Whig party did not want the party to organize.\(^\text{18}\)

Another Democratic newspaper, the *Austin State Gazette*, was fearful that the Democratic division would play into the hands of the Whigs. The Democratic party, it stated, was about "... to drain the cup of bitter defeat so adroitly prepared by its enemies, open and covert."\(^\text{19}\)

An accurate evaluation of the forthcoming political contest was offered by the *Gazette's* scribe in the same issue when he stated that all the Whigs were uniting "... with the utmost enthusiasm on Judge Ochiltree, and with the full vote of his party, unless the democracy unite upon their strongest man, his election is inevitable."\(^\text{20}\) The *Gazette's* editor speculated that Ochiltree would probably receive more votes east of the Trinity River than any other candidate. This would mean that the contest would be between Ochiltree and the strongest man in the west, E. M. Pease. The voters were therefore admonished to unite behind Pease and elect him as governor.\(^\text{21}\)
In a letter to the editor of the Gazette dated July 6, one of the leading Democratic candidates, M. T. Johnson, withdrew from the race. He did so in order to effect the election of a Democrat to the governor's office, even though he felt he was in the front ranks. He stated that he felt the sacrifice was necessary because Texas was a Democratic state. Johnson did not throw his support to anyone else in the race but released all his followers to vote for whomever they chose."

In a postscript to the letter, Johnson noted that the Galveston News of July 5, had stated that there had been an agreement between Wood and Johnson that if Ochiltree ran for governor, then Johnson would withdraw and throw his support to Wood. The report said that this would place the election of Wood "almost beyond a doubt.""

Wood left the impression wherever he went that he was the available Democratic candidate for governor and insisted that Johnson had indeed withdrawn in his favor."

Johnson stated that this allegation was "... utterly untrue; no such understanding does or ever did exist with us or our friends, to my knowledge." Several newspapers withdrew their support from Wood after they found that Johnson was not supporting Wood." Considering the outcome of the vote it is probable that Ochiltree would have been elected if Wood had not claimed Johnson's endorsement because this false claim resulted in most of Johnson's supporters unifying behind Pease and assuring his victory. Without Johnson's withdrawal, Ochiltree still could have probably been elected, since Johnson had a large following and had he remained in the race this would have further fragmented the Democratic vote."

In the opinion of the Austin State Gazette, the withdrawal of Johnson improved Pease's chance for victory. The editor called upon the friends of Pease to be vigilant in the belief that Pease was the strongest man in the Democratic ranks and was the only one who could save the party from defeat. He therefore called "... upon democrats [sic] everywhere to rally to his support.""

The editor of another Democratic journal, the Nacogdoches Chronicle, praised Pease and criticized Ochiltree. In reporting a speech by the Whig candidate, the editor ventured to say that Ochiltree "... made a fling or two at the Chronicle, but his remarks were very much of the character of those made by the fox when he pronounced the grapes sour." One Democratic editor felt that Ochiltree was trying to take undue advantage of the "turmoils and confusion of a family quarrel among democrats [sic]," but concluded "it can't win.""

The results of the election confirmed this view. Pease received 13,089 votes to lead the field and claim victory. Ochiltree was second
with 9,245 ballots, followed by Wood, 5,472, Evans, 4,559, Chambers, 2,738, and Dancy, only 276."

Ochiltree led in sixteen counties located mainly in northeast Texas. He gained the largest vote in Angelina County with 76% of the vote, followed by 60% in Cook County, 56% in Orange County, and 52% in Nacogdoches County, his home county." Ochiltree's good showing was due mainly to his popularity throughout the state rather than to a great Whig following.

Data compiled from the census of 1850 indicates that the sixteen counties carried by Ochiltree were above the state average in population and property. The free population in these counties exceeded the state average of 1,980 by 804; these counties had 521 more slaves than the county average of 746, 101 more farms than the average county with 257, and two more manufacturing establishments, producing $500 or more annually, above the average county which had only four." These figures confirm the traditional view that the Whigs made their greatest appeal in the South to areas with strong property interests.

Although Texas Whigs had suffered defeat, some party leaders looked to the future. The editor of the Galveston Journal, H. H. Smith, declared that there was nothing in the election results to dishearten the Whigs." In October, the Democratic State Gazette stated that Whigs in central Texas were already preparing for the next governor's election and predicted the Whigs would support M. T. Johnson as their next candidate."

The election of 1853, however, marked both the highwater mark of Whig fortunes in Texas and the beginning of the decline of the party. The editor of the Galveston Journal, H. H. Smith, fell victim to yellow fever which swept the city. Smith had labored to maintain the Journal as the leading Whig sheet in the state and had materially extended its circulation. The editor of the Northern Standard, Charles De Morse, attested to Smith's efficient editorship and accepted the witness of his friends that he was a gentleman of popular social qualities." Smith's death was a serious blow to the Texas Whigs. Although the Journal continued to be published until 1855, it was less effective as a political journal." The disintegration of the National Whig Party over the slavery question in the mid-1850s led many former Whigs into the Republican party in the North and the Democratic party in the South. Many Texas Whigs joined the American, or Know Nothing party in the mid-1850s.

Benjamin H. Epperson, the unsuccessful Whig candidate for governor of Texas in 1851, crossed over into the Know Nothing ranks in the mid-1850s. He liked the nationalistic planks of this party's plat-
form and felt that this movement was the "... only hope to halt the growing radicalism of the state Democratic party."

Even though a split had occurred in the Whig ranks, some individuals continued to consider themselves Whigs. This was evident in an episode on the floor of the Texas House of Representatives as late as November 26, 1855. While W. B. Ochiltree was making a speech against the Kansas-Nebraska Bill, he said, "I stand solitary and alone on this floor, an old line Whig. . . ." J. W. Throckmorton arose and after being recognized by the Speaker stated, "I wish to call the gentleman to order. I claim to be in that situation myself."

The majority of the Texas Whigs, however, gradually drifted into the Democratic party as the Civil War approached, and in the years of Reconstruction, former Whigs, such as Throckmorton and Ochiltree, played an active part in the Democratic party.

NOTES


4This partial list included some of the more important Whig leaders and was compiled from various sources, including early Texas newspapers and *Members of the Legislature of the State of Texas from 1846 to 1939* (Austin, 1939), 6-21.

5This writer microfilmed all existing copies of the *Journal* at the University of Texas archives at Austin and has utilized it quite extensively because it has hardly been used to any extent in the examination of Texas politics during this period.

6*Galveston Journal*, July 15, 1851.


8*Texas State Gazette*, Austin, July 2, 1853.

9William Beck Ochiltree Papers, Archives of the University of Texas Library, Austin; "Republic of Texas," *The Handbook of Texas*, II, 463.


11*Galveston Journal*, February 4, 1853.

12*Galveston Journal*, February 4, 1853.

13*Galveston Journal*, February 4, 1853.
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"Texas State Gazette, Austin, July 2, 1853.
'Galveston Journal, July 15, 1853.
'The editor of the Gazette attributed nearly two-thirds of the laws of Texas to Pease's work in the legislature.
"John Winfield Scott Dancy," Handbook of Texas, I, 463.
'Northern Standard, Clarksville, June 11, 1853; Texas State Gazette, Austin, June 11, 1853, July 9, 1853.
'Galveston Journal, July 15, 1853.
"Flag of the Union, Henderson, cited by Texas State Gazette, Austin, July 2, 1853. Evidently the Flag of the Union had decided by this time to change and support Wood instead of Evans.
'Texas State Gazette, Austin, June 25, 1853; "Middleton Tate Johnson," Handbook of Texas, I, 916-917.
'Galveston Journal, January 7, 1853.
'Galveston Journal, January 28, 1853.
'Texas State Gazette, Austin, March 5, 1853, March 26, 1853, June 25, 1853.
'Galveston Journal, July 8, 1853.
'Galveston Journal, July 8, 1853.
'South Western American, Austin, cited by Galveston Journal, July 15, 1853.
'Texas State Gazette, Austin, July 16, 1853.
'Texas State Gazette, Austin, July 16, 1853.
'Texas State Gazette, Austin, July 16, 1853.
'Texas State Gazette, Austin, July 20, 1853; Francis R. Lubbock, Six Decades in Texas or Memoirs of Francis Richard Lubbock, Governor of Texas in Time of War, 1861-1863: A Personal Experience in Business, War, and Politics (Edited by C. W. Raines; Austin, 1900), 195. Lubbock says that Johnson nobly withdrew, threw his support to Pease, and caused his election. Newspaper accounts of the time, however, as indicated in this text, disclose that Johnson gave his support to Pease only after he found that Wood had notified the electorate that Johnson withdrew to support Wood as governor.
'Texas State Gazette, Austin, July 20, 1853.
'Texas State Gazette, Austin, July 20, 1853.
'Northern Standard, Clarksville, July 30, 1853. Some of the papers that shifted from the support of Wood to Pease were the Northern Standard of Clarksville, Nacogdoches Chronicle, and Jefferson Herald. The Marshall Republican decided not to place any name at the top of its mast but encouraged readers to vote for Pease (July 23, 1853, cited by Northern Standard, Clarksville, July 30, 1853). An extra edition of the San Augustine Herald announced that Pease was its choice for governor. (June 16, 1853, cited by Northern Standard, Clarksville, July 30, 1853).
'Texas State Gazette, Austin, July 20, 1853.
'Nacogdoches Chronicle, cited by Texas State Gazette, Austin, July 23, 1853.
"Galveston Journal, cited by Texas State Gazette, Austin, July 23, 1853.

"Perhaps "politics does make strange bedfellows" because a small announce­
ment shortly after the election stated that "Col. Pease arrived in Dallas last night
[August 2] and left this morning for Col. Johnson's, where he and Judge Ochiltree
are to rest several days from the fatigues of the canvass under the Colonel's
 hospitable roof." Northern Standard, Clarksville, August 13, 1853.

"Texas State Gazette, Austin, August 27, 1853.

"Based on The Seventh Census of the United States: 1850, cited by Northern
Standard, Clarksville, December 20, 1851.

"Galveston Journal, September 9, 1853.

"Texas State Gazette, Austin, October 1, 1853.

"Galveston Journal, September 30, 1853, cited by Northern Standard, Clarksville,
October 29, 1853.

"Texas State Gazette, Austin, September 2, 1854; Galveston Journal, Febru­
ary 3, 1855. The Galveston Journal and the Galveston Daily Times merged to
form the Weekly Confederate, still to be printed at Galveston. This new periodi­
cal, was to be the main organ of the American or Know Nothing party. It was
to be published by J. F. Waddell, Holt, and Gossler. J. F. Waddell became its
editor and the publishers were T. J. Allen & Company. Holt had been the editor
of the Times, see Northern Standard, July 28, 1855.

"Ralph A. Wooster, "Ben H. Epperson," East Texas Historical Journal, V
(March 1967), 31.

"Claude Elliott, Leathercoat, The Life History of a Texas Patriot (San
Antonio, 1938), 221.

"Claude Elliott, Leathercoat.