GONE TO TEXAS . . .

THE GRIGSBYS SETTLE IN PORT NECHES

By Camellia Denys

Editor's Note: Camellia Denys, former NGFS genealogist, has recently released her new book, "Grigsby." For a review of her book see the Southwest Chapter Newsletter, Vol. 11, No. 1, March, 1996 and for further information about the book contact the author at 1251 Briar Avenue, Provo UT 84604. The following material was excerpted from her book with her permission. See also "Memorabilia II, The Grigsby Family Reunion Book, 1984," Elizabeth M. Nicholson and Margaret M. Mottley. This is the second in the series, Gone To Texas.

Joseph Grigsby was the sixth son of Nathaniel Grigsby and Elizabeth Butler. He was born 24 Sep 1771, on the family farm in Cameron Parish, Loudoun County, Virginia. When his mother died, his father hired a housekeeper, the widow Susanna Smith with her small son, Linton, as a nurse for John and Joseph. His father married the widow Smith about 1773, and she was the only mother Joseph ever knew. He cared for her until her death at eighty-three years of age. Nathaniel and Susanna had two sons: Mark, born in 1775, and Enoch, born in 1778.

The Grigsby family moved to Nelson County, Kentucky, in 1786 where the male members are named on the tax list of 1787: Nathaniel Grigsby Sr., Nathaniel Grigsby Jr., John Grigsby, Joseph Grigsby.

In 1790, Joseph served in the Whitaker Battalion as a mounted volunteer, commanded by Captain William Rogers. By 1794 he had gained the rank of sergeant. One record for that year showed that Joseph Grigsby served from 14 Jul to 26 Oct and was paid $131.25. Joseph also served as a commissioned officer in the "Corn Stalk" militia of Nelson County, Kentucky. He was an ensign of the 27th Regiment starting 2 Sep 1800.

At twenty-six years of age, he married Sarah Mitchell Graham 28 Jun 1798 at Bardstown, Kentucky. She was born 28 Jun 1782, on Christian Creek in Augusta County, Virginia, the daughter of Christopher C. Graham and Isabella Mitchell. They lived on the Nathaniel Grigsby plantation, located on Beech Fork at the Springfield Road, Nelson County.

Joseph Grigsby was head of the Grigsby plantation farm until 1805. Even though many hundreds of acres of the original Nathaniel Grigsby land grants were located in Nelson County, Nathaniel Jr., declared only 2,200 acres on the tax list. No record can be found to show that Joseph or Susannah Grigsby contested Nathaniel Jr. and William's take of the land. But two suits were filed by Elizabeth Grigsby Mason against her brother, Nathaniel Grigsby Jr., to receive her share of the estate.

Lucas Gusher at Spindletop near Port Neches, 1901

After his father's death, Joseph and his wife, Sarah, moved to the adjoining county of Washington where he bought 264 acres of farm land for 270 pounds. They lived in Washington County seven years. Joseph and Sarah Grigsby sold to Peter Siebert that same 264 acres for $2,200.00 on 28 Sep 1812. They, with their eight children, made their home on the Nathaniel Grigsby plantation until 1815.

They left three members of their family buried in the graveyard so designated in the one acre burying ground: Nathaniel Grigsby Sr., Mark Grigsby, and Nancy, an infant daughter of Joseph and Sarah Grigsby.

Susanna Grigsby and her son, Enoch, lived in a separate house, next to Joseph on the 390 acre plantation. Susanna Grigsby died 9 Oct 1822, age 83 years. Christopher, son of Joseph Grigsby, died 18 Sep 1823, age 10 years. The last three children of Joseph and Sarah were born in Daviess County, Kentucky; Ann in 1819, William in 1820, and Matilda in 1823.

After Susanna Grigsby's death, Joseph became heir to all her estate, according to Nathaniel's will. One half of the plantation in Daviess County, two servants, and six Negro slaves, and all her household furnishings. He bought another large Daviess County tract of farm land of 1,000 acres from Phillip Thompson and Daniel Moseley, located on rich soil near the Green River at the mouth of Panther Creek on 25 Nov 1822, for the sum of $750.00. This was developed into a prosperous cotton plantation. Joseph Grigsby sold all his property in Daviess County, Kentucky 19 Apr 1828.

No pioneer was more highly respected than Joseph Grigsby. Certainly, he was considered one of the better educated and more cultured individuals living in Texas. He was

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the wealthiest citizen in Jefferson County at his death in 1841.

Joseph caught "Texas fever" like so many others, and saw an opportunity for his family. It was said, "the Grigsby's came from a place of plenty to a land of promise."

Joseph and Sarah Grigsby were the parents of thirteen children. Two died young in Kentucky and two daughters married and remained in Daviess County. When fifty-seven years of age, Joseph moved his family in a caravan of wagons pulled by strong horses and oxen teams. Slaves and livestock accompanied the train. They settled in the Mexican province of Texas, Atosocito District, Zavala Colony (later Jasper County). Early colonists with families were granted a league (4,428 acres) and a labor (177 acres). Joseph Grigsby's land was located on Walnut Creek, a branch of the Neches River.

His oldest son, Nathaniel, as an unmarried man, received one fourth of a league (1,107 acres) on the west side of the Neches River.

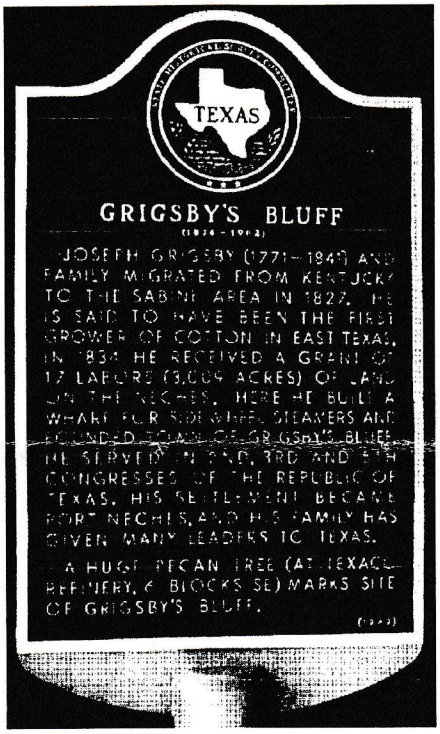
His eldest daughter, Susannah, was married to Ephraim Thompson, and they received a league of land on Sandy Creek, a branch of the Neches River.

His widowed daughter, Sally Grigsby Glenn, and her children were granted a league of land on Walnut Creek.

His daughter, Frances, and her husband, George W. Smyth, located on Indian and Walnut Creeks. Smyth was hired by the Mexican government to survey the land grants. He played important roles in the Texas Revolution as a delegate to the Convention and as a signer of the Declaration of Independence on 2 Mar 1836.

Joseph Grigsby was elected to represent Jefferson County as a delegate to the Second Congress in the young Republic of Texas as well as to the Third Congress in 1838, and to the Fifth Congress, serving until his death in 1841. His two sons, Nathaniel and Enoch, were volunteers in a Regiment at the Siege of Bexar in Dec 1835. They forced Mexican General Cos to leave San Antonio with his 800 soldiers and escorted them across the Rio Grande into Mexico. This so infuriated General Santa Ana, that he was determined to kill all of the American soldiers at the Alamo in the spring of 1836.

Nathaniel, Enoch and Crawford Grigsby received land grants for their service at the Siege of Bexar.



Plaque erected in 1969 honoring Joseph Grigsby

Joseph Grigsby applied for a second league of land on the lower Neches River in Jefferson County, located only six miles from Sabine Pass, entrance to the Gulf of Mexico. This grant is dated 6 Nov 1834, but it is probable that his son, Nathaniel, began cultivating the land before this date. Adjoining his land was that of Thomas F. McKinney with a Mexican grant of 4,428 acres, but he never lived there. The location was first known as McKinney Bluff. Six huge Indian mounds elevated the river bank. In 1837, Joseph Grigsby bought two-thirds of the McKinney grant. He paid $6,172.00 for the 2,944 acres. This boosted his land holdings to 7,372 acres which were afterwards known as Grigsby's Bluff.

This location was ideal for building a plantation. The river provided fresh water and transportation for boats, and the high bluff assured safety from annual flooding. Grigsby sent his slaves to work with horses, leveling one of the mounds as the site for a home and barns.

Twelve miles below Beaumont, and six miles from Sabine Pass on the Neches River are six relics of antiquity. They are about 20 feet high, 50 feet wide at the base and 200 feet long. Mr. Grigsby, upon whose plantation they are situated, leveled one for his house and barns. After digging through several layers of earth mixed with oyster, clam, and marine shells, he found an entire layer of human bones. There were large pan-shaped shells for holding water and cooking shells with signs of fire on the bottom. Several perfect skeletons were buried in the bank. The men must have been seven feet tall, as we placed a bone from a lower leg by Captain Rabb who is six feet tall. The bone was six inches longer than his leg. We supposed that they were the flat-headed Indians as the skull turned straight back an inch above the eye socket and the head was as flat as a pancake.

It is known that the Attakapas tribe occupied the Gulf coast from the Neches River to Vermillion Bay in Louisiana. The shell mounds were not stratified geologically. They had accumulated for centuries, as the warriors brought dug-out loads of shell fish from Sabine Lake to eat at their home village. An earthen vase has been dated by Louisiana State University as over 1,000 years old, but no scientific archeological investigation was ever conducted.

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Joseph Grigsby beautified the spot by planting live oak, mulberry, and pecan trees. Captain Caswell describes it. "This historic point called Grigsby's Bluff is one of the prettiest spots in the country. The bluff rises gradually, with beautiful shade trees covering the natural lawn. Fig trees line the river banks..."

The Neches River was a busy transportation artery for barges and boats. A wharf and warehouses were built to service a station for side-wheelers as well. The first cotton in southeast Texas was grown on Joseph Grigsby's plantation and shipped from the landing at Grigsby's Bluff. He also operated a horse driven sawmill at the bluff. All this activity attracted some early settlers to this area.

The ship, Laura, was a familiar sight on the Neches River. She transported freight and passengers to Sabine Pass and on to Galveston. Andrew F. Smyth was the Captain. He married Emily Allen, granddaughter of Joseph Grigsby.

Joseph Grigsby built the first horse-driven cotton gin in the town of Beaumont, a site he helped establish with four prominent Jefferson County citizens in 1837. Each gave an equal amount of land to lay out a plat which covered 200 acres. The company divided the property with boundary lines, designating and recording it in deeds as "the personal property of each partner." Other tracts of land not included in the private ownership were "set aside for public roads and commons." They laid out sites for the present court house, city hall, library, Keith Park, Millard school, and the high school campus. Beaumont became the seat of Jefferson County.

In 1840, Joseph Grigsby had title to 9,565 acres at Grigsby's Bluff as well as 155 town lots in Beaumont, plus slaves, horses, cattle, sheep, and hogs. Later he acquired 1,475 acres of the valuable D. Gahagan land grant at Mesquite Point at Sabine Pass. His son, Nathaniel Grigsby, is listed with 723 acres of land and 26 work horses at Grigsby's Bluff. An unmarried son of 35 years, Nathaniel was killed from the kick of a horse in Sep 1840. This was a disastrous blow to the Grigsby's Bluff operations as Nathaniel most probably acted as overseer of the plantation.

At nearly three score and ten years of age, Joseph had interests from Jasper County on the north to Sabine Pass on the Gulf. It was three hundred miles on horseback to attend Legislative duties in Austin, the capitol of the Texas Republic. Undoubtedly his health began to fail. One year later, he made his last Will and Testament, a lengthy document. He willed "to my beloved wife, Sarah Grigsby," and to his nine living children "...all my lands, slaves, horses, cattle, sheep, and hogs." Three grandsons were singled out for gifts of land in Jasper County on Walnut Run and at Grigsby's Bluff. "I also give, bequeath, and donate to my much esteemed and respected friend, William Eddy, my Negro boy named Witten."

Joseph Grigsby died 13 Aug 1841, and was buried on his plantation at Grigsby's Bluff. His son-in-law, George W. Smyth, was named Executor of the estate. However, he could not obtain the excessive bond required by Texas statutes to administer an estate of such size. A special "enabling act" was passed by the Congress for his relief, exempting Smyth from the bond requirement.

The widow, Sarah Grigsby, moved back to Jasper County to live with her children. They were married and settled on lands too far away to oversee the plantation at Grigsby's Bluff. Under hired management, the fields and buildings deteriorated rapidly. Most of the lands and slaves were sold. The Grigsby descendants never lived at the Bluff again. The dream of an empire was gone with the death of Joseph Grigsby!