

(RITSON MORRIS AND ELMWOOD PLANTATION)

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14x
13 bar BT
(no Rule) By Jean L. Epperson

R Ritson Morris, a native of Virginia, obtained one league of land from the Mexican government on November 14, 1832, in present Harris County. The land now encompasses the town of Seabrook and a part of the north shore of Clear Lake.¹ On the bluff shore of Galveston Bay near the mouth of Clear Creek, Morris built his first home,² and began his plantation, called Elmwood.

Little is known about the early life of Morris, but family bible records indicate ~~that~~ he was born in Nottaway County, Virginia, on September 22, 1798. He may have been the son of Dabney Morris, who lived in Nottaway County, because Ritson named his first son Dabney.³ A visitor to his home in 1836 later wrote that Morris was from Lunenburg County, which is contiguous⁴ to Nottaway.⁴ It is possible that Morris was born in one county but came to Texas from the other. Family tradition relates that Ritson was a lawyer,⁵ although there is no record that he ever practiced law in Texas.

Morris appeared in Nacogdoches on April 25, 1829, before the Ayuntamiento, and stated that he was married, a merchant, a native of Virginia and had been in Nacogdoches *two*⁶ years. He had married Minerva, the daughter of Amos and Penelope Edwards, on March 2, 1829.⁷ Amos, the brother of Empresario Hayden Edwards, had suffered financial reverses in Kentucky and in 1828 came to Nacagdoches seeking land. He decided to settle in Stephen F.

Austin's colony and in November of 1829 began the move to the site he had chosen, Davis Point (San Leon) in present Galveston County.⁸

In February of 1830, after the birth of his daughter Virginia on December 24, 1829, Ritson followed his father-in-law south to Galveston Bay. He began developing the site Edwards had chosen for him north of Clear Creek.⁹ Anson Taylor, a frontiersman and a reputed cohort of Jean Lafitte, had built a home at the mouth of Taylor's Bayou on Clear Lake sometime before 1830. After burying his wife, Elizabeth there, Taylor agreed to sell his improvements to Amos Edwards.¹⁰ Taylor had no title to the land. Ritson hired Anthony Junker to live on the Anson Taylor place and assist him. Twenty-five acres were prepared for cultivation and log buildings were erected on the bay shore.¹¹ ~~See maps~~
~~Appendix I.~~

Morris returned to Nacogdoches for his wife and child. Family tradition ^{relates} ~~says that~~ Ritson and Minerva took turns carrying the baby as they rode horseback across the country, in July, to their new home.¹²

ELMWOOD PLANTATION
~~12pt BF~~

Beautifully situated in a long-sweeping crescent of the bay between Edward's Point and Red Bluff, Elmwood plantation was also known as Morris' Cove. The land was mostly prairie, but part of it was wooded and wild game was plentiful. Deer, turkey, quail, ducks and geese supplied the larder. The bay offered fine oysters, trout, redfish and other salt water delicacies.

Morris raised cattle, horses, hogs and chickens on the plantation. The 1840 tax list of Harris County enumerated 150

cattle, 15 horses, ⁵⁰⁰ slaves, and title to 3,600 acres of land for the Morris family.

Crops consisted of cotton, corn, potatoes and vegetables. The corn was stored in log corn cribs, and a hand-operated grist mill to grind ^{it} ~~corn~~ was erected between two trees. Sweet potatoes and some other vegetables were piled in different mounds and covered with hay and corn stalks, then covered over with a thick layer of earth to keep them through the winter. These mounds from a distance resembled an Indian village, according to a granddaughter.
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A visitor in 1836 said, "Morris' league is a very fine one, on the west side of the bay. He raised 350 bushels of yams or sweet potatoes from one acre and from the experiment he made in cotton he thinks he raised 3000^(300?)~~2 (300)~~ pounds from an acre.
14 It is well diversified with woods and prairie."

The family lived for a few years in the modest log house built in 1830, then built a larger one on the same site. A large two-story house replaced the log house and it remained until
15 about 1885. The house of Ashmore Edwards, Ritson's brother-in-law, was located about 100 yards south of the Morris home in 1836.
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A GREAT TALKER AND A STAUNCH TEXAN

A personable man and a "great talker", Ritson earned the sobriquet "Jawbone" from his contemporaries.
17 One story says he was known as "Jawbone" Morris from his picking the banjo and singing the old song beginning:

Oh, it's work jawbone

To the bottom of the pot.

A neighbor wrote in his diary that the bay area had some rare characters, and named Captain James Spillman, David Harris and John (Ritson) Morris. These three had entered into a compact to gather around the bier of the one who died first and sing, "Old Rosin the Bow". They vowed to sing, drink wine, and make glad the exit of the departed. Captain Spillman died first at his home on Highland Bayou in July of 1840. It has not been recorded if the celebration took place.

During June of 1832, Morris participated in the skirmishes with the Mexican garrison at Anahuac. On the second day of the conflict, about daylight, William J. Russell and Morris, with his double-barrelled shotgun loaded with buckshot, crawled up within gunshot of the fort and fired at the guards. One or two soldiers may have been killed and several wounded. Further clashes between the Anglos and Mexicans resulted in the withdrawal of the soldiers from Anahuac.

The Mexican fort at Anahuac was regarrisoned in January of 1835 under Captain Antonio Tenorio. On May 4, Morris set fire to the lumber that had been brought to rebuild Fort Davis (Fort Anahuac). William B. Travis and twenty-five Anglos attacked the fort and demanded its surrender. Morris and Ashmore Edwards joined the fray and the Mexicans were forced to leave Anahuac a second time.

1836 - WAR AND PANIC

When Mexican troops advanced to the Brazos River in 1836, Morris sent his family to New Orleans on the schooner, Koscius-

ko. The immediate family consisted of Ritson's wife, Minerva and three children, Virginia, Mary Jane, and Dabney. Dabney, the infant son, died in Natchitoches, ^{on} August 6, 1836. ²⁴

Family tradition ^{tells us} says that Morris and a few slaves remained at the plantation to take care of the stock. Sometime after the family had gone, Mexican soldiers arrived and captured two slave girls, who had run to let the cows out of the pen. Morris and the others rushed to the shore with a few valuables and rowed into the bay. The Mexicans called from the shore to the men to come back, but Morris, fearful that they would all be killed, kept rowing well out into the bay. The Mexicans found a trunk left on the shore and broke it open. One of them dressed in Morris' wedding suit. Morris was furious but helpless. A number of hours later, Morris and his party returned to shore. The Mexicans were gone, taking the negro girls but leaving the buildings intact. Everyone was surprised that the plantation had not been put to the torch. ²⁵

On April 10, 1836, just before the battle of San Jacinto, William Fairfax Gray and several traveling companions stopped for shelter from a storm at Morris' Cove. Mr. Gray was a land speculator from the United States, and he recorded many interesting, descriptive notations in his diary as he journeyed through Texas. He described Elmwood plantation and mentioned 50 Guinea African negroes which ~~Munroe Edwards~~ had imported in March ^{by Munroe Edwards} and left with his brother-in-law, Ritson Morris. ²⁶ Morris reported later that he lost over 120 blacks, who escaped during the Mexican invasion. ²⁷

During the visit of Gray, Morris' patriotic fever and lack of service in the army, culminated in his signing a document donating half of his league of land to the infantile Republic of Texas. In part the document reads,

yes *TP* Whereas the emergency of the times requires that every good citizen should come forward and lend all the aid in his power to his country in her present struggle against Mexico, without which all our lands and property may be lost. ^{ev} Relying therefore on the future justice of the Congress of Texas, I do hereby convey one-half of my league of land, lying on Galveston Bay and fronting on the Red Bluffs, to the president of Texas and hereby authorize and empower him to sell the same on such terms as he may be able to obtain to raise money for the use of the government. 28

TP It is not known if the Republic ever utilized this gift, as Andrew Clopper wrote to his father, June 27, 1837, that Ritson Morris had sold one-half of his league on Clear Creek for \$12, 29 000. Harris County probate records lists the Ritson Morris estate as consisting of one-half league of land, one certificate 30 for a labor, and no debts.

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] A FAMOUS VISITOR [*12 pt BF*

General Santa Anna's visit to Morris' Cove was probably the way the family remembered it, but it was not during the time period they recounted. The story goes that a few days after the battle of San Jacinto, April 21, 1836, several white men rode up to the Morris home just before dark with a Mexican prisoner that

they were guarding very closely. The prisoner was dressed very roughly and the men did not say who he was. They stabled their horses and were given supper and beds for the night. The next morning, Old Savannah, the black cook, fixed them a good breakfast and they all sat down at the table to eat.

Revised *R* Now the Morris family had a parrot who was also a good talker and he had a way of screaming 'Savannah,' which sounded very much like 'Santa Anna,' as the Mexicans pronounced it. The parrot had not been noticed by the strangers until he suddenly screamed out for Savannah. The Mexican almost jumped out of his chair and his face turned as white as a sheet. Mr. Morris knew the prisoner was Santa ~~Anna~~ *Anna* and told the guards he was sure of it. They admitted to him that he was and told him they were taking him to Freeport under General Houston's orders. They swore him to secrecy until they could get him to safety.

The facts are:

1) After the battle of San Jacinto, Santa Anna and all the Mexican officers were taken to Galveston Island on the Steamboat Yellowstone, which did not stop along the way.

2) Freeport, Texas, was not in existence in 1836. It was founded in 1912 by a group of New York investors interested in developing sulphur deposits.

3) Santa Anna was held a prisoner at Orozimbo, the plantation home of Dr. James Phelps, until November 1836, when he was

released to go to Washington, D. C., in the company of General Juan Almonte, George W. Hockley, Benard Bee and William Patton.

TR The diary of Almonte says that on November 26, they left Orozimbo. On November 28 they reached the headwaters of Clear Creek and on the 29th they came to the mouth of ~~Clear~~ ^{the} Creek and two miles distance thereof they arrived at the house of (Ashmore) Edwards.³⁴ Therefore, the scenario with the parrot took place on the 30th of November, 1836. Santa Anna was not a prisoner, but his identity was kept secret as his life was still endangered by those who wished to see him dead.

Ritson (Jawbone) Morris died of tuberculosis on September 21, 1849, at his home, Elmwood Plantation, and was buried in the family cemetery.³⁵ He was survived by his wife, Minerva, four daughters, Virginia, Mary Jane, Penelope and Ada, and two sons, Osceola and Edley. The family continued to live on the plantation for many years.

Andrew Clopper, a neighbor, died while visiting the Morris home, and Mrs. Morris buried him in the family burial ground. Joseph Clopper, Andrew's brother, described the cemetery as a beautiful place on high ground immediately back of the garden, shaded by oaks, peach, evergreen and other trees. Joseph carved his initials and the date (J. C. 1853) on a large oak tree which shaded Andrew's grave. The Cloppers placed a headstone on the grave with the following inscription: "In memory of A. M. Clopper, a Texas Pioneer of 1822, died September 16, 1853, aged 62 years."³⁶ This stone was visible on the Rosa Tod Hamner property³⁷ on Todville Road until a few years ago.

Many descendants of Ritson Morris are respected and promi-

nent citizens of the Seabrook-Clear Lake area today. Several members of the family still own and live on the original homesite property on the bluff overlooking Galveston Bay.

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13 pt BF } FOOTNOTES [

Footnotes in 11 pt

- 1) Virginia H. Taylor, ed. The Spanish Archives of the General Land Office (Austin: The Lone Star Press, 1955), 216. *Reg. 1441*
- 2) Russell, Marie. Marriage Records Harris County Harris County 1837-1865.I (Houston: Privately printed, 1980), 35; Personal communication Mary Milby Brown on September 17, 1989. A sign reading "Elmwood" was on the family property on Todville Road, Seabrook, for many years. *Reg. 1441*
- 3) Madeline W. Crickard, Index to the 1810 Census of Virginia (West Virginia: McClain Printing Co., 1971); Morris and Menard Family Bible Records copy in the files of the author. *Reg. 1441*
- 4) William Fairfax Gray, From Virginia to Texas 1835, Diary of William F. Gray (The Fletcher Young Publishing Co., reprint 1965), 158-9. *Reg. 1441*
- 5) Jennie Larrabee, "Recollections of the Settling of Morris Cove and the Ritson Morris Family", manuscript written in 1933 by a granddaughter of Ritson Morris. Vertical files of the Evelyn Meador Library, Seabrook, Texas
- 6) Robert B. Blake, trans., "Minutes of the Ayuntamiento of Nacogdoches, 7 July 1828 to 8 August 1835", Nacogdoches Archives pages 377-406, Texas State Library, Austin.

St. 11

- 7) Morris and Menard Family Bible Records.
- 8) Eugene C. Barker, ed., The Austin Papers (Washington, D.C.:
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U. S. Government Printing Office, 1928) II, 68, 69, 74, 481
- 9) Morris and Menard Family Bible; Barker, II, 481.
- 10) Barker, II, 480 & 481; Young, S. O. True Stories of Old
Reg. 441
Houston and Houstonians, (Houston: Oscar Springer, 1913), 198;
Map of W.P. Harris and Others. ca. 1837, Rosenberg Library,
Galveston. TX.
- 11) Barker II, 480, 481.
- 12) Gray, 159. Gray states that 3,000 pounds of cotton to an
acre was raised at Elmwood. This must be an error and 300 pounds
meant.
- 13) Larrabee
- 14) Gray, 159.
- 15) Larrabee
- 16) Gray, 159.
- 17) Frank W. Johnson, Texas and Texans (Chicago and New York:
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The American Historical Society, 1914), I, 71.
- 18) Ben C. Stuart, "Adventures of a Famed Texas Picaron", undat-
ed newspaper clipping about Monroe Edwards, vertical files,
Rosenberg Library, Galveston.
- 19) Cornelius C. Cox, "The Reminiscences of C. C. Cox,"
Texas Historical Association Quarterly (Oct. 1902): VI, 129.
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- 20) Johnson, I, 71.
- 21) Tenorio to Ugartechea, May 18, 1835. John H. Jenkins ed.,
The Papers of the Texas Revolution (Austin: Presidial Press,
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1973) I: 117-118.
- 22) Eugene C. Barker. "Difficulties of a Mexican Revenue Officer

in Texas." Texas Historical Association Quarterly (July-April 1900-1901): 199. *Reg. Hist*

23) Gray, 159.

24) Larrabee

25) Larrabee

26) Gray, 158.

27) Eugene C. Barker, "The African Slave Trade in Texas." The Southwestern Historical Quarterly (Oct. 1902): VI, 152-153. *The Reg. Hist*

28) Triplett to Burnett, April 15, 1836, Jenkins, 1973) V, 2777.

29) Edward N. Clopper, An American Family (Huntington, W. Virginia: Standard Printing and Publishing C., 1950), 274. *Reg. Hist*

30) Harris County Probate Records, I, 212.

31) Larrabee

32) James M. Day, compiler, Col. Pedro Delgado—Mexican Account of the Battle of San Jacinto 1857-1873 (Waco: Texian Press, 1967), 624, 625. *Reg. Hist*

33) Walter Prescott Webb, ed., The Handbook of Texas, 3 vols. (Austin: The Texas State Historical Assoc., 1952), I, 646. *Reg. Hist*

34) J. V. Haggard, trans., "Almonte Diary 1836-7", typescript 1939. Earl Vandale Collection, Barker History Library, Austin.

35) Caroline Morgan Harris Beazley to Mary Jane Harris Briscoe, Oct. 16, 1849. Adele B. Looscan papers, San Jacinto Monument Museum.

36) Clopper, 415, 454, 460.

37) Personal communication with C. D. Milby, Seabrook, Texas, September 17, 1989.

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Bio attached