



A Gateway to Texas

by Scott Sosebee

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(Jan 23, 2023) Today's highways, byways, bridges, and interstates mean that most of us never think about the difficulty of travel in the days before such modern conveniences. During the days of our great-great grandparents a journey of just twenty miles, depending on conditions, could take days and involve much toil and anxious moments. Rivers, particularly, posed a serious impediment to travel; they tended to flood, could contain treacherous, shifting currents, and often had inaccessible banks. Bridges were expensive and difficult to build, and their maintenance demanded constant attention. Thus, ferry operations became a vital and important part of the nation's transportation system of the nineteenth century.

Most travelers to Texas in the early to mid-1800s came from the United States; some made their way by ship and thus disembarked along the coast, but those who came overland usually found a route to the terminus of the El Camino Real in Natchitoches, Louisiana and then traveled that road into Texas. Such a route required one to cross the Sabine River, a waterway that in the 1820s and 1830s was wide, often swift, and had very few natural places to cross. The El Camino Real crossed the Sabine at what was originally known as Chabanan Ferry, but by the 1820s migrants to Texas knew it as Gaines Ferry, so named after its owner and operator James Gaines.

James Gaines came from a very prominent and distinguished family in Virginia. He joined his cousin, American Army officer Edmund Pendleton Gaines, in an expedition west to survey the lands along the Natchez Trace in 1803. Both men would eventually make their lives and careers in the West, Edmund as a prominent military commander in Louisiana, and James as an entrepreneur and businessman in western Louisiana. The two cousins also became involved in intrigue along the border. Edmund had a role in numerous "filibustering" expeditions into Texas in the early 1800s (including the famous Phillip Nolan excursion), and James helped to raise men and served as an officer in the Republican Army of the North

(RAN) in 1810-1811. The RAN would march across the border and first occupy Nacogdoches before turning south to San Antonio and a date with infamy. A Spanish royal army under General Joaquín Arrendondo first defeated the RAN at the Battle of the Medina River, and then ordered the execution of any associated with the insurrection. James Gaines luckily escaped the fate of death that befell so many members of the RAN and went back to Virginia for a while where he fought against the British in the War of 1812.

James Gaines' passion remained in the West—it was where he believed his fortune lay—so he returned to the border area where his cousin was now the commander of U.S. Fort Jessup. James was not the only American who had decided that the west was a land of economic opportunity in the years after the War of 1812 and into the 1820s. Hundreds of thousands of his fellow countrymen traveled the roads into the Louisiana Purchase lands. Many of them—some of them quite illegally—began to cross the border into what was now Mexican Texas in the mid-1820s. Chaos in Mexico had prevented that new nation was establishing any control over its northern border, so countless Americans took advantage of the condition and came to Texas to squat and hope for a title at a later date. James Gaines saw an opportunity and seized it.

The new Texas migrants needed a way across the river, so James Gaines bought the ferry that crossed the Sabine along the El Camino Real. Along with his sons he operated the business, and also built and opened a general store, a tavern and inn for the many travelers that passed through and speculated in land. He became a prominent citizen of the region and would serve as alcalde for the Sabine District of the Municipality of Nacogdoches, the Nacogdoches sheriff, and the postmaster for the area. He also became very involved in leading the opposition to Haden Edwards during the Fredonian Rebellion in 1827. Later, he would become embroiled in the political debates in the region that eventually lead to the Texas Revolution.

Gaines Ferry became the most used and recognizable port of entry for Texas in the 1830s. After independence, the ferry location on the Texas side of the Sabine became the town of Pendleton (probably named after James Gaines' military leader cousin), and the new Republic of Texas made it a customs collection port in 1837. Gaines sold the ferry to a group of businessmen in 1843 and moved to Nacogdoches, although the crossing would retain his name. The ferry remained a profitable and important part of the transportation infrastructure of East Texas throughout the nineteenth century, although its fortunes declined with the arrival of the railroad and modern bridges. Eventually, the Pendleton-Gaines Bridge replaced the ferry in 1937.

The next time you make your way east on Hwy. 21 and reach the border, take a minute to look around and imagine that you found not a nice, modern bridge but instead a wooden ferry with a rope and pulley system. And then know that you would have been very glad to find Gaines Ferry in operation.