

Standing on Principle: German Unionists and the Battle of the Nueces

by Scott Sosebee

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(Mar 20, 2023) Texas made its decision to secede from the Union in February 1861 through a state-wide election. The outcome of the polling reflected the mood of the Texas electorate as well over 45,000 Texans voted for secession and less than 15,000 cast against; 122 counties voted for secession and only 18 voted against. That left 18 counties that voted to stay loyal to the United States, and the majority of those were in a cluster around Austin often referred to as the “German Belt” because the majority of the residents in those counties were of German descent, although it also included a sizable number of people of Czech heritage. Few Germans, like most Texans, owned slaves, but unlike the majority of the white residents of Texas who fully supported slavery both as the primary way to maintain the South’s plantation economy as well as the institution’s role as being the vital cog that propped up the region’s concept of white superiority, the Germans not only questioned the institution but they were vehemently opposed to its concept. Thus, they saw no reason to support a movement to leave the United States in order to continue the “peculiar institution.”

German migration to Texas began when it was still a part of Mexico, but it greatly accelerated after the establishment of the Republic. German migrants to Texas tended to settle in the central frontier region, in the area surrounding and between Austin and San Antonio. They operated small farms, stock operations, and engaged in merchant activities. They were also joined by immigrants from other central European regions, including a significant number of ethnically Czechs. While most of these new residents came to acquire the acres of free land that Texas offered, some left Germany to escape religious and political persecution. Often referred to as “Freethinkers,” this group of mostly German intellectuals moved to Texas in an attempt to

establish a society that was free from governmental and institutional oppression, and a chance to live as free, independent, people. A tenet among the Freethinkers was their opposition to any forms of bondage.

One of those Freethinkers who came to Texas from Prussia was Frederick “Fritz” Tegener. He established a small farm in Kerr County, and his family was one of the original inhabitants of that county’s town of Comfort. Tegener became one of the leading citizens of Comfort, served as the county treasurer, as well as the owner of a gristmill, which was an important business within the fairly isolated, rural region.

When Texas began to consider secession Tegener, along with most other residents of the region, actively campaigned against the measure. When Texas did secede, and the subsequent Civil War began in April 1861, he and many other locals joined the Union Loyal League, which they called a militia organized to protect Gillespie, Kendall, Kerr, Edwards, and Kimble Counties from both Indian raids (which were actually rare) and any potential Confederate actions. The latter became more urgent when the Texas legislature, citing the secession vote, the presence of the Union Loyal League, and the refusal of many county officials in the area to take a loyalty oath to the Confederacy, declared those counties to be in “open rebellion” against the Confederacy and the state. While some might think it ironic that a new nation born because an area decided to oppose the larger governmental institution would consider groups with an opposing view subversive, the Confederate government of Texas decided to crush any opposition the Union Loyal League might offer. To that end, officials ordered the Fourteenth Texas Cavalry Battalion to break up and disperse the Union Loyal League’s militia.

When the Union Loyal League heard of the approach of the Confederates, a small group of them agreed on Tegener as the head of their force and decided to try to make their way to Mexico, with the intention of from there going north and joining the Union Army. On the morning of August 10, 1862, they were camped on the Nueces River in Kinney County when they were attacked by Confederate troops. The initial fighting killed 19 of the 61 German Texans. The Germans fled across the river, leaving nine of their fellow Leaguers wounded in the camp with the hope they would receive medical aid. That did not happen. When Confederate commander C.D. McRae (who was wounded in the battle) reached the encampment he immediately ordered the wounded Germans shot as traitors to the Confederacy.

The Confederate troops continued to fire and harass the Union Loyal Leaguers as they made their way toward the border. In two different skirmishes, eight more of the German Texans fell. Tegener was seriously wounded in one of these later encounters, but he and what was left of his militia did make it to Mexico. Some of the Leaguers did make it north and joined the Union Army, but most reports have Tegener remaining in Mexico and working as either a miner or a farm laborer until the Civil War ended. After the war, he returned to Kerr County, served in the Texas legislature, and eventually became a judge in Austin.

The Battle of the Nueces remains a source of controversy. Confederates of the time and supporters of the cause afterward have always maintained that the rebel troops who engaged the fleeing Germans at the Nueces were wholly justified in their actions and that the fight was a strategic military incident. The Union Loyal League and their defenders conversely argue that the attack was unprovoked, unnecessary, and to prove their point they usually label it as a massacre. After the war, the remains of those killed at that battle were returned to Comfort and buried. Today a monument in that town honors their sacrifice.

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