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LORENZO AUGUSTUS BESANÇON: MAN OF MANIFEST DESTINY

A Thesis

Presented to the

Graduate Faculty of the History Department

and the

Faculty of the Graduate College

University of Nebraska

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

University of Nebraska at Kearney

By

William J. Woodard

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THESIS ACCEPTANCE

Acceptance for the faculty of the Graduate College, University of Nebraska, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in History, University of Nebraska at Kearney.

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Finally, I thank Dr. Lorena Careaga Viliesid, who provided me with a manuscript of her excellent work on the history of Yucatán, *Episodios de una Entidad Futura*, which proved invaluable in my research into the Caste War of Yucatán and the American volunteers who participated in it.

Abstract

There is little published scholarship on Lorenzo Augustus Besançon, a nineteenth-century newspaper publisher, politician, soldier, filibuster, adventurer, and (briefly) tax collector. He had a hand in founding newspapers in Mississippi and Louisiana and was elected to public office in both of those states. On several occasions, his public battles on behalf of his Democratic Party principles led to duels, one of which purportedly ended in the death of his opponent. He volunteered to lead a cavalry regiment in the Mexican-American War and figured publicly in Mexican filibustering enterprises. The limited historical record paints a picture of him as an energetic man of his times who lived a colorful life of chance and adventure, but he is much more than that.

This thesis will cover the important periods of Besançon's life and tell his story in national and international contexts in which it was lived. Jacksonian Democratic politics, editorial and personal combat, the financial crisis of the 1830s, Latin American filibustering, Southern regionalism, and the lure of the American West provided the backdrop against which Besançon's life played out. From his native Cooperstown, New York, to Mississippi, Louisiana, Mexico, and California, Besançon actively participated in some of the major events and movements of the nineteenth century. He is emblematic of a nineteenth-century American character shaped by Manifest Destiny—the filibuster/adventurer—much like his famous contemporaries, John A. Quitman and William Walker. However, while much has been written about both Quitman's and Walker's lives, Besançon's story has languished in obscurity. The purpose of this thesis

is to rescue Besançon from that darkness and examine his participation in major events of his time and how his life was shaped by them.

Table of Contents

Introduction and Historiography.....1

Chapter 1. Butternuts and Glimmerglass: Origins (1812-1834)..... 19

Chapter 2. Natchez, Tunica, and New Orleans: Newspapers and Politics (1834-1847) .. 41

Chapter 3. Mexico: Captain of Cavalry (1847-1848)..... 84

Chapter 4. Yucatán: Filibuster (1848-1849).....114

Chapter 5. Tuolumne to New Orleans: The Gold Rush and a Premature End
(1849-1853).....145

Epilogue161

Bibliography166

Introduction and Historiography

By the time of his death in 1853, Lorenzo Augustus Besançon had managed to pack the adventures of several lifetimes into his forty years. A newspaper publisher, politician, cavalry officer, filibuster, and tax collector, Besançon participated in some of the major events and movements of the first half of nineteenth-century America.

Although relatively little print space has been devoted to Besançon, an examination of the extant source material reveals that Besançon led a remarkably bold and colorful life from his earliest years, one that deserves a place in American history.

In his early twenties, L.A. Besançon left his native Otsego County, New York, for Mississippi. By 1837, he had established himself as co-publisher and editor of the *Mississippi Free Trader*, which took a pugnaciously Democratic editorial slant. He used his editorial platform to further his adjunct political career while engaging in land speculation.

During his time in Mississippi, Besançon became involved in a number of public political and business scandals, as well as several personal imbroglios, some of which led to violence. By the time he finally abandoned Mississippi for Louisiana in the early 1840s, he had cemented his reputation as a vocal and belligerent self-promoter, publicizing his intrigues, confrontations, and duels (one of which may have been deadly) in his paper.¹

¹ The number of duels that Besançon was involved in is not clear. Tony Seybert claims that “In 1837, Besançon was involved in four affairs of honor, one of which ended in death for his opponent,” but he does not offer any evidence for the total number or the claim of a fatality. Likewise, Matthew Byron attributes an 1835 dueling death to Besançon, with his supposedly deceased opponent listed as “unknown.” See Tony Seybert, “The Natchez Slavery Press and the Road to Disunion, 1800-1865” (MA Thesis, Northridge, CA, California State University-Northridge, 2005), chap. 1, <http://natchezpress.blogspot.com>;

Besançon settled into life in Louisiana with his wife Octavia, continued his newspaper work, and was elected to the Louisiana legislature.² When the United States' war with Mexico presented him with the opportunity to lead men in battle, he left his family to lead a company of volunteer Louisiana cavalry. This experience whetted his appetite for further adventures across the border, for shortly after the war he participated as the second-in-command of a regiment of American mercenaries, most of them veterans of the recent conflict, hired by the government of Yucatán to help put down a peasant rebellion.

Ever restless and always on the lookout for new opportunities, after his Yucatán experience Besançon departed Louisiana for California to participate in the gold rush. While there, he used his political connections to secure a position as a tax collector. However, circumstances forced him to abandon California and return home to Louisiana. Shortly after his return, he fell victim to cholera while aboard a Mississippi River steamboat, and he passed away at the age of forty, just a short distance from his home and family.

Besançon lived his adventure-filled but brief life in exciting times, which seemed to hold limitless opportunities both at home and abroad for those individuals bold enough to grab them. The age of Manifest Destiny saw no shortage of adventurers, rogues, and

Matthew A. Byron, "Crime and Punishment: The Impotency of Dueling Laws in the United States" (Doctoral Dissertation, University of Arkansas, 2008), 220.

² According to the obituary that appeared in the *Brooklyn Evening Star*, Besançon had a hand in establishing the *Morning Herald and Star*, a short-lived newspaper published in both New Orleans and Lafayette City, Louisiana. "Obituary of L.A. Besançon," *Brooklyn Evening Star*, February 5, 1853.

filibusters who left behind legacies both famous and infamous. William Walker, for one, achieved much notoriety for his private military escapades in Central America. However, for every Walker, there are a dozen others who have been lost to history. This thesis will examine the life of Lorenzo Augustus Besançon, and detail how his careers as newspaper publisher, politician, cavalry officer, and filibuster reflect the important events and major historical trends of the era in which he lived, the age of Manifest Destiny.

No biography has been written about L.A. Besançon, but he does appear in both primary and secondary sources. Bringing Besançon out of the shadows and placing him in focus requires building the framework for his life and piecing together a coherent narrative from his rather fleeting historical appearances. This context is provided by a historiography that encompasses wide thematic and geographic landscapes. As a comprehensive historiography encompassing one-half of the of the nineteenth century would far exceed the limitations of a thesis format, the scope of this essay on primary and secondary sources is limited to those sources that best illuminate the context for Besançon's life.

The primary sources for this thesis mainly consist of public records and newspapers. Documents include census data, Mexican-American War muster rolls and service records, US-Mexico diplomatic correspondence, and archived collections of documents dealing with Mississippi and Louisiana political and editorial figures in the 1830s through 1850s.

Besançon was a prolific chronicler of his public life, and he was forceful in using his newspapers to disseminate his opinions, debate his rivals, and further his political and

personal agendas. He did not conceal his combative nature in print, but rather seemed to revel in public jousting and belligerent diatribes in the pages of the *Mississippi Free Trader* and other newspapers. However, outside of the relative abundance of his newspaper output during his years in Mississippi, there are gaps in his history. For the most part, these gaps must be filled in by sources centered on other characters and events. Many secondary sources reveal momentary glimpses of Besançon, but, with a few exceptions, the spotlight does not shine on him directly.

Born on July 1, 1812, Lorenzo Augustus Besançon was a native of Otsego County, New York, which is located about forty miles south of the geographical center of the Empire State. The early history of Otsego County is documented by Hamilton Hurd. His 1878 publication goes into minute detail concerning Otsego County's history, and the picture that it paints of turn-of-the-nineteenth-century life in the county is one of a violent semi-frontier in which settlers lived in fear of attack by the natives. Although L.A. Besançon's father, Pierre (who went by the Anglicized form of his name, Peter), does not appear in Hurd's work, he must have been accustomed to the violence of his adopted home in the Otsego County township of Butternuts. Hurd's history of the county is replete with incidents of scalping and Indian attacks, and it illustrates what he perceived as the violent character of the earlier days of the county.³

³ D. Hamilton Hurd, *History of Otsego County, New York: With Illustrations and Biographical Sketches of Some of Its Prominent Men and Pioneers*. (Salem, Mass.: Higginson Book Co., 1878), <https://archive.org/details/cu31924074488366/page/n10/mode/2up>.

Edwin Bacon's description of the township supports that of Hurd and describes the Butternuts Valley area of Otsego County as having first been explored by American settlers in 1786, not long after which time Pierre Besançon would have settled to raise his family. The value of Bacon's rather brief work lies in its rich description of the frontier roots of the county.⁴ The emphasis on Otsego County as near wilderness is further exemplified by James Fenimore Cooper's *The Chronicles of Cooperstown*. In his history of the Otsego County seat, he describes native Americans as "lurking" on the fringes of the small town with supposed ill intent. Cooper also makes what is perhaps the only mention of the Besançon family name in written histories of Otsego County, including the Besançons amongst the families who "may now be considered as old inhabitants" and who "are now among the most respectable and useful inhabitants of the place."⁵ Two generations later, in the introduction to *The Legends and Traditions of a Northern County*, Cooper's grandson and namesake again emphasizes the untamed nature of Revolutionary War-era Otsego, describing it as a "lonely spot unsafe for settlers . . . abandoned to the wilderness."⁶

⁴ Edwin F. Bacon, *Otsego County, New York, Geographical and Historical: From the Earliest Settlement to the Present Time : With County and Township Maps from Original Drawings* (Oneonta, New York: The Oneonta Herald., 1902), https://archive.org/details/otsegocountynewy00baco_0.

⁵ James Fenimore Cooper, *The Chronicles of Cooperstown* (H. and E. Phinney, 1838), 49, 82, <https://archive.org/details/chroniclesofcoop00coop/page/n5/mode/2up>.

⁶ James Fenimore Cooper, Jr., *The Legends and Traditions of a Northern County* (Cooperstown, NY: The Freeman's Journal Co., 1936), ix, https://ia803104.us.archive.org/12/items/legendstradition00coop_0/legendstradition00coop_0.pdf.

Roy Butterfield wrote the volume *In Old Otsego* as his county's contribution in the celebration of New York's Year of History in 1959. This slim tome, while not intended as an academic treatise on the county, contains valuable information on early Otsego. It is of interest to note that the population of the county increased twenty-fold between 1790, about the time of Pierre Besançon's arrival, and 1830, not long before son Lorenzo Augustus left for Mississippi.⁷

Two histories stand out for the local connections of the authors to their subject. Levi Beardsley's *Reminiscences* is notable for the author's detailed personal knowledge of the county. Beardsley was a resident of Otsego County for over forty years, from the late 1700s until his departure for Oswego in north-central New York in 1989. He served as a member of the New York legislature and was a well-known member of society. His memoir, while not academic in nature, is a font of state and local history and lore.⁸ Stuart B. Blakely's *A History of Otsego*, is especially useful for its information on the town of Butternuts. Although census and tax records place Besançon père in Butternuts in 1800, he does not appear in Blakely's book, which has detailed information on other families of

⁷ Roy A. Butterfield, *In Old Otsego: A New York County Views Its Past* (Cooperstown, NY: The Freeman's Journal Co., 1959), 6, <https://ia803104.us.archive.org/20/items/inoldotsegonewyo00butt/inoldotsegonewyo00butt>.

⁸ Levi Beardsley, *Reminiscences; Personal and Other Incidents; Early Settlement of Otsego County* (New York, NY: Charles Vinten, 1852), <https://ia800908.us.archive.org/24/items/reminiscencespe00beargoog/reminiscencespe00beargoog.pdf>.

the town with whom Peter Besançon undoubtedly would have been acquainted, mentioning them by name, origin, and homestead.⁹

The exact date of L.A. Besançon's departure from upstate New York is unknown, but by 1835 he was installed in Natchez, Mississippi and was a founding partner of the *Mississippi Free Trader* newspaper at the rather tender age of twenty-three. Tony Seybert's unpublished master's degree thesis, "The Natchez Slavery Press and the Road to Disunion, 1800-1865," does an outstanding job of laying out the intricacies and internecine newspaper wars of mid-nineteenth-century Natchez, Mississippi, waged between backers of the Whigs and Democrats. Combined with the primary source material from the era, it provides excellent context and rich details for Besançon's life.¹⁰

Besides his work in the newspaper business, Besançon became involved in local and state politics. A transplanted northerner, he was quick to make the necessary political and social connections to be successful in the South, which was suspicious of outsiders, but at the same time welcoming to those who espoused Southern views. Besançon mixed his jack-of-all trades mentality with a good dose of pugnaciousness, and he did not shy away from confrontations or disagreements arising from Southern ideas of honor.

When Besançon moved from New York to Mississippi, he must have felt as if he were moving to another country, given the gulf between the two societies and their

⁹ Stuart Banyar Blakely, *A History of Otego* (Cooperstown, NY: Crist, Scott & Parshall, 1907), <https://archive.org/details/historyofotego00blak>.

¹⁰ Tony Seybert, "The Natchez Slavery Press and the Road to Disunion, 1800-1865" (MA Thesis, Northridge, CA, California State University-Northridge, 2005), <http://natchezpress.blogspot.com>. Although unavailable in paper form Seybert's master's thesis is posted online and available at <https://natchezpress.blogspot.com>.

respective inhabitants. Many historians have explored the idea of antebellum Southern character, including William R. Taylor's *The Old South and American National Character* and Bertram Wyatt-Browns' *Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South*. These works explore the larger picture of Southern character and Southern culture's influence on America. Southern character was replete with notions of chivalry and honor, which Besançon was quick to adopt, and which are treated in Rollin G. Osterweis's *Romanticism and Nationalism in the Old South*. Another aspect of Southern culture that Besançon was to take to heart was a strong tendency toward bellicosity, dealt with in John Hope Franklin's *The Militant South*.¹¹

The antebellum South, of course, was not a homogeneous culture. To situate Besançon in his particular corner of the South, it is helpful to look at the place in which Besançon spent his formative Southern years, Natchez, Mississippi. Here, two works are of specific interest. *Antebellum Natchez*, by D. Clayton James, provides wonderful color to early Natchez from the points of view of both aristocrats and commoners. His Natchez is one in which strong disagreements took place in the press, as well as in the streets and public places. James ranks "gambling, prostitution, and drinking" as the main vices of Natchez residents, especially those of means, and dueling was a rather common way of

¹¹ William Robert Taylor, *Cavalier and Yankee: The Old South and American National Character* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South* (Ann Arbor, Scholarly Publishing Office, University of Michigan, 2010); Rollin G Osterweis, *Romanticism and Nationalism in the Old South* (Baton Rouge, Louisiana State University Press, 1971); John Hope Franklin, *The Militant South* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1956).

settling disputes.¹² This depiction of a violence-prone society is supported by *William Johnson's Natchez: The Ante-bellum Diary of a Free Negro*, a fascinating and useful book based on Johnson's diary, which he kept for sixteen years, including several years in which Besançon was a resident of Natchez. Both James and Johnson make mention of Besançon several times in their works, mostly regarding conflicts in which Besançon was a principal.¹³

While the aforementioned works cover the regional and local contexts for Besançon's Mississippi years, Charles Sydnor's *A Gentleman of the Old Natchez Region* gives a particular instantiation of Southern character. Sydnor's work is a biography of Benjamin L.C. Wailes, who was born in Natchez just before the turn of the nineteenth century and who died not long after the beginning of the Civil War. Sydnor's biography takes advantage of Wailes's unpublished, thirty-six volume diary and provides a profile of one of Besançon's Natchez contemporaries. Even more germane to Besançon's story is Robert E. May's biography of John A. Quitman, with whom Besançon had a rather tumultuous, even violent, relationship that lasted through their time in Mississippi and Mexico.¹⁴

¹² D. Clayton James, *Antebellum Natchez* (Baton Rouge, La: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1993), 262.

¹³ William Johnson, William Ransom Hogan, and Edwin Adams Davis, *William Johnson's Natchez: The Ante-Bellum Diary of a Free Negro*, Louisiana paperback ed (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1993), <https://archive.org/details/williamjohnsonsn0000john/page/172/mode/2up?q=Tompkins>.

¹⁴ Charles S. Sydnor, *A Gentleman of the Old Natchez Region: Benjamin L.C. Wailes* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1938); Robert E. May, *John A. Quitman: Old South Crusader*, Southern Biography Series (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1985).

At some point after 1842, L.A. Besançon moved to New Orleans. Several works deal with the history of that city during the mid-nineteenth century. Henry Rightor's *Standard History of New Orleans*, published in 1900, is a broad-ranging book. While it begins with the earliest historical roots of the city, it also touches on topics such as the culture, fauna, and civic organizations of the city. Its greatest contribution to this thesis is the content dealing with the development of mid-nineteenth century journalism and the many newspapers that were competing for the public's eye. John S. Kendall's three-volume *History of New Orleans* is notable for its deep genealogical information on many New Orleans families. The Besançon family, in the form of L.A. Besançon's son and grandson, appear in Volume III. Lastly, and on a more recent note, Joan B. Gardner and Mary Lou Widmer's *Beautiful Crescent: A History of New Orleans*, provides a compact overview of the city's history in a highly accessible format.¹⁵

Given his rather adventuresome personality, it is no surprise that with the looming war with Mexico Besançon was amongst the thousands of Southerners (native or transplanted) who helped to make up the many volunteer regiments that participated in the Mexican-American War. Having transplanted his family from Natchez to New Orleans, Besançon volunteered to lead a company of cavalry in the war, and by all accounts he acquitted himself well.

¹⁵ Henry Rightor, ed., *Standard History of New Orleans, Louisiana* (Chicago, IL: The Lewis Publishing Company, 1900), <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=uva.x001229361&view=1up&seq=1>; John S. Kendall, *History of New Orleans*, vol. 3, 3 vols. (Chicago: The Lewis Publishing Company, 1922), <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=wu.89081205288&view=1up&seq=7>. Joan B Garvey, *Beautiful Crescent: A History of New Orleans* (Pelican Pub Co Inc, 2017).

The United States' conflict with Mexico has been the subject of numerous works that are of use in this thesis. David Pletcher's *The Diplomacy of Annexation* provides analysis of the broader context of the war vis-à-vis America's position in the world, as well as pressures such as the Southern push to expand slavery that affected the US decision to go to war. His effort pairs well with that of John D.P. Fuller's *The Movement for the Acquisition of All Mexico*, whose early-70s work recounts the United States' all-consuming interest in expansion, and that of William H. Goetzmann's *When the Eagle Screamed*, which covers American expansionism during the years 1800-1860.¹⁶ A more recent work is Amy S. Greenberg's *A Wicked War*, which captures the range of debate over president Polk's decision to wage war on America's neighbor—a debate that gave birth to an antiwar movement that included journalists, politicians, citizens, and even members of the active-duty military. Greenberg's work takes its title from Ulysses S. Grant's take on the war, "I do not think there was ever a more wicked war than that waged by the United States on Mexico."¹⁷

The war itself is covered from numerous perspectives. Edward D. Mansfield's *The Mexican War* has the unique position of having been published within a year of the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, which officially concluded the conflict.

¹⁶ David M. Pletcher, *The Diplomacy of Annexation: Texas, Oregon, and the Mexican War* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1973); ; John D.P. Fuller, *The Movement for the Acquisition of All Mexico, 1846-1848*, The Johns Hopkins University Studies in Historical and Political Science, Ser. 54, No. 1 (St. Clair Shores, Mich: Scholarly Press, 1971); William H. Goetzman, *When the Eagle Screamed: The Romantic Horizon in American Expansionism, 1800-1860* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2000).

¹⁷ Amy S. Greenberg, *A Wicked War: Polk, Clay, Lincoln, and the 1846 U.S. Invasion of Mexico*, 1st ed (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2012), vii, xvii.

Mansfield's work might even be considered a primary source, given its proximity to the events it describes.¹⁸

More modern treatments of the Mexican-American War include Jack Bauer's *The Mexican War: 1846-1848*, which provides an excellent overview of the road to war and its prosecution, while Robert Walter Johannsen's *To the Halls of the Montezumas: The Mexican War in the American Imagination* details how the war played in the US public. For a soldiers-eye view of the war, there are several books of note. James McCaffrey's *Army of Manifest Destiny: The American Soldier in the Mexican War* puts a human face on the American soldiers who went to engage in Polk's war of opportunity, while George W. Smith and Charles Judah offer *Chronicles of the Gringos*, which provides invaluable eyewitness accounts of the war from previously unpublished sources. Lastly, Jack Bauer's *Surfboats and Horse Marines* recounts the US Navy's part in the two theaters of the war, the Gulf of Mexico and the Pacific Ocean.¹⁹

In addition to the many monographic works on the war with Mexico, numerous scholarly articles are dedicated to exploring distinct facets of the war. In specific, those

¹⁸ In the introduction to his book, written in January 1848, Mansfield uses the present tense in describing the conflict as "the present Mexican war." See Edward D. Mansfield, *The Mexican War: A History of Its Origin and a Detailed Account of the Victories Which Terminated in the Surrender of the Capital; with the Official Despatches of the Generals* (New York, NY: A. S. Barnes & Burr, 1860), <https://archive.org/details/mexicanwarhistor02mans/page/n9/mode/2up>.

¹⁹ K. Jack Bauer, *The Mexican War, 1846-1848* (Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1993); Robert W Johannsen, *To the Halls of the Montezumas: The Mexican War in the American Imagination* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015); James M McCaffrey, *Army of Manifest Destiny: The American Soldier in the Mexican War, 1846-1848* (New York: New York University Press, 1992); George Winston Smith and Charles Judah, *Chronicles of the Gringos: The U.S. Army in the Mexican War, 1846-1848; Accounts of Eyewitnesses & Combatants* (Albuquerque, NM: The University of New Mexico Press, 1968); K. Jack Bauer, *Surfboats and Horse Marines: U.S. Naval Operations in the Mexican War, 1846-1848* (Annapolis, MD: United States Naval Institute, 1969).

dealing with the unique case of Yucatán during the war are of particular value to this thesis. Marvin Aliski focuses on Yucatán's separateness and differences with the rest of Mexico, as does Edward Fichten, while Louis de Armond concentrates on the efforts of Justo Sierra O'Reilly, a pivotal player in Yucatán's diplomacy with the United States and an instrumental figure in bringing foreign mercenaries into play in putting down a rebellion in the region.²⁰

Within months of his participation in the Mexican-American War, L.A. Besançon became involved in what eventually became known as the Caste War of Yucatán, an uprising of native Maya against their overlords, who were for the most part of Spanish origin or Spanish descent (i.e., "*criollos*," "*Ladinos*," or "*Yucatecos*"). The leaders of Yucatán sought aid from the United States, but official aid was denied by Washington, leading Yucatán diplomat Justo Sierra O'Reilly to explore the possibility of American guns for hire. The mercenaries that he sought were, for the most part, veterans of Mexico's recent war with the US. In addition to the veterans, there was a motley group of adventurers and filibusters who saw Mexico, and particularly the wayward region of Yucatán, as a worthy target of their ambitious designs. This group included Besançon, as

²⁰ See: Marvin Aliski, "The Relations of State of Yucatán and the Federal Government of México, 1823-1978.," in *Yucatán: A World Apart*, ed. Edward H. Mosely and Terry, Edward D. (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 1980), 245–63; Edward D. Fichten, "Self-Determination or Self-Preservation: The Relation of Independent Yucatan with the Republic of Texas and the United States, 1847-1849," *Journal of the West* 18, no. 1 (1979): 33–40; Louis de Armond, "Justo Sierra O'Reilly and Yucatecan-U. S. Relations, 1847-1848," *Hispanic American Historical Review* 31, no. 3 (August 1951): 420–36, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2509400>.

he took a lead role in recruiting volunteers for the venture and was second-in-command of the volunteer regiment that went to Yucatán's aid.

A general treatment of Yucatecan history that addresses the socio-economic development of the region is Gilbert M. Joseph's *Rediscovering the Past at Mexico's Periphery: Essays on the History of Modern Yucatán*. Although it serves as a general historiography, the third essay of the volume is of particular interest to researchers of the Caste War. The roots of the Caste War are explored in Terry Rugeley's *Yucatán's Maya Peasantry and the Origins of the Caste War*, an excellent study of the war from the point of view of the have-nots. Rugeley contributes another monographic work on the war that focuses on the use of violence in the conflict, *Rebellion Now and Forever: Mayas, Hispanics, and Caste War Violence in Yucatan, 1800-1880*, a topic which is also addressed in depth by Wolfgang Gabbart in *Violence and the Caste War of Yucatan*.²¹

The monographic work that deals most in detail with the Yucatán conflict inclusive of American involvement is Nelson Reed's *The Caste War of Yucatán*. Reed's book is intended primarily as an in-depth study of the rather long war (it was not officially over for many decades), and it devotes several pages to the regiment of Americans that was recruited and led by George White and L.A. Besançon. The second

²¹ Gilbert M. Joseph, *Rediscovering the Past at Mexico's Periphery: Essays on the History of Modern Yucatán* (University, Ala: University of Alabama Press, 1986); Terry Rugeley, *Yucatán's Maya Peasantry and the Origins of the Caste War*, 1st ed (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996); Terry Rugeley, *Rebellion Now and Forever: Mayas, Hispanics, and Caste War Violence in Yucatán, 1800-1880* (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 2009); Wolfgang Gabbart, *Violence and the Caste War of Yucatán*, Kindle Edition, Cambridge Latin American Studies (Cambridge, United Kingdom ; New York, NY, USA: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

edition of the book corrects some errors that marred the first edition, and it is an excellent jumping-off point for further study.²²

However, it is Lorena Careaga Viliesid who has perhaps devoted the most energy to the specifics of the American involvement in the Caste War. In “Filibusteros, Mercenarios y Voluntarios: Los Soldados Norteamericanos en la Guerra de Castas de Yucatán, 1848-1849,” one of three essays in manuscript form dealing with Yucatán history, Careaga Viliesid delves into the recruitment and comportment of the American soldiers. Her essay was at least partially responsible for the corrections that Reed made to his seminal book on the Caste War of Yucatán.²³

Whether taken as a mercenary operation or outright filibustering, the involvement of US citizens in the Caste War of Yucatán is a particular episode in the larger movement of American incursions into Latin America in the mid-1800s, which includes filibustering and other armed activities outside the borders of the United States. This topic is well-covered in numerous works. James Jeffrey Roche provides a late nineteenth-century historical perspective on filibustering, especially as regards Central America and William Walker, in *The Story of the Filibusters*, while on a more modern note, Charles H. Brown gives an excellent introduction to the topic in *Agents of Manifest Destiny: The Lives and Times of the Filibusters*. Edward S. Wallace devotes an entire chapter to the American

²² Nelson A. Reed, *The Caste War of Yucatán*, Rev. ed (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 2001).

²³ Trans.: “Filibusters, Mercenaries, and Volunteers: North American Soldiers in the Caste War of Yucatán, 1848-1849.” Lorena Careaga Viliesid, “Episodios de una Entidad Futura: Tres Ensayos Conmemorando el Centenario de la Creación del Territorio Federal de Quintana Roo 1902 - 2002” (June 2002).

volunteers in Yucatán in *Destiny and Glory* while Robert May contributes two excellent volumes on the topic in *Manifest Destiny's Underworld: Filibustering in Antebellum America* and *The Southern Dream of a Caribbean Empire*. These latter two do an excellent job of putting filibustering in the context of American culture and examines the nuts and bolts of financing such ventures, as well as the motivations of the men who undertook them.²⁴

Other book-length works deal with specific incidents of filibustering. Two contemporaneous accounts that are available from the early twentieth century deal with several attempts made by US citizens to intervene militarily in Cuba. These are Robert Granville Caldwell's *The López Expeditions to Cuba, 1848-1851*, published originally in 1915 and Anderson Quisenberry's *López's Expedition to Cuba, 1850 and 1851*.²⁵

Although the López expeditions did garner a degree of fame (or infamy), it is William Walker's filibustering escapades in Central America and Mexico that have captured the public's imagination, not only for their audacity, but also because Walker actually managed to meet with some success. In many ways, Walker and Besançon led

²⁴ James Jeffrey Roche, *The Story of the Filibusters: To Which Is Added the Life of Colonel David Crockett (Classic Reprint)*. (London: T. Fischer Unwin, 1891), <https://archive.org/details/storyfilibuster00rochgoog>; Charles H. Brown, *Agents of Manifest Destiny: The Lives and Times of the Filibusters* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012); Edward S. Wallace, *Destiny and Glory* (New York, NY: Coward-McCann, Inc., 1957); Robert E. May, *Manifest Destiny's Underworld: Filibustering in Antebellum America* (Chapel Hill, N.C: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 2002); Robert E. May, *The Southern Dream of a Caribbean Empire, 1854-1861*, 2nd pbk. ed, New Perspectives on the History of the South (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2002).

²⁵ Robert Granville Caldwell, *The Lopez Expeditions to Cuba, 1848-1851* (Whitefish, MT: Kessinger Publishing, 2010). Anderson C. Quisenberry, *Lopez's Expedition to Cuba, 1850 and 1851* (Louisville, KY: John P. Morton & Co., 1906), https://ia802703.us.archive.org/33/items/lopezsexpedition01quis/lopezsexpedition01_quis.pdf.

parallel lives. They both were engaged in the newspaper business, both were fond of dueling as a means of settling disputes, and both had large ambitions. Walker's escapades south of the border began mere months after Besançon's death in January of 1853, with an "invasion" of Sonora and Baja California in October of that year. His adventures are admirably covered in Albert Carr's *The World and William Walker* and Scott Martell's *William Walker's Wars*.²⁶

The topics of Manifest Destiny, the Mexican-American War, and filibustering have been thoroughly researched and enjoy an abundance of published scholarship. The reputations of many Americans were made during the Mexican-American War. Zachary Taylor famously led American forces in Mexico, and he turned that fame into a successful run for the presidency immediately after the war. Many officers who served under Taylor, including Ulysses S. Grant and Robert E. Lee, went on to become famous in their own rights in the great conflict that was to consume the nation not long after. Likewise, the names of filibusters Narciso López and William Walker are well known. Yet somehow the story of their contemporary Lorenzo Augustus Besançon has managed to escape the scrutiny that it deserves. Besançon was the archetype of the American adventurer-filibuster of the mid-1800s. As such, his life can provide insight into the age of Jacksonian politics and Manifest Destiny that gave rise to military adventurism. The

²⁶ Albert Z. Carr, *The World and William Walker*, First (New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1963). Scott Martelle, *William Walker's Wars: How One Man's Private American Army Tried to Conquer Mexico, Nicaragua, and Honduras* (Chicago, Illinois: Chicago Review Press Incorporated, 2019).

biography of Lorenzo Augustus Besançon's life will contribute a missing piece of scholarship on mid-nineteenth-century American history.

This thesis will take a traditional chronological approach to Besançon's biography. Chapter 1 deals with Besançon's origins and family history in Otsego County, New York, beginning with a brief outline of the settlement of the region and the Besançon family's roots in the county. Chapter 2 concentrates on Besançon's life in Mississippi and New Orleans, following him as he establishes his newspaper and enters the political arena. Chapter 3 investigates Besançon's involvement in the Mexican-American War as the captain of a company of mounted volunteers. Chapter 4 deals with Besançon filibustering expedition to Yucatán in the Caste War. Finally, Chapter 5 details Besançon's participation in the California gold rush, his work as a tax collector, and his premature death.

Chapter 1
Butternuts and Glimmerglass: Origins (1812-1835)

*Then back, go back from the red man's track,
 For the hunter's eyes grow dim,
 To find that the white man wrongs the one
 Who never did harm to him.*
 — Eliza Cook, “The Indian Hunter”

By the beginning of the eighteenth century, the Haudenosaunee Confederacy consisted of six nations of native peoples: the Seneca, Cayuga, Onondaga, Oneida, Tuscarora, and Mohawk nations. Stretching from the southern shores of Lake Erie in the southwest to the Ottawa River in Canada to the north, the union of nations was at the height of its power and influence when the first English settlers arrived in the area of New York known as Otsego, or “place of the rock” in the language of the Mohawk.

Having fought with and against both the French and the English, the Haudenosaunee were familiar with the ways of the white man. Hamilton Hurd, author of several histories of New England and New York counties, claims that the French had a “civilizing” approach toward the Indigenous peoples as opposed to the English, who “bestowed no attention upon the enlightenment of the race, either morally or religiously.” Hurd references Frenchman Samuel de Champlain and Englishman Henry Hudson in comparing the two colonial powers. De Champlain introduced the Haudenosaunee to gunpowder, which Hurd called a “dark hour” for the tribe, but he reserves his greater condemnation for Henry Hudson’s introduction of liquor, which he claims the

Haudenosaunee were unable to resist despite its obviously deleterious effects.¹ New York officials had at times banned the sale of alcohol, but this ran counter to New Yorkers' desire to make a profit from its sale to Indigenous peoples.²

Although Hurd's account strikes a somewhat patronizing tone, it underscores the poisonous and, eventually, fatal consequences of contact with Europeans for the Native peoples of North America in general. Although a mighty nation, feared by both native rivals and European interlopers alike, the Haudenosaunee were to be pushed and pulled in the French-English rivalry, eventually giving way to the tide of European settlement in their territory. The area of central New York known as the Mohawk Valley was to be no exception to the rule of colonial expansion.

By the early eighteenth century, the Mohawk began the transfer of land to the English, and in 1738 the lieutenant-governor of the New York colony, George Clark, granted 8,000 acres of land in what would eventually become Otsego County to John Lindsay, Jacob Roseboome, Lenelet Gansevoort, and Sybrant Van Schaick. Surveying began in 1739 under the instructions of Lindsay, and the first white pioneers settled at Cherry Valley. Under Lindsay's command, these settlers may not have survived the harsh winter of 1740-1741 were it not for the aid of one of the Mohawk natives who brought them supplies. At this early point of interaction, the white settlers and the native

¹ D. Hamilton Hurd, *History of Otsego County, New York: With Illustrations and Biographical Sketches of Some of Its Prominent Men and Pioneers*. (Salem, Mass.: Higginson Book Co., 1878), 11-12, <https://archive.org/details/cu31924074488366/page/n10/mode/2up>.

² Daniel K. Richter, *The Ordeal of the Longhouse: The Peoples of the Iroquois League in the Era of European Colonization* (Chapel Hill: Published for the Institute of Early American History and Culture, Williamsburg, Virginia, by the University of North Carolina Press, 1992), 263-64.

inhabitants were on friendly terms, as Lindesay had made efforts to curry the favor of the Mohawk.³ In other New York settlements, such as Owego, settlers and the Naticoke natives lived in close proximity and even engaged in sport.⁴

The original settlers of Cherry Valley were joined by others, and by the time of the French and Indian War, there were around three hundred settlers. A fort was built for their protection, although no fighting took place during the conflict. The Cherry Valley settlement was followed by others at Edmeston, Hartwick, Laurens, Middlefield, and New Lisbon before the Revolutionary War.⁵

In 1768, the Mohawk conveyed a substantial tract of land in the area of Otsego to the colonial powers in the person of Colonel George Croghan. Croghan used this land, the Otsego Patent, as collateral for raising money in the sum of £3,000 from the governor of the New Jersey Colony, William Franklin, son of Benjamin Franklin. Croghan wished to use the money raised in New Jersey to purchase the New York lands outright from the crown. Croghan also obtained conveyances of large Indian tracts for certain friends and partners, the total of which amounted to a quarter of a million acres, and much of this land was ultimately transferred to him. It had been Croghan's intent to settle in the area, and once he had the Otsego Patent in hand, he mortgaged the land. His son-in-law,

³ Hurd, 12–13.

⁴ Alan Taylor, *The Divided Ground: Indians, Settlers and the Northern Borderland of the American Revolution*, 1st ed (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006), 139.

⁵ Edwin F. Bacon, *Otsego County, New York, Geographical and Historical: From the Earliest Settlement to the Present Time : With County and Township Maps from Original Drawings (Oneonta, New York: The Oneonta Herald., 1902)*, 10-11, https://archive.org/details/otsegocountynewy00baco_0.

Augustine Prevost, soon occupied a portion of it. However, Croghan's land speculation plans came crashing down as he mortgaged his properties to buy others in a pyramid scheme. When he eventually defaulted on his payments, the land was conveyed to Andrew Craig and William Cooper of Burlington, New Jersey.⁶

By 1775, Cherry Valley was the main settlement south of the Mohawk River in what was then known as Tryon County, an enormous area covering much of present-day central New York stretching from Lake Ontario and the Saint Lawrence River in the north and west to the Pennsylvania line in the south.

With the breakout of hostilities in the American Revolution, Cherry Valley managed to raise at least thirty-three patriots for the independence cause. Those who stayed behind felt that they would be at the mercy of the Mohawk, who had sided with all but one of the six nations of the



A Map of the Provinces of New-York and New-Jersey, with a Part of Pennsylvania and the Province of Quebec (Augsburg, 1777), Library of Congress, www.loc.gov/item/74692644(location of Cherry Valley indicated in outline).⁷

⁶ James Fenimore Cooper, *The Chronicles of Cooperstown* (H. and E. Phinney, 1838), 6-8, <https://archive.org/details/chroniclesofcoop00coop/page/n5/mode/2up>; Roy A. Butterfield, *In Old Otsego: A New York County Views Its Past* (Cooperstown, NY: The Freeman's Journal Co., 1959), 8-12, <https://ia803104.us.archive.org/20/items/inoldotsegonewyo00butt/inoldotsegonewyo00butt>.

⁷ *A Map of the Provinces of New-York and New-Jersey, with a Part of Pennsylvania and the Province of Quebec* (Augsburg, 1777), Library of Congress, www.loc.gov/item/74692644.

Haudenosaunee Confederacy in backing the British and loyalist colonists (Tories), the Oneida being the lone member of the confederacy to abstain. The settlers soon drafted a petition to the provincial congress to provide protection. A company of rangers under the command of Captain John Winn of the Tryon County Militia was sent, and a small fortification built, but not continuously manned.⁸ The militia had been the product of the county's first Patriot committee formed in 1774, after the death of Sir William Johnson, who influence the Mohawk and other Indigenous peoples to align with the British.⁹

The fears of the Cherry Valley settlers were to be realized in 1778, not long after the killing at Wyoming, Pennsylvania, of over 300 patriots by Tory loyalists and their Haudenosaunee allies on July 3. That same summer, a fort was erected at Cherry Valley and Colonel Ichabod Alden was chosen to command the garrison, which was manned by members of the Seventh Massachusetts Regiment.

In early November, Alden received a warning from an agent who had been contacted by an Oneida Indian who claimed that Tories and Haudenosaunee intended to perpetrate the same violence upon Cherry Valley as had been visited upon the village of Wyoming. Although forewarned, Alden did not appear to take the warning as seriously as he should have, nor did he allow the nearby residents to seek shelter in the fort, a mistake which was to prove quite costly to both himself and the settlers he was supposed to be protecting.

⁸ Hurd, *History of Otsego County*, 15–16. Bacon, *Otsego County, New York*, 11.

⁹ Taylor, *The Divided Ground*, 78.

The loyalist forces surrounded the fort on the night of November 10, and sixteen of the three hundred soldiers died in the attack on the following day. Colonel Alden was killed and scalped while fleeing from a Seneca Indian just outside the gates of the fort. As for the villagers, thirty-two were killed, for the most part women and children, and many were taken prisoner, although later released. The remaining soldiers defended the fort with cannon until the attackers retreated.¹⁰

The Wyoming and Cherry Valley attacks provoked a campaign of retribution in which Generals John Sullivan and James Clinton of the Continental Army first defeated the loyalist Tories and Haudenosaunee at the Battle of Newtown, and then went on to punish the Haudenosaunee by burning at least forty Seneca villages. As a result of the Sullivan-Clinton Campaign, according to Bacon, “Otsego County, which had nearly a dozen white settlements at the beginning of the Revolution, was an uninhabited wilderness at its close, but with peace a new era was soon to dawn upon it.”¹¹

The Besançon Family in Otsego County

James Fenimore Cooper, in *The Chronicles of Cooperstown*, writes that in 1785 his father, Judge William Cooper, began surveying his vast land holdings in what was

¹⁰ Hurd, *History of Otsego County*, 16–19. In his memoir, Levi Beardsley records a rather gruesome incident in 1825 in which the interred remains of Colonel Alden were disturbed in the digging of an adjacent grave. Beardsley writes, “I saw and examined his skull, which was sound as when first buried. The tomahawk with which he was struck, after being shot, had not cut through the skull to the brain, but seemed to have glanced off, chipping away a portion of the skull. The cavity was discolored with blood, and several lines or marks, where the tomahawk had entered were red and bright., Alvan Stewart took one of the loosened teeth.” See Beardsley, *Reminiscences*, 458–59.

¹¹ Bacon, *Otsego County, New York*, 13.

then Montgomery County, but which was soon to become Otsego County. Cooper, despite his “scant education, colloquial speech, and rough manners,” was nominated to be the county’s judge, from which position three years later he launched his successful bid for the US Congress.¹² The next year, he chose to found a settlement at the foot of Otsego Lake. The lake would be referred to and made famous as the “Glimmerglass” in several novels of the *Leatherstocking Tales* by Judge Cooper’s son, author James Fenimore Cooper, the first of which was published in 1823. This spot was also the location at which the troops of General Clinton had camped during their campaign against the Haudenosaunee some six years prior.¹³

Judge Cooper was wary of land speculation, and he had no intention of falling into the financial trap that had ensnared George Croghan, from whom he had received many thousands of acres after Croghan’s forfeiture for failure to pay. Cooper wished to attract settlers to his land, and he offered a variety of inducements to protentional buyers, including contracts in which newcomers had to pay no down payment, but rather only interest on the monetary value of the land. This arrangement could continue until the prospective landowner could come up with a down payment or purchase the land outright. To make land purchase even easier, the interest payments, a kind of rent, could be paid in cash or in the form of farm produce.¹⁴

¹² Alan Taylor, *William Cooper’s Town: Power and Persuasion on the Frontier of the Early American Republic*, 1st ed (New York: A.A. Knopf : Distributed by Random House, 1995), 6.

¹³ Cooper, *The Chronicles of Cooperstown*, 8–11. Cooper, Jr., *The Legends and Traditions*, x.

¹⁴ Butterfield, *In Old Otsego*, 12–13.

Otsego County, along with Herkimer and Tioga Counties, was split off from the much larger Montgomery County in 1791, and Cooperstown was declared the county seat, despite Cherry Valley having a larger population. Roy Butterfield estimates that by the time of the first US census in 1790, there were approximately 2,420 residents in Otsego County, and by the time of the 1800 census that number would multiply almost tenfold to 21,636. Butterfield notes a report that states, “In 1789, multitudes were flocking to Cooperstown at the rate of thirty a day.”¹⁵

Who were the early settlers of Otsego County? Seeking land and opportunity, they comprised a group of adventurous souls who were willing to live on what was then the frontier. Perhaps it was a frontier that had been somewhat pacified during the Revolutionary War, but as G. William Beardslee points out, “In the late eighteenth century, Otsego County lands along the Tianadarah were the American frontier.”¹⁶ James Fenimore Cooper relates that as late as 1794, there was a fear of Indian attack in Otsego. That year became known as the “Indian Alarm,” when there was a report of “a considerable body of Indians having been seen lurking in the woods.” This turned out to be false.¹⁷

If there had been a legitimate Indian attack, Otsego would have been able to put up a fight, as a good many of the settlers were veterans of the recent war of

¹⁵ Butterfield, 6–7.

¹⁶ G. William Beardslee, “An Otsego Frontier Experience: The Gratzburg Tract, 1770-1795,” *New York History* 79, no. 3 (1998): 253, <http://www.jstor.org.ezrvcc.vccs.edu/stable/23182500>.

¹⁷ Cooper, *The Chronicles of Cooperstown*, 49.

independence. In 1781, New York passed a provision to provide a land bounty to veterans who had served in the Revolutionary War. These bounties ranged from five hundred acres for a private, up to 5,400 acres for a brigadier general. The New York land bounty act effectively quintupled the amount of land authorized by the US Congress in September of 1776.¹⁸ However, the lands of Otsego County were not included in these bounties, as those bounty tracts were located to the west, in the Finger Lakes region, and were known as the “Military Tract.” Nevertheless, many of the post-war pioneers in Otsego County had served in the war. Hamilton Hurd, in his brief biographies of the founding families of post-Revolutionary War Otsego, lists a multitude of veterans from New York, Vermont, Massachusetts, and Connecticut. One name missing from Hurd’s impressive number of “biographical sketches” is that of Pierre Besançon.¹⁹

Pierre (a.k.a. “Peter”) Besançon first appears in the public record in the 1800 US census as a resident of the township of Butternuts in Otsego County. His household consisted of two adults and one child. Genealogical records show that he was married to Elizabeth Hayes, aged twenty, in 1798, and their first child, Paschal, was born in 1799. In 1801, his property value was assessed at \$1,500, a rather goodly sum in comparison to his neighbors.²⁰

¹⁸ New York Secretary of State, *The Balloting Book, and Other Documents Relating to Military Land Bounties in the State of New York* (Albany, New York: Packard & Benthuisen, 1825), 5–6.

¹⁹ Hurd, *History of Otsego County*.

²⁰ “1800 United States Census, Butternuts, Otsego County, New York, Digital Image s.v. ‘Peter Besançon,’ Ancestry.Com.,” accessed June 16, 2021, <https://bit.ly/3jb8Lr7>. “New York, U.S., Tax Assessment Rolls of Real and Personal Estates, 1799-1804 [Database online]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.Com Operations, Inc.,” 2014, <https://bit.ly/3daW0ct>.

That Pierre Besançon was a resident of Otsego County is undeniable. He not only appears in census and tax records across several decades, but the Besançon family is also mentioned in *The Chronicles of Cooperstown* as “old inhabitants,” adding that “some of the members of these families are now among the most respectable and useful inhabitants of the place.”²¹ What is unclear is whether Pierre Besançon was a veteran of the Revolutionary War, as he claimed.

According to his application for naturalization as a US citizen submitted in 1809, Pierre Besançon asserted that he was born in Paris, France, and that he had been residing in the United States since June 18, 1798, long after the end of the Revolutionary War. No mention is made in his application for naturalization of his having served in the war. However, forty-four years later, at the age of ninety-one, he applied for a pension under the 1832 Pension and Bounty-Land Act that extended the benefits of previous acts for veterans of the Revolutionary War and the War of 1812. Besançon claimed that he had not applied for a pension previously, as he “knew of no other acts, having always resided in small country towns.” He lists half a dozen names of neighbors who were upstanding citizens, some of whom were war pensioners, who were willing to testify as to his character and merit regarding a pension for his service in the Revolutionary War.²²

²¹ Cooper, *The Chronicles of Cooperstown*, 82.

²² “New York, County Naturalization Records, 1791-1980, Petitions for Naturalization and Petition Evidence 1806-1874,” FamilySearch.org, accessed June 16, 2021, <https://familysearch.me/3vOIRfC>; “Case Files of Pension and Bounty-Land Warrant Applications Based on Revolutionary War Service, Compiled ca. 1800 - ca. 1912, Documenting the Period ca. 1775 - ca. 1900. NARA Record Group 15, Roll 0229, Pension Number R. 803,” n.d., accessed June 16, 2021.

In his pension application, Pierre Besançon claims that he came to the United States with the Marquis (General) de Lafayette, from whom he received a commission as a lieutenant at Valley Forge. After the war, he states that he lived in Chenango County, New York, for seven years, followed by ten years in Butternuts (Otsego County), thirty years in Cooperstown (Otsego County), and an unspecified number of years in his then-current place of residence as of 1853, Wyoming County, in western New York, where he had moved with his youngest son James, a shoemaker, at some point after 1840.²³

Pierre Besançon was unable to provide any documentation regarding his birth in Paris or his service, and none of those whom he listed as character witnesses had served with him during the Revolutionary War. Those witnesses state simply that Besançon had long claimed to have served with Lafayette. Evidently, he was fond of discussing his purported service, and his war stories managed to gain him a small degree of celebrity. He claimed to have been present at the execution of British Major John André, the head of the British Secret Service in the colonies who was hanged as a spy on October 2, 1778, for his collaboration with General Benedict Arnold. This was noted by historians and journalists alike, who, upon Pierre Besançon's death in 1855, gave him credit for being the last surviving witness to André's execution.²⁴

²³ "Case Files of Pension and Bounty-Land Warrant Applications."

²⁴ Robert Bolton, *The History of the Several Towns, Manors, and Patents of the County of Westchester, from Its First Settlement to the Present Time*, ed. Cornelius W. Winter, vol. 1 (New York, NY: C. F. Roper, 1881), 333; "Peter Besançon Death Notice," *Squatter Sovereign*, August 14, 1855, Newspapers.com, <https://www.newspapers.com>.

Pierre Besançon's claim to a Revolutionary War pension may or may not have been valid. While alive, no one seemed to question the authenticity of his claims, and in death he was eulogized as a veteran of the war. He would have been young, fifteen or sixteen, if he had indeed arrived with Lafayette, and received his lieutenancy at the tender age of sixteen or seventeen. This does not necessarily weigh against the veracity of his account however, as the Marquis de Lafayette himself was a mere twenty years old when he came to fight for the American cause. Besançon's pension application was nonetheless denied because he was unable to provide documentary evidence for his wartime service. Nor did he comply with the bureaucratic insistence that all documents submitted for "evidence or suggestion" in support of his claim be written in English. Instead, he had written a letter detailing his service in French, which the US Bureau of Pensions rejected in a letter dated February 3, 1854, a little over a year before his death.²⁵

Further adding to the intrigue of Besançon's claim of Revolutionary War service and belated application for a pension is the fact that at the time his father submitted his claim for a pension, his son and namesake, Peter Besançon, Jr., was working for the pension office. He was released from a position at the Bureau of Pensions in July 1857 for not being efficient at his work. His firing so angered Besançon, Jr. that on April 8 of the following spring he confronted US Secretary of the Interior Jacob Thompson demanding to know the reason for his release. When Thompson informed him that he had been accused of inefficiency, Besançon became so infuriated that he struck Thompson on

²⁵ "Case Files of Pension and Bounty-Land Warrant Applications."

the head and pulled out a pistol. Fortunately, Thompson was able to disarm him, and in doing so he dislocated Besançon's arm. Rather than have him arrested, Thompson sent him to the Washington Infirmary, where he was treated and released. Besançon later submitted a notice in the newspapers that the attack on the secretary was "unpremeditated" and that he "was armed only for self-defense in anticipation of an attack from another quarter." Newspapers speculated that Besançon had become temporarily insane due to his domestic situation.²⁶ His wife Mentoria had sued him for divorce in February 1854 alleging "infidelity and gross ill-treatment," this fewer than two years after their marriage in May of 1852.²⁷

Although his father passed away on May 15, 1855, in Wyoming County, New York, Peter Besançon, Jr. continued to pursue his father's pension claim as late as 1859, after he had attacked Secretary of the Interior Thompson. His dogged pursuit of the pension application is suspect, at best. What interest did Besançon Jr. have in continuing in his quest years after his father had died? Surely, he was aware that, given his firing from the pension office and his violent attack on a cabinet member, he would not meet with any success. In addition, one may legitimately question his role in his father's pension request from the outset. Why would Pierre Besançon apply for a pension so late in life? Could he have been provoked or motivated by his son to do so? It would not be

²⁶ "The Dropped," *Evening Star*, July 1, 1857, 2, Newspapers.com; "A Very Narrow Escape," *Evening Star*, April 8, 1858, 2, Newspapers.com; "Besançon Submits Card," *True American*, April 14, 1858, Newspapers.com.

²⁷ "New Orleans Locals," *Southern Sentinel*, February 25, 1854, Newspapers.com, <https://www.newspapers.com>; "Married," *The Daily Picayune*, May 9, 1852, Newspapers.com, <https://www.newspapers.com>.

inconceivable to believe that Peter Besançon, Jr. may have been assured that his father's application would go through, given his association with the very office that would have to process and approve the application, although how this might benefit a deceased man or himself is not clear. This, of course, is purely speculative, but circumstantial evidence abounds.

Pierre Besançon's claim to having served in the Revolutionary War remains unsubstantiated. He died in 1855 and was buried in Elmwood Cemetery in Pike, New York, and his grave is listed in the *Abstract of Graves of Revolutionary Patriots*.²⁹

Regardless of his status as a veteran, Pierre Besançon had established himself in Otsego County and remained there for at least forty years, spending ten years in the town of Butternuts and the remaining years in Cooperstown.



*Pierre "Peter" Besançon Headstone*²⁸

Public records reveal no indication of Pierre Besançon's profession, although given his land holdings it most likely involved agriculture, at least during his first decade

²⁸ Sandra Markham, *Photograph of Pierre "Peter" Besançon's Headstone*, Photograph, Find-a-Grave.com, accessed June 16, 2021, <https://bit.ly/3zm8MwN>.

²⁹ Patricia Law Hatcher, *Abstract of Graves of Revolutionary Patriots, [Database Online]*. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.Com Operations, Inc., vol. 1, 4 vols. (Provo, Utah, 1999).

or so in Butternuts. He is once referred to as “Doctor Besançon” in a notice of “Letters Remaining in the Post Office” in the April 15, 1839, edition of the *Freeman’s Journal* of Cooperstown. Likewise, in an 1838 letter written to his parents from Andrew Jackson’s Tennessee home, the Hermitage, L.A. Besançon, addresses his letter to “Doct. P. Besançon.”³⁰ However, it is not clear if this form of address was purely honorific, or if Pierre Besançon had taken up the medical profession as an informal practitioner. The latter seems unlikely, as his name never appears in advertisements for medical services in the *Freeman’s Journal*, while many other doctors did in fact advertise there. Nor does the title “doctor” appear in any of the many obituaries that were written upon his death, most of which mention three items: his alleged Revolutionary War service, his witnessing of the execution of Major André, and his membership in the Freemasons. At least one obituary made the claim that Besançon was initiated into the Masonic order by George Washington.³¹ Records of the Freemason Lodge at Otsego show that he was indeed an active member of the Freemasons, although no mention is made of George Washington.³²

Although the facts of Pierre Besançon’s biography are spotty and his own accounts of his life are somewhat suspect, the lives of several of his children are better

³⁰ Lorenzo A Besançon, “Letter to Dr. P. Besançon,” September 9, 1838, The Myrtles Plantation Archives.

³¹ “A Revolutionary Patriot Dead,” *The Buffalo Commercial Advertiser*, June 21, 1855, 2. “List of Letters Remaining in the Post Office,” *The Freeman’s Journal*, April 15, 1839, 3, New York State Historic Newspapers, <https://nyshistoricnewspapers.org>.

³² Albert T. Van Horne, *History of Otsego Lodge No. 138 F. & A.M. and Mark Lodge, Chapter, and Council, Cooperstown, N.Y.* (Cooperstown, NY: S. M. Shaw and Company, 1896), <https://archive.org/details/cu31924030289270>.

documented. Lorenzo Augustus was Pierre's next-to-youngest child, born on July 1, 1812, and he had four brothers and a sister, all of whom were born in Otsego County.

Lorenzo's oldest brother, Paschal (b. 1799), was a stonemason, and he often advertised his services in the *Freeman's Journal* of Cooperstown. He married Elizabeth Hayes in 1828 and they had one child who died at the age of three. Paschal and Elizabeth later moved to Ohio, where he died in 1840 at the age of 41.

Julia Besançon (b. 1801), the second oldest of the Besançon children and Lorenzo's only sister, is a bit of a mystery. All that is known is that she married George W. Cornwall and eventually settled in Illinois, where she passed away at the age of forty-three. Her husband was a wagon-maker and had fled to Canada during the Patriot War along the New York-Canada border in 1837-1838 before returning to the United States. He remarried a mere six weeks after Julia's death and had eight children with his second wife. The only record left behind of Julia's life is a brief death notice in the *Mississippi Free Trader*, most likely posted by her brother Peter.³³

Peter (b. 1804), the third oldest of the Besançon children, was an editor, publisher, and printer, professions he shared with his younger brother Lorenzo as well as his nephew Henry Oscar, son of his youngest brother James. Peter led a peripatetic life and had a close relationship with Lorenzo, having departed with him for Mississippi in the 1830s to continue a newspaper career that he had begun in New York with the purchase

³³ "Died," *Mississippi Free Trader*, April 20, 1844, 2, Newspapers.com, <https://newspapers.com>.

of the *Lockport Journal* in 1828.³⁴ As shall be seen, Peter's and Lorenzo's lives and fortunes were intertwined both professionally and personally.

Lorenzo's brother Edward (b. 1808) was a tailor. In 1831, he purchased a shop in the Otsego County town of West Springfield and advertised his abilities to reproduce the latest New York City fashions as well as his willingness to take "all kinds of country produce" as payments for his services.³⁵ Edward would follow his brothers Peter and Lorenzo to Mississippi, and like his younger brother Lorenzo, Edward became involved in the Mexican-American War, enlisting in the 1st Texas Mounted Rifles. He was listed in muster rolls as a hospitalized casualty (whether wounded or ill is not stated), and his brother Peter traveled to Mexico to retrieve him. For his services, Edward received a land bounty from the US government of one hundred sixty acres near Milwaukee, Wisconsin, where his historical trail ends.³⁶

James (b. 1814), the youngest of the Besançon children, was a shoemaker, and in adulthood he moved to the town of Pike, Wyoming County, in western New York. In

³⁴ *History of Niagara County, N. Y., with Illustrations Descriptive of Its Scenery, Private Residences, Public Buildings, Fine Blocks, and Important Manufactories, and Portraits of Old Pioneers and Prominent Residents* (New York, NY: Sanford & Co., 1878), 174, <https://archive.org/details/historyofniagara00sanf>.

³⁵ "New Tailoring Establishment," *Freeman's Journal*, February 13, 1831, New York State Historic Newspapers, <https://nyshistoricnewspapers.org>.

³⁶ "Compiled Service Records of Volunteer Soldiers Who Served During the Mexican War in Organizations from the State of Texas," 1959, MA 278. Compiled service records of volunteer soldiers who served during the Mexican War in organizations from Texas. RG 94, NARA, <http://www.archives.gov>. "Military Warrant, Bureau of Land Management, General Land Office Records; Washington D.C., USA; Federal Land Patents, State Volumes, Online" (Bureau of Land Management), Ancestry.com, accessed June 18, 2021, <https://gloreCORDS.blm.gov/details/patent/defaultLieutenant.aspx?accession=0990-251&docClass=MW&sid=ervoszjt.4b3>. "Arrival of the Steamer New Orleans," *Baltimore Sun*, April 7, 1848, Newspapers.com, <https://newspaper.com>.

their old age, his parents joined him and lived there until their deaths. James enlisted in the 1st New York Dragoons in September 1864, despite being fifty years old at the time. Quite possibly he did so for the \$500 signing bonus he was paid upon enlistment at Lockport, New York. Whatever his motivations, James was present at the battles of Fisher's Hill, Loudoun Valley, Harrisonburg, and Port Republic during the last year of the Civil War. He died in 1882 at the age of sixty-seven.³⁷ It is of note that his son Henry Oscar, who also served in the Civil War, and his grandson Claire were both newspaper editors. This is a profession that seemed to run in the family and was shared by two of James's brothers, Peter and Lorenzo, as well.³⁸

The lives of Lorenzo Augustus Besançon's siblings give some clues as to his childhood and adolescence, but he himself left no traces of his life in Otsego County. By the time he reached adulthood and left for Mississippi, most likely along with this brother Peter Jr., the family had moved from Butternuts and was living in the county seat of Cooperstown, according to his father's account of his residence in Otsego. What is known is that in the 1830 census, Pierre Besançon's household consisted of one male between the ages of 15-19, one female between the ages of 20-29, and two adults over the age of fifty. The US census did not list individual names other than the heads of families until the 1850 census, so one must make educated guesses as to the identities of other

³⁷ "New York, U.S., Town Clerks' Registers of Men Who Served in the Civil War, ca 1861-1865 [Database online]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.Com Operations, Inc.," 2011, Ancestry.com, <https://www.ancestry.com>.

³⁸ "South Dakota Newspaperman Dies at Rapid City," *The Weekly Pioneer-Times*, November 25, 1937, 4, Newspapers.com, <https://www.newspapers.com>.

members of a household in pre-1850 census data. The adults of the Besançon household are easily accounted for—Pierre Besançon and his wife, Elizabeth—as is the younger female (Julia). The lone male teenager would most logically be James, who would have been sixteen at the time. Lorenzo would have been eighteen. Where was he?

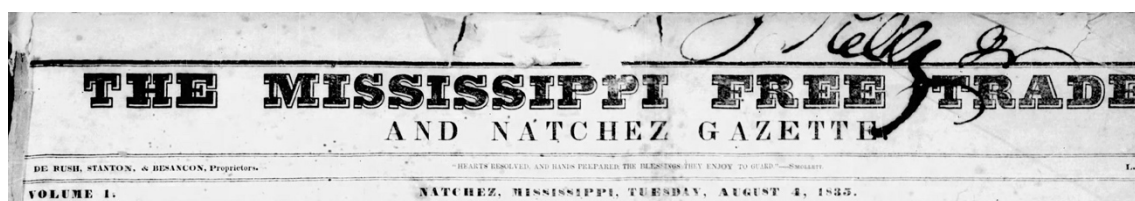
Lorenzo's whereabouts as of the 1830 census cannot be ascertained directly through documentary evidence. However, there is enough indirect evidence to formulate a plausible explanation for his absence in the census records. It is quite possible that he was counted in the census in another household, perhaps that of one of his older siblings or that of a master to whom he was apprenticed. One scenario that is supported by circumstance is that he was apprenticed to his elder brother Peter, who at that time was actively engaged in journalism and printing, having purchased the *Lockport Journal* in 1828. The town of Lockport is in Niagara County in far western New York, approximately thirty miles from Buffalo and over two hundred miles from Cooperstown.

Although speculative, this scenario is logically sound. A year after purchasing the newspaper, Peter changed its name to the *Lockport Balance* and continued to publish the paper until 1834.³⁹ While it is true that neither Peter nor Lorenzo appears in the 1830 census as a resident of Lockport, this does not weigh against either's presence in the town. Neither brother was married and would not have been counted as the "head of family," the only category of the 1830 census naming an individual. As bachelors, they could very well have taken lodgings in a boarding house, where they may (or may not)

³⁹ "About Lockport Balance." [Volume] (Lockport, N.Y.) 1829-1834 « *Chronicling America* « Library of Congress," accessed June 21, 2021, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83031425/>.

have been counted in the census. Lockport, only recently incorporated as a village in 1829, had a population of over 6,000 by 1835 and would have had suitable temporary lodging available.⁴⁰

In 1834, Peter Besançon Jr.'s tenure as publisher of the *Lockport Balance* ended, and he was soon advertising a new business venture some 1,200 miles to the southeast in Natchez, Mississippi. He ran an advertisement in the *Mississippi Free Trader and Natchez Gazette* for "Pearce & Besançon: Booksellers and Stationers," located on Natchez's Main Street. The banner of this newspaper listed "Rush, Stanton, and Besançon" as proprietors of the publication, with L.A. Besançon as editor.⁴¹ These facts point to a close professional relationship between the two brothers and indicate a likelihood that Lorenzo had been the protégé, apprentice, or partner of his older brother in the printing and publishing profession in New York before they left for Mississippi, where they continued their entwined careers.



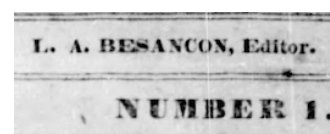
⁴⁰ William Pool, ed., *Landmarks of Niagara County, New York* (Syracuse, New York: D. Mason & Co., 1897), 103, http://archive.org/details/landmarksofniaga00pool_0.

⁴¹ "Pearce & Besançon: Booksellers and Stationers," *Mississippi Free Trader*, February 12, 1836, 3, Newspapers.com, <https://www.newspapers.com>. Library of Congress publishing information indicates that the Besançon of "Rush, Stanton, and Besançon" was Lorenzo, not Peter, as a later formulation of the paper lists L.A. Besançon as the publisher. Lorenzo held the editorship of the paper in all its configurations (daily, weekly, tri-weekly) from 1835 until August of 1839, at which point his brother Peter took over publishing the paper and G.V.H. Forbes the editorship.

Masthead of the first edition of the Mississippi Free Trader under new ownership, August 4, 1835⁴²



Close-up of proprietors on masthead



Close-up of editor on masthead

The evidence clearly supports a Cooperstown-Lockport-Natchez trajectory for Peter Besançon, Jr. and his brother Lorenzo during the years 1828-1835. However, there is one indication that the Besançon brothers, or at least Lorenzo, may have had a brief stay in Washington, DC, on their way south.

The January 25, 1887, edition of the *Times-Picayune* of New Orleans ran an article lauding longtime employee Henry L. Kelsey. Kelsey was a New Englander, born in Connecticut in approximately 1814, who helped in the founding of the *Times-Picayune* in 1837. In recounting his long experience at the paper, Kelsey recalls a colleague, William N. Birckhead, who helped in publishing the paper's first edition. Kelsey claims that Birckhead "was apprenticed in the printing business under L.A. Besançon in Washington and finished his apprenticeship in Natchez. He came to this city [New Orleans] in October 1836."⁴³ However, there is no other evidence to substantiate a Washington sojourn for either Besançon until Peter's previously mentioned altercation

⁴² "Masthead," *Mississippi Free Trader*, August 4, 1835, Newspapers.com, <https://www.newspapers.com>.

⁴³ "Henry L. Kelsey," *The Daily Picayune*, January 25, 1887, 3, Newspapers.com, <https://www.newspapers.com>.

with Interior Secretary Jacob Thompson in 1858, long after the death of his brother Lorenzo in 1853.

What is clear is that Lorenzo and Peter Besançon had left New York and established themselves in business in Natchez, Mississippi, by 1835. Natchez would be the proving ground for Lorenzo's editorial and political careers, which are emblematic of the entwined nature of politics and journalism in nineteenth-century America. As noted by Jefferey L. Pasley, "In nineteenth-century America . . . the newspaper press was the political system's central institution, not simply a forum or atmosphere in which politics took place."⁴⁴ By the time the Besançon brothers arrived in Natchez to take control of the Democratic mouthpiece *Mississippi Free Trader*, the partisan nature of editors and their newspapers was well-entrenched in American society. The so-called "dark ages" of blatantly partisan US journalism had begun around 1800 and reached its climax in the presidential election of 1920 with the nomination of two Ohio newspaper editors, Republican Warren G. Harding and Democrat James M. Cox, as the respective candidates of their parties.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Jeffrey L. Pasley, *"The Tyranny of Printers": Newspaper Politics in the Early American Republic*, Kindle Edition, Jeffersonian America (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2001), 3.

⁴⁵ Pasley, 1–2.

Chapter 2

Natchez, Tunica, and New Orleans: Newspapers and Politics (1834-1847)

“I came into a strange country to make a fortune and acquire a name, independent of relatives or friends, and have succeeded beyond my most sanguine expectation.”

— *L.A. Besançon Letter to J. Starkweather, July 11, 1837*¹

Situated on the eastern shore of the Mississippi River in Adams County, Natchez has a comparatively long history, having been founded by the French in 1716. For five years, until the state capital was moved to Jackson in 1822, Natchez had served that function, as well as being the Mississippi Territory capital prior to statehood in 1817.

After the Spanish declaration of war on England in 1779 and Bernardo de Gálvez’s capture of Natchez, the territory of Mississippi was under Spanish control. District governor Lieutenant Col. Manuel Gayoso de Lemos took up residence in Natchez in 1789, and the town benefitted from his leadership. Gayoso worked with the English-speaking population and brought a sense of order and security to the town.

While the British and French had more or less ignored Natchez, Gayoso promoted the development of commerce and encouraged American settlers. The US-Spanish treaty of 1795 gave the United States control of what would become the southern counties of the state of Mississippi, as well as recognizing US navigation rights on the Mississippi River. At the turn of the nineteenth century, Natchez was poised to enjoy the mighty

¹ “Letter to J. Starkweather,” *The Southron*, February 17, 1842, 3, Newspapers.com, <https://www.newspapers.com>.

river's "glorious age as the great inland carrier of immigrants and trade,"² according to D. Clayton James. "In population and commercial activity" James writes, "Natchez had no rival among other Mississippi towns; Vicksburg and Jackson in the 1820s were insignificant villages, whereas Greenville and Washington were declining rapidly."³ The important men of Natchez were also the important men of Mississippi, especially the coterie of Natchez lawyers who represented the town and Adams County at various levels of government, from state supreme court to the state legislature.

By the time of L.A. Besançon's arrival some time in 1834, Natchez was a bustling, if somewhat rustic, center of commerce for southern Mississippi. Based on averages of the 1830 and 1840 US censuses, Natchez, Mississippi in 1835 was a town of around 3,200 individuals, most of whom were from somewhere else originally, many of them born outside the United States. A good number of residents had moved from the mid-Atlantic states, including many from Virginia, Maryland, and Pennsylvania. James describes mid-nineteenth century Natchez as a "cosmopolitan" town with almost one-third of its white population foreign born.⁴

Although New Yorkers were somewhat less well represented than some other states in the 1835 population of Natchez, Lorenzo and Peter Besançon were not the only

² D. Clayton James, *Antebellum Natchez* (Baton Rouge, La: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1993), 53.

³ James, 112.

⁴ James, 164; "1830 United States Census, Natchez, Adams County, Mississippi, Digital Image, Ancestry.Com.," accessed June 24, 2021, <https://bit.ly/35NuHRx>. "1840 United States Census, Natchez, Adams County, Mississippi, Digital Image, Ancestry.Com.," accessed June 24, 2021, <https://bit.ly/3qpF0ET>.

immigrants from the Empire State. Another transplanted New Yorker, John A. Quitman, had arrived in Natchez in 1821, via Ohio. Quitman would lead a life somewhat parallel to that of L.A. Besançon, although Quitman had a much higher profile and was more successful. He would at times be Besançon's political counterweight and at others a fellow traveler in political circles.⁵

The town of Natchez was divided into upper and lower divisions, with the wealthier class and most respectable businesses located in the upper town. The lower town, on the other hand, was described by English gentleman Charles Augustus Murray as “the most abandoned sink of iniquity in the whole western country . . . the resort of the lowest and most profligate wretches of both sexes.”⁶ As a busy harbor on the Mississippi, lower Natchez was a center of the vices one might expect of a port, including gambling and prostitution. William Johnson, a free black man and owner of several Natchez barbering establishments, kept a decades-long diary in which he detailed both the mundane and important events of his town. The diary is replete with incidents of violence, debauchery, and generalized mayhem, often centered on the lower town. In one single page of the over eight hundred in the combined volumes of his diary, Johnson

⁵ Quitman and Besançon would follow similar paths in life, with both serving in the Mississippi legislature, fighting in the Mexican-American War, and plotting filibusters in Latin America. Quitman, however, was always of a higher position than Besançon, serving in Mexico as a general, for example, while Besançon was a mere captain. In the Mississippi legislature, Quitman was the president of the senate and even acting governor of the state, while Besançon served but two years a representative from Tunica. Quitman was a protégé of John C. Calhoun and had political ambitions beyond Mississippi.

⁶ William Johnson, William Ransom Hogan, and Edwin Adams Davis, *William Johnson's Natchez: The Ante-Bellum Diary of a Free Negro*, Louisiana paperback ed (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1993), 4, <https://archive.org/details/williamjohnsonsn0000john/page/172/mode/2up?q=Tompkins4>.

nonchalantly recounts a drunken mule-team driver, a fight in the sheriff's office, and a fatal blow to the head suffered by a customer at a "house of ill fame."⁷

Upper Natchez was where the real power of the city lay, and from whence the image of "Natchez as a center of aristocratic political dominance originated."⁸ The so-called "nabobs" of Natchez, described by Robert May as "a group of families intertwined in a bewildering maze of a marriage ties," were the respected movers and shakers of the town. The nabobs "had fashioned an elitist mansion society from the profits of their business interests and extensive landholdings."⁹

The nabobs were not only the economic and social leaders of the town, but they were also deeply involved with the "Natchez Junto," either directly or through fiscal backing. According to James, "The Junto's aim was to maintain the political supremacy of Natchez by de-emphasizing its aristocratic reputation, stressing the Jacksonian Democratic sympathies of its majority, and thereby winning support from the ever-growing eastern populace."¹⁰ In other words, while holding dear to their pretensions and privilege, the upper-crust of Natchez was willing to give the appearance of embracing populist Jacksonian ideals. By the mid-1830s, however, the Junto had come undone, as the Natchez nabobs were unable to maintain the hauteur of Mississippi aristocracy in the

⁷ Johnson, Hogan, and Davis, 466.

⁸ James, *Antebellum Natchez*, 101.

⁹ Robert E. May, *John A. Quitman: Old South Crusader*, Southern Biography Series (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1985), 20.

¹⁰ James, *Antebellum Natchez*, 113.

midst of earthy Jacksonian politics. James colorfully describes this situation thusly:

Natchez's politicians "refused to put hayseed in their hair."¹¹

Although president Andrew Jackson was very popular in Mississippi, both for his own military renown as well as for signing the Indian Removal Act into law, he certainly had his detractors. His threat of military force against South Carolina during the Nullification crisis was enough to make at least some Mississippians and Natchez nabobs turn away from the Jacksonian Democratic party altogether, at least temporarily. Among these was Quitman, who joined the National Republicans, which later merged with others in the Whig Party.¹²

The new political lines were being drawn when Lorenzo and Peter Besançon arrived in Natchez. The town which greeted them was one in which voting citizens had to declare a side or be left out of the political culture. By the end of the decade, the Whigs and Democrats "achieved a high degree of stability and nearly fanatical loyalty."¹³

It is unclear if Lorenzo arrived alone or if he was accompanied from the outset by his brother Peter. He worked for short time as foreman for the *Natchez Courier*, a Whig publication,¹⁴ but by August of 1835, L.A. Besançon had established the *Mississippi Free*

¹¹ James, 116.

¹² Christopher J. Olsen, *Political Culture and Secession in Mississippi: Masculinity, Honor, and the Antiparty Tradition, 1830 - 1860*, Oxford University Press Paperback (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2002), 31.

¹³ Olsen, 32.

¹⁴ Robert Clinton Rogers, "From Alienation to Integration: A Social History of Baptists in Antebellum Natchez, Mississippi" (Doctoral Dissertation, New Orleans, LA, New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, 1990), 73.

Trader and Natchez Gazette, for which he was listed as co-proprietor (along with A. De Rush and Stanton, full names unknown) and editor. Within five months, his brother Peter was running advertisements for his bookseller business in the paper.

In a letter to a New York City acquaintance, Mr. J. Starkweather, L.A. Besançon described his arrival in Natchez in 1834. He claims that he managed to save \$1,500 as a journeyman printer, with which money he established his paper. He goes on to brag about how he managed to grow the circulation of his paper to make it “the largest circulation of any paper in the state.” He also crows about his growing income, the thousands of acres of land he owned in Mississippi and Texas, and his appointment as one of three commissioners charged with examining the banks of Mississippi. In short, the letter is full of self-importance and braggadocio.¹⁵

One may be tempted to assign L.A. Besançon’s boastfulness to his relative youth (he was twenty-five) at the time he penned the letter to Starkweather, but Besançon’s public statements and actions continued to reveal a pugnacious self-satisfaction throughout the rest of his life. The Starkweather letter was eventually used against him in a public forum by a political opponent who had it published in several newspapers as an indication of Besançon’s alleged venal and vain nature. The resulting furor would eventually lead to a proposed duel.

¹⁵ “Letter to J. Starkweather.”

Journalism and Politics Lead to Violence

Violence against the press was well-entrenched by the time Besançon was exercising the editorial trade at the *Free Trader*. The use of newspapers as political weapons has a long history in the US, going back to the earliest days of the republic. As pointed out by John Nerone, Benjamin Franklin suggested the public resort to literal cudgels and tarring-and-feathering to curb the excesses of newspapers and their editors. Nerone describes “violence as being an integral part of the culture of public expression in the United States.”¹⁶ One manifestation of press-related violence that was prevalent in the antebellum South was dueling as a means of settling affairs of honor. Nerone describes dueling, like slavery, as another Southern peculiarity. Duels were not only prominently reported in the Southern press, but they frequently involved editors of Southern newspapers.¹⁷ Besançon, although a native-born Northerner, adapted quickly to the Southern climate of violence.¹⁸

¹⁶ John C. Nerone, *Violence Against the Press: Policing the Public Sphere in U.S. History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 8–9.

¹⁷ Nerone, 75. Dick Steward, in describing nineteenth-century Missouri, emphasizes the cultural ties that state had with the South, including the custom of dueling and the climate of violence in which editors plied their trade. Steward writes, “Personal danger should have been part of the job description of pioneer newspapermen.” See Dick Steward, *Duels and the Roots of Violence in Missouri* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2000), 82. Matthew Byron points out that while the South did witness the majority of duels, it was not exclusively a southern institution and had commonalities with other regions. Byron claims that “the ineffectiveness of dueling laws reflects an American culture rather than strictly a southern culture.” See Matthew A. Byron, “Crime and Punishment: The Impotency of Dueling Laws in the United States” (Doctoral Dissertation, University of Arkansas, 2008), 19.

¹⁸ Violence was not the only aspect of Southern culture that Besançon adopted. He would go on to marry into a slave-holding family. The defense of slavery was not uncommon for northerners in the 1830s. Historian Larry Tise writes, “In terms of the number of separate publications on the subject of slavery with the purpose of overturning abolitionism, New Englanders and northerners more than doubled the production of southerners between 1831 and 1840.” See Larry E. Tise, *Proslavery: A History of the Defense of Slavery in America, 1701-1840* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1987), 262.

Mississippi in the mid-1830s was a political hothouse in which local and state issues reflected the contentions of national politics. The nation had only recently passed through the travails of the Nullification Crisis that had been spurred by the South's reaction to the tariffs of 1828 and 1832, which the region found onerous. When the Whig party emerged in opposition to Jacksonian Democrats after the collapse of National Republicans and Henry Clay's defeat in the 1832 presidential election, Mississippi politics mirrored the newly redefined national political landscape, albeit with a Southern twist. Mississippians, like other Southerners, would at times find conflict between their chosen political party and the party's national agenda. When this occurred, allegiances might shift, but the essential Whig versus Democrat dynamic defined the political arena in the Magnolia State. This dynamic played out at the polls, but also in the newspapers, the mass media of the times. In Natchez, the rivalry would manifest in the competition between the Democratic *Mississippi Free Trader* and the Whig-backing *Weekly Courier and Journal*.

Upon arrival in Natchez, L.A. Besançon's intention from the outset was to establish what he called a "Jackson press," and as editor he was unwavering both in his support of the Democratic party as well as his disdain for the opposition, both political and journalistic.¹⁹ At the time of the *Free Trader's* founding, the *Courier* was edited by

¹⁹ Tony Seybert, "The Natchez Slavery Press and the Road to Disunion, 1800-1865" (MA Thesis, Northridge, CA, California State University-Northridge, 2005), n.p., <http://natchezpress.blogspot.com>. Seybert speculates that L.A. Besançon and his two partners, De Rush and Stanton, purchased the necessary equipment for establishing their newspaper from Andrew Marschalk. Not long before he died, Marschalk, known as "the father of Mississippi journalism," wrote a letter to Besançon in which he explained how he came to Mississippi and founded the *Mississippi Herald and Natchez Gazette* in the first decade of the

William Mellen. Later it was edited by Samuel Black, who operated the paper for most of Besançon's tenure at the *Free Trader*. The editorial wrestling between the two sides would prove to be no-holds-barred.

The *Free Trader*, like most other papers of its day, published a wide variety of content, including poetry, prose fiction, advertising, hard news, and editorials.²⁰ It is the last of these that caused Besançon friction with the editors of the *Courier* and other Whig-aligned publications, as well as their readership. In the letter he wrote to his acquaintance Starkweather in New York, Besançon recounts one example of an uproar that almost ended his publishing career, not to mention his life. He writes that “a portion of the Whigs got up a mob because some of my editorial articles did not please them.” He claims that a mob of seven hundred descended upon his office demanding that he retract an offending editorial, but that he was able to talk to them and calm them down, even convincing half of them to become his friends.²¹ However, there was much more to the incident than Besançon let on in his letter to Starkweather. In fact, Besançon had devoted four full-page columns in his newspaper to describing in detail what happened.

Besançon had written an article in which he accused Whig business owners of compelling their employees or journeymen (whom he refers to as “mechanics,” meaning skilled craftsmen) to vote for Whigs at the peril of losing their jobs. The accusatory

1800's. Besançon was obviously an admirer of Marschalk, and he retained the words “Natchez Gazette” in the official title of his new paper in the mast: *The Mississippi Free Trader and Natchez Gazette*.

²⁰ Seybert, n.p. Seybert goes into some detail regarding the editorializing style of Southern newspapers, in which editors' grievances and vendettas were laid out for public consumption.

²¹ “Letter to J. Starkweather.”

article was based on information he had received from one such mechanic, Wesley Shanks. Besançon's article caused "a distinguished gentlemen, a violent political opponent" to rile up a crowd and march on the *Free Trader's* offices. Not finding Besançon, they confronted co-proprietor Stanton, who said he would not deal with a mob. The group agreed to wait and have one of their number speak with Besançon upon his return to the office, which occurred shortly thereafter. In the meeting Besançon assured the man, Col. Adam L. Bingaman (one of Natchez's nabobs), that the *Free Trader* would be willing to retract or correct any inconsistencies or errors in its original article. This seemed to satisfy Bingamen, but when Besançon left the office, he was spotted and someone yelled, "There he goes—lynch him!" Besançon retreated to his office and the mob approached once more, yelling "The *Free Trader* office must come down—that paper must stop!" and "Not an inch of the hide of the editor . . . shall be left!" Another demanded the crowd to "grease him and swallow him."²²

According to Besançon's rather self-serving account, he managed to mollify the crowd by promising to print a disclaimer, which he did. The disclaimer was composed in a lawyerly manner, which allowed him to seemingly acquiesce to the mob's demand while diverting culpability for his original accusation. He writes, "Now we unqualifiedly disclaim the charge [of voting coercion] upon our own responsibility, *because honorable men have pronounced it false*" (emphasis added by Besançon). In recounting the events that led to the mob's action and the later published disclaimer, he manages to reiterate the

²² "A History of the Outrage Monday Night, November 2," *Mississippi Free Trader*, November 13, 1835, Newspapers.com, <https://www.newspapers.com>.

charge that so infuriated the mob while at the same time avoiding any direct accountability by claiming he was simply printing what someone else had told him, and that he would take it on the word of honorable men that it may not be true. Additionally, he makes it appear as if he were the victim.²³

The details of the affair were repeated by other Democratic papers in the region, and it soon became a cause célèbre, allowing them to amplify the original charge and providing a convenient vehicle for criticizing the Whig opposition. The *Weekly Mississippian's* account of the incident refers to Besançon as “a gentleman of fine talents and character,” and accuses the mob’s chosen negotiator, Bingaman, of acting “in the very spirit of despotism,” while claiming that Whig papers were allowed to “state falsehoods and publish infamous advertisements about respectable men,” but that when a Jacksonian paper’s editor “dares to publish a fact [based] upon respectable testimony” he is threatened with his life.²⁴

The newspaper wars between Democratic and Whig publications raged throughout Besançon’s tenure at the *Free Trader*, and both sides openly promoted their preferred candidates and policies while slinging mud and pouring invective at the opposition.²⁵ In January 1837, Besançon became the sole proprietor of the *Free Trader*,

²³ “A History of the Outrage.”

²⁴ “Communicated,” *The Weekly Mississippian*, December 11, 1835, Newspapers.com, <https://www.newspapers.com>.

²⁵ Name-calling, mud-slinging, libel, and slander were par for the course in mid-nineteenth century American newspapers. William H Lyon writes that Missouri editor William Gilpin branded his opponents as ‘Federalists,’ ‘toadies,’ and members of the ‘dung hill breed,’” and continuing with “jackass,”

and that year was a contentious and trying one for the young editor.²⁶ The political atmosphere of Natchez would soon become even more charged when Besançon became personally involved with the state legislature.

Five months after Besançon assumed sole ownership of his publication, the May 19, 1837, issue of the *Free Trader* ran a short piece reprinted from the *Grand Gulf Advertiser* stating that the Mississippi state legislature had selected three men “to make a thorough investigation into the affairs of all the banks of this state.” The article lists the names of the three bank commissioners—L.A. Besançon of Natchez, James McClaren of Clinton, and E.F. Calhoun of Columbus—and notes that they will have the same salaries as that of the state legislators. “A more fortunate selection could not have been made,” editorializes the piece.²⁷

The congratulatory final remark aside, the rather understated article could hardly be accused of being overly partisan. Nevertheless, the legislature’s appointments of the three men provoked the publication of an unattributed article in the Natchez *Courier* that mockingly proposed seven rules “by the observance of which the most insignificant man may bring himself into pretty considerable notice.” These rules include such sardonic recommendations as “Let him hang around and pester the legislature of the State every

“poltroon” and “of the vagrant set.” See William H. Lyon, *The Pioneer Editor in Missouri 1808-1860* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1965), 75.

²⁶ “Dissolution,” *Mississippi Free Trader*, August 6, 1839, Newspapers.com, <https://www.newspapers.com>.

²⁷ “Correspondence of the Grand Gulf Advertiser,” *Mississippi Free Trader*, May 26, 1837, Newspapers.com, <https://www.newspapers.com>.

succeeding session, seeking office, until he gets one,” “Let him attack every man, set of men, institution or party who have character, reputation, and the confidence of the people,” and “Let him deny, stoutly, that the Government of the United States is the best government on Earth.”²⁸ The writer does not mention Besançon by name in the piece, but the next week the *Courier* dropped any pretense of maintaining a general condemnation of aspirational politicians and lamented with specific and pointed irony that “the Legislature could not make a better choice than a land auctioneer, a tavern-keeper, and a demagogue’s tool,” the last of which undoubtedly refers to Besançon. The *Courier* asked, “Is there a man, white or black, less competent in mind, manners or character, than *Free Trader* Besançon, to enter a bank, look into its vaults, examine the accounts of private individuals, understand its operations, and cause it to keep on the safe side of solvency?”²⁹

The publication of the “Rules” article incensed Besançon. In the May 27, 1837, issue of the *Free Trader*, he replied derisively that the unnamed author of the rules must have been speaking from experience when he wrote them.³⁰ Besançon was determined to find out who had penned the piece, and he finally settled on prominent Natchez lawyer Thomas Armat. When Besançon wrote to Armat and asked him if he had authored the

²⁸ “Rules by the Observance of Which the Most Insignificant Man May Bring Himself into Pretty Considerable Notice,” *The Weekly Courier and Journal*, May 26, 1837, Newspapers.com, <https://www.newspapers.com>.

²⁹ “The Late Miscalled Legislature,” *The Weekly Courier and Journal*, June 2, 1837, Newspapers.com, <https://www.newspapers.com>.

³⁰ “Besançon’s Reply to ‘Rules,’” *Mississippi Free Trader*, May 27, 1837, Newspapers.com, <https://www.newspapers.com>.

satirical article, Armat denied having done so. Besançon, however, was unsatisfied with Armat's response and felt that his only recourse was to challenge him to a duel, which was to take place on the opposite shore of the Mississippi on June 1. A flurry of correspondence ensued between Besançon's and Armat's seconds and other involved parties, and specific rules were drawn up (*e.g.*, four pistols for each duelist, the fight to end with the death of one or the other).³¹ Fortunately, before the combatants could take the field, Besançon was finally convinced by the testimony of others that Armat had not, in fact, authored the "Rules" article, and so the proposed duel never took place.

It was ironic that Besançon had resorted to dueling at all given that some twelve weeks prior to issuing his challenge to Armat he had published an article praising Texas' decision to punish two respected men, General Felix Houston and General Johnson, for a duel in which Johnson was wounded. The Texas congress had recently passed a law making dueling punishable by death. The article describes Texas' law and actions as "setting a noble example for the civilized world by the manner in which she treats this barbarous custom."³²

Dueling in the antebellum South was quite common among the men of the upper class, unlike in the North, where it had been fading away.³³ John Franklin ties dueling to

³¹ Seybert, "The Natchez Slavery Press," n.p.

³² "Duel-Texas," *Mississippi Free Trader*, March 10, 1837, Newspapers.com, <https://www.newspapers.com>. Note that the use of titles such as "Lieutenant Colonel," "Colonel," and "General" does not necessarily imply actual military service or rank, as these titles were often used as honorifics, with higher ranks denoting more respect for the person. Sometimes the title derived from service in state militias. At various times, L.A. Besançon was addressed with all these titles.

³³ Kenneth S. Greenberg describes dueling as part of a complex system of social interaction among white men in the South. The system included the exchange of gifts, which Greenberg marks as a privilege

European traditions, class distinctions, and even slavery, stating that slave owners (“gentlemen”), being accustomed to absolute power, could not conceive of allowing any offense that would question that power or impugn their honor. Dueling was not something to be hidden either, but rather something that a gentleman of means and honor might expect to encounter or instigate, so one had to be prepared. Franklin describes a Major Dunn of New Orleans establishing an academy in that city that was “little more than a school for duelists.” Franklin also states, “No class of Southerner, perhaps, went to the field of honor more frequently than newspaper editors.”³⁴

One might expect that Besançon, a transplanted Yankee printer from New York, might not have much in common with the image of a dueling slave-master and plantation gentleman. However, he was in fact both a slave owner and a landowner, if not a genuine aristocratic southern planter, and he seems to have taken to southern ideals of honor rather quickly. Seybert claims that Besançon participated in two more duels in 1837, one of which ended in withdrawal, as in the Armat affair, and another that ended in the death

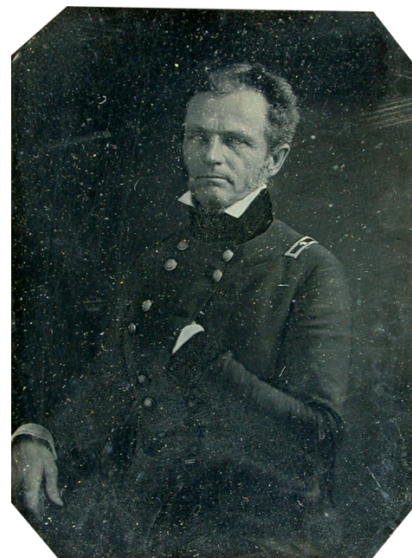
employed by white men as a means of signifying wealth, status, and power in relationships. The use of gifts was part of the ritual of dueling is illustrated in the 1826 duel between secretary of state Henry Clay and Virginia senator John Randolph, in which Randolph plied his opponent and his seconds with gifts. He went as far as having commemorative gold gift coins minted for the occasion. See Kenneth S. Greenberg, *Honor & Slavery: Lies, Duels, Noses, Masks, Dressing as a Woman, Gifts, Strangers, Humanitarianism, Death, Slave Rebellions, the Proslavery Argument, Baseball, Hunting, and Gambling in the Old South* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1996), 64–65.

³⁴ Franklin, *The Militant South*, 44–45. Frederic Hudson, in *Journalism in the United States, 1690-1872*, gives details on at least twenty duels in which editors of Southern newspapers were involved. See Frederic Hudson, *Journalism in the United States from 1690 to 1872* (New York, NY: Harper & Brothers, 1873), <https://archive.org/details/journalisminunit00huds>.

of Besançon's opponent, although Seybert acknowledges the evidence for these two alleged duels is unsubstantiated.³⁵

At the end of the summer that had begun with his challenge to Armat, Besançon found himself embroiled in yet another situation that could have led to dueling but was instead decided by a brawl in which Besançon and his opponent, John Quitman, went at each other with canes.

Quitman was running to be elected as Major General of the 2nd Division of the Mississippi State Militia. On encountering Besançon on election day, Quitman asked him if he thought him (Quitman) a "demagogue," as Besançon had stated in the *Free Trader*. When Besançon said that he did indeed believe him to be a demagogue and that he had no intention of taking back his words, Quitman struck him. "He then attacked me with an iron cane," wrote Besançon. "I made an unsuccessful thrust with a dirk cane, which was in my hand."³⁷ In



*John A. Quitman, c. 1846*³⁶

³⁵ Seybert, "The Natchez Slavery Press," n.p. Seybert relies on an article by Edwin A. Miles, who cites a letter from one of Besançon's relations in New York for his information on the man who was allegedly killed by Besançon. See Edwin A. Miles, "The Mississippi Press in the Jackson Era, 1824-1841," *Journal of Mississippi History*, n.d.

³⁶ *John A. Quitman, c. 1846*, c 1846, Photograph, c 1846, Wikimedia Commons, https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/e/e0/John_A_Quitman_c1846.png.

³⁷ "A Concise History of the Various Whig Insurrections and Violations of Law in This City, Including the Late Exploit of a Political Demagogue, on the Day of the Election for Major General, for Which He Was a Candidate," *Mississippi Free Trader*, September 12, 1837, Newspapers.com, <https://www.newspapers.com>.

his diary, William Johnson recounts that Besançon “made a thrust at [Quitman] that would have killed him had not a piece of Silver in the Pocket of the Judge arrested the Progress of the sword [*i.e.*, Besançon’s “dirk cane”].”³⁸

Tony Seybert speculates that the brawl may have substituted for a duel on Quitman’s part, as “he had been a vocal advocate of an anti-dueling society and he did not want to appear inconsistent before his admirers.”³⁹ Although this appears to be the end of Besançon’s physical quarrels with Quitman, he wielded his cane at least one more time, purportedly giving a caning to Grenada Bank president F.E. Plummer in 1838, causing Plummer to beg for the beating to end.⁴⁰

Besançon as Bank Commissioner

John Quitman’s quarrel with L.A. Besançon can be tied directly to Besançon’s elevation to bank commissioner, as reflected in the coverage of the appointment in the *Natchez Courier*. The *Courier* had insinuated that Besançon had gained his appointment in exchange for promoting the gubernatorial aspirations of Alexander McNutt, a Democratic state senator. With McNutt’s patronage, Besançon received one of the three commissioner appointments, while McNutt received the backing of Besançon’s *Free Trader*. The *Courier* bluntly states, “McNutt voted a member of Congress’ salary into the pockets of Besançon, and Besançon’s *Free Trader* can now support McNutt for the office

³⁸ Johnson, Hogan, and Davis, *William Johnson’s Natchez*, 191.

³⁹ Seybert, “The Natchez Slavery Press,” n.p.

⁴⁰ Ryan Chamberlain, *Pistols, Politics and the Press: Dueling in 19th Century American Journalism* (Jefferson, N.C: McFarland & Co., Inc. Publishers, 2009), 81.

of Governor!”⁴¹ This *quid pro quo* worked out well for both parties, as McNutt was elected governor in November 1837 and Besançon used his appointment as a springboard for launching his own political career two years later.

McNutt’s election to the Mississippi governorship occurred six months into the Panic of 1837, which was precipitated by president Andrew Jackson’s refusal to re-charter the Second Bank of the United States. The national bank’s twenty-year charter was set to expire in January 1836, and Nicholas Biddle, the Bank’s president, lobbied hard for renewing the bank’s charter for another two decades. However, Jackson had grown to loathe the bank, which he considered to be corrupt and on the side of monied class, which grated against his populist ideals. In addition, Jackson felt that Biddle had a vendetta against him and was working with elements of the press to save the bank on behalf of the bank’s private backers who provided eighty percent of the bank’s capital.⁴²

Jackson swore to kill the Bank, and he did. He then distributed the government funds that the bank had held to various state banks, which promptly went on unbridled sprees, lending money for the construction of railroads and other infrastructure projects. English investors in these banks had strong interests in maintaining a viable US financial system, mostly as a way to guarantee the viability of the cotton trade, but they soon began to realize the weakness and corruption of the state banks. A rise in lending rates ensued. The rise in rates combined with a precipitous (thirty to forty percent) drop in the price of

⁴¹ “The Late Miscalled Legislature.”

⁴² Scott Reynolds Nelson, *A Nation of Deadbeats: An Uncommon History of America’s Financial Disasters*, 1st ed (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2012), 108-113.

cotton, and state banks soon began defaulting on loans and panic set in. Scott Reynolds Nelson writes, “The panic of 1837 was the first fully national suspension of bank payments in the United States.”⁴³

With McNutt in the governor’s office and Besançon installed as a bank commissioner, the pieces were in place for a drama that was to consume Mississippi politics for several years—the Union Bank debacle.

In the 1832 Mississippi constitutional convention, John Quitman had been instrumental in setting up the process necessary for the state to grant a charter and issue bonds for the establishment of banks. His legislation was formulated so that any bill proposing such a charter would have to pass through two sessions of the legislature before being enacted, as a precautionary measure.

In 1838, the Union Bank cleared the legislative hurdles and was chartered and funded with state-backed bonds and a \$5,000,000 stock investment that had been pushed through by Quitman. The Union Bank would soon run into financial trouble due to poor investments and lending, as management used bank resources for political maneuvering and currying of favor. The Union Bank was unable to redeem the bonds held by investors and the state was left holding the bag.

Quitman was blamed in part for this situation because he had authored the constitutional process through which the bank was chartered. Quitman, who was at that time a Whig, was eventually forced to publicly acknowledge his support for the state

⁴³ Nelson, 121.

making good on the bonds and paying them off. The Democrats, on the other hand, were in favor of non-payment of the bonds, wondering why Mississippi's taxpayers should be left to pick up the tab for the Union Bank's mismanagement. The situation was complicated by the fact that some of the legislators themselves had stock in the company.

This was the context for Besançon's appointment as bank commissioner by the legislature led by McNutt. McNutt would try to have it both ways vis-à-vis the Union Bank, as he approved of chartering the bank as state senator, but as governor he pioneered the concept of "repudiation," or abandonment of the debt.⁴⁴ Besançon, for his part, would continue his duties as bank commissioner and editor of the *Free Trader* for the next year and a half.

Running the *Free Trader*, examining Mississippi's banks, and participating in duels and fisticuffs took up most of L.A. Besançon's time in 1837-1838, but he still managed to find a few free moments to woo his future bride, Mary Octavia Woodruff. Octavia was the daughter of Clark Woodruff, a Louisiana judge and school superintendent with origins in Connecticut and strong ties to Andrew Jackson, under whom he served in the Battle of New Orleans in 1815. The Woodruffs lived on a plantation called The Myrtles in St. Francisville, West Feliciana Parish, that had been built in 1796 by General "Whiskey Dave" Bradford, Octavia's maternal grandfather and infamous leader of the Whiskey Rebellion of 1791-1794.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Nelson, 124.

⁴⁵ Troy Taylor, "Myrtles Plantation" Legends, Lore and Lies," American Hauntings, accessed July 2, 2021, <https://www.americanhauntingsink.com/myrtles>. The house today is tourist destination and bed and breakfast. It is also well known for the many supposed ghosts that lurk about the premises.

Clark Woodruff had his doubts as to Besançon's character and ability to maintain his daughter properly, and Besançon felt motivated to defend himself to his future father-in-law. In a letter dated April 22, 1838, Besançon writes, "Relative to private character, inquire of all of the worth who know me and are not personally as well politically hostile." He goes on to boast, "As regards 'this world's goods,' I have already sufficient to enable me to support a lady of mine in such style as she might desire, and I have fair prospects of acquiring and independence."⁴⁶ Evidently, this sufficed to assuage Woodruff's fears for his daughter's future, as L.A. Besançon and Octavia Woodruff were married in New Orleans on May 10, 1838. Other life changes were soon to come for Besançon.

Woodruff need not to have been so concerned, for Besançon was indeed industrious, and he had friends and acquaintances in high places, not the least of whom was former president Jackson, whose term had ended in March 1837. Five months after marrying Octavia Woodruff, Besançon found himself writing another letter, this time from the Hermitage, Jackson's Tennessee home. In a letter addressed to his father, Besançon recounts his presence at "a Gathering of the Chiefs" at which Jackson, whom Besançon refers to as "the slumbering lion," was moved to comment on the banks, and emotional topic for Old Hickory, given his history.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ Lorenzo A Besançon, "Letter to Honorable Clark Woodruff," n.d., The Myrtles Plantation Archives.

⁴⁷ Lorenzo A Besançon, "Letter to Dr. P. Besançon," September 9, 1838, The Myrtles Plantation Archive

With his new wife in tow, Besançon began to make plans for his future. In January 1839, Besançon sold a stake in the *Free Trader* to Thomas J. Haliday, who claimed that he would refrain from strong political stances. In July of that same year, he sold his remaining share, and his brother Peter bought into a partnership in the paper with Haliday. Peter Besançon and Haliday installed the paper's longtime literary editor, G.V.H. Forbes, as the paper's managing editor. The trio of new owners and editor signed on to Haliday's pledge of greater nonpartisanship in the paper's content. One year later, on July 14, 1840, Haliday and Peter Besançon sold the paper to T.A.S. Doniphan, thus ending five years of association of the Besançon family name with the *Free Trader*.⁴⁸ Under Doniphan's leadership, the paper continued to laud L.A. Besançon in its pages. L.A. Besançon had spent nearly four years as proprietor and editor of the *Free Trader* during a politically tumultuous time for Mississippi. It would not be his final efforts in the publishing or newspaper business, as he would take up the profession again in Louisiana.

Also in January 1839, Besançon resigned as bank commissioner, an event that coincided with the bank commission's issuance of its official report.⁴⁹ Leaving his post as commissioner did not signal the end of his involvement with the Union Bank scandal,

⁴⁸ "Gleanings, Multum in Parvo," *The Southern Banner*, January 25, 1839, Library of Congress, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov>; "To the Patrons of the Free Trader," *Mississippi Free Trader*, July 31, 1839, Newspapers.com, <https://www.newspapers.com>; "To Subscribers," *Mississippi Free Trader*, August 29, 1840, Newspapers.com, <https://www.newspapers.com>; "Notice," *The Natchez Courier*, July 18, 1840, Newspapers.com, <https://www.newspapers.com>; "Dissolution," *Mississippi Free Trader*, August 6, 1839, Newspapers.com, <https://www.newspapers.com>.

⁴⁹ "To His Excellency, A.G. McNutt, Governor of the State of Mississippi," *Mississippi Free Trader*, January 29, 1839, Newspapers.com, <https://www.newspapers.com>.

however, as he would shortly take up the issue with its president, Hiram G. Runnels, in the spring of 1839.

Runnels had served as governor of Mississippi from 1833 to 1835. In 1838 he was appointed president of the newly chartered Union Bank. A man of volatile nature, Runnels was known to be loud, boisterous, and belligerent. Mississippi historian David Sansing claims that Runnels lost his 1835 re-election bid because of an “emotional outburst against one of his opponents during which he used some very harsh and unparliamentary language.”⁵⁰ Despite his rather fearsome reputation, Runnels’s appointment as the president of the Union Bank put him in the crosshairs of (recent) bank commissioner L.A. Besançon, who published a signed open letter to Runnels in the February 27 edition of the *Free Trader* in which he minced no words as to his feelings about Runnel’s conduct as president of the Union Bank.

The opening sentence of the letter begins with a thundering salvo that was matched only by the even more inflammatory accusations that would follow:

Occupying the position you do, inflated as you unquestionably are by the moneyed power which you control, and irascible as your temper is known to be, it might have been expected that you would endeavor to crush those who, not possessed with your great financial wisdom, and who saw not with your eyes, dared dissent from your views and condemn the measures which your gigantic intellect conceived.⁵¹

⁵⁰ David G. Sansing, “Mississippi History Now | Hiram G. Runnels, Ninth Governor of Mississippi: 1833-1835,” accessed July 2, 2021, <https://www.mshistorynow.mdah.ms.gov/issue/hiram-g-runnels-ninth-governor-of-mississippi-1833-1835>.

⁵¹ “To H.G. Runnels, Esq., President of the Union Bank,” *Mississippi Free Trader*, February 27, 1839, Newspapers.com, <https://www.newspapers.com>.

This salutation was followed by an enumerated list of twelve charges in which Besançon accused Runnels of lying, cheating, stealing, and bribing as president of the Union Bank. While accusatory letters and editorials were not particularly unusual for the times (indeed, they were quite common), Besançon's blunt and vehement attack on a man known to be prone to violence showed that Besançon was either fearless or was filled with righteous indignation, or perhaps both. Fortunately for Besançon, he evidently did not suffer the full wrath that Runnels was capable of delivering. Instead, he seized the moment to his advantage.⁵³



*Hiram G. Runnels*⁵²

Evidently having tired of the publishing world and having successfully discharged his duties as bank commissioner, L.A. Besançon wished to use his moment in the spotlight as an anti-bank crusader to pursue political ambitions. In plotting his path to the legislature, Besançon had to consider that Natchez was home to many established, well-known, and experienced politicians of the nabob variety, and perhaps this line of reasoning was the motive for his selling off the

⁵² *Hiram G. Runnels*, Unknown, Photograph, Unknown, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, <http://www.mshistorynow.mdah.ms.gov/images/259.jpg>.

⁵³ "To H.G. Runnels." Besançon was indeed lucky to escape Runnels's infamous fury, but others were not so lucky. While running for a seat in the Mississippi state legislature in the 1840 election (while still serving as the Union Bank president), Runnels gave a caning to the sitting governor, McNutt, in the streets of Jackson and was involved in a duel in which he wounded an editor of a Jackson, Mississippi newspaper who had dared to accuse him of mismanagement of the Union Bank. see May, *John A. Quitman*, 117.

Free Trader and making a move to a less populated and more politically inviting location. With this in mind, in the summer of 1839 Besançon placed an advertisement seeking carpenters to build a house in Commerce, Mississippi, a small port town on the Mississippi in the recently created (1836) Tunica County, some 265 miles from Natchez in the far northwestern corner of the state.⁵⁴ In the late summer of 1839, L.A. Besançon and family made their move to Tunica County.

In November, Besançon was elected representative to the legislature. However, like many events in his life, his election was not without controversy.⁵⁵ No sooner had the new legislature met in Jackson than Besançon was faced with two impediments to his taking his seat as Tunica's new representative. The first obstacle he faced was an argument made by his opponents that he was not constitutionally eligible to be elected, as he had resided only three months in Tunica prior to the November 1839 election. The Mississippi constitution required candidates to have twelve months of residency. The Mississippi House of Representatives charged the election committee with investigating the legitimacy of Besançon's election.⁵⁶

⁵⁴ "House Carpenters Wanted," *Mississippi Free Trader*, July 25, 1839, Newspapers.com, <https://www.newspapers.com>.

⁵⁵ "Huzza for Tunica," *The Vicksburg Tri-Weekly Sentinel*, November 11, 1839, Newspapers.com, <https://www.newspapers.com>. According to the 1840 U.S. Census for Tunica County, which did not include slaves, Besançon's household consisted of six individuals: one male between the ages 20-30, one male between ages 30-40, one female under age five, and three females between the ages 15-20. See "1840 United States Census, Tunica, Mississippi, Digital Image, Ancestry.Com," accessed July 4, 2021, <https://bit.ly/3AIUoXn>.

⁵⁶ "Lobby Notes by a Denizen, No. 19," *The Weekly Courier and Journal*, January 22, 1840, Newspapers.com, <https://www.newspapers.com>.

It was the second charge, however, that was perhaps more serious—an unspecified count of forgery, which he denied. If found guilty, his accusers claimed, he would be ineligible to serve in the legislature. Given the rather lengthy list of crimes, sins, and other shenanigans that could be pinned to various members of the legislature, it seems apparent that the charges against Besançon were based more on political expediency than out of any true concern for the honor and integrity of the legislature. Nonetheless, Besançon would need to clear both hurdles that had been placed before him if he were to take his seat in the chamber.

While the newspapers devoted a goodly amount of ink to discussing the charges against Besançon, they either could not discover the details or were unwilling to publish them if they could, although the later possibility is highly unlikely, given the papers' willingness to sling mud whenever possible. On January 25, 1840, the *Madison Whig Advocate* of Canton, Mississippi, ran a short blurb claiming that "Genl. L.A. Besançon, member of the Legislature and former Editor of the *Free Trader*, has been arraigned for forgery." This elicited a response from Besançon that he had not been *arraigned*, but rather he himself had *requested* an investigation into the forgery charges so that he might clear his name and protect his reputation.⁵⁷

In the meantime, the legislature and its committees went about their work. On February 5, the *Natchez Courier* ran an article stating that on January 25 the legislature

⁵⁷ "Besançon Arraigned," *The Madison Whig Advocate*, January 25, 1840, Newspapers.com, <https://www.newspapers.com>; "Besançon Replies," *The Madison Whig Advocate*, February 1, 1840, Newspapers.com, <https://www.newspapers.com>.

had declared Besançon's election valid and cleared him of the forgery charge; he was now eligible to take his seat. This came only after much rancorous testimony from both sides of the legislative aisles. "Mr. Besançon," the article stated, "said that it seemed as though all the shafts of envy and malice were hurled against him; there was a secret Iago in the hall who sought the assassination of his rights and character."⁵⁸

Besançon would use his seat to continue his investigation and oversight of banks in the role of chairman of the committee on banks and currency. The banking problems that consumed Mississippi in the early 1840s were not limited to the Union Bank; however, the Union Bank is the illustrative case of Mississippi's banking crisis. The issues at play in Mississippi arose in the midst of the depression touched off by the panic of 1837, which affected the entire country for about a decade. The problem with Mississippi's banks, and the Union Bank in particular, is that they overextended credit, sold their debt to other states' banks (*e.g.*, in Pennsylvania), and were unable to redeem their post-notes (*i.e.*, bank notes payable at a later date). Given that Mississippi's legislature had invested deeply in financing the Union Bank, its potential failure was not only a black mark against the politicians who had championed it, but also a millstone that threatened to drag the state even deeper into depression and financial doom if the state's taxpayers were forced to pay the banks' debts. As a former bank commissioner and now chairman of the Mississippi House of Representative's committee on banking, Besançon was set to play an important role that would have implications both public and personal.

⁵⁸ "Lobby Notes by a Denizen, No. 27," *The Weekly Courier and Journal*, February 5, 1840, Newspapers.com, <https://www.newspapers.com>.

Governor Alexander McNutt was in favor of repudiation, or simply not taking responsibility for the state's debts. According to the Whigs, in repudiating Mississippi's debt, McNutt and others of the so-called "Locofoco" branch of the Democratic party were guilty of trying to "legalize an offence heretofore regarded as one of the highest crimes known to the laws of the land," and such men "will enjoy an immortality of infamy never equaled in the annals of villainy."⁵⁹

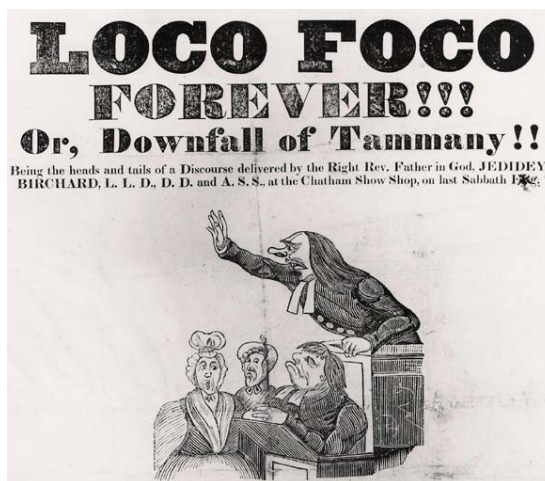
The Locofocos were a Democratic faction who were against state banks and financial speculation, amongst other issues. They had formed from a section of working-class men of northern Democrats and were named after a new type of sulfur-based friction match. They had used the matches to light candles when the Democratic party elites had turned off the gas lamps at a meeting of New York's Tammany Hall in a futile attempt to end the upstarts' challenge to the establishment's proposed slate of candidates in an upcoming election.⁶⁰ Although northern in origin, the Locofocos were also represented in the South. One such southern Locofoco, Alabama lawyer Perez Colman, was the editor and publisher of *The Loco-Foco*, a paper which managed to espouse equal

⁵⁹ "More Locofocoism," *Vicksburg Daily Whig*, February 17, 1840, Newspapers.com, <https://www.newspapers.com>.

⁶⁰ Daniel Walker Howe, *What Hath God Wrought: The Transformation of America, 1815-1848*, Kindle Edition, The Oxford History of the United States (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), loc. 9569.

rights for working men while at the same time supporting slavery.⁶¹ Undoubtedly, Colman, as a prominent politically-motivated southern editor, would have been well known to both McNutt and Besançon.

Debates on the banking crisis and how it should be handled raged throughout 1840, with little progress made towards resolving the issues. By December, in the roiling political turbulence of the crisis, Besançon and several other Democrats found



Drawing depicting Locofoco sermon⁶²

themselves in the political minority of the counties they represented, and petitions were circulated demanding that they resign their seats in Mississippi's House of Representatives. The petition against Besançon, however, garnered only two signatures. One of those signatures, curiously enough, was that of his older brother, E.R. (Edward) Besançon, who was himself a Democrat. In defending his House seat, L.A. Besançon

⁶¹ Anthony Comegna, "'The Dupes of Hope Forever:' The Loco-Foco or Equal Rights Movement, 1820s-1870s" (Doctoral Dissertation, Pittsburgh, Pa., University of Pittsburgh, 2016), 110, http://d-scholarship.pitt.edu/27222/1/AnthonyComegnaDissertation_1.pdf.

⁶² Jedidey Bircharde, *Loco Foco Forever!!! Or, Downfall of Tammany!!!: Being the Heads and Tails of a Discourse Delivered by the Right Rev. Father in God, Jedidey Bircharde, L.L.D., D.D. and A.S.S., at the Chatham Show Shop, on Last Sabbath Ev'g*, 1837, Print, 1837, <http://www.gutenberg.org/greenberg/archive/detail/ LocoFocoForever.jpg.html>.

presented a competing petition containing the signatures of Tunica County residents, all but two of whom were Whigs, requesting that he do so.⁶³

One Democrat who did resign his seat was John Jenkins, who had represented Hinds County, and whom the *Southron* of Jackson characterized as the “late locofoco *mis*-representative.” Elected to replace him was former governor and current president of the Union Bank, Hiram G. Runnels, thus setting the stage for a legislative showdown between the bank president and the anti-bank crusader.⁶⁴

On January 5, 1841, Governor McNutt sent a communication to the Mississippi legislature detailing his position on various matters of importance to the state and its executive branch. Among these issues was the condition of the state’s banks. McNutt claimed that the issuance of state bonds that had helped fund the Mississippi Union Bank at its founding had been a constitutionally illegal act. He argued that since the Union Bank and several other Mississippi banks were unable to pay their debts, the legislature must move to repudiate the state’s bonds and liquidate the banks’ assets to help pay them, at least in part. L.A. Besançon introduced just such a liquidation measure in the House of Representatives; however, the Whigs had gained the upper hand in terms of numbers, and they tried to maneuver to have Whigs take over the banking committee. This was championed by Runnels, amongst others. Besançon, having already suspected this play,

⁶³ “Resignation of Members of the Legislature,” *Mississippi Free Trader*, December 17, 1840, Newspapers.com, <https://www.newspapers.com>. It is unknown when, exactly, E.R. Besançon arrived in Mississippi, but at some point, he had abandoned New York and followed his two siblings south to engage in land speculation in Mississippi and Texas.

⁶⁴ “Ex-Governor Hiram G. Runnels,” *The Southron*, December 31, 1840, Newspapers.com, <https://www.newspapers.com>.

declared that he had already prepared his letter of resignation as chairman of the banking committee.⁶⁵

Besançon and Runnels kept up a running contest for the entire legislative session. At one point, Runnels referred to an article in the *Lexington Union* which purported that Besançon had made a speech in the House of Representatives that had been derogatory towards him (Runnels). He claimed that Besançon had made no such speech, because “no member of the House could make such an one [*sic*] in regard to him with impunity.” He called for Besançon’s disavowal of the alleged speech, to which “Besançon then read over the remarks reported in the *Lexington Union* and, in a cool and emphatic manner, affirmed the delivery of a portion of them, and pointed out some slight errors in other parts.” When another representative attested to having heard Besançon deliver such remarks, Runnels uncharacteristically let the matter drop.⁶⁶

When the bill to liquidate the Union Bank finally came up for a vote, Runnels voted “yea” and Besançon voted “nay.”⁶⁷ Besançon felt that the liquidation of the bank’s assets would benefit only the bank’s shareholders and leave over much debt for the taxpayers. As described in the *Free Trader*, the “true object [of the bill] is to release the shareholders from all liability and throw the Union Bank into the hands of the State, and

⁶⁵ Alexander G. McNutt, “Governor’s Message,” *Mississippi Free Trader*, January 14, 1841, Newspapers.com, <https://www.newspapers.com>. “Mississippi Legislature, Wednesday, January 6,” *Vicksburg Daily Whig*, January 8, 1841, Newspapers.com, <https://www.newspapers.com>.

⁶⁶ “Mississippi Legislature, Tuesday, January 20,” *The Weekly Mississippian*, January 22, 1841, Newspapers.com, <https://www.newspapers.com>.

⁶⁷ “Mississippi Legislature, Tuesday Evening, February 2,” *Vicksburg Daily Whig*, February 5, 1841, Newspapers.com, <https://www.newspapers.com>.

consequently the people will have to pay the bonds and perhaps a portion of the bills.”⁶⁸ The Senate amended the House bill and passed it to the governor, who promptly vetoed the bill because it required the state to pay the bank’s bonds. Besançon moved that the House print five hundred copies of the veto message to shame those who proceeded to condemn the governor for his actions. The bill was once again in limbo.⁶⁹

By mid-summer of 1841, the Union Bank issue was still up in the air. The July 17 issue of the *Lexington Union* ran a full-page, front-page article by Rep. Joseph S. Leake of Lowndes County that rehashed the entire Union Bank history and picked apart every argument against debt repudiation made by the Whigs. These ranged from the potential of Mississippi’s reputation being ruined to fear of military attack by Great Britain, whose citizens had invested in the bank and wanted their money.⁷⁰ The *Vicksburg Daily Whig* reprinted an article from the *New York Journal of Commerce* which claimed that if Mississippians repudiated their debt, “It will hunt [*sic*] them like a spectre, by day and by night.”⁷¹

Other states and other countries were anxious to see Mississippi make good on its debt obligations, but this was proving difficult because of the nature of the Mississippi

⁶⁸ “House of Representatives, January 30,” *Mississippi Free Trader*, February 11, 1841, Newspapers.com, <https://www.newspapers.com>.

⁶⁹ “House of Representatives, February 5,” *Mississippi Free Trader*, February 11, 1841, Newspapers.com, <https://www.newspapers.com>.

⁷⁰ Joseph S. Leake, “From the Columbus Democrat: Gentlemen,” *The Lexington Union*, July 17, 1841, Newspapers.com, <https://www.newspapers.com>.

⁷¹ “Repudiation,” *Vicksburg Daily Whig*, December 31, 1841, Newspapers.com, <https://www.newspapers.com>.

legislature and judiciary. The members of the legislature were directly involved in regulating an entity in which many were invested (*e.g.*, H.G. Runnels), and the judiciary was elected for only brief terms, thereby denying an independent judiciary. While other states would eventually reconcile with their creditors, many Mississippians were looking to avoid payment, reputation be damned.⁷² As for Besançon, he was having it both ways, in favor of liquidating the Union Bank to pay some debts, but not having the state (meaning the people) pay the remainder unless they chose to do so in the manner laid out in the 1832 state constitution, which would require passing through two consecutive legislatures. On this platform, Besançon was re-elected representative from Tunica County in the November 1841 election as a “bond-paying Democrat.”⁷³

In early 1841, it had appeared that the Union Bank crisis would have the makings for a showdown between L.A. Besançon and H.G. Runnels. Their repeated clashes and spats played out in the House of Representatives and in Mississippi’s newspapers. When the Democrats again took control of the legislature after the November 1841 election and Besançon was reappointed to the committee on banks and currency, there was strong potential for physical confrontation, as both men had been involved in duels and canings. However, this clash between the two outspoken politicians was not to be, as Runnels

⁷² Clifford Thies, “Repudiation in Antebellum Mississippi,” *The Independent Review*, 19, no. 2 (Fall 2014): 205–6, https://www.independent.org/pdf/tir/tir_19_02_02_thies.pdf.

⁷³ “Parties in the Legislature,” *The Weekly Mississippian*, December 16, 1841, Newspapers.com, <https://www.newspapers.com>.

departed Mississippi for the greener pastures of Texas.⁷⁴ Besançon would have to find a new partner for his political jousting. It would not take long.

In the February 15, 1842, meeting of Mississippi's House of Representatives, Besançon presented a resolution to censure twenty-nine Whig members of the House who had refused to vote on a resolution condemning some legislative maneuvering that had occurred in the recent extra session of the legislature. Not voting either way, claimed Besançon, was a violation of the rules of the chamber and an insult to its members. In reply to Besançon's resolution to censure the non-voters, Patrick W. Tompkins, of Vicksburg, attached an amendment intended to reveal to the legislature Besançon's "character and motives." This amendment consisted of an annexed letter—the "Starkweather" letter that Besançon had sent to his New York acquaintance when he (Besançon) had been feeling fairly full of himself and his prospects. With this amendment and the attached letter, Tompkins replaced Runnels as a focus for Besançon's enmity.⁷⁵

The Starkweather letter was, to Besançon's shame, printed in various Mississippi newspapers, and described as "celebrated" (the *Raymond Times*), "famous" (the *Vicksburg Daily Whig*), "notorious" (the *Natchez Courier*), or "private (the

⁷⁴ Runnels had a plantation on the Brazos River and in the 1845 convention on the proposed annexation of Texas, he represented Brazoria County. He died in 1857. See Texas State Historical Association, "Runnels, Hiram George (1796-1857)," accessed July 5, 2021, <https://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/entries/runnels-hiram-george>.

⁷⁵ "Mississippi Legislature, Tuesday, February 15, 1842," *Vicksburg Daily Whig*, February 15, 1842, Newspapers.com, <https://www.newspapers.com>.

Mississippian),” depending on the editorial slant of the paper.⁷⁶ Besançon was obviously more than a bit chagrined at having his youthful, exuberant boastfulness put on display for the amusement of the entire state as part of a political stunt designed to humiliate him when he had thought himself to be the one doing the censuring of the recalcitrant Whigs. The seriousness of the public humiliation suffered by Besançon should not be overlooked. The culture of antebellum Mississippi was one that required a defense of one’s honor. Numerous duels resulting in injuries and death were fought between editors for perceived slights and slanders. The majority of these duels were the product of “caustic editorials.”⁷⁷

By the end of the month, although both the resolution and its amendment had been tabled, the dispute between Besançon and Tompkins had grown so bitter that Besançon challenged Tompkins to a duel. The February 28, 1842, edition of the *Vicksburg Daily Whig* published five full-page columns on its front page with the entire correspondence that flowed between the two prospective duelists and their respective supporters. This correspondence was mostly handled by the combatants’ seconds. For Besançon, this was G.S. Cook, and for Tompkins it was J.M. Duffield.⁷⁸

⁷⁶ “The Row in the Legislature,” *The Raymond Times*, February 25, 1842, Newspapers.com, <https://www.newspapers.com>; “Speech of T.W. Tompkins, Esq.,” *Vicksburg Daily Whig*, April 14, 1842, Newspapers.com, <https://www.newspapers.com>; “State Legislative News, February 14, 1842,” *The Natchez Courier*, February 24, 1842, Newspapers.com, <https://www.newspapers.com>; “Col. L.A. Besançon,” *The Mississippian*, February 18, 1842, Newspapers.com, <https://www.newspapers.com>.

⁷⁷ Olsen, *Political Culture and Secession in Mississippi*, 178.

⁷⁸ “A Controversy,” *Vicksburg Daily Whig*, February 28, 1842, Newspapers.com, <https://www.newspapers.com>.

The notes flew fast and furiously, and the newspapers printed all the details for a gawping public, which was hoping for a bloody spectacle. The fight was to take place across from Vicksburg on Louisiana side of the Mississippi River. The combatants were to each have a second and a sub-second, as well as a surgeon. There was a strict protocol as to the distance between the duelists, the countdown, and the position of the weapons. If either foe should move his weapon or otherwise break with the rules, a sub-second armed with a double-barreled shotgun was to shoot down the offending party “instanter.” Finally, the party challenged, Tompkins, was to choose the dueling weapon. This last detail was to prove key to the whole affair, as Tompkins, rather curiously, chose a “Yager.”⁷⁹ Also known as a “Jager,” and as a “Mississippi Rifle” during the Mexican-American War, the Yager is described by *American Rifleman* magazine as “one of the most beautiful military long arms of the 19th century.” It was by no means the most common weapon in dueling.⁸⁰

Dueling was so common in the antebellum South, that in 1838 John Lyde Wilson, one-time governor of South Carolina, codified the custom’s protocols in *The Code of Honor, or, Rules for the Government of Principals and Seconds in Dueling*. In this forty-six-page work, Wilson makes no mention of using rifles or muskets of any kind, but rather only pistols or swords. As regards the choice of time, place, and weapon Wilson

⁷⁹ “A Controversy.”

⁸⁰ National Rifle Association, “I Have This Old Gun: U.S. Model 1841 ‘Mississippi’ Rifle,” *American Rifleman*: Official Journal of the NRA, accessed July 5, 2021, <https://bit.ly/36tHybX>.

writes, “The time must be as soon as practicable, the place such as had ordinarily been used where the parties are, the distance usual, and the weapons that which is most generally used, which, in this State, is the pistol.”⁸² Perhaps Mississippians had different ideas of what was meant by “generally used.” One might also speculate that the choice of a rifle, which was much more accurate than any pistol of its day, might have been an attempt to intimidate Besançon by instilling in him a genuine fear of serious injury or death. In any case, it was the choice of Yager rifle that led to the duel’s cancellation.

G.S. Cook, Besançon’s second, wrote a note to Tompkins’s second, J.M. Duffield, stating, “I am not aware that the Yager has ever been used upon the field of honor” and that Besançon “would be compelled to go to Vicksburg, a distance of 40 miles and procure his weapon.” He therefore requested a postponement of the duel, or at least the right to postpone if the weapon could not be found in time for the scheduled time and date, 8:00 a.m. on Saturday, February 28.⁸³



*US Model 1841
“Mississippi Rifle,”
or “Yager”⁸¹*

⁸¹ *U.S. Model 1841 Mississippi Rifle*, April 30, 2021, Photograph, April 30, 2021, <https://bit.ly/36tHybX>.

⁸² John Lyde Wilson, *The Code of Honor, or, Rules for the Government of Principals and Seconds in Duelling* (Charleston, S.C: James Phinney, 1858), 21, <https://archive.org/details/codeofhonorrrul00wils>.

⁸³ “A Controversy.”

At 10:00 Friday night, Cook sent another note to Duffield, in which he complained about Duffield's and Tompkins's objection to Besançon's choice of his sub-second, a man by the name of Dr. James Hagan, editor of the *Vicksburg Sentinel*. Tompkins felt that Hagan bore him personal animosity and could not be trusted to follow the rules of the duel. Cook wrote that the rejection of Hagan as sub-second amounted to "an evasion of the anticipated conflict." He also announced that the Besançon contingent had been unable to procure the required weapon, the Yager, and therefore requested postponement of the duel to a date no later than the coming Monday, March 2.⁸⁴

In light of Besançon's insistence on his choice of Hagan as a sub-second and his inability to secure the weapon chosen by Tompkins, Duffield replied to Cook on Saturday morning, "We are now fully convinced that your party is determined to evade the fight and have used these means to escape it." In remarks directed to the readership of the *Vicksburg Daily Whig*, Duffield stated that Besançon "was aiming to convert the [duel] into his favorite mode of warfare—the use of *paper bullets*," and ended by stating that Besançon's "conduct throughout this affair has been that of a braggadocio and coward."⁸⁵

Besançon appeared content to accept this state of affairs, as it allowed him to avoid the peril of the duel while blaming the duel's cancellation on Tompkin's choice of an uncustomary weapon and refusal to accept Hagan as Besançon's sub-second. The matter may have ended there had not Cook re-issued the challenge to Tompkins in his

⁸⁴ "A Controversy."

⁸⁵ "A Controversy."

own name. Cook and Tompkins agreed to meet on March 15, two weeks after the date of the canceled Besançon-Tompkins duel.

The *Vicksburg Daily Whig* ran a tongue-in-cheek piece on the Cook-Tompkins duel by an unnamed witness, who bragged about Mississippi's tradition of allowing spectators at duels. The witness apparently thought of the outing as rather a lark. This person claimed that Cook and Tompkins shot at the same instant and that a ball passed through Cook's coat but did not hit him, nor was Tompkins hit. After that, the combatants' seconds convened and ultimately agreed that honor had been satisfied and the two duelists shook hands. With acid pen, the witness asked, "But where was Besançon all this time?" He answered himself: "Prowling around the field of battle unnoticed by any, scorned and detested by all." When Besançon attempted to meddle in the negotiations between the seconds, he got a black eye for his troubles.⁸⁶

The same month of the duels, March 1842, Besançon was appointed to a select committee to look into the affairs of the Planters Bank and the Mississippi Rail Road [*sic*] Bank. This appointment naturally raised the ire of the Whigs, who mounted a campaign to claim that his appointment was not valid because the legislature was not in session. However, his appointment seems to have cleared any procedural hurdles. It is unclear how long he held the position, as no further public mention is made of L.A. Besançon or his affairs in 1842, other than several notices that appeared in the *Free*

⁸⁶ "Curious--Original--Graphic--Singular--Geological Description of a Duel in the West--Honor on the Banks of the Mississippi," *Vicksburg Daily Whig*, May 12, 1842, Newspapers.com, <https://www.newspapers.com>.

Trader in June for mail not picked up at the Natchez post office (although he was supposedly living in Tunica).⁸⁷

Move to Louisiana

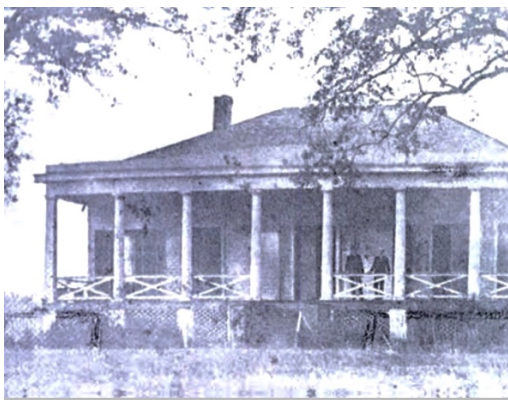
By the age of thirty, L.A. Besançon had made a name for himself in Mississippi. He had founded and edited a vigorous Democratic newspaper, been appointed bank commissioner, and served three years as a representative in the Mississippi legislature, in which he vociferously voiced his opinions. He had also been involved in several duels and may have even killed a man.

Perhaps Besançon was tired of Mississippi politics. Maybe he no longer wished to deal with the never-ending bank crisis. It could be that he simply wished to meet new challenges. Whatever the reason, at some point in 1842, most likely that summer, L.A. Besançon left Mississippi to establish a new home in New Orleans. Accompanying him were his wife of four years, Octavia, and his two daughters, Leoline Francesca (age three) and Julia (age one). For his wife, it would be a homecoming, as her father would be living with her and her growing family in Oak Lawn Plantation House, located in Jefferson Parish, just a few miles from downtown New Orleans.

L.A. Besançon would leave behind his brother Peter, who would remain in Natchez for another two and a half years. Peter would be appointed Louisiana Commissioner in Mississippi, authorized to take testimony in Natchez for cases in the

⁸⁷ “Col. L.A. Besançon of Tunica,” *Mississippi Free Trader*, March 24, 1842, Newspapers.com, <https://www.newspapers.com>; “To the Public,” *The Weekly Mississippian*, April 1, 1842, Newspapers.com, <https://www.newspapers.com>; “List of Letters Remaining in the Post Office in the City of Natchez, June 1, 1842,” *Mississippi Free Trader*, June 30, 1842, Newspapers.com, <https://www.newspapers.com>.

Louisiana court system. He would also run for the office of justice of the peace in Natchez before finally joining his brother in New Orleans in December of 1844 to continue his publishing career at the *New Orleans Daily Jeffersonian*.⁸⁸ Brother Edward (E.R.) Besançon's whereabouts were unclear, although he still owned land in northern Mississippi.



*Oak Lawn Plantation House, c. 1898*⁸⁹



*Oak Lawn Plantation House, 2021*⁹⁰

Settling into his new home and new life in the New Orleans area, Besançon returned to his old profession, newspaper publishing and editing, at the *New Orleans Herald*, beginning in January of 1843. He would hold the editorship of the paper for that

⁸⁸ "Louisiana Commissioner," *Mississippi Free Trader*, December 20, 1843, Newspapers.com, <https://www.newspapers.com>; "We Are Authorized to Announce Peter Besançon, Jr. as a Candidate," *Mississippi Free Trader*, December 27, 1843, Newspapers.com, <https://www.newspapers.com>; "New Orleans Jeffersonian," *The North Alabamian*, December 20, 1844, Newspapers.com, <https://www.newspapers.com>.

⁸⁹ *Oak Lawn Plantation House*, c 1898, Photograph, c 1898, Wikimedia Commons, <https://bit.ly/3yt7jVq>.

⁹⁰ "305 Claiborne Ct, Jefferson, LA," Redfin, accessed July 7, 2021, <https://bit.ly/3xrlVoe>. When Jefferson Parish near New Orleans became more urban and streets were laid out in the neighborhood, Oak Lawn Plantation House was lifted from its foundation piers and reoriented to face Claiborne Street; it had originally faced the Mississippi River some three hundred yards distant. See Betsy Swanson, *Historic Jefferson Parish: From Shore to Shore* (Gretna, La.: Pelican Pub. Co. Inc., 2004).

year before leaving in December. During his term as editor of the *Herald*, he wrote an article eulogizing his old comrade and fellow editor Dr. James Hagan, who had been shot to death in an altercation.⁹¹

The following August, 1844, Besançon was appointed inspector of the revenue for New Orleans. That same year in December, his brother Peter joined him in New Orleans and took over the *Morning Herald and Weekly Jeffersonian* in partnership with D. Ferguson, with John F.H. Claiborne handling the editorial duties.⁹²

Through the rest of 1844 and into 1845, L.A. Besançon continued in his newly appointed post as revenue inspector. In the summer of that year, he made a trip to Texas to report on the vote on annexation to the United States.

According to the *Free Trader*, Besançon passed through Natchez en



*L.A. Besançon family photograph, c. 1852. From left to right: daughter Julia, wife Octavia, daughter Leoline, son Clark, and son Octave.*⁹³

⁹¹ Terry L. Jones, "Disunion: A Very Violent Gentleman," New York Times Opinionator Blogs, September 20, 2013, <https://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/09/20/a-very-violent-gentleman/>. On June 7, 1843, Dr. James Hagan met his end at the hands of Daniel W. Adams. Adams shot Hagan in the head during a scuffle while defending his father's honor, which Hagan had publicly impugned in his newspaper, the *Vicksburg Sentinel*. Adams was acquitted of the charge of murder and would go on to achieve the rank of Brigadier General in the Civil War. He was severely wounded and captured at the Battle of Chickamauga and later exchanged.

⁹² "L.A. Besançon, Esq.," *Central Journal*, August 13, 1844, Newspapers.com, <https://www.newspapers.com>. "The New Orleans Jeffersonian and Herald," *Mississippi Free Trader*, December 7, 1844, Newspapers.com, <https://www.newspapers.com>.

⁹³ *Besançon Family Photograph*, c. 1853, The Myrtles Plantation Archives. This photograph was taken at some time just before or just after L.A. Besançon's death in 1853.

route from Washington as a “special express,” charged with delivering messages to various persons of importance involved in the annexation. The *Free Trader* article refers to Besançon with the honorific title of “General,” and claims that Besançon had been working that spring in the service of the State Department and the Treasury, “his knowledge of men and things in the South-west making his aid truly valuable.”⁹⁴

Besançon seemed to be in Texas in an official capacity and was most likely also feeding news of the annexation to his brother Peter. Both Lorenzo and Peter were in direct correspondence with President Polk in July 1844, keeping the president apprised of the situation. Peter wrote to the president concerning the progress of Lorenzo’s trip to Texas, and after the annexation proceedings concluded, Lorenzo travelled to Washington, DC, to hand deliver to President Polk a dispatch from Andrew J. Donelson, the US diplomatic representative to Texas who had helped negotiate the annexation.⁹⁵

In July 1845, the Texas Congress voted to agree to the annexation of Texas to the United States. This act angered neighboring Mexico and marked the first step towards the declaration war in the following year. It also marked the beginning of L.A. Besançon’s involvement with that country, an involvement that would last throughout the Mexican-American War and beyond.

⁹⁴ “Correspondence of the Free Trader, New Orleans, 4th July, 1845,” *Mississippi Free Trader*, July 8, 1845, Newspapers.com, <https://www.newspapers.com>.

⁹⁵ James K. Polk and Wayne Cutler, *Correspondence of James K. Polk. Vol. 10: July - December 1845* (Knoxville, Tenn: Univ. of Tennessee Press, 2004), 11, 52–53, 102–3.

Chapter 3 Mexico: Captain of Cavalry (1847-1848)

“If the brave volunteers should all run at the first fire, they will nevertheless come out heroes. Such paltry matters as reputation are all arranged by the letter writers nowadays.”

— Lieutenant Thomas Williams, 4th Artillery, February 28, 1847¹

The term “Manifest Destiny,” the idea that the United States should expand to occupy the entire continent of North America, was coined in 1845. The phrase has been attributed most commonly to John L. O’Sullivan of the *United States Magazine and Democratic Review*, although Linda Hudson makes the argument that the originator was actually a woman, Jane McManus Storm (Cazneau), who worked for O’Sullivan and often wrote editorials for which he received the credit.² Regardless of whose idea it was, the concept of the United States’ divinely guided right to occupy the whole of the continent from Atlantic to Pacific was a popular one. The idea of a more expansive United States was hardly new, reaching back to Thomas Jefferson, but the term “Manifest Destiny” itself incorporated two concepts: the idea that America’s right to expand was both *obvious* and *inevitable*. It harkens back to John Quincy Adams’s belief in a country directed by “divine providence” and provided a convenient politico-religious justification for taking whatever actions necessary to fulfill the country’s destiny, be that the

¹ George Winston Smith and Charles Judah, *Chronicles of the Gringos: The U.S. Army in the Mexican War, 1846-1848*, 39.

² Linda S. Hudson, *Mistress of Manifest Destiny: A Biography of Jane McManus Storm Cazneau, 1807-1878* (Austin: Texas State Historical Association, 2001), 45–46.

extirpation of the Native American populations or the acquisition of new territories by purchase or force.³

Manifest Destiny provided a convenient shorthand for expressing the young country's collective belief in the rightness and righteousness of its expansionist cause. John Fuller expressed the idea succinctly: “[In] order to rationalize land-grabbing tendencies of the Anglo-Saxons in America, propagandists had succeeded in instilling in the minds of many people a number of shibboleths which could always be drawn upon to support practically any scheme of expansion.”⁴ Manifest Destiny was one such shibboleth.

In addition to the quasi-religious notions expressed by Manifest Destiny, there were also plenty of practical motivations behind expansionist rhetoric and politics, many which came from Southerners who were eager to expand slavery beyond the American South into new territories. These included not only lands appropriated from the Native Americans (so-called “empty” lands), but also lands within the borders of such sovereign countries as Mexico, the nations of Central and South America, and those of the Caribbean. Cuba had long been coveted by American presidents, for both its strategic and economic importance, and Southerners in particular looked to Cuba as an attractive addition to the United States given its slave-owning history. Although Northerners and

³ James M. McCaffrey, *Army of Manifest Destiny: The American Soldier in the Mexican War, 1846-1848* (New York: New York University Press, 1992), 66.

⁴ John D.P. Fuller, *The Movement for the Acquisition of All Mexico, 1846-1848*, The Johns Hopkins University Studies in Historical and Political Science, Ser. 54, No. 1 (St. Clair Shores, Mich: Scholarly Press, 1971), 160.

Southerners were in disagreement with each other and even amongst themselves as to the viability of spreading slavery into Latin America, there were plenty who looked to the possibility of Mexico becoming a slave state in the union. This included L.A. Besançon's old acquaintance and sometimes foe, John Quitman.⁵

By the time dedicated expansionist James K. Polk assumed the presidency in 1845, the United States had set its sights on acquiring three territories in particular: Oregon, California, and Texas. Oregon would prove to be the easiest, acquired by treaty from Great Britain, but California was the territory that Polk considered most desirable. For Polk, "Manifest Destiny was not a matter of *if* but merely one of *how*."⁶ He tried to purchase it outright from Mexico for the sum of twenty-five million dollars and the promise to assume Mexico's debts to American citizens. When Mexico rejected his offer, he promoted a campaign of subversion against the weak Mexican government in California. As for Texas, it had seceded from Mexico and declared itself independent in 1836. Mexico did not recognize its independence and made it explicitly clear that any attempt on the part of the United States to annex the rebellious province and award it statehood would be a provocation to war. Not only was the annexation of Texas a provocative proposal to Mexico, but it was also a cause of contention in American politics, pitting Democrats against Whigs, and driving a wedge between pro-annexation

⁵ Robert E. May, *The Southern Dream of a Caribbean Empire, 1854-1861*, 2nd pbk. ed, New Perspectives on the History of the South (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2002), 16. Quitman would go on to lead a brigade of volunteers as a brigadier general under Zachary Taylor in the war with Mexico and act as military governor of Mexico City after the conclusion of the conflict.

⁶ Amy S. Greenberg, *A Wicked War: Polk, Clay, Lincoln, and the 1846 U.S. Invasion of Mexico*, 1st ed (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2012), 36.

and anti-annexation southern Whigs, acting “as a powerful centrifugal force intent on pulling apart southern Whiggery.”⁷ Texas would prove to be the key that opened the door to war and which allowed the United States to eventually seize one-half of Mexico’s pre-war territory.⁸

The Texas Congress voted in favor of the United States’ offer of annexation in July 1845, and Texas was admitted to the union on December 29 of that year. Mexico did not accept the integration of its renegade northern territory into the United States. In addition to the very problematic issue of Texas’ statehood, the matter of the boundary between Texas and Mexico proper remained unsettled, with Mexico claiming the boundary lay along the Nueces River, and the United States and Texas claiming it lay along the Rio Grande (or Río Bravo, as it was called in Mexico), some one hundred fifty miles to the south. The boundary dispute would provide the opening that Polk was seeking to fulfill his goals.

Whether or not Polk was actively seeking war with Mexico as a means to an end is debatable. Jack Bauer contends that Polk wanted “a peaceful, diplomatic settlement,” and that Polk’s correspondence and pronouncements back this up. According to Bauer, the boundary dispute was part of Polk’s “policy of public brinksmanship” that had been successfully deployed in winning a peaceful settlement with Great Britain in Oregon.⁹

⁷ William J. Cooper, *The South and the Politics of Slavery: 1828 - 1856*, Repr. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1992), 221.

⁸ Fuller, *The Movement for the Acquisition of All Mexico, 1846-1848*, 32–38.

⁹ K. Jack Bauer, *The Mexican War, 1846-1848* (Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1993), 11–12.

John Fuller, on the other hand, writes that “the American president, for reasons which he chose to consider sufficient, took certain steps which precipitated the Mexican War, as a result of which war he fully intended from the beginning to acquire California.”¹⁰

Whatever the reasons behind Polk’s play in the Nueces Strip between the Rio Grande and Nueces River, when General Zachary Taylor moved his troops to enforce the Rio Grande border, Mexico responded. On April 15, 1846, Captain Seth Thornton’s small detachment of troops was attacked by forces under the command of Mexican General Pedro Ampudia. Sixteen Americans were killed, and the remaining troops were taken prisoner.¹¹

President Polk addressed Congress on May 11, 1846, regarding the developing situation. “Mexico,” he stated, “has passed the boundary of the United States, has invaded our territory and shed American blood upon the American soil.” The US Congress declared war on May 13.¹²

The US Military at the Outset of War

In 1845, the United States Army had a total strength of fewer than 8,000 men organized into fourteen regiments—eight infantry regiments, two cavalry (dragoon) regiments, and four artillery regiments. Considering the territory that this army had to cover, this was an extremely small force, much of which was spread along the borders of Indian territory and the Canadian border. When Polk ordered Zachary Taylor to Texas,

¹⁰ Fuller, *The Movement for the Acquisition of All Mexico, 1846-1848*, 38.

¹¹ McCaffrey, *Army of Manifest Destiny*, 7.

¹² McCaffrey, 7.

his Army of Observation, as it was called, totaled almost 4,000 troops, or about half of the United States' standing army. This army was ill-prepared for large-scale warfare. Neither the enlisted men nor the officers had the training necessary for maneuvering in force nor the logistical skills necessary for supplying an invading force in what would become America's first foreign war.¹³

The US Navy consisted of about 7,500 officers and sailors, a force that President Polk would authorize to increase to 10,000. The Navy would be charged with blockading Mexican ports in the Gulf, defending against privateers, and carrying out operations on the Pacific coast. While Mexico's navy was not really a threat, the US Navy would be challenged by the scope of operations, as well as the lack of ships appropriate to the tasks at hand. There was not enough manpower to fully crew some of the larger ships, and other ships' drafts were too deep to use in transporting and landing a possible invasion force.¹⁴ In order to wage a war against Mexico, the United States would have to bolster its army and navy greatly in terms of both materiel and men.

The only way to meet the demand for troops was either through a draft or a call for volunteers. On May 13, 1846, Congress authorized a volunteer force of 50,000 men. These volunteers were to be recruited by the states, with the officers appointed by governors and other political figures or acting as self-selected leaders of volunteer companies. Americans, particularly Southerners, were eager to answer the government's

¹³ Smith and Judah, *Chronicles of the Gringos*, 1–2; Robert W Johannsen, *To the Halls of the Montezumas: The Mexican War in the American Imagination* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 7.

¹⁴ K. Jack Bauer, *Surfboats and Horse Marines: U.S. Naval Operations in the Mexican War, 1846-1848* (Annapolis, MD: United States Naval Institute, 1969), 23–37.

call to arms. George Smith and Charles Judah write, “The number of volunteers at the beginning of the war was so large in a number of states, that it caused both confusion and embarrassment.”¹⁵ While there may have been a surfeit of volunteers, at least at first, their recruitment was not without problems.

Robert Johannsen points out the importance of local and regional political factions in the formation of volunteer units. “There were Whig companies and there were Democratic companies, and sometimes the politics of the officers differed from those of the men, a situation not always conducive to good discipline.”¹⁶ In general, while Whigs may have been more likely to be against the war in principle, and Democrats in favor, neither side was going to allow the other claim to be more patriotic in what was becoming a popular war.

In addition to political conflicts, often in the upper levels, there were practical considerations in raising a volunteer force. The qualifications for being accepted as a volunteer were mainly the ability to pay for one’s own uniform and pass a physical exam. A prospective cavalryman would have to supply his own horse.¹⁷ These expenses were to be reimbursed later. As for the physical exam, McCaffrey notes that the failure rate for one regiment was only four percent, although many who passed were unable to perform in Mexico and were discharged. They had taken their physical exams fully clothed. Later

¹⁵ Smith and Judah, *Chronicles of the Gringos*, 9.

¹⁶ Johannsen, *To the Halls of the Montezumas*, 66.

¹⁷ Bauer, *The Mexican War*, 69.

replacement troops were held to a higher standard, and the rejection rate rose to twenty percent. However, neither the expense of a uniform nor the hurdle of a physical exam seemed to prevent large numbers of recruits from successfully joining up. Volunteers signed up in droves, driven in part by a sense of adventure, but also inspired by revenge for the Alamo and the Goliad massacre in Texas that had occurred ten years before.¹⁸

The recruitment and organization of volunteers took time, of course, but they would begin arriving at the front before too long. The rushed nature of the volunteer forces inevitably led to problems at the front. Bauer describes the volunteers as having “arrived with no equipment, two left feet, and an innate resistance to discipline.” The disciplinary problems were “enormous,” and they increased despite General Taylor’s threats of courts martial, to the point that Taylor had to send in a contingent of troops to quell a riot led by Georgia volunteers.¹⁹ Regardless of the disciplinary problems and disinclination toward military subordination displayed by the volunteers, they would prove themselves indispensable, for without the volunteers, there could be no invasion of Mexico.

The war advanced rather quickly on all fronts, and by January 1847, the fighting was already over in California with the signing of the Treaty of Cahuenga. In February, General Zachary Taylor ended a string of important battles in northern Mexico with the Battle of Buena Vista, which was the largest battle of the war in terms of the numbers of

¹⁸ McCaffrey, *Army of Manifest Destiny*, 24, 33.

¹⁹ Bauer, *The Mexican War*, 83.

troops involved. Taylor's forces at Buena Vista were made up almost entirely of volunteers who were eager to show that they were up to the task. Although both sides claimed victory in the battle, the Mexican forces under Santa Anna left the Americans in control of the battlefield. By March, with the landing of General Winfield Scott's troops at Veracruz, the concluding phase of the war—the push inland to take the Mexican capital—was at hand.

L.A. Besançon and the Louisiana Mounted Volunteers

By July 1847, the final chapter of the Mexican-American War was playing out. General Scott's troops had landed at Veracruz and taken the city after a two-week siege in March. Scott then proceeded to march unopposed into Puebla, the second largest Mexican city, on May 10. Mexico City and ultimate victory lay but sixty-five miles to the northwest. However, the Americans now had another problem. Many of Scott's volunteer troops' twelve-month enlistments were ending, and fewer than 10 percent were willing to extend their terms of service to the end of the conflict. Scott sent them back to Veracruz for transport to the United States.²⁰ Veracruz lay 140 miles to the east of Puebla, a long distance to march for the volunteers to catch a ride back home, but also an enormous distance for replacements and supplies to traverse. This long supply chain would be the source of immense effort and aggravation for Scott, as well as a target for harassment by Mexican guerrilla forces.

²⁰ Bauer, 270.

Although he lost seven regiments of volunteers in the first week of June 1847, Scott was reinforced with new units of volunteers, the recruitment of which was continual. One such unit was the company of Louisiana Mounted Volunteers led by Captain L.A. Besançon.

On July 7, 1847, the *Daily Picayune* of New Orleans ran a notice seeking men to serve for a one-year term in a volunteer cavalry company under the command of Besançon.



*Notice in the Daily Picayune, July 7, 1847*²¹

The ad for volunteers was picked up and repeated by Besançon's former concern, the *Mississippi Free Trader* of Natchez. The *Free Trader's* ad noted that, in addition to Besançon's Louisiana Mounted Volunteers, Hiram Fairchild was to captain the Louisiana Rangers, another unit of mounted men, with James Risk as his lieutenant. The *Free Trader* added the sanguinary embellishment that each of these officers "is probably, like Henry Clay, anxious to slay a live Mexican."²²

²¹ "Mounted Men," *The Daily Picayune*, July 7, 1847, Newspapers.com, <https://www.newspapers.com>.

²² "L.A. Besançon and Hiram Fairchild," *Mississippi Free Trader*, July 14, 1847, Newspapers.com, <https://www.newspapers.com>. Unfortunately, even before he could have the chance to spill the blood of his enemy, Besançon's company lost one of its own when Besançon's orderly, Sergeant Joseph S. Wright, committed suicide. The *Freeman's Journal* of Cooperstown, New York wrote that Sgt.

Captain Besançon and his company of mounted men were up and running with great speed and intent, arriving in Veracruz before the end of July. The Louisiana Mounted Volunteers and the Louisiana Rangers were to be part of a 2,000-man force whose area of operations would be the area between Veracruz and Jalapa (Xalapa in modern Mexican Spanish). They would operate somewhat independently of General Scott's forces in Puebla, and their tasks would be "keeping communications open, escorting trains and fighting guerrillas."²³ In other words, Besançon's company would be protecting part of Scott's extremely long supply chain from the coast into the interior.

The Mexican-American War was America's first war on foreign soil, and it was well-covered by numerous newspapers. Within a week of the Louisiana volunteers' arrival in Veracruz in late July 1847, the news was printed in the papers of New Orleans and other cities. The war was popular, and Americans avidly followed its events both major and minor. The papers included pieces written by paid correspondents, as well letters and poetry written by the combatants themselves. In addition, the American press gleaned news items from the Mexican papers and passed them on to their readers, although these pieces were usually heavily editorialized, especially if they contained reports that portrayed Mexico as gaining the upper hand in any way. Robert Johannsen attributes this intense coverage to the war's great popularity with the public, as well as a

Wright was rooming in a hotel with another man who witnessed the sergeant get out of bed without saying a word, open a trunk and remove a razor, and cut his own throat. Wright, a former Marine, was characterized as a "temperate" man, but one who had been feeling melancholic. See "Awful Suicide," *Freeman's Journal*, August 7, 1847, Library of Congress, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov>.

²³ "More Troops from Louisiana," *The Daily Picayune*, July 27, 1847, Newspapers.com, <https://www.newspapers.com>.

newfound American taste for exoticism. The public was hungry for news from “romantic” Old Mexico, and the newspapers were determined give its readers what they wanted.²⁴

The boom in publishing of 1840s meant that there were papers aplenty for American readers back home. However, the soldiers themselves did not have easy access to American papers, and they were a hot commodity amongst the troops whenever an issue of a hometown publication would arrive with a new recruit.²⁵ Not to be outdone by the professional journalists, the soldiers started their own papers whenever they were in one place long enough to print. Several such self-published papers followed the troops from battle to battle, including the *Anglo-Saxon* and the *American Star*, both edited by active-duty soldiers serving in Mexico, and the *Picket Guard*, a “camp paper” of an Illinois volunteer regiment.²⁶ A good number of soldiers considered themselves either authors or reporters. John Frost, writing in 1848, describes the literary and journalistic bent of the American soldier thusly: “It is a fact never before known in the annals of war, that almost every American soldier in the present war considers himself in some degree its historian.”²⁷

²⁴ Johannsen, *To the Halls of the Montezumas*, 145.

²⁵ Johannsen, 150.

²⁶ Bauer, *The Mexican War*, 157, 327; Johannsen, *To the Halls of the Montezumas*, 150.

²⁷ John Frost, *The Mexican War and Its Warriors* (New Haven, CT: H. Mansfield, 1848), 120, <https://bit.ly/3r8ZwtF>.

The regular publication of war news in American papers allows historians to trace the Louisiana Mounted Volunteers in Mexico. After arriving in late July of 1847, they did not have to wait long before seeing action. However, the company's first bloody incident did not come in a violent clash with the enemy. The *New Orleans Daily Picayune* reports that on August 3, 1847, one of Besançon's men, George Evans, was accidentally shot by a guard who was attempting to thwart the escape of a trooper of the 1st Infantry Regiment who was being held on unspecified charges. Shortly after this inauspicious beginning to their service in Mexico, the Mounted Volunteers were assigned their first real task—a scouting mission near Veracruz. Although they were fired upon by guerrillas, no one was injured, and the mission came off successfully with the capture of a guerrilla communique in a house that had been abandoned by Mexican guerrillas “with precipitation.”²⁸

At about the same time the *Daily Picayune* was detailing the arrival of Besançon and his company's first actions near Veracruz, the Mexican paper *El Sol de Anahuac* ran an article describing great discord between the American volunteers and the troops of the regular US Army, and that desertion rates were high. The *boletín* claims that over seventy Americans deserted in Puebla in a single day. In referencing the report of the Mexican paper, the *Semi-Weekly Natchez Courier* sneeringly declaims, “We don't believe one word of this.”²⁹ While it is not surprising that an American publication would publicly

²⁸ “Arrival of the Steamship New Orleans: Later from Vera Cruz and Tampico,” *The Daily Picayune*, August 14, 1847, Newspapers.com, <https://www.newspapers.com>.

²⁹ “Later from Mexico,” *Semi-Weekly Natchez Courier*, August 17, 1847, Newspapers.com, <https://www.newspapers.com>.

doubt the veracity of a report in a newspaper of its enemy, it is of import to note that it does so while apparently not investigating the claims of discord or desertion amongst the Americans, as both charges were evidently true to a greater and lesser extent.

As for dissension amongst the Americans, there was plenty. As already noted, political differences between various factions of volunteers were evident from the beginning of recruitment. There were also rivalries between men of different states and, of course, enmities between individuals. According to James McCaffrey, “The most enduring friction between any groups of soldiers during the Mexican War . . . was the rivalry between the volunteers and the regulars.” Bauer ascribes the rivalry to class conflict, with middle and upper-class volunteers looking down on the lower class of regular soldiers who “were in the army because that was the only way they could make a living.”³⁰ The various conflicts produced crimes ranging from murder to mutiny.

Desertion, while not exactly rampant, was far from unknown. McCaffrey reports that about 7 percent, or 6,700 soldiers, deserted during the war, a figure that he compares favorably with the 25 percent desertion rate that George Washington’s army endured during the Revolutionary War. However, the length of the two wars was quite different. In addition, in the Mexican-American War desertion was more difficult, as deserters would have to find their way back home from foreign soil.³¹ Hoping to entice deserters amongst the invading forces, the Mexican government and its military leaders

³⁰ McCaffrey, *Army of Manifest Destiny*, 115–19.

³¹ McCaffrey, 110–11.

encouraged Americans to desert, and at one point offered any American deserter from General Taylor's army in northern Mexico 320 acres of land and Mexican citizenship. They especially hoped to lure their fellow co-religionists, such as the Irish Catholics who deserted to join Mexico's Saint Patrick Battalion of foreign fighters, the "San Patricios," as they were known colloquially in Spanish. Jack Bauer, however, refutes the claim that most American deserters were Irish, and states that the majority of the foreigners who joined the San Patricios were most likely not even deserters.³²

Defending Major Lally's Wagon Train

The men of the Louisiana Mounted Volunteers had not had time to entertain ideas of desertion. They were busy protecting the wagon trains coming up and down the National Road between Veracruz and Puebla. General Scott's long supply line was further complicated by a bottleneck that



*National Bridge, Veracruz, Mexico*³³

occurred at the Puente Nacional (National Bridge) that crossed the Antigua River about twenty-five miles west of Veracruz. In a letter from April 1847, General Scott wrote that

³² Bauer, *The Mexican War*, 41–42.

³³ Hpav7, *Puente Del Rey (Puente Nacional)*, *Public Domain Photograph*, October 4, 2010, October 4, 2010, Own work, <https://bit.ly/3xHPKBh>.

in addition to the challenges presented by heat and disease, “the danger of having our [supply] trains cut and destroyed by the exasperated rancheros” was a grave concern. He lamented his small cavalry force and the “necessity of escorting trains, seventy miles up and down.”³⁴ By the time Besançon’s Louisiana Mounted Volunteers arrived three months after Scott wrote this letter, the situation had grown worse, and the supply chain had grown even longer.

On August 6, 1847, a supply train of some 1,000 men and sixty-four wagons under the command of Major Folliot T. Lally departed Veracruz along the National Road headed toward Scott’s army, which was nearing Mexico City. Lally had been given command of the wagon train after its original commander, Colonel Lewis D. Wilson, died from “fever,” a common disorder, as disease was more deadly than enemy bullets. Disease amongst the soldiers in the coastal areas was rampant, with one Tennessee regiment reporting 60 percent of its troopers disabled. The sicknesses included measles, mumps, cholera, and smallpox, but perhaps the most dreaded was yellow fever, called “el vómito negro” (“black vomit”) by Mexicans. At the time, no one knew how it was spread (mosquitoes), but they associated it with the air of the hot, humid coastal areas. Ulysses Grant, then a lieutenant in the regular army, wrote, “We will all have to get out of this part of Mexico soon or we will be caught by the yellow fever which I am ten to one more affraid [*sic*] of than the Mexicans.” The Mexicans knew the power of the disease, and

³⁴ Smith and Judah, *Chronicles of the Gringos*, 364.

they hoped it would be the not-so-secret weapon that would help to stop, or at least slow down, the American invasion of their country.³⁵

Whether Wilson's death had been caused by the yellow fever virus or some other tropical disease is unknown, but Lally was given the task of getting the important resupply train to Scott and he lost no time in getting started.

Lally had not gotten far along the National Road when his column came under attack from Mexican guerrilla forces and national guard troops. An American intelligence officer sent word back that he expected a more decisive attack by the Mexicans near the National Bridge, and he requested reinforcements. In response, two units of mounted men from Louisiana under the command of Captains Fairchild and Besançon were called up to provide protection for the wagon train, along with a mounted Georgia company and units of infantry. The Mexican forces numbered around 1,500 and were supposedly motivated not only by military goals, but also by the rumor that the wagon train was carrying a million dollars in specie. In the initial fighting to reach the National Bridge, thirty American were wounded, and several were killed. Among the dead was one of Besançon's men, Francis Loring, described in the *New Orleans Daily Picayune* as "Canadian by birth."³⁶

After the initial clashes with the enemy, communication was cut off along the National Road at the bridge, as the guerrillas had taken control after the supply train

³⁵ McCaffrey, *Army of Manifest Destiny*, 52–53, 62–63.

³⁶ "Camp at Bridge, 24 Miles from Vera Cruz," *The Daily Picayune*, August 20, 1847, Newspapers.com, <https://www.newspapers.com>.

crossed over. With the road shut down, communication with Lally's column was lost. In the absence of hard news, rumors soon began to run amok. On August 31, the *Daily Picayune* reported that "no news has been heard at Vera Cruz of Captain Besançon's company for a fortnight." It was assumed that the company had either successfully joined up with Lally's wagon train or had been cut off by enemy forces. The other units that had been sent in relief of Lally had been turned back after encountering enemy forces in control of the heights.³⁷ Three days later, on September 3, the same paper reported that "it is now very generally believed that Besançon's company went up with the train under Major Lally."³⁸ There followed a period of almost four weeks in which no news was heard regarding the fate of Besançon and the Louisiana Mounted Volunteers.

Finally, on September 28, news came through that Captain Besançon and his entire company, minus Lieutenant Hawkins and some men left behind in Veracruz, had been killed within one mile of the National Bridge. This news was rendered by a Veracruz police official, a Mr. Eloi, who had heard it from a Spaniard who had traveled from Mexico City. The Spaniard knew the names of many of the men of the company, and Mr. Eloi further claimed that an American, Captain Biscoe, had examined their

³⁷ "Later from Vera Cruz. Advance of General Scott to Ayotla. Safety of Major Lally's Train. Repulse of Americans at National Bridge," *The Daily Picayune*, August 31, 1847, Newspapers.com, <https://www.newspapers.com>. Note the two-word spelling "Vera Cruz," which often appeared in American papers, as opposed to the correct one-word spelling "Veracruz."

³⁸ "Correspondence of the Picayune. Vera Cruz, August 27, 1847," *The Daily Picayune*, September 3, 1847, Newspapers.com, <https://www.newspapers.com>. It is interesting to note that the same edition of the *Daily Picayune* mentions an uprising in Yucatán: "The whole Indian population of [Yucatán] had risen against the whites and in some districts massacred the entirety of the white population, with the exception of the women, whom they only spared for a fate still worse than death." This was the beginning of the Caste War of Yucatán, which would draw Besançon back to Mexico in 1848.

graves.³⁹ When the *Daily Picayune* printed these claims, a shock wave of grief was felt throughout New Orleans, the hometown of many of the men.

Fortunately, the grief was short lived. Two days later, it was revealed that reports of Besançon and company's demise had been greatly exaggerated, and in fact they were all safe and sound, having fought their way through to join Lally's column and accompany it to Jalapa, some thirty-five miles beyond the National Bridge.⁴⁰ The *Picayune's* rival New Orleans paper the *Weekly Delta* chided "those persons who are in the habit of swallowing every idle and improbable story from certain sources, without inquiring into its authenticity, date and probability."⁴¹

In the space of but a month, from recruitment to enemy contact in Mexico, the Louisiana Mounted Volunteers now counted several casualties amongst its members. In accompanying Lally's supply train, the company lost two killed and three injured.⁴²

The Fall of Mexico City and the Battle of Huamantla

On September 12, 1847, the same day that Besançon's company was engaged at the National Bridge alongside Lally's troops, the bulk of Scott's forces were initiating

³⁹ "Captain Besançon's Company--Lieut. David Henderson, &c.," *The Daily Picayune*, September 28, 1847, Newspapers.com, <https://www.newspapers.com>.

⁴⁰ "From Major Lally's Train," *Mississippi Free Trader*, September 30, 1847, Newspapers.com, <https://www.newspapers.com>.

⁴¹ "Captain Besançon's Company," *New Orleans Weekly Delta*, September 23-30, Newspapers.com, <https://www.newspapers.com>.

⁴² "The Anxiety," *The Natchez Courier*, October 8, 1847, Newspapers.com, <https://www.newspapers.com>.

their attack on Chapultepec Castle, home of the Mexican military academy at Mexico City. Besançon's old acquaintance and cane-assailant, John Quitman, led the American forces that defeated the castle's defenders on September 13. It was yet another example of Quitman outshining his old Natchez contemporary, although it is doubtful that Quitman thought of himself as being in competition with Besançon. However, their parallel nature of their paths in life from Natchez to Mexico is uncanny, but always with Quitman in a higher profile position. Quitman was a state senator, governor, and general, while Besançon was an editor, state representative, and captain.

Unfortunately for his troops, Quitman was to exceed Besançon in yet another area—the number of men lost in his quest for glory. Ignoring Scott's order to hold back and assume a supporting role in the attack on Chapultepec, Quitman instead “fired his last cartridge, tied his red silk handkerchief to the weapon's muzzle, and waved it in signal for the Rifles and the Palmettos, who had been in his advance, to follow him over the breastwork.” However heroic his actions may have seemed at the time, they did not result in an immediate victory and came at the cost of eight officers and nearly seventy men killed with close to 500 wounded.⁴³

⁴³ Robert E. May, *John A. Quitman: Old South Crusader*, Southern Biography Series (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1985), 192–93.



The Battle of Chapultepec (Storming of Chapultepec), by James Walker, 1857⁴⁴

The fall of Mexico City on September 14, 1847, did not end the war immediately. After the capture of the capital, General Santa Anna resigned his position as president of the republic but kept his title of commander of the Mexican army, which he led in retreat toward Puebla. General Scott had left a garrison force there to help protect his supply line leading back to Veracruz and to protect several thousand sick and wounded men.

Santa Anna and his force of about 4,000 men attempted to re-take Puebla from its five hundred American defenders, who managed to hold off the Mexicans for four weeks while waiting for a relief column to arrive. The National Bridge had been secured and the road to Puebla from Veracruz was open. On October 2, Lane and 1,700 men were ordered to join with Lally's troops to come to the aid of Brevet Colonel Thomas Childs at Puebla. However, upon learning of the approach of the would-be rescuers, Santa Anna withdrew from Puebla and prepared to attack the relief column instead. The first clash between

⁴⁴ James Walker, *The Battle of Chapultepec (Storming of Chapultepec)*, 1857, oil on paper mounted on canvas, 1857, <https://www.christies.com/lotfinder/Lot/james-walker-1819-1889-the-battle-of-chapultepec-6054931-details.aspx>, <https://bit.ly/36H67IO>.

Santa Anna's troops and the Americans occurred on October 9, at Huamantla, some thirty-five miles to the northeast of Puebla.⁴⁵

At the vanguard of the American forces was a contingent of four cavalry companies under the command of Major Samuel H. Walker. The Louisiana Mounted Volunteers was one of the four. When Walker sighted a force of 2,000 Mexican lancers, he and his men charged and chased them out of the town of Huamantla. Walker then set about securing the artillery pieces the Mexicans had left behind and was caught unaware by the Mexican counterattack.⁴⁶ The American cavalry was in danger of being routed when Captain Besançon, along with two other officers, "gallantly forced their way to the plaza," with Besançon barely escaping with his life. Captain Walker was not so lucky. While directing his forces, Walker "was shot from behind, from a house that displayed a white flag."⁴⁷ Whether the facts support this version of events or if they were bent to justify the ensuing violence perpetrated against the town's residents is unclear.

Lieutenant William T. Wilkins of the 15th Infantry described Walker's gallantry in action and the abuses that followed as the American troops obeyed Lane's order to take revenge on the town for Walker's death. "Grog shops were broken open first," he writes, "and then maddened with liquor every species of outrage was committed."⁴⁸ Huamantla's

⁴⁵ Bauer, *The Mexican War*, 330.

⁴⁶ Bauer, 331.

⁴⁷ "Battle of Huamantla," *Daily American Star*, November 5, 1847, Hemeroteca Nacional Digital de México, <https://bit.ly/3ku5KTL>.

⁴⁸ Smith and Judah, *Chronicles of the Gringos*, 270–71.

sacking was singular in the war, as the conflict had seen any number of atrocities committed by small groups or individuals, but none on the scale of the rape, pillage, and murder witnessed in the sacking of Huamantla.⁴⁹

With the attack at Huamantla, Santa Anna was finished as leader of the Mexican army. He was on the run, pursued by the Americans until he was eventually allowed to depart Mexico for Jamaica in the spring of 1848. After the taking of Mexico City and the defeats at Huamantla and Puebla, the Mexican army was, for all intents and purposes, defeated. The remaining three months of the war deteriorated into a conflict between the occupying American army and Mexican guerrilla forces.

By December 1, 1847, the Louisiana Mounted Volunteers were reported as being stationed at Puebla with Lieutenant Waters in charge. Besançon had returned home for a brief visit, possibly to see his wife, who was pregnant with his fourth child, Clark Woodruff Besançon, who would be born in February 1848. The same report states that his unit “has suffered considerably and has been of great service.”⁵⁰

The war was drawing to a close, but the Louisiana Mounted Volunteers were to experience a bit more action. In January, Besançon and his cavalry company were sent from Puebla to the National Bridge, which was still a hotbed for guerrilla attacks on supply trains moving between Veracruz and Mexico City. On January 31, they took part in a skirmish near Palo Verde in which they routed a band of mounted guerrillas. This

⁴⁹ Bauer, *The Mexican War*, 331.

⁵⁰ “Late and Important from Mexico! Ten Days Later from the City of Mexico,” *Vicksburg Daily Whig*, December 1, 1847, Newspapers.com, <https://www.newspapers.com>.

appears to be the last combat action of Besançon and the Louisiana Mounted Volunteers to take place before the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo officially ended the war on February 2.⁵¹ There would be a few more isolated incidents involving bandit attacks on individuals as well as a few attempts to revive the conflict by Mexican military leaders who refused to recognize the treaty, but the war was over as regards any real organized resistance.

Courts Martial

As the fighting came to a close, the political combat began. Generals Winfield Scott, William J. Worth, and Gideon J. Pillow exchanged charges against one another which would eventually lead to General Scott being relieved of command ahead of an official court of inquiry into a charge of bribery.

Both Worth and Pillow were very ambitious. Each had dreams of a potential presidential run, although these ideas were a bit far-fetched. To further their political schemes, they published laudatory accounts of their exploits in Mexico that were boastful at best and misleading at worst. This led General Scott to accuse his two underlings of disobeying his order to not publish accounts of battles until after one month had passed. Scott had General Worth, General Pillow, and Brevet Colonel James Duncan (an artilleryman allied with Worth and Pillow) arrested. Pillow appealed to his friend, President Polk, and they were soon released, only to turn the tables on General Scott.

⁵¹ "Important from Mexico. Arrival of the New Orleans--Mustang on His Way to Washington with Despatches--Capture of Orizaba," *New Orleans Weekly Delta*, February 14, 1848, Newspapers.com, <https://www.newspapers.com>.

They accused the commanding general of attempting to bribe Mexican army commander Santa Anna to end the war. President Polk relieved Scott of command and a court of inquiry was called.⁵²

The court of inquiry seemed politically motivated from the outset, as Polk rightfully feared the popularity that Scott could wield in a run for the presidency as the victorious commander in the Mexican war. If Polk could keep Scott under a cloud of suspicion long enough, he could prevent Scott from winning the Whig nomination in the June 1848 convention. The court began its investigation in mid-March in Mexico City.

The president of the court of inquiry was General Nathan Towson, who was accompanied on his trip to Mexico City by Captain L.A. Besançon. It is unclear if Besançon was acting as part of a cavalry escort for the general or if he was to attend to other matters in the capital. At least part of his company of Louisiana Mounted Volunteers was in Veracruz at the time, having accompanied a wagon train along the National Road. As the *Daily Crescent* put it, the duty was very necessary, although disagreeable and unlikely to bring glory.⁵³

⁵² Bauer, *The Mexican War*, 371–73.

⁵³ “Vera Cruz Items,” *The Weekly Mississippian*, April 7, 1848, Newspapers.com, <https://www.newspapers.com>. “Further Mexican News,” *The Daily Crescent*, April 24, 1848, Newspapers.com, <https://www.newspapers.com>. At the same time that L.A. Besançon was escorting General Towson to Mexico City, his brother Peter was making the voyage from New Orleans to Veracruz. The *Concordia Intelligencer* speculated that he might be acting either as “a secret agent of government” or as a private investigator for a Mrs. Gaines, whose father was once a resident of Mexican territory and whose records were stored in the national archives of that country. However, it seems likely that the object of his mission was more prosaic—to retrieve his (and Lorenzo’s) brother Edward, who had enlisted in Company ‘F’ of the first regiment of the Texas Mounted Volunteers under Captain Hays the previous September. He was now being discharged “for disability” from the general hospital in Mexico City. Whether his disability was due to wounds, accident, or sickness is not mentioned in army records. What is

The investigative proceedings regarding the charges and countercharges between Scott, Worth, and Pillow made daily news back in the United States. The charges were obviously political in origin. The investigations by the court of inquiry in Mexico and the follow-up court in Frederick, Maryland, had no concrete repercussions, but rather were used as a political weapon against Scott. Pillow was not able to prove his accusations against Scott, the charges against Worth were later dropped, and Pillow himself was not found guilty of wrongdoing.

The episode between the generals, high-profile in the public eye, was not the only courtroom drama playing out in Mexico. Other courts martial were quite serious and held the possibility of sober consequences.

On May 17, 1848, a military court sentenced seven American soldiers to death for breaking into the Mexico City home of Manuel Zorriza and shooting him in the head as part of a robbery. Perhaps the most surprising aspect of the case is that three of the accused murderers were officers, lieutenants in Pennsylvania and Indiana regiments. The three lieutenants, along with one American civilian, were to be “hanged by the neck until dead, dead, dead.” Two sergeants and a private from the 7th Infantry Regiment of the regular US Army were also found guilty, but they had their death sentences remitted

known is that Peter returned to New Orleans with Edward onboard the steamship New Orleans on March 29. See “Correspondence of the Concordia Intelligencer,” *The Concordia Intelligencer*, March 25, 1848, Newspapers.com, <https://www.newspapers.com>. “Compiled Service Records--E.R. Besançon.” “Arrival of the Steamship New Orleans,” *The Daily Picayune*, March 30, 1848, Newspapers.com, <https://www.newspapers.com>.

shortly after the trial ended and suffered only dishonorable discharge from the army.⁵⁴ Two weeks later, the death sentences of the three lieutenants were also reduced to dishonorable discharge from military service. Because the seriousness of their crimes merited severe punishment, their reprieve was condemned by some fellow officers as being detrimental to the army's reputation.⁵⁵

Other offenders against military discipline and rules were not so lucky. Punishments for infractions ranged from demotion and forfeiture of pay to corporeal punishment, such as having one's head shaved or being branded with letters (*e.g.*, HD for "Habitual Drunkard," and W for "Worthless"). One volunteer from Pennsylvania wrote that his officers were "tyrannical and brutal" men who would "go out and get drunk every night and raise the very devil." He claims that these officers instituted a water torture for men who followed their example of drunkenness, throwing water in their faces until the victims were nearly drowned. Another punishment was to have the guilty party dig a small, tight, underground compartment in which the offender would be placed and given only three crackers to eat per day and water to drink. The Pennsylvanian writes that "one man, a fifer, was sentenced for 30 days after having 400 pails of water thrown on him and all his crime was running through the guard."⁵⁶ As for men who deserted, their punishments were often uncompromising. Captain George Davis refers to the fates of

⁵⁴ "Military Commission," *The New Orleans Weekly Delta*, June 5, 1848, Newspapers.com, <https://www.newspapers.com>.

⁵⁵ "Later from Vera Cruz, May 31, 1848," *The New Orleans Weekly Delta*, June 12, 1848, Newspapers.com, <https://www.newspapers.com>.

⁵⁶ Smith and Judah, *Chronicles of the Gringos*, 423–24.

those who deserted to the enemy and fought in the San Patricio battalion. Twenty-seven were hung and fourteen were given fifty lashes by “an experienced Mexican muleteer,” which Davis describes in gory detail, followed by branding their faces “with the letter D high up on the cheek-bone, near the eye, but without jeopardizing its sight.”⁵⁷

L.A. Besançon was undoubtedly aware of the various crimes and punishments that were being meted out as the military was settling its accounts and the diplomats were ironing out the details of the peace treaty in preparation for a transition from military occupation to the return of Mexican self-government. The goings-on of the military courts martial and courts of inquiry were public knowledge; the papers published their details every day. Besançon was soon to find his own name in the papers as he returned to Veracruz from Mexico City to participate in the trial of Lieutenant John Smith of the 3rd Battalion, Louisiana Volunteers.

Besançon was joined by seven other officers on Smith’s court martial panel.⁵⁸ Smith was accused of “desertion, enticing of soldiers to desert, embezzlement of public property; [and] conduct unbecoming an officer and a gentleman.”⁵⁹ Smith had allegedly deserted along with eight other soldiers of his unit and joined up with a band of

⁵⁷ Smith and Judah, 434.

⁵⁸ One of the panel members was Captain George White, leader of another company of Louisiana volunteers who would later that year organize the band of veterans hired to fight in Yucatán with Besançon as his second in command.

⁵⁹ “Letter from Mustang--Great Military Parade--Hon. Mr. Clifford’s Reception--The Old Cerro Gordo Division--Cavalry Brigade--Artillery--The Kentucky Volunteers--Courts Martial--Robbers in the City--Querétero, Old Song, No Quorum--Mr. Clifford--Mr. Trist,” *The New Orleans Weekly Delta*, April 23, 1848, Newspapers.com, <https://www.newspapers.com>.

guerrilleros before being apprehended and placed in confinement. Smith claims simply to have left his post in Veracruz to lead his men on a hunting expedition outside the city limits, but the members of his court martial panel concluded otherwise, finding him and his men guilty of desertion. Five of the eight men were given sentences of fifty lashes and dishonorable discharges from the service. The entirety of Smith's sentence was not publicly specified, and all punishments but the penalty of dishonorable discharge were remitted, much to the consternation of the *Daily Crescent*, which suggested that the ship transporting the men back to New Orleans be pelted with rotten eggs for besmirching the honor of the Louisiana volunteers.⁶⁰

By the end of May 1848, fresh from Smith's trial, Besançon found himself in a bit of hot water of his own. A commission was investigating unspecified charges against him, charges which the *New Orleans Weekly Delta* assured readers "will not amount to anything." Besançon was placed under arrest for a period of a few weeks while the charges were investigated. During his brief period of arrest, he was granted permission to lead a contingent of five troopers in pursuit of guerrilleros who had been observed in the area. The brief skirmish, apparently the last documented action for Besançon and company, resulted in one enemy being killed. Soon after this action, the charges against

⁶⁰ "Late and Important from Mexico," *The Daily Crescent*, April 13, 1848, Newspapers.com, <https://www.newspapers.com>. "Still Later from Mexico; Vera Cruz, Tuesday, May 9," *The Daily Crescent*, May 19, 1848, Newspapers.com, <https://www.newspapers.com>.

Besançon were dismissed and he was ordered to resume regular duty in time to prepare his men for the return to New Orleans and civilian life.⁶¹

The four companies of the Louisiana Mounted Battalion, including Besançon's Company A, boarded a New Orleans-bound ship in Veracruz on July 2 and arrived home on July 9. The entire battalion was mustered out of service on July 17, 1848.⁶² L.A. Besançon, however, was far from finished with Mexico. The experience of leading a cavalry company in combat would serve him well, as he would soon to return to Mexico as an officer hired by the Yucatecan government in its fight against the Maya insurrection known today as the Caste War of Yucatán.

⁶¹ "Later from Vera Cruz, May 31, 1848." "Vera Cruz News Items: Camp Louisiana Mounted Battalion," *The Daily Crescent*, May 27, 1848, Newspapers.com, <https://www.newspapers.com>.

⁶² "Our Troops in Mexico," *The Daily Crescent*, July 8, 1848, Newspapers.com, <https://www.newspapers.com>; "Louisiana Mounted Men," *The Daily Crescent*, July 10, 1848, Newspapers.com, <https://www.newspapers.com>; "Louisiana Mounted Battalion," *The Daily Crescent*, July 19, 1848, Newspapers.com, <https://www.newspapers.com>.

Chapter 4 Yucatán: Filibuster (1848-1849)

“Such are the fragmentary accounts of this strange and misty expedition which ended in disaster. It is almost completely unknown and the bones of the killed Americans have rotted into oblivion in the wilderness of Yucatán . . .”
— Edward S. Wallace¹

The relationship between Mexico proper and the province of Yucatán is historically complicated. The peninsula, with its comparatively low numbers of Spanish colonists, large population of indigenous Maya, and its relative lack of mineral resources, was a backwater of the New Spain Viceroyalty. Although these factors undoubtedly added to a feeling of separateness, Albino Acereto credits the roots of friction between the peninsula and the rest of independent Mexico to the failure of the central government to live up to its promises of a federalist system in which Yucatán would enjoy relative autonomy.² Likewise, Lorena Careaga Viliesid claims that “Yucatán was always liberal and federalist, and its problems with the Mexican government arose from the pressures of centralism and the breaking of agreements that guaranteed its tariff privileges.”³

With its capital, Mérida, closer to Havana than to Mexico City, in some ways Yucatán had more in common with the Caribbean than the rest of Mexico. Geographically separated from the rest of the country by dense jungle on its southern

¹ Edward S. Wallace, *Destiny and Glory* (New York, NY: Coward-McCann, Inc., 1957), 52.

² Albino Acereto, *Evolución Histórica de las Relaciones Políticas entre México y Yucatán* (Mexico City: Müller Hermanos, 1907), 49–60, <https://bit.ly/3IhWcUt>.

³ Lorena Careaga Viliesid, “Episodios de una Entidad Futura: Tres Ensayos Conmemorando el Centenario de la Creación del Territorio Federal de Quintana Roo 1902 - 2002” (June 2002), 9.

border and surrounded by water on three sides, the isolated residents of the peninsula felt no particular kinship with the inhabitants of the rest of the country. When Mexico gained its independence from Spain in 1821 and the first republic was established in 1824, Yucatán joined, but not without some apprehensions. “Many Yucatecans considered Mexico a greater liability than Spain: an extractive and monopolistic central government which lacked the old empire’s wealth, stability, and trade connections,” writes Terry Rugeley. These apprehensions were rooted in Yucatán’s limited resources and weak economic situation, which required a close relationship with a country from which they felt estranged, but which they needed to survive.⁴

Economic conditions were certainly a factor in the external relationship between Yucatán and Mexico, and they were also at play in the internal dynamics between the ruling class and the Maya. The majority Maya peasantry provided the labor that allowed the gentry to maintain its lifestyle while reaping few of the economic rewards. In addition, the Catholic Church placed its own burden on the peasantry, so that the Maya were under the yoke of both the elite landowners and the clergy, paying taxes to the one and “user fees” to the other.⁵ The economic framework in which the peasants labored was not unique to Yucatán or Mexico, however. It was rooted in a power structure based on racial differences that was common throughout Latin America, a system in which white elites held first position and indigenous peoples and those of mixed race were held to be

⁴ Terry Rugeley, *Rebellion Now and Forever: Mayas, Hispanics, and Caste War Violence in Yucatán, 1800-1880* (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 2009), 62.

⁵ Rugeley, 184.

inferior. As pointed out by Burkholder *et al.*, however, “race” per se was more a more complex construct than simple biology, with “the mastery of Spanish or Portuguese, Christianity, mode of dress, diet, place of residence, and honor also [contributing] to racial and ethnic identity.”⁶ In such a system, the indigenous Maya were certainly bound to suffer the greatest discrimination.

As in other Spanish colonies and territories in the Americas, Yucatán’s social hierarchy placed European whites above all other racial and ethnic groups. This privileged community was composed of the *peninsulares* (those born in Spain) and the *criollos* (those born in Yucatán of European, mostly Spanish, heritage). At around 10 percent of the total population of Yucatán, the *peninsulares* and *criollos* were the smallest in number, but wielded the greatest power and prestige. Next in the pecking order were the *mestizos*, of mixed European and native blood, who made up roughly 15 percent of the population. Together, the Hispanic population—the *peninsulares*, *criollos* and *mestizos*—were referred to as *Ladinos* or *Yucatecos*, the Spanish-speaking population. Finally, the largest group was composed of the native people of Yucatán, the Maya, who made up at least 75 percent of the population, although estimates range as high as 90 percent.⁷ The Maya were often referred to simply as *indios*, or Indians, a pejorative and dismissive word in most of Latin America.

⁶ Mark A. Burkholder, Monica Rankin, and Lyman L. Johnson, *Exploitation, Inequality, and Resistance: A History of Latin America Since Columbus* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2018), 117.

⁷ Charles River Editors, *The Caste War of Yucatán: The History and Legacy of the Last Major Indigenous Revolt in the Americas* (Charles River Editors, 2020), 40.

These racially-based castes gave name to the conflagration that was to consume Yucatán beginning in 1847, the Caste War of Yucatán. The word “caste” implies a rigidity that was belied by the cooperation at various levels between Yucatecos and Maya, but it has been used as a shorthand by historians to describe a social system in which the native peoples worked to ensure the wealth and power of the few through the negotiations of Maya leadership in the form of the *batabs*, the Maya caciques who acted in the role of intermediaries between the Maya peasants and the Yucatecos⁸

Historian Terry Rugeley makes a strong argument that the threat to the *batabs*’ status was a significant factor in the roots of the Caste War. In 1839, Yucateco militia leader Santiago Imán employed the Maya peasantry as soldiers in a successful last-ditch effort to win independence from Mexico. With independence in 1840 came a redistribution of land by way of “land alienation,” in which public lands were granted to private individuals. The *batabs* acted as the tax collectors for the government, and the land redistribution, which favored the elite class, put them in an untenable position of collecting taxes that landowners were longer disposed to paying, as they felt freed from the shackles of the previous central Mexican government. As the *batabs* saw their power erode and their own persecution begin, they began to lash out. In the eastern half of Yucatán, isolated from the capital at Mérida, a series of conflicts erupted between the

⁸ Rugeley, *Yucatán’s Maya Peasantry and the Origins of the Caste War*, 183.

batabs, government officers, and Catholic clerics. These clashes were the precursors to the open conflict that was to ensue.⁹

Another factor in the run-up to war was the rivalry between western Yucatán's two principal cities, Campeche and Mérida. Lorena Careaga Viliesid characterizes this rivalry as one between politically liberal entities whose practical priorities differed. The capital, Mérida was the seat of government and administrative power, while Campeche had traditionally been the region's principal port and therefore commercial and economic center. Campeche had complete control over regional imports and exports until the port town of Sisal was founded. Located only thirty-five miles from Mérida, Sisal allowed Mérida to control its own exports of the fiber that gave its name to the new port.¹⁰

Although both Campeche and Mérida were of the liberal persuasion, identified with federalism and Yucatán regional autonomy, they differed strongly in their pragmatic stances towards the central government in Mexico. Campeche was willing to deal with the central government as long as it could maintain its monopoly on trade and strong commercial ties with Mexico, while Mérida was less likely to accept Mexican political domination, especially after the port at Sisal gave it the ability to control its own trade with Cuba and the United States.¹¹ The balance of power between the two cities and

⁹ Rugeley, 183–85.

¹⁰ Lorena Careaga Viliesid, "Neutralidad y Rebelión: Yucatán Entre Dos Guerras, 1846-1849," in *Episodios de una Entidad Futura: Tres Ensayos Conmemorando el Centenario de la Creación del Territorio Federal de Quintana Roo, 1902-2002* (Chetumal, Quintana Roo, México: Unpublished manuscript, 2002), 10.

¹¹ Careaga Viliesid, 9.

between Yucatán and Mexico proper was in flux from the moment of Mexico's independence from Spain until the conflict with the United States.

By the time of the Mexican-American War, Yucatán was (temporarily at least) no longer part of the Mexican Republic, having declared its independence for the second time on January 1, 1846 (the first declaration of independence was in 1841)¹². The Campeche-Mérida rivalry was raging, with Campeche's cause championed by Santiago Méndez and Mérida led by Miguel Barbachano. The two sides feuded with each other over the matter of neutrality and the benefits and drawbacks of Yucatán independence. The American intervention in Mexico would bring matters to a head.

In May 1846, the US Navy blockaded Yucatán's ports to stop supplies from transiting the peninsula for Mexico. This action further exacerbated the already tense relationship between the Méndez-Campeche camp and the Barbachano-Mérida camp. The US took advantage of the situation when they allowed General Santa Anna to return to Mexico from Cuba with Santa Anna's promise to end the war quickly. Passing through Mérida on the way to Mexico City, Santa Anna promised Barbachano that he would return Mexico to federalism and recognize Yucatán's demands for autonomy and other rights if Barbachano would agree to Yucatán rejoining the republic. He also promised

¹² The first period of Yucatán independence lasted from 1840 until the end of 1843. After General Santa Anna re-established himself as president by coup in October of 1841, he first attempted to bargain with Yucatán, sending Andrés Quintana Roo to carry out negotiations, and later trying to subdue the rebellious region through military force. Yucatán returned to the republic at the end of 1843 with a promise of regional autonomy. See Careaga Viliesid, "Neutralidad y Rebelión: Yucatán Entre Dos Guerras, 1846-1849," 11 and Lorena Careaga Viliesid, "Filibusteros, Mercenarios y Voluntarios: Los Soldados Norteamericanos en La Guerra de Castas de Yucatán, 1848-1850," in *Episodios de Una Entidad Futura: Tres Ensayos Conmemorando el Centenario de la Creación del Territorio Federal de Quintana Roo, 1902-2002* (Chetumal, Quintana Roo, México: Unpublished manuscript, 2002), 41.

Barbachano that he (Barbachano) would remain as Yucatán's governor. With these assurances, Barbachano declared Yucatán's allegiance, and on November 2, 1846, Yucatán was once more part of Mexico.¹³ The Campeche camp, however, was not in agreement, and opted for continued neutrality, which led to saber-rattling and the eventual movement of Campeche-aligned troops against Mérida. Although Barbachano managed to muster enough troops to meet the Campeche forces, they were defeated, and the seat of government was moved to Campeche in January 1847. Now led by interim governor Domingo Barret, Yucatán immediately opened negotiations with the United States to remove the blockade in exchange for Yucatán's neutrality in the war.¹⁴

The long-running battle for dominance between Mérida and Campeche, the tenuous and fractious relationship of Yucatán with Mexico, and the outbreak of the war with the United States put Yucatán in a politically volatile situation. Combined with the region's long history of endemic racial, economical, and societal injustices, this volatility required only a spark to burst into a conflagration that would consume the region for years to come. It would not take long.¹⁵

The Maya Uprising Begins

On July 30, 1847, a group of Maya led by Cecilio Chi massacred almost the entire white population of Tepich, a town in the northeastern interior of the peninsula. The

¹³ Careaga Viliesid, "Neutralidad y Rebelión," 13.

¹⁴ Careaga Viliesid, "Filibusteros, Mercenarios y Voluntarios," 42; Nelson A. Reed, *The Caste War of Yucatán*, Rev. ed (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 2001), 39.

¹⁵ Careaga Viliesid, "Filibusteros, Mercenarios y Voluntarios," 38.

Maya killed every white man, woman, and child, save for a few women who were spared only to be raped. The immediate motive for Chi's attack was vengeance for the execution of fellow Maya leader Manuel Antonio Ay on July 26. Ay, along with many others, had been accused of conspiring against the whites and the government and was executed by firing squad in the city of Valladolid.¹⁶

The Maya date the insurrection from the day of Ay's execution, but most historians recognize the July 30 date of the Tepich massacre as the beginning of the Caste War of Yucatán.¹⁷ News of the uprising began to appear almost immediately in US papers. The *Daily Picayune* of New Orleans published a short article on the event on September 3, 1847, based on correspondence written in August. The paper was, unsurprisingly, sympathetic to the plight of the white population, but also recognized that of the Maya peasantry, writing, "The Indians in Yucatan have been more oppressed than in any other part of Mexico because the landholders are generally absentees residing in Spain and entrust the management of their estates to stewarts [*sic*], who to subserve their own interests grind the Peon to the dust."¹⁸

The characterization of the uprising as a racial, or caste, war was a "political ploy," according to Wolfgang Gabbert, one designed to instill terror into the white (Yucateco) population who feared for "the very roots of civilization" at the hands of

¹⁶ Reed, *The Caste War of Yucatán*, 66; Rugeley, *Yucatán's Maya Peasantry and the Origins of the Caste War*, 176.

¹⁷ Careaga Viliesid, "Neutralidad y Rebelión," 17.

¹⁸ "Correspondence of the Picayune. Vera Cruz, August 27, 1847."

“barbarous savages.”¹⁹ This portrayal is seen in coverage of the war by US newspapers. “The Yucatan affair was the project of the Indians to massacre all of the whites and mulattoes. All the white women and children of Tetic [Tepich] are said to have been murdered,” cried the *Buffalo Commercial Advertiser* in a voice that was echoed by papers around the United States.²⁰ While the papers got the facts of the massacre were more or less correct, the emphasis on race was one that must have pleased the Yucatán elites, as they would soon make international appeals for assistance based on racial fears and prejudices.

Other than a flurry of scare-mongering articles in US newspapers, the news of the initial uprising in Yucatán was little more than a footnote to the Mexican-American War. While stories of racially-tinged horror would always find a home in American papers, especially in the South, which harbored its own fears of a race war, the Yucatán insurrection did not have much impact on either the conduct or perception of the war with Mexico as far as the average American newspaper reader was concerned. However, for the residents of Yucatán, and especially for the Maya, the events of July were to be the beginning of the descent into a no-holds-barred conflict that would see Yucatán’s population plummet 40 percent over the next fifteen years.²¹

¹⁹ Wolfgang Gabbert, *Violence and the Caste War of Yucatán*, Kindle Edition, Cambridge Latin American Studies (Cambridge, United Kingdom ; New York, NY, USA: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 63.

²⁰ “New York, Aug. 31--7 P.M.,” *Buffalo Commercial Advertiser*, September 1, 1847, Newspapers.com, <https://www.newspapers.com>.

²¹ Gabbert, *Violence and the Caste War of Yucatán*, 2.



1848 Map of Yucatán, with important towns and cities indicated²²

While Yucatán's government began a round-up of suspected insurrectionist leaders, the Maya caciques Jacinto Pat and Cecilio Chi began their campaign against the Yucatecos in earnest. They attacked haciendas, taking loot, and murdering any Yucatecos they could find, along with their loyal Maya servants. Other caciques were biding their time, waiting to see if the uprising would gain steam and be successful. The government forces, however, were equally as interested in continuing the old Campeche-Mérida

²² Stephen Salisbury, *The Mayas, the Sources of Their History. Dr. Le Plongeon in Yucatan, His Account of Discoveries* (Worcester, Massachusetts: Press of Charles Hamilton, 1877), Frontispiece (modified), <https://bit.ly/3fzoltY>.

rivalry as they were in bringing the Maya insurrectionists to justice. Colonel José Dolores Cetina, for example, took advantage of the situation to march a small force into Mérida and reclaim the city for recently ousted governor Barbachano. This move prompted Campeche-aligned forces to abandon their fight against the Maya in a quest to reclaim the government, which they eventually did. For their part, the Maya saw the conflict between the two factions of Yucatecos as an opportunity to further their cause, and they quickly ran off a string of victories.²³

While the Maya uprising and the political infighting raged, the Campeche faction had been busy on the diplomatic front seeking aid from abroad. Envoy Justo Sierra O'Reilly had been sent to Washington to negotiate with US Secretary of State James Buchanan in September 1847. Initially, O'Reilly was authorized to offer a promise of Yucatán neutrality in the Mexican-American War in exchange for the elimination (or at least diminution) of the blockade and the high tariffs the US was imposing on Yucatán goods. However, as the uprising picked up steam and the Maya looked like they were gaining the upper hand, O'Reilly made appeals for arms and ammunition. Soon, even more drastic measures were called for.²⁴ By March 1848, the situation had deteriorated to the point that Méndez, once again the governor of Yucatán, offered up Yucatán's

²³ Reed, *The Caste War of Yucatán*, 2001, 72–75.

²⁴ Careaga Viliesid, "Filibusteros, Mercenarios y Voluntarios," 42–43.

sovereignty itself in exchanged for military intervention in the conflict. This offer was made to the United States, Great Britain, and Spain.²⁵

The offer of control over Yucatán was intriguing to the Polk administration and to the expansionist members of the US Congress. After Mexico's recent defeat and the loss of much of her territory, the US taking Yucatán was seen by many as the logical next step. With O'Reilly practically begging the United States to occupy and colonize the peninsula, Yucatán must have seemed liked a fruit ripe for the taking. With this in mind, Foreign Relations Committee Chairman Edward Hannegan cited the supposed threat of Great Britain's intervention in Yucatán as well as the need to defeat the "savages" as reasons for his proposal of the Yucatán Bill, which would authorize US troops to temporarily occupy Yucatán. However, the terms of the recently signed Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, which officially ended the Mexican-American War in February, presented an obstacle to congressional expansionists. In addition, they claimed that the Monroe Doctrine did not support American involvement in Mexican affairs, as the supposed threat of British intervention in the region never materialized. When the Maya signed a peace treaty with the Yucatán government at the end of April 1848, the drive to pass the Yucatán Bill in the US Congress stalled. Although the peace was broken shortly thereafter, it was too late; Yucatán would receive no direct official aid from the United

²⁵ Reed, *The Caste War of Yucatán*, 2001, 95.

States government. However, the government would not prevent American “volunteers” from joining the fight.²⁶

Who Were the American Volunteers?

While the United States government, or at least Congress, was hesitant to attend to Justo Sierra O’Reilly’s appeals for help in Yucatán, the American public was not. In June 1848, while American troops were still occupying Mexico, the *Daily Crescent* of New Orleans ran an article calling for volunteers “who desire to render assistance to the whites of Yucatan,” claiming that “these men, once in Yucatan, will remain there, and joined by their friends from the United States, will soon make it a powerful and independent State.”²⁷

In the 1964 edition of *The Caste War of Yucatán*, Nelson Reed claims that the majority of volunteers who eventually went to Yucatán were from the 13th Infantry Regiment. The 13th had been created as one of nine regiments to bolster the regular army (*i.e.*, they were not “volunteer” regiments, but rather regular army regiments whose members enlisted for only one year). This regiment saw little action in Mexico and had been mustered out in Mobile, Alabama, in the summer of 1848.²⁸ Reed’s initial

²⁶ David M. Pletcher, *The Diplomacy of Annexation: Texas, Oregon, and the Mexican War* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1973), 569–71; Careaga Viliesid, “Filibusteros, Mercenarios y Voluntarios,” 44–46.

²⁷ “Aid to Yucatan,” *The Daily Crescent*, June 12, 1848, Newspapers.com, <https://www.newspapers.com>.

²⁸ Nelson A. Reed, *The Caste War of Yucatán*, 1st Edition (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 1964), 110.

assessment as to the composition of the Yucatán volunteer force is also found in Edward S. Wallace's *Destiny and Glory*. So, too, is the mistaken identification of Georgian veteran Joseph A. White as the leader of the expedition.²⁹ The revised edition of Nelson's book, published in 2001, makes no mention of the veterans of the 13th Infantry Regiment having joined the Yucatán volunteers *en masse* after being discharged. Instead, Reed writes, "It was not weeks but months later that soldiers discharged in the American South were enlisted under a Captain George W. White, who promoted himself to colonel for the occasion."³⁰

The largely Southern provenance of the volunteers account is corroborated by Lorena Careaga Viliesid, whose detailed essay on the American volunteers in Yucatán is quite specific as to their origins. The majority appear to have been soldiers from the South who had recently returned from the Mexican-American War. A good number had served with various Louisiana volunteer units, including the Louisiana Battalion of Volunteers and the Louisiana Mounted Volunteers. Captains White and Besançon served in these two units, respectively, and had become acquainted during the war. They had even served together on at least one court-martial panel at the end of the conflict.³¹

Wallace also backs idea of the Southern identity of the volunteers, noting that the port of New Orleans was the both the location of discharge as well as the site for recruitment for

²⁹ Wallace, *Destiny and Glory*, 40.

³⁰ Reed, *The Caste War of Yucatán*, 2001, 122.

³¹ Careaga Viliesid, "Filibusteros, Mercenarios y Voluntarios," 62.

Southern veterans of the Mexican-American War who then turned around to enlist in the Yucatán adventure. “The Northern and Western boys, however, had mostly had their fill of army life,” writes Wallace.³² In any case, regardless of their origins, there was no problem in getting a solid response to the call for troops.

Although requests for volunteers had gone out in the summer of 1848, it was not until November that the regimental command structure was complete and the *Daily Crescent* published the news that Colonel White had appointed Lieutenant Colonel Besançon as his second in command, both having awarded themselves promotions from their previous rank of Captain, as befitted the leaders of the newly organized regiment of nearly 1,000 men who would soon be off to fight the Maya in Yucatán.³³

The Volunteers as Filibusters

The martial spirit prevalent among young Southern men of the era combined with the prospect of campaigning in an exotic locale may have been a strong enough lure for many of the men who volunteered for the Yucatán expedition. As demonstrated in the war with Mexico, Southerners far outpaced their northern brethren in volunteering to fight. Tennessee, for example, raised ten times the number of men requested to fight in the war, and Savannah, Georgia, had to resort to a lottery to select one company of men from amongst the many volunteer companies.³⁴ Almost all of the men who volunteered to

³² Wallace, *Destiny and Glory*, 32–33.

³³ “Colonel White’s Regiment,” *The Daily Crescent*, November 20, 1848, Newspapers.com, <https://www.newspapers.com>.

³⁴ John Hope Franklin, *The Militant South* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1956), 7–8.

join White and Besançon were young, between eighteen and forty-five years old, and the Yucatán adventure may have seemed like a continuation of the recently ended war with Mexico.³⁵

In addition to the call of adventure, the volunteers could look forward to a handsome payout for their participation. The Yucatán government promised the volunteers 320 acres of land and a monthly stipend of eight dollars at the conclusion of the conflict, so there definitely was a mercenary aspect to their service.³⁶ Many men had volunteered for service in the nine temporary regiments that bolstered the regular army in the recent Mexican-American War based on just such a promised reward.

If not money or adventure, it is conceivable that some may have been inspired by racism and revenge for the Maya's massacre of the white Yucatecos. Certainly, many of the volunteers would have been well acquainted with the Southern fear of slave uprisings, as well as the seemingly continual conflicts with native Americans as the boundaries of the United States expanded ever westward.

Undoubtedly, there was a range of reasons that provided motives enough for a restless young man to try his luck in Yucatán. Careaga Viliesid describes the American volunteers as a "mixture of adventurers, filibusters, and mercenaries, both heroes and villains, agents and actors of Manifest Destiny," but she makes a strong case for the second of these—that the volunteers were, in fact, filibusters. Filibustering, she states,

³⁵ Careaga Viliesid, "Filibusteros, Mercenarios y Voluntarios," 63.

³⁶ Reed, *The Caste War of Yucatán*, 2001, 122.

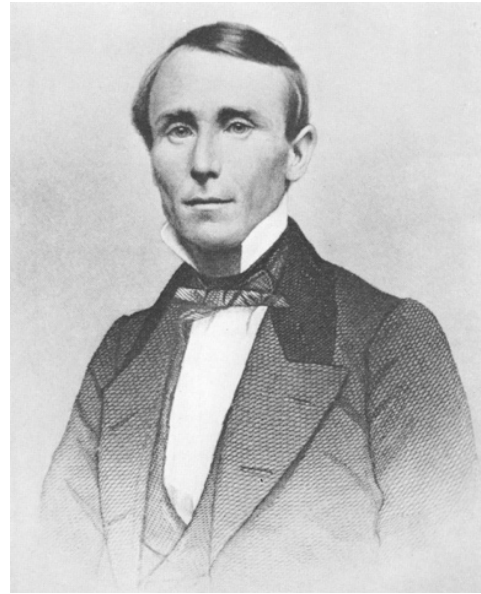
was a natural result of Manifest Destiny and was to be distinguished from mere piracy by the belief of its adherents in its allegedly loftier goal of expansionism and its supposed “philanthropic” nature. These, she argues, allowed filibustering to garner support in the press.³⁷

If the Yucatán volunteers were in fact the first filibusters after the Mexican War, they were far from the first Americans to engage in the activity. Charles H. Brown proposes Venezuelan Francisco de Miranda and American Aaron Burr as filibustering’s early-1800s prototypes. Miranda wished to “revolutionize” Spanish colonies, while Burr looked to refurbish his image and renew his fortunes after destroying his political future in his fatal duel with Alexander Hamilton. Miranda and Burr both shared the goal of establishing themselves as heads of state, both enlisted Americans in their pursuits, and both ended in failure. However, their examples spurred several other filibusters in a string that ended in 1821 with the attempt of citizens of Natchez, Mississippi, to establish the independence of Texas. After this failed attempt, filibustering died down until the 1840s, when it took off with renewed vigor, reaching its zenith in the 1850s with the most famous and successful of the mid-century filibusters—William Walker.³⁸

³⁷ Careaga Viliesid, “” 37, 47-48.

³⁸ Charles H. Brown, *Agents of Manifest Destiny: The Lives and Times of the Filibusters* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 1–16.

Walker's filibusters took place not long after the American volunteers' participation in the Caste War of Yucatán, and he serves as the standard against which all filibusters may be measured. Wallace compares the Yucatán volunteers to Walker, making a distinction not in kind but rather in method, describing Walker's efforts to invade Baja California and Sonora in 1853 as akin to "outright piracy,"



*William Walker, Wikimedia Public Domain*³⁹

while ventures such as that of the American volunteers in Yucatán were more along the lines of Walker's later, more successful efforts in Nicaragua. In the latter, Walker was invited in to participate in a revolt, but once there he took over the government, declared himself president, and reinstated the practice of slavery. Wallace claims that the American volunteers in Yucatán may have had similar thoughts and probably "had a vague objective of the eventual annexation of Yucatán" and speculating that "it is a fair assumption that they set sail with a gleam in their eyes for siring a revival of slavery in that mysterious land."⁴⁰

Lending credence to the characterization of the Yucatán expedition as a filibuster is the fact that White and Besançon had been involved in planned filibusters both before

³⁹ *William Walker*, Unknown, Photograph, Unknown, Wikimedia Commons, <https://bit.ly/3AZv60z>.

⁴⁰ Wallace, *Destiny and Glory*, 36–37.

and after their participation in the Caste War. The *Port Gibson Herald* of September 29, 1848, reports that Besançon sent five hundred men to Corpus Christi on what the paper called a “buffalo hunt.” The buffalo hunt turned out to be the spurious Sierra Madre expedition to filibuster northern Mexico under the alleged command of Henry L. Kinney. The *Herald* published Kinney’s letter denying his involvement in the expedition, in which he stated, “Our country is at peace with Mexico, and it certainly would be a breach of neutrality to organize a force in our limits to invade any portion of her territory, and I certainly would not, with my consent, lend my name for such a purpose.”⁴¹ However nebulous the Sierra Madre expedition may have been, Besançon’s alacrity in sending men on the “buffalo hunt” on the flimsiest of evidence demonstrates his willingness to participate in filibustering activity.

Likewise, in 1849, some eighteen months after leading the expedition to aid Yucatán in the Caste War, Besançon’s commander, George White, whom Robert G. Caldwell calls a “soldier of fortune,” recruited from five to eight hundred (exact numbers conflict) volunteers to join him in assisting Narciso López, a Venezuelan-born filibuster, in his attempt to overthrow the government of Cuba. The volunteers met on Round Island, four miles south of Pascagoula, Mississippi, to await transport to Cuba. However, the planned expedition was foiled by the US Navy, as by this time president Zachary Taylor had had enough of filibustering activities by US citizens.⁴²

⁴¹ “The Sierra Madre Movement,” *The Port Gibson Herald*, September 29, 1848, Newspapers.com, <https://www.newspapers.com>.

⁴² Robert Granville Caldwell, *The Lopez Expeditions to Cuba, 1848-1851* (Whitefish, MT: Kessinger Publishing, 2010), 50; Wallace, *Destiny and Glory*, 46.

The filibustering nature of the Yucatán expedition is also supported by historians Nelson Reed, Edward Wallace, and Robert May. In referencing the volunteers, Reed writes that “some of them had big dreams: a Caribbean extension of the United States, perhaps an independent kingdom based on slavery and supposed Latin decadence, with wealth, señoritas, and power for every red-blooded volunteer.”⁴³ Edward Wallace places the American volunteers in Yucatán in a chain of such adventurers, linking Manifest Destiny and American expansionism to the independence movement in Texas, the Mexican-American War, the extension of slavery, and eventually the American Civil War.⁴⁴ Finally, Robert May raises the question of whether or not the Yucatán volunteers could be better described as mercenaries rather than filibusters, but he cites the pre- and post-Yucatán filibustering activities of Besançon and White in concluding that making such a distinction “would seem to be splitting hairs.” May concludes, “It is easy to imagine White, Besançon, and company trying to convert their intervention in Yucatán into an attempt at conquest, had the opportunity to do so presented itself.”⁴⁵

In defining Besançon’s Yucatán expedition as a filibuster, it is convenient to compare the undertaking to the more famous filibustering exploits of William Walker that took place in the 1850s. The adventure of military action abroad, the promise of reward in the form of money and land, the lure of power, and the driving force of

⁴³ Reed, *The Caste War of Yucatán*, 2001, 122–23.

⁴⁴ Wallace, *Destiny and Glory*, 29.

⁴⁵ Robert E. May, *Manifest Destiny’s Underworld: Filibustering in Antebellum America* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 2002), 17.

Manifest Destiny are to be found in Besançon's participation in the expedition to Yucatán as well as in Walker's later filibusters in Mexico and Central America. However, the comparison goes beyond the filibustering episodes themselves to find parallels in the two men's lives.

Both L.A. Besançon and William Walker were transplants to New Orleans, with Besançon having arrived from New York via Natchez and Walker from Nashville. Walker, a graduate of the University of Nashville, had tried his hand at both medicine and law before arriving in New Orleans, but he soon took to journalism, like Besançon. He wrote his first article for the *Commercial Review* in January 1847, and it whetted his appetite for more. He purchased a share of the New Orleans *Daily Crescent* in March 1849, and upon the sale of that paper in 1850, he picked up work as an editor at the *Herald* in San Francisco.⁴⁶ By this time, Besançon, too, had made the trip west to California just the year before, both men having been lured by the promise of the gold rush.

In addition to journalism, Walker followed in Besançon's footsteps in engaging in duels, one of which, his duel with William Hicks Graham, had a decidedly journalistic component with charges and countercharges flying in the press. Luckily for Walker, he escaped his duel with Graham with only a relatively minor wound to his leg.⁴⁷ He went on to have two more duels, which he survived.

⁴⁶ Scott Martelle, *William Walker's Wars: How One Man's Private American Army Tried to Conquer Mexico, Nicaragua, and Honduras* (Chicago, Illinois: Chicago Review Press Incorporated, 2019), 27, 30.

⁴⁷ Martelle, 41–45.

Finally, the two men had one more thing in common—they both died young, Besançon at age 40 and Walker at age 36. In many ways, William Walker’s life mirrored that of L.A. Besançon. However, just as was the case with John Quitman, who had outshone Besançon in Mississippi politics and in military achievements in the Mexican-American War, Walker went on to garner much more notoriety for his filibustering activities.

Actions of Besançon and the American Volunteers in Yucatán

The Mexico City newspaper *El Siglo Diez y Nueve* (*The Nineteenth Century*), published the ten articles of agreement between Miguel Barbachano (governor of Yucatán) and private American citizen John H. Peoples that delineated the contractual agreement between Yucatán’s government and the American volunteers. The last of these articles required that the volunteers leave New Orleans for “in all haste . . . coming in fragmentary groups as transport comes available if they cannot all come together.”⁴⁸ The articles of agreement had been drawn up in July 1848, but the American volunteers did not begin to arrive until November of that year. The official state newspaper of Yucatán issued a bulletin welcoming Colonel White and 330 Americans who arrived in Sisal and lauded the volunteers’ support and the way they had “captured the public’s appreciation

⁴⁸ “Interior: Estado de Yucatán,” *El Siglo Diez y Nueve*, November 3, 1848, Hemeroteca Nacional Digital de México, <https://hnm.iib.unam.mx/index.php/hemeroteca-nacional-de-mexico>. Peoples had been the editor of the *American Star*, perhaps the most well-known of the many newspapers that sprung up in Mexico amongst the troops during the Mexican-American War; see Careaga Viliesid, “Filibusteros, Mercenarios y Voluntarios,” 51.

with their good behavior, especially that of their fine and respectable officer corps.”⁴⁹ The *Natchez Daily Courier* soon reported that the number of volunteers in Yucatán had reached 700, one of whom was L.A. Besançon.⁵⁰

Within a week of their arrival, the American volunteer forces were engaged in combat at Ticum, “in which,” the *Natchez Courier* reported, “the American volunteers were conspicuous for their bravery and good conduct.”⁵¹ The Americans did not operate as one unified force, but rather by late November had been split into two commands under Yucateco leadership, with one group marching to Peto in south-central Yucatán, and the other headed to Tihosuco some eighty miles to the west.⁵² Shortly before Christmas, the *Daily Crescent* reported Peto had been taken by Yucateco troops at the end of November, with the loss of only one man wounded, while inflicting casualties in the dozens on the Maya who had held the town.⁵³

The reports of casualties in the American papers, however, were not to be trusted. Careaga Viliesid notes that the papers exaggerated the volunteers’ achievements while downplaying the number of their casualties. Nelson Reed quotes an American survivor as

⁴⁹ “La Redacción,” *Periódico Oficial del Estado de Yucatán*, December 5, 1848, Hemeroteca Nacional Digital de México, <https://hnm.iib.unam.mx/index.php/hemeroteca-nacional-de-mexico>.

⁵⁰ “Yucatan Battalion,” *The Natchez Courier*, December 5, 1848, Newspapers.com, <https://www.newspapers.com>.

⁵¹ “Late and Interesting: Yucatan-Havana-Guatemala-Venezuela,” *The Daily Crescent*, December 13, 1848, Newspapers.com, <https://www.newspapers.com>.

⁵² Careaga Viliesid, “Filibusteros, Mercenarios y Voluntarios,” 64.

⁵³ “Yucatan,” *The Daily Crescent*, December 21, 1848, Newspapers.com, <https://www.newspapers.com>.

claiming that almost three hundred of his compatriots had perished in the battles of November and December 1848. Both historians agree that the Maya were more than holding their own, employing guerrilla tactics, harassing the Americans and Yucatecos with ambushes, employing home-made weapons against them, enticing them to desert, and improvising tactics such as stake-pits and poisoned wells in their determined resistance.⁵⁴

The casualties of November and December had several effects on the Americans. First, and perhaps most importantly, these losses convinced a good number of them to return home in January. They had had enough of fighting the “barbarians” and realized that the war was not going to be won nearly as easily as they had imagined. Second, it hardened the negative, racist attitudes of many toward the Maya and even toward their own Yucateco comrades in arms. Third, the stubbornness of the Maya in defending themselves eventually won the admiration of some Americans. Careaga Viliesid notes that Captain Tobin, who wrote a regular column called “Notes from Tobin’s Knapsack” for the *Daily Delta* of New Orleans, grudgingly came to acknowledge that the contest between the Yucatecos and Maya was less like an uprising of savages against their civilized overlords and more akin to a contest of slave against master with Maya cacique Jacinto Pat playing the part of Spartacus.⁵⁵ Tobin calls him “Prince Pat” and lauds his

⁵⁴ Careaga Viliesid, “Filibusteros, Mercenarios y Voluntarios,” 65–66; Reed, *The Caste War of Yucatán*, 2001, 123–24.

⁵⁵ Careaga Viliesid, “Filibusteros, Mercenarios y Voluntarios,” 67.

engineering prowess in cutting a road through tough terrain, citing “skill that would not be discreditable to the most accomplished engineer from West Point.”⁵⁶

American reporting on the war took on a bit of a more realistic, if not pessimistic, tone at the turn of the new year. The January 25 edition of the *Daily Picayune* reported the early return to New Orleans of twenty-two American volunteers, from whom the paper learned that the Maya had confronted the Yucatecos and Americans “in such overpowering force as to make success over them always costly and often doubtful.” Such reporting was a far cry from the optimistic, even arrogant, attitude that had prevailed in the US press only a month before. However, the press had not given up completely on its exaggerated claims of American prowess, as the same article reported that Besançon, with a detachment of three hundred men, had taken on a force of six to eight thousand Maya at the Battle of Tihosuco. In two days of fighting, the Americans suffered thirty-eight casualties, including two lieutenants and a sergeant. In the series of engagements lasting several days, the paper reported that “the Indians fought bravely,” but they “treated all their American captives barbarously, mutilating their persons in the most horrible manner.”⁵⁷

Although American newspapers were wont to describe the actions of the Maya as barbarous, the truth was that the Yucatecos were guilty of atrocities themselves.

Wolfgang Gabbert writes that the Yucatecos frequently referred to the Indians as “savage

⁵⁶ “Our Volunteers in Yucatan,” *The Daily Delta*, March 14, 1849, Newspapers.com, <https://www.newspapers.com>.

⁵⁷ “Late from Yucatan: Battles Between the American Volunteers and the Indians,” *The Daily Picayune*, January 25, 1849, Newspapers.com, <https://www.newspapers.com>.

barbarians,” yet the Yucatecos tortured, killed, and maimed them with no sense of irony at their own barbarity. General Severo del Castillo admitted that “barbarous and cruel actions were as common among whites as they were among Indians.”⁵⁸ Although General del Castillo campaigned against the Maya in the 1860s, long after the American volunteers had quit the field, the atrocities of war preceded his command and had been present from the beginning of the war. One might argue that the Yucatecos’ mistreatment of the Maya during the war was merely the wartime manifestation of conditions under which the Maya labored before the beginning of the uprising, while the Maya’s actions certainly contained an element of revenge on their Yucateco overlords for decades of mistreatment.

The battles of December and January seem to have sapped the spirit of the majority of American volunteers. The twenty-two volunteers who had returned to New Orleans were soon followed by others as the American volunteer regiment began to crumble. The troops must have felt the loss of military discipline, and reports of improprieties surged. This prompted Colonel White to call for a meeting of his officers in late January 1849 to look into charges of poor conduct on the part of the volunteers. These charges included fighting, robbery, desertion, and pillaging. While the meeting concluded that these charges were without merit (as might be expected), it could not be denied that the American regiment was falling apart.⁵⁹ Finally, the Yucatán government

⁵⁸ Gabbert, *Violence and the Caste War of Yucatán*, 3.

⁵⁹ Careaga Viliesid, “Filibusteros, Mercenarios y Voluntarios,” 69–70.

had seen enough, and the *Fénix* of Campeche reported on March 1 that “the battalion of American volunteers under the command of Colonel White had been disarmed, dissolved, and ordered to embark,” attributing the decision to the Americans’ “terrible conduct.”⁶⁰

It appears that the poor conduct of the Americans was not limited to the private soldiers but included officers as well. In a letter dated March 4 that appeared in the *Daily Delta*, Captain Tobin relates that he found himself in nominal command of the volunteer regiment as both White and Besançon had been arrested for their involvement in a duel. In an act reminiscent of his Mississippi days of journalism and dueling, Besançon was to duel with “muskets loaded with ball and buckshot” at ten paces with a certain “Captain K___y,” whose name was partially redacted by Tobin but most likely referring to Captain Robert J. Kelly. Fortunately, cooler heads prevailed, Governor Barbachano was notified, and the entire dueling party was arrested. Tobin had “a good laugh at their expense,” but apparently the government of Yucatán was not amused.⁶¹

Tobin was soon to be reported among the two hundred and fifty men to arrive in New Orleans on March 13, 1849, aboard the *Tennessee*, along with a dozen other officers of the now-defunct American volunteer regiment. The *Daily Delta* praised the service of the returned volunteers while at the same time chastising the government of Yucatán for not fulfilling its promises. The paper claimed that the volunteers had been rewarded for

⁶⁰ “Voluntarios,” *El Fénix*, March 1, 1849, Hemeroteca Nacional Digital de México, <https://hnm.iib.unam.mx/index.php/hemeroteca-nacional-de-mexico>.

⁶¹ “A Note from Tobin’s Knapsack,” *The Daily Delta*, March 25, 1849, Newspapers.com, <https://www.newspapers.com>.

their service with “the paltry sum of ten dollars each.” The same report notes, however, that some Americans had made the decision to stay in Yucatán and continue the fight under the command of Kelly.⁶²

While the American press lingered on the achievements of the volunteers as well as the hardships they had endured, the Mexican press emphasized what it viewed as the fecklessness of the Americans as well as their poor behavior. Of a group of two hundred volunteers who had embarked aboard the steamship *Cetro* bound for New Orleans, *El Siglo Diez y Nueve* stated that their “services were few and bad, and very costly to our poor treasury.”⁶³ The paper faulted the “insubordination and bad conduct” of the Americans, with the exception those men of good conduct who would continue to serve under Yucateco leadership and who were to embark in the port of Sisal for transport to “where they may most be needed.”⁶⁴

It turned out that this remnant force of approximately one hundred fifty volunteers would form a company and participate in the Battle of Bacalar in southeastern Yucatán, not far from the border with Belize, in May. Now nominally under the command of Colonel Jose Dolores Cetina, commander of the 7th Expeditionary Division, Kelly and the remaining Americans were effectively part of the Yucatán army. Cetina’s aim was to take

⁶² “From Yucatan. The Return of the American Volunteers,” *The Daily Delta*, March 14, 1849, Newspapers.com, <https://www.newspapers.com>.

⁶³ “Yucatán,” *El Siglo Diez y Nueve*, March 22, 1849, Hemeroteca Nacional Digital de México, <https://hnm.iib.unam.mx/index.php/hemeroteca-nacional-de-mexico>.

⁶⁴ “Parte Oficial. Gobierno General. Ministerio de Guerra y Marina,” *El Siglo Diez y Nueve*, March 30, 1849, Hemeroteca Nacional Digital de México, <https://hnm.iib.unam.mx/index.php/hemeroteca-nacional-de-mexico>.

and hold Bacalar as part of an effort to stop the flow of supplies and arms that was streaming from nearby Belize. While initially successful in taking the town, Cetina and his army of eight hundred men were soon facing four to five thousand Maya who had been sent by Jacinto Pat to root out the Yucatecos and keep the supply line to Belize open. In the ensuing fighting, which Nelson Reed describes as “hand-to-hand madness, bayonets against machetes in the dark,” two-thirds of the remaining American volunteers were killed, including Kelly.⁶⁵

Lorena Careaga Viliesid reports that of the remaining few dozen American survivors of the Bacalar campaign, some continued to fight, perhaps until as late as 1852. She notes that “at least two married Yucateca women and remained in Mérida where their children and grandchildren were still living at the beginning of [the twentieth] century.”⁶⁶

And what of Besançon? The *Daily Crescent* reported that he arrived in New Orleans on board the schooner *D.C. Foster* from Sisal, along with his commander, White, and a handful of other officers, on April 25, 1849. Where he and the others had been for the past month and what they had been doing was not reported. They obviously did not join forces with the doomed Kelly, who was shortly to lose his life in Bacalar. Perhaps they had remained in Sisal awaiting transport, or perhaps they had remained as “guests” of Governor Barbachano after their arrest for participating in a duel. However, this last bit of speculation is unlikely, as the other dueler, Kelly, had been released to serve with

⁶⁵ Reed, *The Caste War of Yucatán*, 2001, 129–30; Careaga Viliesid, “Filibusteros, Mercenarios y Voluntarios,” 70.

⁶⁶ Careaga Viliesid, “Filibusteros, Mercenarios y Voluntarios,” 70–71.

Cetina in his expedition to Bacalar. In any case, Besançon was home with his wife and four children in New Orleans, and he would never return to Yucatán or Mexico.

Three years later, in April 1852, the *Daily Delta* ran an article condemning the governments of Yucatán and Mexico for not living up to the contractual obligation of land and money that had been the due of the American volunteers in Yucatán. The paper claimed, “The Indians were subdued, mainly by the aid of Colonel White’s auxiliary forces,” but they were discarded when no longer of use. This bold statement ignores the fact that the bulk of the American volunteers participated in the war for a mere three months, as well as the fact that the Caste War would continue until 1901. The Maya were hardly “subdued.” In fact, the United Kingdom recognized a Maya state in southeastern Yucatán in the 1850s, such recognition holding until 1893.

Nonetheless, the American volunteers appointed their old leader White as their agent in seeking what they considered to be their due for having served alongside the Yucatecos against the Maya.⁶⁷ Unfortunately, their efforts would prove fruitless. White died within a year at the age of thirty-two. He was buried in the Cypress Grove Cemetery in New Orleans on February 15, 1853.⁶⁸

So ended Besançon’s adventures in Mexico. He was still a relatively young man, just a few months shy of his thirty-seventh birthday, which he would celebrate on July 7,

⁶⁷ “The Yucatan Volunteers,” *The Daily Delta*, April 11, 1852, Newspapers.com, <https://www.newspapers.com>.

⁶⁸ “Louisiana, Orleans Parish, State Museum Historical Center, Cemetery Records, 1805-1944,” n.d., Family Search, <https://familysearch.org/ark:/61903/3:1:3Q9M-CSKV-59N9-3?cc=4234528>; “Local Intelligence. The Funeral Ceremonies,” *The Daily Crescent*, February 15, 1853, Newspapers.com, <https://www.newspapers.com>.

and further adventure awaited. While he was fighting in the Mexican-American War, just days before the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, a man by the name of James W. Marshall struck gold at Sutter's Mill, near Coloma in the foothills of California's Sierra Nevada. By the time Besançon returned from Yucatán in April of 1849, the California gold rush was in full tilt. L.A. Besançon was soon to join the forty-niners who were streaming to what would soon become the thirty-first state of the Union.

Chapter 5
Tuolumne to Baton Rouge:
The Gold Rush and a Premature End (1849-1853)

*“It is time to unite, Frenchmen, Chileans, Peruvians,
Mexicans; there is the highest necessity for putting an end to
the vexations of the Americans in California.”*
— *Notice to Foreigners*¹

The discovery of gold in the foothills of the Sierra Madre precipitated a mad rush to California by those who believed an easy fortune was to be had by digging or panning for the precious ore. Men, mostly single, but some with wives and children in tow, made the journey to California in the most expeditious manner they could, depending on their points of origin. All of the available options presented their own special dangers.

Prospectors whose native lands touched the Pacific had it the easiest—they simply sailed to the California coast. These included South Americans, Central Americans, Asians, Australians, and New Zealanders. Everyone else had to pick their poison from three options. Those from midwestern US states often chose an overland route, which was arduous and included such dangers as Indian attacks, scarcity of supplies, and lack of food and water. There were even reports of cannibalism on the 1,600 miles of the California Trail. Gold-seekers from farther east could also choose the overland route or they could go by sea. Many chose to take the clipper ships on a voyage around Cape Horn, braving its treacherous waters and notoriously fickle weather, while others preferred to shorten the journey by sailing to Panama and crossing the isthmus by

¹ William Perkins, *Three Years in California: William Perkins' Journal of Life at Sonora, 1849-1852* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1964), 37.

boat and mule train (there was no railroad at that time), enduring the heat and mosquito-borne diseases.²

It is not known which route L.A. Besançon chose, but by September 1849, he was in California. In announcing Besançon's presence in the territory, his old Natchez paper, the *Mississippi Free Trader*, declared him to be "just the kind of man to succeed and rise to honor and eminence in the embryo State of California, and we know of no man whose future prosperity would give us more satisfaction."³

Besançon's name is found in the 1850 census as a resident of Township No. 1, Tuolumne County. The county was at the southern end of the gold fields of the Sierra Nevada. Sonora, the county's largest town, lay some eighty-five miles south of Sutter's Mill at Coloma. Besançon is listed as a resident of the same dwelling as that of a dozen other men, making it likely that he had left his wife and four young children behind in their comfortable home in New Orleans as he pursued his purposes in California, which evidently did not include mining for gold. As the sixty pages of Tuolumne County's Township No. 1 indicate, there were quite a few residents who listed their profession as "miner," but there was a wide range of other professions, including tavern keeper, rancher, merchant, musician, mechanic, and grocer. Besançon listed his profession as "lawyer."⁴

² Gordon V. Axon, *The California Gold Rush* (New York, NY: Mason/Charter, 1976), 37–40.

³ "Col. L.A. Besançon," *Mississippi Free Trader*, September 1, 1849, Newspapers.com, <https://www.newspapers.com>.

⁴ "1850 United States Census, Township 1, Tuolumne County, California, Digital Image, Ancestry.Com.," n.d., <https://bit.ly/3jYXrOW>. The 1850 census of Tuolumne County must have extended into 1851, as the "0" of 1850 is overwritten by a "1." This is most likely due the fact that California became

The Foreign Miners' Tax

The miners of Tuolumne County were a diverse lot. The residents of Township No. 1 numbered over 2,500 individuals hailing from almost every state and a good number of foreign nations. The influence of Mexican nationals on the county was strong. In fact, the larger township of Sonora had been founded in 1848 by miners from that country who named it after the Mexican state of Sonora, and by 1849 it was home to more than 10,000 Mexican miners. With the influx of Europeans and white Americans from eastern and midwestern states, racism and resentment soon reared their ugly heads. The prejudice was directed towards foreigners in general, but especially towards those who were not white, regardless of their origins.⁵

Conflicts between the mostly white, native-born population and the multiethnic, foreign population grew heated. Whites attacked a group of one hundred Chileans, who retaliated at the end of December. For their efforts, the Chileans were jailed in Stockton, where they were tortured. Next, a lynch mob went after a group of four Mexicans whose murder charges were dismissed by a judge who then had to save their lives from the mob.

a state in September of 1850, after the census had begun. The canvassing of Township 1 in Tuolumne County was completed in April 1851.

⁵ "Sonora California," Western Mining History, accessed September 9, 2021, <https://westernmininghistory.com/towns/california/sonora/>.

When the Mexicans were declared innocent on retrial, the whites posted notices that all foreigners should leave Tuolumne County, and many did so.⁶



*Sonora, Tuolumne County, c. 1853*⁷

The California legislature did nothing to dampen the animosity between racial groups or between nativists and foreigners. David Lavender records that “any person having one fourth or more Indian blood or one-half or more Negro blood was barred from giving evidence in court cases involving whites.” Eventually, the legislature came up with a way to placate the nativists who were raging against the foreigners while filling the coffers of the treasury at the same time: a tax of \$20 a month was imposed on foreign

⁶ Jean Pfaelzer, *Driven Out: The Forgotten War Against Chinese Americans*, Kindle Edition (New York: Random House, 2007), 19–20. Pfaelzer reports that the Chileans had their ears cut off and that some were hanged; others were shot for “target practice.”

⁷ “Sonora California.”

miners. While the tax on foreign miners would raise money for the state, its main purpose “was putting pressure on Latin Americans,” according to legislator Thomas Jefferson Green. Lavender describes Green as publicly claiming to have “no more compunction about injuring them [Latin Americans] . . . than about crushing body lice.”⁸

As its name suggests, the Foreign Miners’ Tax Act was openly anti-immigrant and was written to appease nativists who felt that their country and its bounties were being taken from them. It was also blatantly racist and was but one of a series of laws and acts written at the state and national level attacking non-whites. These types of laws and acts would continue to be written and passed throughout the second half of the nineteenth century, reaching their zenith, perhaps, with the xenophobic Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. Foreigners, naturally, objected to the Foreign Miners’ Tax, as it was not only a significant financial burden, but they also recognized and rebelled against its inherent injustice.

Just two weeks after the tax act was signed into law on April 13, 1850, L.A. Besançon was appointed as the tax collector for Tuolumne County. Exactly how he obtained his appointment is not clear, but he was publicly lauded in the *Daily Pacific News* for his appointment by the governor, Peter H. Burnett. The paper, which referred to the newly-minted tax collector as “General Besançon,” noted his previous profession as editor and journalist as well as his service in the Mexican-American War in praising his appointment. Besançon’s Southern connections and association with the Democratic

⁸ David Lavender, *California: Land of New Beginnings*, Kindle Edition (Lincoln, Nebraska: UNP - Nebraska Paperback, 1972), loc. 3734.

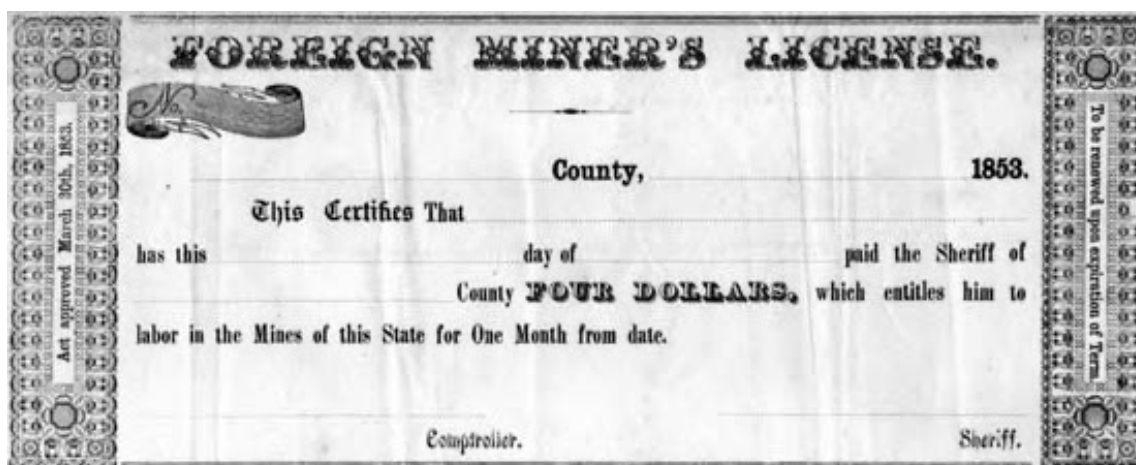
Party certainly aided his candidacy for the position. Governor Burnett had grown up in a slave-holding Missouri family, and Solomon Heydenfeltd, a Democrat and fellow transplant from the South who would soon be elected to the California Supreme Court, was most likely the person who nominated Besançon to practice law before the court shortly after Besançon's appointment as tax collector.⁹

Once appointed, Besançon began immediately to post notices that he would be collecting the tax in his office in Sonora. For each twenty dollars he collected, he would be allowed to pocket three. The many foreign miners of Sonora and greater Tuolumne County countered with their own flyers calling for unity amongst the foreigners in the face of the unjust, punitive tax, which they assumed, rightly, was nothing more than a racist plot to get them out of the prospecting business.¹⁰ Angry protests soon followed, and by May 16 the Anglo Americans of Sonora feared for their lives as the protests begat acts of violence. According to a reporter from the *Alta California*, the sheriff was approached by a Mexican miner who threatened to kill him for doing his part in collecting the tax. Instead, when the miner attempted to attack the sheriff with a knife, a bystander “with a single stroke of a Bowie knife, nearly severed his head from his body.”¹¹

⁹ “California, U.S., Occupational Licenses, Registers, and Directories, 1876-1969 [Database Online], Digital Image, Ancestry.Com,” accessed September 10, 2021, <https://bit.ly/3A1EpwN>.

¹⁰ Lavender, *California*, loc. 3890.

¹¹ Perkins, *Three Years in California*, 38.



*Foreign Miner's License c. 1853, Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain*¹²

As the anger of the foreign miners grew, so did the size of their protests, which eventually numbered in the thousands. Soon, there was a decisive confrontation when Besançon, in his official capacity as tax collector, called together a group of three hundred or so American citizens to counter more than 5,000 foreigners who had gathered to protest the tax law. The foreigners were led by “some hot-headed Frenchmen, lately arrived from France, of the Red Republican order,” according to Robert Wilson, the *Alta California's* reporter. However, although many of the foreigners had taken up arms to face the Americans, a good number wanted no part in armed conflict, so they packed up to leave the town and county. Despite the rumor that Besançon had lost his life in the protest, the tense situation deflated with the withdrawal of the foreigners, and a bloodbath was avoided.¹³

¹² *Foreign Miner's License*, 1853, 1853, Wikimedia Commons, <https://bit.ly/3jZp5v6>. By 1853, the date of this license, the miners' tax had been reduced from twenty dollars to four dollars.

¹³ Perkins, 36-38.

Unfortunately for the merchants of boomtown Sonora, the peaceful exit of so many foreigners from Sonora may have satisfied their xenophobic and racial prejudices, but it had a devastating effect on their businesses. They complained until the Foreign Miners' Tax was rescinded in 1851. However, by 1852 it was reinstated at the much lower rate of \$3 (eventually raised to \$4). In addition, the tax was modified to apply only to those miners who were not "free white persons," thereby emphasizing the racist underpinnings of the law and allowing Irish, Germans, and other Europeans to avoid the tax.¹⁴ Gordon Axon maintains that the tax had the intended effect of forcing certain foreigners out of the mines, but this was only temporary, as more and more immigrants arrived in California, especially from China. "The discrimination of the early mining days," he writes, "made an unpleasant mark on the life of California."¹⁵

The backlash against the Foreign Miners' Tax affected L.A. Besançon as well. His hometown newspaper re-ran an article from San Francisco's *Pacific News* from June that California's Supreme Court had issued an order to the Judge of California's fifth judicial district "to issue a writ of *quo warranto* against L.A. Besançon to show by what authority he exercised the office of 'Collector of Licenses to Foreign Miners' for the county of Tuolumne."¹⁶ On July 21, 1850, two months after the foreign miners' uprising which he had ably put down, Besançon was required to appear before the Supreme Court

¹⁴ Pfaelzer, *Driven Out*, 20.

¹⁵ Axon, *The California Gold Rush*, 71.

¹⁶ "Foreign Miners' Tax," *The Daily Crescent*, July 25, 1850, Newspapers.com, <https://www.news-papers.com>.

of California to prove his authority for collecting the foreign miners' tax. This was a rather absurd situation, as Besançon had to defend himself for doing a job to which he had been appointed by the governor, only to have his authority to carry out his duties questioned by the supreme court of the same state. In his defense, Besançon said that he had done what was expected of him in collecting the tax that had been authorized by the legislature, and had gone so far as to pay, out of his own pocket, the expenses incurred in raising a militia force to combat the foreign protestors in May 1850. He claimed that he held the tax money he had collected and would turn it over to the state treasury if he were to be held free from lawsuits that had been filed against him by the foreign miners and if he were reimbursed for his expenses.¹⁷

While Besançon fought his case in court, he applied himself once again to politics, chairing a committee charged with drafting an address to the California Democratic Party in March 1851.¹⁸ However, his foray into the California political scene was as short-lived as his career as a tax collector. By the time the District Court made a judgment against him in the amount of \$2,431 in October of 1852, Besançon had already decided that it was high time to leave California and return home to New Orleans. According to a report that appeared decades later in the *Daily Alta California*, he had absconded with his share of the \$60,000 that was owed to the state by several of the tax

¹⁷ "Gen. L.A. Besançon," *Sacramento Transcript*, February 15, 1851, UCR California Digital Newspaper Collection, <https://bit.ly/3A4Fowt>.

¹⁸ "Democratic Meetings at the Capital," *Sacramento Transcript*, March 17, 1851, UCR California Digital Newspaper Collection, <https://bit.ly/3Ejw0Yq>.

collectors. The paper described Besançon as one of the “delinquents” who had made a tidy “pile” before returning to New Orleans.¹⁹

Return to New Orleans and Death on the Mississippi

Besançon returned home to Louisiana at some point in late 1851 or early 1852. He appears in a *New York Times* report dated from April 24, 1852, as being present to greet the ship *Southerner*, which had returned to New Orleans with thirty-five men from Narciso López’s mission to Cuba from eight months prior. The filibuster had failed, and many of the Americans involved had been killed or imprisoned. The thirty-five who returned to New Orleans had been held prisoner in Spain. Besançon and members of the “Friends of Cuban Independence” organization had arranged to have the ship saluted by the Washington Artillery upon arrival.²⁰

Settling in quickly, Besançon took up where he had left off in New Orleans, founding a newspaper, the *Southern Democrat*, with his war buddy George White and three others. The first edition appeared on Independence Day of 1852.²¹ He also re-entered Louisiana politics, getting elected as the delegate

¹⁹ “Pioneer Recollections,” *Daily Alta California*, December 21, 1884, UCR California Digital Newspaper Collection, <https://bit.ly/2VymZZQ>.

²⁰ “New Orleans,” *The New York Times*, April 24, 1852, Newspapers.com, <https://www.newspapers.com>.

²¹ “Southern Democrat,” *New Orleans Weekly Delta*, July 11, 1852, Newspapers.com, <https://www.newspapers.com>.

from Jefferson Parish to the 1852 state convention, at which he helped draft the wording of Louisiana's new constitution.²²

The convention stretched into September 1852, and Besançon does not appear again in the public record until January 1853. Perhaps he was enjoying the peacefulness of home life at Oak Lawn after several years of adventure in Mexico and California. He had missed a good portion of the young lives of his children. His oldest child, daughter Leoline, was now thirteen. His youngest, son Clark, was but four. However, Besançon was a man of action and not one to stand still for too long. If not plotting his next adventure, he was likely busy with the *Southern Democrat*, Louisiana politics, or a new business venture.

Perhaps it was a political meeting or business opportunity that drew Besançon to the capital city of Baton Rouge, some seventy-five miles distant as the crow flies, in January 1853. Most likely he made the journey by riverboat, as both Oak Lawn and the Louisiana state capitol building in Baton Rouge overlooked the Mississippi. Whatever the purpose of his trip, while at the capital Besançon fell suddenly ill and bought a ticket for the side-wheel steamboat *Caspian* for the journey home.²³

Illness was no stranger to the residents of Baton Rouge, nor to Louisiana in general. Malaria, yellow fever, smallpox, and cholera were endemic in the state

²² "Telegraphed to the New Orleans Picayune: Louisiana State Convention," *The Daily Picayune*, July 28, 1852, Newspapers.com, <https://www.newspapers.com>.

²³ "Death of Gen. L.A. Besançon," *Buffalo Morning Express*, February 2, 1853, Newspapers.com, <https://www.newspapers.com>.

in the antebellum period, and 1853 was no different. In fact, in the summer of that year, the death rate was an incredible one in fifteen, mostly due to an outbreak of yellow fever that took 12,000 victims in New Orleans alone.²⁴

It was not yellow fever, however, that ended L.A. Besançon's life. The man who had avoided death by dueling on multiple occasions and who had braved the battlefields and tropical diseases of Mexico and Yucatán unscathed was felled by a bacteria, *Vibrio cholerae*. Cholera was a common ailment, especially in cities with primitive sanitation and a weak understanding of how disease was spread. Causing severe diarrhea which leads to dehydration and electrolyte imbalance, cholera left untreated is capable of causing death within hours.²⁵ Although the newspapers attributed Besançon's death to cholera, it is conceivable that Besançon was suffering from some similar malady not caused by *Vibrio cholerae*. The means of detecting the cholera bacterium are readily available in the modern world, but in 1853 many deaths were attributed to cholera which may have been caused by other pathogens. While cholera was endemic, in 1853 New Orleans was suffering a deadly wave of yellow fever which would kill 12,000 residents in only five months.²⁶

²⁴ "Antebellum Louisiana: Disease, Death, and Mourning," page, Louisiana State Museum Online Exhibits, accessed September 12, 2021, <https://bit.ly/3k4cvLe>.

²⁵ "Cholera," accessed September 12, 2021, <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/cholera>.

²⁶ Kathryn Olivarius, "Death, Data, and Denial in Antebellum New Orleans," accessed March 7, 2022, <https://harvardlibrarybulletin.org/death-data-and-denial-antebellum-new-orleans>.

Regardless of the accuracy of his diagnosis, death came swiftly for Besançon. Boarding the *Caspian* in Baton Rouge, Besançon remarked that he felt ill. One hundred and thirty river miles later, the vessel docked in New Orleans, where he expired minutes after the steamboat's arrival. Only miles away, his family was unaware of his fate. It was Friday, January 21, 1853, and he was forty years old.

The news of Besançon's death spread quickly, and within days notices appeared in the papers of several states. The *Brooklyn Evening Star* highlighted his New York birth and his able editing faculties.²⁷ The editor of his old newspaper, the *Mississippi Free Trader*, noted that although he did not know Besançon personally, he recognized Besançon as a founder of the paper, which "he edited with ability and tact."²⁸ The New Orleans *Daily Delta* lamented, "Poor Besançon is gone!" and stated that "he had many noble and generous qualities."²⁹ His old nemesis, the *Natchez Courier* got in a last parting shot, describing Besançon's life as "somewhat chequered."³⁰ Almost all the death notices mentioned his time in the Mississippi state legislature and service in the Mexican-

²⁷ "Intelligence," *Brooklyn Evening Star*, February 5, 1853, Newspapers.com, <https://www.newspapers.com>.

²⁸ "Death of Gen. L.A. Besançon," *Mississippi Free Trader*, February 2, 1853, <https://www.newspapers.com>.

²⁹ "The Late Col. Besançon," *The Daily Delta*, February 27, 1853, Newspapers.com, <https://www.newspapers.com>.

³⁰ "Death of a Natchez Editor," *The Natchez Courier*, January 25, 1853, Newspapers.com, <https://www.newspapers.com>.

American War, while several noted his expedition to Yucatán to help put down the Maya insurrection.

Besançon was survived by his wife Octavia and his four children. All would live through the Union occupation of New Orleans during the Civil War, a conflict in which L.A. Besançon most surely would have participated had he lived to see it, given his proclivity for seeking wartime glory. Octavia never remarried and would pass away in 1889 at the age of seventy-three. Three of his children would live to see the turn-of-the-century, with Leoline living until 1919. His daughter Julia died in 1878, just a few weeks shy of her thirty-seventh birthday. His son Octave served with Dreux's Louisiana Cavalry during the entire Civil War, until General Joseph E. Johnston's surrender in May 1865.³¹ Son Clark dabbled in New Orleans politics and became a well-respected judge.

Of Besançon's five siblings, only James and Peter would survive him. James, the shoemaker, had remained in western New York and died in 1882, aged sixty-seven. His son Henry Oscar would follow in his uncle's footsteps by becoming a newspaper editor and publisher.

Besançon's older brother, Peter, had shared much of Lorenzo's life journey, following him from New York, to Natchez, and on to New Orleans, engaging in the newspaper business and acting as a presidential go-between and

³¹ "Octave Besançon. Well-Known New Orleans Man Dies in Illinois," *Times-Democrat*, June 30, 1905, Newspapers.com, <https://www.newspapers.com>; "Dreux's Cavalry," *Times-Democrat*, December 8, 1901, Newspapers.com, <https://www.newspapers.com>.

possible government agent during the Mexican-American War in which his younger brother was involved. He had gotten married the year before Lorenzo's death, at the age of forty-eight, and started working at the Pension Office in Washington. After his wife Mentoria filed for divorce a mere two years later, Peter began a downward spiral that would lead to his unhinged attack on Secretary of the Interior Jacob Thompson in the spring of 1858, Thompson being the target of Peter's wrath for delivering the news that he (Peter) had been released from the pension office for inefficiency. Upon his return to New Orleans, he became *persona non grata* amongst his erstwhile colleagues and friends of the newspaper industry in the Crescent City. He haunted the city streets and the editorial pages of the local papers, predicting the coming war with the North until they would hear no more from him. A rather pitying article in the *Daily Picayune* described his situation: "When Peter ceased to write, stern poverty, which had long dogged his footsteps, fastened upon him his whole desolating load, and he moved about our streets animated by the proud instincts of a gentleman but weighed down by the fortunes of a beggar."³² This article, published in September 1862, was the last word on Peter's life, as he disappeared from the public record.

Besançon's old comrade-in-arms and, more recently, fellow co-founder of the *Southern Democrat*, George W. White, survived his friend Lorenzo by a mere

³² "Peter Besançon Knocked Down by a Negro," *The Daily Picayune*, September 5, 1862, Newspapers.com, <https://www.newspapers.com>.

twenty-four days, dying unexpectedly on February 14, 1843. The cause of his death is unknown.

John A. Quitman had been Besançon's sometimes nemesis and *de facto* role model (although Besançon would never have admitted as much) and had competed with Besançon in the pages of Mississippi newspapers, in the halls of the Mississippi legislature, and on the battlefields of Mexico, and once even engaged with him in a mutual cane-duel over a political dispute. Having bested Besançon in terms of rank and achievement, at least by outward signs, he delivered one more defeat to his aspirational junior by outliving Besançon by five years, dying in 1858 of "National Hotel Disease" after attending President James Buchanan's inauguration in the nation's capital.³³

In his four decades of life, L.A. Besançon had been involved in major moments and events of the first half of the nineteenth century. He had made his fortune, however modest, and found his small share of fame, married and fathered children, and engaged in a life of public service. He was a self-made man who pursued his dreams and never backed down from a challenge, and the vicissitudes of his life played out in the press for all to see. Had his life not ended prematurely, he undoubtedly would have continued to seek new adventures, pressing his luck to the limit with his eyes on the horizon.

³³ National Hotel Disease was an infection of unknown origin that afflicted from five to seven hundred guests of Washington's largest and most prestigious hotel, including James Buchanan. Kerry Walters explores several theories concerning the origins of the illness, from poisoning by disgruntled employees to an assassination plot against Buchanan. See Kerry S. Walters, *Outbreak in Washington, D.C.: The 1857 Mystery of the National Hotel Disease* (Charleston, S.C: The History Press, 2014).

Epilogue

Lorenzo Augustus Besançon lived in a period of American history defined by Manifest Destiny, which conceived of a United States whose boundaries were ever-expanding under the direction of divine providence. It was a concept that impelled energetic men to action in achieving its goals, men who did not question the righteousness of the cause nor the prerogatives inherent in their American identity. That this applied only to free white males, ignoring the plight of the enslaved millions (over three million in 1850), was not a concern to those engaged in expanding American territory. In fact, for many adherents of Manifest Destiny, the expansion of slavery was part and parcel of their version of the concept and one of the driving forces their filibustering activities. This is evidenced by William Walker's immediate reinstatement of slavery after helping himself to the presidency of Nicaragua, as well as by the entry of Texas into the United States as a slave state. Prominent Texan Stephen S. Austin emphasized the importance of slavery to Texas's future, declaring "Texas must be a slave country," as it held the key for future growth of the South's "peculiar institution."¹

It would be impossible to believe in the Manifest Destiny of America without a belief in American exceptionalism. Although the term "American

¹ Randolph B. Campbell, *An Empire for Slavery: The Peculiar Institution in Texas, 1821-1865* (Baton Rouge London: Louisiana state university press, 1989), 3-4.

exceptionalism” was not current in 1850, the idea of America as an exceptional nation had already been expressed by Alexis de Tocqueville in 1840.²

Going hand-in-hand with this idea of America as unique amongst its fellow nations is the idea of the singularity of its individual citizens. In addressing the idea of individualism as a product of democratic revolution, de Tocqueville writes that individuals “acquire the habit of always considering themselves as standing alone, and they are apt to imagine that their whole destiny is in their own hands.”³ Although de Tocqueville regarded intense individualism as undesirable, Koenraad Swart, in his study of mid-nineteenth century individualism, notes the “more appreciative” take on individualism of Karl von Rotteck and Karl Welker, “in which America was likewise portrayed as the home of an unfettered and energetic individualism.”⁴

In choosing an example of the manifestation of the concepts of American exceptionalism and the precepts of American individualism in the era of Manifest Destiny, one could do far worse than L.A. Besançon.

Besançon left his native state of New York to establish himself on the Southern frontier using his wits and drive, managing to establish a newspaper that

² Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America: Part the Second: The Social Influence of Democracy*, trans. H. Reeve, v. 2 (J. & H. G. Langley; Philadelphia, Thomas, Cowperthwaite & Company, 1840), 36–37, <https://books.google.com/books?id=oEQvAAAAYAAJ>.

³ de Tocqueville, 106.

⁴ Koenraad W. Swart, “‘Individualism’ in the Mid-Nineteenth Century (1826-1860),” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 23, no. 1 (March 1962): 89, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2708058>.

outlived him and engaging in the editorial wars between Democratic and Whig-aligned papers. In his letter to his New York friend J. Starkweather, he came off as brash and boastful in recounting his successes in the publishing world, something that his detractors would later use against him in the Mississippi legislature. His braggadocio, however, was merely a social faux-pas that could be used to embarrass him, not a breach of the standards by which he lived. On the other hand, such superficialities could have real consequences when combined with the requirements of the Southern code of honor, to which he readily took, as witnessed by his several duels with those he offended or who had offended him. Again, however, his dueling was in character for a man of his time and place.

In his journalistic career, Besançon editorialized for the platform of the Democratic Party, much of which was dedicated to the pursuit of the ideals of Jacksonian Democracy and, ultimately, Manifest Destiny. He used the *Mississippi Free Trader* as his weapon in journalistic jousting, just as he used firearms on the field of honor in his various duels. He continued this combat as one of Mississippi's appointed bank inspectors during the banking crisis of the 1830s and the fervor of Locofocoism, and also as an elected representative in the halls of the Mississippi legislature. Although the lines between his careers and his personal affairs were often blurred and overlapping, they were never out of step with the ideals of his party and Manifest Destiny.

Besançon's involvement in the Mexican-American War following his move to New Orleans epitomizes Manifests Destiny's goals. The United States'

war with Mexico was unnecessary, at least from a moral point of view. Mexico was simply defending her territory and historical claims; the United States was interested in expansion, regardless of questions of morality. As a means for achieving the goals of Manifest Destiny, however, the war was the perfect vehicle. Men such as L.A. Besançon, full of bravado and a sense of the rightness of America's cause, jumped at the opportunity to test their mettle in a war that was at best an exercise in political expediency and at worst the plundering of a weak neighbor.

Besançon's leadership role in the US volunteers' filibustering expedition to Yucatán came hard on the heels of the Mexican-American War and represented, perhaps, the worst aspects of Manifest Destiny. The volunteers were ostensibly coming to the aid of their white brethren in Yucatán who were fighting a war against the "barbaric" Maya. That this war had its roots in centuries of repression and brutality of the Yucateco population against the Maya was not a consideration for the volunteers. Most of the volunteers were Southerners and avid supporters of slavery. Many undoubtedly had dreams of carrying on the South's "peculiar institution" in Yucatán with the land bounties that had been promised to them as partial payment of their service. Besançon, although not a Southerner by birth, was a Southerner by choice and an advocate of the acquisition of new territories and the expansion of slavery, both of which were part of the Democratic Party's platform and fit neatly within the concept of Manifest Destiny.

Finally, there is Besançon's participation in the California gold rush. An international phenomenon, one might be tempted to consider it separately from the concept of Manifest Destiny. However, California itself was a prize of the recent war, itself a byproduct of Manifest Destiny, and had only recently been taken from Mexico. California gold was a lure that propelled Americans by the thousands to move westward, thereby fulfilling the mandates of Manifest Destiny.

Besançon's actions in the events surrounding the xenophobic Foreign Miners' Tax can also be viewed through the lens of Manifest Destiny. In taxing the foreign miners and suppressing the resulting protests with the aid of armed Americans, Besançon was acting in line with his principles, principles that defined his belief in the superiority of Americans and the rightness of any actions taken to support their cause.

Lorenzo Augustus Besançon is a prime example of a man of his times. The framework of his life and the events built upon it are illustrative of an era. His life is a roadmap of the first half of the nineteenth century, tracing a path through its major movements and events. His story has been hidden in the shadow of others of greater fame, waiting to be brought to light. He was, truly, a man of Manifest Destiny.

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