

3-1971

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Walter N. Vernon

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### Recommended Citation

Vernon, Walter N. (1971) "McMahan's Chapel: Landmark in Texas," *East Texas Historical Journal*: Vol. 9 : Iss. 1 , Article 9.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.sfasu.edu/ethj/vol9/iss1/9>

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**McMAHAN'S CHAPEL: LANDMARK IN TEXAS\***

by WALTER N. VERNON

An area in East Texas that was the passageway in 1812-20 of freeboaters, filibusters, spies, soldiers, and settlers<sup>1</sup> became the location in 1833 of what seems to be the oldest Protestant Church with continuous history in Texas — McMahan's Chapel. There were Methodist churches or "societies" in Northeast Texas along Red River as early as 1815, established by the Rev. William Stevenson, but none begun there before 1833 seem to have survived.

The area in which McMahan's Chapel is located is Sabine County, adjoining Louisiana. While under Mexican rule there were restrictions against settlements within twenty leagues of the boundary of Texas, and this encouraged drifters and squatters, delaying permanent settlement. In 1812 Gaines Ferry was established across the Sabine River, making easier the route from Natchitoches, Louisiana to San Augustine and Nacogdoches, Texas. This route was variously called the King's Highway (it was authorized by the king of Spain in 1691, and established in that year by Domingo Terran de los Rios, first provincial governor of Texas),<sup>2</sup> the old Spanish Highway, the old San Antonio Road, and El Camino Real. It became the principal land route to Texas from about 1815 to 1850. As an example, Jared E. Groce migrated over this route in 1821-22 from Alabama to Texas with a caravan of more than fifty covered wagons, plus men on horseback herding horses, mules, oxen, cows, sheep, and hogs.<sup>3</sup>

In 1829 Lorenzo Manuel de Zavala received an empresario's contract to settle 500 families in the area east of the Sabine River including Nacogdoches and San Augustine. In 1834 he sold his contract to the Galveston Bay and Texas Land Company, and its agents conveyed many titles to early settlers.<sup>4</sup>

In 1831 Samuel Doak McMahan moved from his home near Doak's Crossing in Tennessee to Sabine County, locating near Polly Gotch Creek Valley, some ten or twelve miles northeast of San Augustine. His land title, dated October 11, 1835, is identified as a part of Zavala's Colony.<sup>5</sup>

Samuel Doak McMahan was born in Tennessee on November 5, 1789, according to family information and the U.S. Census.<sup>6</sup> His birthplace may have been Washington County, for (1) county records show that there were several McMahan or McMahan families in the county at that time, (2) Washington County was the home of a famous Presbyterian preacher in Washington County, the Rev. Samuel Doak for whom he may have been named, and (3) it is possible that his wife's family or relatives also came from that county.<sup>7</sup> Incidentally, present students of the family line are convinced the name was spelled McMahan, but the McMahan spelling has become so fixed in regard to McMahan's Chapel, thus it is used herein.

McMahan was in Smith County, Tennessee by 1803 when he was married to Phoebe Young. Smith County at that time was a strong Methodist center; among other more famous Methodists there was William Stevenson<sup>8</sup> whose son, James Porter, organized the society at McMahan's Chapel in 1833, as we shall see later. McMahan may have been influenced by the Methodists, but so far as we know he did not join them until he was in Texas. There is evidence that McMahan moved to other parts of

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\*This article appeared in *Methodist History* for October, 1970, and is used here with permission.

Tennessee before going to Texas, but we are not able to trace his itinerary although there were other McMahan's during these years in Marion, Lawrence, and Lincoln counties. Nor have we discovered the location of Doak's Crossing in Tennessee, from which, tradition says, he went to Texas.

When McMahan arrived at his new Texas home, it was still a part of the Mexican government, being in the San Augustine municipality. He built his home of logs on a site at the brow of a hill, and some remaining stones from the fireplace are still to be seen.<sup>9</sup> He is described as a seeker of religion while still in Tennessee by Homer S. Thrall, who also says that "while engaged in secret prayer on the bank of Aish Bayou in 1832 he was happily converted."<sup>10</sup>

Having come to this new religious experience, McMahan naturally wanted to conserve and extend it to others. For one thing, he had a large and growing family for whom he desired religious nurture. His children — and the years of their births — were Elizabeth Moor (1813), James B. (1814), Merlin Young (1816), Susan Young (1817), Alabama Tennessee (1820), Nancy Hardin (1823), Diana Lucina (1828), Margaret Tabitha (1831), and Louisa Holman (1834). He was concerned to find a preacher for his area of the country. He was undoubtedly aware that Methodist circuit riders were already active in northeastern Texas, southwestern Arkansas, and northwestern Louisiana, not far from his home.

Methodist preaching had been introduced into northeastern Texas along Red River in the winter of 1815. The Rev. William Stevenson had preached at Pecan Point in Red River County in that year, and in succeeding years he and others (including Henry Stephenson) extended the circuits on both sides of the river. Soon Stevenson, as the presiding elder in Arkansas, was investigating possibilities for evangelizing other parts of Texas. The chief obstacle to Methodist preaching in Texas was the Mexican prohibition of any but the Roman Catholic religion. Stevenson had a series of letters with Stephen F. Austin, the Texas colonizer, in which Austin wrote that "if a METHODIST, or any other PREACHER except a CATHOLIC, was to go through his colony preaching, I should be compelled to IMPRISON HIM."<sup>11</sup>

At about this time the Rev. Henry Stephenson, a close friend and colleague of William Stevenson, made a trip into Texas visiting some of the Methodists they had both nurtured earlier in northeastern Texas. Undoubtedly, Stevenson, as Henry's presiding elder, knew of this trip and may well have encouraged it in order to learn if Methodist preaching was possible. The Rev. J.P. Sneed wrote that about 1823 "Brother [William] Gates and a few others once and awhile united in the service of God. About one year after they had settled [in 1822] an old acquaintance (Henry Stephenson, a Methodist preacher) visited them and preached for them and a few other neighbors, not desiring to let it be known publicly."<sup>12</sup> Stephenson also preached at other places, as quietly as possible.

All of this preaching, however, evidently raised Austin's ire, for soon he wrote to his sister: "The Methodists have raised the cry against me . . . if they are kept out, or would remain quiet if here for a short time we shall succeed in getting a free toleration for all Religions, but a few fanatic and imprudent preachers at this time would ruin us . . ."<sup>13</sup>

Austin was fearful that too much public preaching would have serious consequences on the effort to gain the larger goal of religious toleration: "I am of

opinion that no evils will arise from family or neighborhood worship . . . provided it is not done in a way to make a noise about public preaching. So as not to start excited Methodist preachers, for I do say that in some instances they are too fanatic, too violent and too noisy . . . I do assure you that it will not do to have the Methodist excitement raised in this country."<sup>14</sup>

In 1825-26 Stevenson moved to Claiborne Parish, Louisiana, accompanied by the Rev. Henry Stephenson. William transferred his membership to the Mississippi Conference (which then included Louisiana), and Henry joined it in 1830. Henry seems to have continued his visits to old Methodist friends in East Texas, sometimes preaching, we would assume. In 1831 James Porter Stevenson, William's son, joined the Mississippi Conference; in the fall of 1832 he was appointed to the Sabine Circuit in Louisiana, with Natchitoches as the headquarters. He soon heard of the desire of Texas Methodists to secure preachers, among these being Samuel Doak McMahan. Stevenson told a friend of the events that followed, and here is what the friend reported:

"In May, 1833, casually meeting with some Texans in a store in the town of Natchitoches, they invited him [James Porter Stevenson] to preach in Texas. His response was 'I am afraid.' It was then a penal offense for any Protestant to preach the gospel in Texas. The Texans . . . Lowe and Milton . . . insisted . . . . Speaking in a firm, resolute voice he [Milton] said, 'You come; I'll stand at your back; you shan't be hurt.' Brother Stevenson consented. The programme fixed upon was a two days' meeting at John Smith's, in Sabine County, where Milam, the first county seat, now stands, with an appointment at Mr. Lowe's house on the preceding Friday. True to time, Bro. Stevenson . . . set out for Lowe's Ferry. Passing safely through the floods of the Sabine a half mile or more, he found the faithful ferryman in readiness to set him across and conduct him to his house, where a large congregation was in waiting to hear the word, in defiance of the laws of Mexico.

"Mr. Milton was 'at his back' per promise, with whom he lodged on Friday night, and by whom he was piloted to Uncle Johnny Smith's. A very large congregation was in waiting . . . on Sabbath at 11 o'clock . . . .

"Samuel D. McMahan, a citizen living a few miles in the interior, sent the preacher a verbal invitation to preach at his house on the following Monday. The congregation at Mr. McMahan's was large, some coming eight or ten miles. This, Bro. Stevenson thinks, was the first Methodist preaching ever done in this section of Texas . . . . Brother S. returned to Louisiana, the Texans having prevailed on him to hold a camp-meeting, embracing the 4th of July. The place selected was on the Polly-gotch [sic], in Sabine Parish,<sup>15</sup> where McMahan's Chapel now stands . . . . The meeting was held at the appointed time and continued three days . . . . This meeting resulted in several conversions. The people demanded another camp-meeting to be held in September following.

"This [September] meeting was on a larger scale. Bro. Stevenson was assisted by Bros. McKinney, Gordon, and Dawdy. On Sunday evening the people clamored for the organization of a church. What was to be done? The laws of Mexico positively forbade such organization, under heavy penalties. The knot difficult to untie may be cut. The pioneer preacher organized a church *de facto* in the wilderness but prudently styled it a society. Let who will make capital of this fact.

"The first church in the Red lands of Texas was composed of forty-eight members, nearly all of whom were genuine believers, truly regenerate persons. The rest professed to have a desire to flee the wrath to come. With a promise to visit them again in October, the preacher left the flock under the care of Bro. McMahan, whom he had appointed class leader. This promise was redeemed and a two-days meeting was held, in which Rev. Enoch N. Talley, of the Mississippi Conference, rendered efficient aid. Great and lasting good resulted from this meeting . . ."

This account appeared in the *Texas Christian Advocate* of September 18, 1880 and was signed "H". The writer was almost certainly James W. Hill, a long-time resident of Hunt County, a prolific writer of articles and several books, and editor of *The North Texas Pulpit* (1880). The account says that he and James R. Stevenson worked together in a protracted meeting at Shady Grove, Hunt County, in 1880, and evidently Stevenson talked at length about his early ministry in Texas.

Charter members of the society/church formed at McMahan's home included Colonel and Mrs. Samuel Doak McMahan, three of their daughters and their husbands; Mr. and Mrs. J.T.P. Irvine, Mr. and Mrs. Acton Young, Mr. and Mrs. E.P. Chisholm; and the Colonel's son and his wife, Mr. and Mrs. James B. McMahan; Mr. and Mrs. Willis Murphy, Martha Murphy Drawhon and her husband, and Mr. and Mrs. W.A. Thompson.

Across the years there has been some difference of opinion regarding the dates and the founder of this society/church, due to a statement from the Rev. J.P. Sneed, quoted and accepted by the Rev. Macum Phelan in his *History of Early Methodism in Texas, 1817-1866*. Sneed wrote, "The society that Bro. James Stevenson formed and never met was scattered. Henry Stephenson formed one [in 1834] and appointed Bro. McMahan leader. This society remains to this day [1873]."<sup>16</sup> Obviously no one wishes to detract any credit or honor from either of these two fine men. Each labored sacrificially for his Lord. It is clear that Henry Stephenson made numerous preaching tours into both Northeast and East Texas long before 1833. But the account above of James P. Stevenson's work at McMahan's states specifically that he first preached there soon after May, 1833, again over the Fourth of July, again in September, and again in October in company with Rev. Enoch N. Talley. All of this sounds like a fairly well established society, and gives ground for concluding that the 1833 society beginning under James P. Stevenson was a continuing one.<sup>17</sup> Yet each man contributed significantly to establishing Methodism in Texas.

Class leader McMahan was given the title of "colonel" because of his commanding one of the battalions in the fight with Piedras at Nacogdoches. He was licensed as a local preacher by the Rev. Robert Alexander in 1837. The three sons-in-law mentioned above all became traveling preachers.

After Texas independence was achieved, the members of the group at McMahan's set out to erect a house for their worship. Soon, under the leadership of the Rev. Littleton Fowler, they had completed a meeting house, thirty by forty feet, made of pine logs, hewed flat. C.A. West dates the building in 1836, Homer S. Thrall in 1838, and Macum Phelan in both 1838 and 1839! At that time it was named McMahan's Chapel; a contemporary called it a "rude log-chapel."<sup>19</sup> When Fowler died in 1846, he was buried under the pulpit of the Chapel, and as successive buildings have been erected, the grave has been retained under the pulpit. Fowler had made his home in the McMahan area before his death.

The church continued to grow and in 1872 a frame structure was built. A third building was dedicated in 1900; a newsstory in the *Houston Post* for August 12, 1900 said that over a thousand people gathered for the dedication on July 28. The present brick structure was dedicated by Bishop A. Frank Smith on July 19, 1956, with the Rev. C.A. West presiding as chairman of the Texas Conference Historical Society.

Methodist historians have considered McMahan's Chapel the oldest Protestant congregation in Texas with continuous existence. This claim seems likely to be true. The nearest claim to challenge McMahan's Chapel is that of the Presbyterian Church in Clarksville. The best evidence about the beginnings of the Presbyterian Church seem to place it about December 1, 1833 or even early in 1834. This is the conclusion of a recent pastor, the Rev. Raymond Judd, Jr., after he had examined all the available evidence.

The Chapel has a special board of trustees consisting in part of the representatives of the Texas Conference and of the San Augustine District. The annual conference provides certain funds to help maintain the Chapel. It has about thirty members, but average attendance on Sunday mornings is often more than that. An adult church school class has about thirty members and an average attendance of twenty to twenty-five. The building is valued at about \$50,000. Four churches in the area comprise the McMahan's Chapel Circuit. The Rev. John W. Mills has been the pastor for four years.

In addition to regular services two Sundays each month, the church has an annual reunion/celebration on the second Thursday in July each year.

## FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Dan Ferguson in *The Handbook of Texas*, Walter Prescott Webb, Editor, II, 523-4. Austin: Texas.

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*, 309.

<sup>3</sup>William Ransom Hogan: *The Texas Republic*. (Norman: University of Oklahoma, 1946), 5-6.

<sup>4</sup>Archie P. McDonald, "Westward I Go Free - Some Aspects of Early East Texas Settlement" in *East Texas Historical Journal*. (October, 1966), IV, 78.

<sup>5</sup>*An Abstract of the Original Titles of Record in the General Land Office [of Texas]*, 1838. Reprinted by Pemberton Press, Austin, 1964, 145-6.

<sup>6</sup>Letter from Mrs. N.I. Hurst, Newton, Texas, dated January 3, 1969.

<sup>7</sup>McMahan was married to Phoebe Young, daughter of Merlin Young, in Smith County, Tennessee on April 26, 1811 (according to Mrs. Hurst). Smith County records also show the names of William and John Young, and in Washington County we find a few years earlier the names of William, John, and "Phebe" Young (county records in Tennessee State Archives and Library).

<sup>8</sup>See Walter N. Vernon: *William Stevenson, Riding Preacher*. (Dallas: S.M.U. Press, 1964).

<sup>9</sup>C.A. West: *McMahan's Methodist Chapel*. Four-page booklet, no date, no publisher.

<sup>10</sup>Homer S. Thrall: *A Brief History of Methodism in Texas*. (Nashville: Publishing House of the M.E. Church, South, 1894), 24.

<sup>11</sup>Written May 30, 1824. Printed in *Arkansas Gazette*, August 29, 1824, 3.

<sup>12</sup>Macum Phelan: *A History of Early Methodism in Texas, 1817-1866*. (Nashville: Cokesbury Press, 1924), 33.

<sup>13</sup>To Mrs. James F. Perry, December 17, 1824 in *Annual Report of the American Historical Association for the Year 1919*, Vol. II, *The Austin Papers*, Part I, 991-92. Edited by Eugene C. Barker. (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1924).

<sup>14</sup>Austin to Josiah H. Bell, February 24, 1829, in *Annual Report of the American Historical Association for the Year 1922*, Vol. II, *The Austin Papers*, (for 1828-1834), 173-74.

<sup>15</sup>This should obviously be Sabine County; Sabine Parish was just across the Sabine River in Louisiana.

<sup>16</sup>Phelan, *op. cit.*, 29.

<sup>17</sup>As early as 1856, H. Yoakum in his *History of Texas* (New York: Redfield, II, 221) stated that a Methodist church had been established in 1853 ten miles east of San Augustine, acknowledging it as one of, if not the first, churches "in the Texas wilderness."

<sup>18</sup>C.A. West, *op. cit.*, 2; Homer S. Thrall, *op. cit.*, 53; Macum Phelan, *op. cit.* 30, 257. The Rev. Robert Alexander entered Texas as one of the three first official missionaries at Gaines Ferry on August 19, 1837. He has stated that a few days later he held a camp meeting for the McMahan society and that "on Sunday, during the service, rain fell gently for over an hour on the unsheltered audience, yet no one left." (Yoakum: *History of Texas*, II, 539). This would seem to place the date for erecting the building after 1837.

<sup>19</sup>Quoted in Laura Fowler Woolworth: *Littleton Fowler, 1803-1846*. 1936, n.p., 9.