
The Texas Presidential Election of 1838: Robert Wilson

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Sam Houston became the first popularly elected president of the fledgling Republic of Texas in 1836. Although Stephen F. Austin—the “Father of Texas”—and former provisional governor Henry Smith had both been candidates, Houston’s status as the hero of San Jacinto was too much to overcome. He was elected by a landslide. The Texas constitution provided that the first president would only have a two-year term, though all subsequent ones would serve three years. In addition, incumbent presidents could not serve consecutive terms. Thus for the election of September 3, 1838, Sam Houston could not be a contender.

One thing President Houston did not want was for his vice-president, Mirabeau Buonaparte Lamar, to succeed him. Though nominally they were teammates as the top two elected officials in the Republic, Houston and Lamar were in fact by 1838 political rivals who headed the two factions that would dominate politics until statehood. On December 1, 1837, most of the country’s senators publicly requested their presiding officer Lamar to run for president. Lamar’s acceptance of candidacy appeared in the same issue of the newspaper as this request.¹

A strong potential candidate was General Thomas Jefferson Rusk. However, he would not be the constitutionally minimum age of 35 until five days before the inauguration. Lamar was sufficiently concerned about Rusk’s popularity that he sought a meeting with Rusk. Rusk wrote Lamar instead, saying he had no desire to run for any office in 1838. In fact, he

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¹*Telegraph and Texas Register*, December 9, 1837.

would "be happy to sustain you in your labors."²

Various public meetings were held to name candidates. At Richmond on April 17, 1838, Lamar was nominated for president and former President *ad interim* David Gouverneur Burnet for vice-president. Four days later, citizens in Columbia endorsed the same ticket. A public meeting in Houston on May 19 adopted resolutions praising Rusk, noting his disinterest in the presidency, then endorsing Lamar. Lamar was paired with House Speaker Joseph Rowe at a nominating session in San Augustine, and with Albert Clinton Horton in Nacogdoches. One of the country's leading newspapers, the *Telegraph and Texas Register*, endorsed the Lamar-Burnet ticket in July 1838, and carried their names on the paper's masthead until the election. Its support, however, was unenthusiastic.³

Sam Houston and his friends did not stay idle while Lamar's machine started rolling. On May 15, 1838, Houston supporters from around the Republic gathered in the capital city of Houston and drew up resolutions beseeching Thomas Rusk to reconsider his earlier rejection of running. They implored Rusk to yield "to the wishes of the country." The *Telegraph* printed the resolutions, but four days later also published Rusk's restated refusal.⁴ Houston's supporters continued their search for a Lamar alternative. On May 26, many of the same leaders who had met in Houston 11 days earlier to endorse Rusk published a plea that former Burnet cabinet member and diplomat Peter Grayson become a candidate. In the same issue of the *Telegraph* that published the request, Grayson reluctantly accepted.⁵

Early portents for Grayson were dreary. The Houston administration had failed to gain annexation with the United States. Indian problems seemed insoluble, and economic misery was rampant. Thus, overwhelming defeat for Grayson was predicted even in the Houston strongholds of East Texas. Grayson left around June 20 on a diplomatic mission to Washington, D.C. His campaigning was handled in key areas by Houston allies, cabinet officials, and the president himself. One Lamar partisan said: "Let your friends watch Sam Houston in the east—he has much at stake in the election of Grayson—he is, rely upon it, the *primum Mobile* of the opposition, his travelling cabinet are the whippers-in."⁶

²Mary Whatley Clarke, *Thomas Jefferson Rusk, Soldier, Statesman, Jurist* (Austin: Pemberton Press, 1971), 104-105.

³*Telegraph and Texas Register*, April 25, 1838; *ibid.*, May 23, 26, 1838; *ibid.*, June 16, 23, 30, 1838.

⁴*Ibid.*, May 19, 23, 1838.

⁵*Ibid.*, May 26, 1838.

⁶Charles A. Gulick, et al., eds., *The Papers of Mirabeau Buonaparte Lamar* (Austin: Von Boeckman-Jones, 1921-1927), vol. 2, 164-181.

Personal campaigning was unorthodox for presidential candidates in Texas, just as in the United States, until the twentieth century. Electioneering instead was conducted through newspapers, which eschewed objectivity and treated truth as a malleable concept. To press their candidate's case, Houston-Grayson allies started a newspaper called the *Civilian*. It is suggestive of the *Telegraph's* weak support for Lamar that the *Civilian* was printed on the *Telegraph's* press. In the first issue of the *Civilian*, which appeared on June 7, 1838, the editor announced that "all fair and honorable means" would be used to secure Grayson's election. Lamar was condemned for being a recent émigré, having arrived from Georgia only on the eve of San Jacinto. Furthermore, he had left Texas for most of 1837 to tend business affairs in Georgia. A whispering campaign was also maintained, based on the fact that Olivia Roberts, a friend from Mobile, Alabama, had followed the widower Lamar to Texas. Rumors of "peccadillos" circulated widely, regardless of their uncertain basis in fact.⁷

The *Telegraph* frequently carried anti-Grayson articles and letters, whose themes included Grayson's failure to join the army during the Revolution, and his leaving for the United States (as a Texas envoy) on the eve of the 1838 election. The *Civilian* complained that a Lamar partisan was "sent abroad" in East Texas to vilify Grayson. Lamar supporters responded that this messenger of ridicule was actually a candidate for Congress who was using Grayson's alleged unpopularity to help his own cause.⁸

The words exchanged in print and elsewhere became so heated that the *Telegraph* requested a truce in its issue of June 30, 1838. The battle ended another way, however. On July 9, Grayson committed suicide in Tennessee. Some coldly analytical Lamar supporters were less moved than they were now supremely confident. One wrote Lamar that Grayson's death "settled the Question without a doubt," and added, "he would have made a miserable Run if he had Lived."⁹

Even before Grayson's death, the name of another Houston administration official had surfaced. James Collinsworth, the first chief justice, entered the race late, as the first mention of him was in the *Telegraph* for June 30, 1838. There the names of all presidential contenders were listed: Lamar, Grayson,

⁷*Telegraph and Texas Register*, June 9, 30, 1838; *ibid.*, July 14, 1838; Stanley Siegel, *The Poet President of Texas: The Life of Mirabeau B. Lamar* (Austin: Pemberton Press, 1977), 41; Nina Covington, "The Presidential Campaigns of the Republic of Texas of 1836 and 1838" (M.A. thesis, University of Texas, 1929), 99-100; Marilyn McAdams Sibley, *Lone Stars and State Gazettes: Texas Newspapers Before the Civil War* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1983), 103.

⁸*Telegraph and Texas Register*, June 9, 16, 23, 1838; *ibid.*, July 14, 1838.

⁹*Ibid.*, June 30, 1838; *The Papers of Mirabeau Buonaparte Lamar*, vol. 2, 203.

Collinsworth, and Senator Robert Wilson of Houston. There had been no formal nomination of either of the latter two. Whether Collinsworth had the potential to pick up Grayson's support will never be known as, only two days after Grayson's suicide, a drunk Collinsworth either jumped or fell off a ship in Galveston harbor and drowned. Word of Grayson's July 9 death reached Texas well after the news of Collinsworth's death on the night of July 11. The *Telegraph* did not publish a report on Grayson until August 11. Notice of Collinsworth's death appeared at least by July 21, and of his funeral in the issue of July 28.¹⁰

Lamar's remaining opponent was Robert Wilson. His candidacy received scant attention in the newspapers or in the letters of his contemporaries. A brief flurry of interest occurred late in the campaign when Wilson appeared to become a pawn in a newspaper war between the Lamar-supporting *Telegraph* and a new competitor, the *Houston National Banner*. The first issue of the *Banner* appeared April 25, 1838, and the paper attacked the *Telegraph* by its second issue. The *Banner* publicized the fact that the pro-Houston, formerly Grayson-supportive *Civilian* was printed on the *Telegraph's* press. The *Telegraph* retorted on September 1 that the *Banner* was publishing Robert Wilson's circulars, and could not therefore claim loyalty to Lamar.¹¹

After a presidential campaign that had seen a leading presidential contender decline, two others apparently commit suicide, and a fourth be almost totally ignored, election day results could be nothing but anticlimactic. At least the vice-presidency created a modicum of drama. The final vote was:¹²

President		Vice-president	
Lamar	6987	Burnet	3863
Wilson	252	Horton	2080
		Rowe	1313

Houston's popularity was not fairly tested in this campaign, as the substantial proadministration candidates did not survive until election day. Still, there can be little doubt that Lamar's strong showing was at least partially a reaction to the negative conditions left from Houston's first term. For the first time in his career; but not the last, Houston and those in his orbit were in a temporary eclipse. Old "Sam Jacinto" would regain his

¹⁰*Telegraph and Texas Register*, June 30, 1838; *ibid.*, July 21, 1838; *ibid.* August 11, 1838.

¹¹Sibley, 99-106; *Telegraph and Texas Register*, September 1, 1838.

¹²Covington, 115-116.

ascendancy in 1841, but that was an election away.

The three candidates pitted against Lamar were joined in 1838 by their futility, and today by their obscurity. All three were intriguing men whose lives before arriving in Texas had contained elements of success, sadness, and uncertainty. Like many of the early immigrants to Texas, they all sought the fulfillment that had eluded them elsewhere. Their stories provide a poignant commentary on aspiration and disappointment in early Texas.

Candidate Robert Wilson

"Honest Bob" Wilson's campaign for president of the Republic of Texas in 1838 represents probably the most quixotic of the self-generated entries into any of the Republic's five presidential elections. Voters almost universally rejected him, despite the existence of a substantial anti-Lamar faction. His interests in Texas were primarily in his many business ventures. In his political career, Wilson captured the limelight only briefly.

James Wilson and Elizabeth Hardcastle, Robert Wilson's parents, were natives of Talbot County, Maryland. The Wilson family emigrated from England in the late seventeenth century, settling in the New World in Penn's Colony. On December 7, 1793, Elizabeth gave birth to their son Robert in Talbot County. Robert obtained a reasonably good education, acquired in Baltimore the skills of the carpenter and joiner trade, and became a capable machinist and boiler engineer as well.¹³ As an adult, he would put all these talents to profitable use. The Marylander served during the War of 1812, but otherwise his life in his native state is unrecorded. In 1819, he married a Baltimore girl, Margaret Prendergrast, and with her moved to St. Louis. There Bob worked as a carpenter and settled long enough for his first son, James Theodore Dudley Wilson, to be born.¹⁴

By 1823, the Wilson family had moved on to Natchez, Mississippi. Tragically, they arrived about the time of a serious yellow fever epidemic. Margaret Wilson was one of 13 fatalities on August 24, 1823, the deadliest day of any during the outbreak. Margaret gave birth to a second son, John, probably during the same year. Robert Wilson did not believe he could care

¹³Amelia W. Williams and Eugene C. Barker, eds., *The Writings of Sam Houston* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1939), vol. 2, 20; *History of Texas, Together with a Biographical History of the Cities of Houston and Galveston* (Chicago: Lewis Publishing Co., 1895), 437.

¹⁴Andrew Forest Muir, "Robert Wilson," in *The Handbook of Texas* (Austin: Texas Historical Association, 1952), vol. 2, 921. James T. D. Wilson was born July 4, 1820, married Mary Adeline Cornelia Cone on February 1, 1855, was mayor of Houston in 1874-1875 and 1877-1878, and became a wealthy businessman. He died November 23, 1902. *History of Texas... Houston and Galveston*, 381-384; "James Theodore Dudley Wilson," *Handbook of Texas*, vol. 2, 921.

for his sons, and they spent most of their early years with various relatives in several states before joining their father in Texas in the mid-1830s.¹⁵

On September 27, 1824, Wilson formed a mercantile partnership with Samuel W. Butler and Loring Morton. They purchased a warehouse along the Mississippi on the Natchez Landing, and constructed a steamboat wharf. There, under the name of Wilson and Morton, the firm operated a store. By December 1826, Wilson was the sole owner, having bought out his partners. He mortgaged everything he had at about this time, including his house and five slaves. Some of the money must have been required for the buyouts, but some may have also been used for a risky business expansion Wilson was on the verge of making.¹⁶

William Plunkett Harris and Bob Wilson met as passengers aboard the steamboat *Mississippi* in 1823. They soon became friends, but their business relations did not commence until Harris arrived in Natchez in 1826 or 1827 aboard the *Tecumseh*. Harris convinced Wilson to enter the steamboat business. They were unable to charter the boat they wanted, the *Ontario*, as the owner wanted to sell it instead. Wilson considered the matter closed, but in the ensuing months Harris wrote several letters arguing the advantages of buying the vessel. Finally Wilson, the only one with any money and property, agreed. The initial success of the steamship *Ontario* allowed them to purchase other ships. A growing fleet of Wilson and Harris steamboats, carrying passengers and cargo, soon plied the Mississippi and Red rivers.¹⁷

While William Harris and Robert Wilson made money in the steamboat business, John Richardson Harris, William's brother, was founding a town and offering his own ships for hire between Texas and New Orleans. John Harris established his town on Buffalo Bayou near Galveston Bay in 1826 and called it Harrisburg, after the Pennsylvania capital, which had been founded by his ancestors. The new Texas port became an important supply center for Stephen F. Austin's colony.

Harrisburg seemed a natural location for Texas's first sawmill. Harris foresaw a rich reward from such a venture in a developing region like Texas. Wilson became part of the scheme when he met Harris in 1827. The next year, Wilson established his home in Harrisburg. Perhaps in conjunction

¹⁵Wanda L. Roark, "Robert Wilson: Letters to His Son" (M.A. thesis, Stephen F. Austin State College, 1966), 3; *Natchez* (Mississippi newspaper), September 24, 1823.

¹⁶Documents from Adams County, Mississippi, Chancery Clerk's Office: Articles of Agreement, Wilson and Morton, Deed Book P, 218; Butler to Wilson, *ibid.*, 219; Wilson to Burns, *ibid.*, 349; Burns to Wilson, *ibid.*, 351; Wilson to Henderson, *ibid.*, 209; Wilson to Scovill, *ibid.*, 372; Wilson to Burns, *ibid.*, 616; Wilson to Payne, *ibid.*, 382; Wilson to Lewis, *ibid.*, 642; Wilson to Irvine, Deed Book Q, 157.

¹⁷Roark, 4-5; *History of Texas. . .Houston and Galveston*, 437.

with his emigration, Wilson took tools and machinery for building a sawmill and gristmill. The sawmill was to be steam-powered, a recent innovation. Wilson and John R. Harris each had something to offer this enterprise—one the equipment and some mechanical knowledge, the other the necessary Texas land and his entrepreneurial skill. Wilson received a part interest in this land, and construction soon began at the point of land where Bray's Bayou empties into Buffalo Bayou. In 1829, John Harris sailed to New Orleans to purchase some additional sawmill machinery. He arrived in New Orleans during a yellow fever epidemic, became ill almost immediately, and died on August 21, 1829, after a five-day struggle. Wilson had, within six years, lost both his wife and his business partner to this dread disease.¹⁸

John R. Harris's death in New Orleans did not prevent Wilson from immediately going there himself to get the needed equipment. Wilson and William P. Harris industriously worked on the sawmill and gristmill.¹⁹ In June 1830, Wilson wrote Samuel May Williams of San Felipe de Austin that despite "our cogs giving way on our first trial, that we have again started the mill, and she does indeed perform well." Workers were needed, and Wilson asked Williams to send on any "smart strong Blacksmith Boys that could be hired."²⁰ The local newspaper reported on July 22 that the sawmill was in operation "and works very well." Either alone or in conjunction with the Harris, Wilson had established blacksmith, carpenter, and turning shops along Buffalo Bayou south of the sawmill. There was a store, houses for workmen, and a lumber yard. His ships sailed to New Orleans, south to Tampico, and also up the Brazos and Trinity rivers. Wilson also built customs houses for the Mexican government at Velasco and Galveston.²¹

Wilson's business ventures prospered, and so did his personal affairs. He courted Mrs. Sarah Reed, a widow living in New Orleans, and they were married in Matamoros on September 21, 1830. Mrs. Reed was a wealthy businesswoman in her own right, and a marital contract provided that her

¹⁸Adele Looscan, "Harris County, 1822-1845," *Southwestern Historical Quarterly* 18 (1914): 200; Cecil B. and Jernice S. Falk, "The History of Harrisburg, Texas, 1822-1927" (M.A. thesis, George Peabody College for Teachers, 1934, edited and printed by Daisy Lauretta Smith, 1981), 11-14; Adele B. Looscan, "The Pioneer Harris of Harris County, Texas," *Southwestern Historical Quarterly* 31 (1928): 366-367; Robert S. Maxwell and Robert D. Miller, *Sawdust Empire: The Texas Lumber Industry, 1830-1940* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1983), 17-18.

¹⁹Roark, 5-6; "Information Note," *Southwestern Historical Quarterly* 12 (1908): 172.

²⁰Wilson to Williams, June 29, 1830 (document #23-0380), Samuel May Williams Papers, Rosenberg Library, Galveston, Texas.

²¹"Information Note," *Southwestern Historical Quarterly* 12 (1908): 172; Looscan, "Harris County, 1822-1845," 203 n10; *History of Texas. . .Houston and Galveston*, 437.

new husband would have no involvement with her ventures unless she specifically consented. Wilson spent considerable time in New Orleans, where Sarah remained. Her health was poor, but as it improved she planned to move to Texas. The couple gradually put their New Orleans businesses in order, and perhaps as early as May 1833 both the Wilsons settled in Texas.²² Robert Wilson, Sarah, and apparently both sons by his first wife lived at least part of the time in Harrisburg. In time they moved to Lockhart, outside of Houston.²³

Meanwhile, John Harris's death had set off a series of disputes about the estate's Harrisburg holdings. David Harris, a brother of the deceased, became the administrator. He, another brother William, and Wilson operated the sawmill. The latter two filed a claim of approximately \$18,000 against the estate, involving title to land and improvements. Within a short time, allegations arose that these claims were fraudulent. In 1831, Wilson hoped the estate would be "settled soon as can be, with advantage, to all parties, to save trouble, and expense." In this letter to Samuel May Williams and Luke Lesassier, Wilson said, "your efforts Gentlemen in bringing the unsettled business of the late John Harris's estate to an advantageous close would lay me under an important obligation." This is a discreet letter, one that does not confirm but definitely does not quiet the suspicion of fraud. No quick solution would occur. In 1833, Jane Birdsall Harris, the deceased's widow, arrived from New York along with her oldest son, DeWitt Clinton Harris. Mrs. Harris filed a petition in the estate proceedings accusing Wilson and David Harris of fraud. She charged they had deceitfully omitted listing the sawmill as part of her husband's estate, and instead claimed it as their own.²⁴

Before Mrs. Harris arrived in Texas, a court-ordered sale of estate property was conducted. On June 8, 1830, Wilson had been the purchaser of every tract of land auctioned off. Bidding allegedly had been "chilled" in some manner, leaving the estate with far less than the fair value of the property. Almost exactly eight years after the court-ordered sale, and seven years after

²²Roark, 8-9. The May 1833 date for the Wilsons' residing in Harrisburg is in Looscan, "Harris County, 1822-1845," 204. The following letters suggest that the Wilsons for a while thereafter continued to be in New Orleans at least part of the time: Wilson to Williams, March 7, 1834 (document #23-1277), Williams Papers; Wilson and William P. Harris to Williams, October 23, 1834 (document #23-1368), Williams Papers.

²³Looscan, "Harris County, 1822-1845," 204; "Robert Wilson," *Handbook of Texas*, vol. 2, 922.

²⁴Wilson to Williams and Lesassier, January 11, 1831 (document #23-0539), Williams Papers; Looscan, "The Pioneer Harris," 366-367.

Mrs. Harris filed her claims, a settlement was entered in 1838. The property in dispute was divided, with Wilson and William P. Harris retaining part, and Mrs. Harris and her children receiving the remainder.²⁵ David G. Burnet was named arbitrator of any disputes. A former provisional president of the Texas Republic, Burnet was a candidate for vice-president in 1838, the same year that Wilson ran for president. Regardless of the merits of Wilson's claim, it has frequently been alleged that the cloud cast over the title to much of Harrisburg kept promoters Augustus Chapman Allen and John Kirby Allen from purchasing the property for the site of their proposed new city. Harrisburg's location at the head of navigation on Buffalo Bayou would have made it a more satisfactory port than the eventual city of Houston, which was located further up the bayou.²⁶

Most Texans who arrived as early as did Wilson had no immediate interest in opposing the Mexican government. Good business required good relations with the government. Building the two customs houses at Velasco and Galveston, put Wilson in close contact with several officials. One was Colonel Juan Davis Bradburn, in whom Wilson at first expressed confidence. A year and a half later, however, Wilson became one of the volunteer soldiers who in 1832 laid siege to the garrison commanded by Bradburn at Anahuac, securing the release of several rebellious colonists imprisoned there, including William B. Travis and Patrick C. Jack. The capture of the fort led to the negotiated evacuation of the Mexican troops. Wilson agreed to provide two ships to transport the Mexicans. One sloop, the *Mexicana*, was wrecked during its mission. The other, a schooner called the *Nelson*, apparently completed its voyage safely. Wilson was not indemnified for the destruction of the *Mexicana*, nor for the separate loss of his ship *Josefa*, which was seized by Mexican authorities at Velasco. The Mexican government granted him and his wife several leagues of land along Buffalo Bayou, though whether this was meant to be compensation for his losses is unclear.²⁷

In November 1833, a group of Texans, including William B. Travis, signed a subscription list encouraging Wilson and William P. Harris to bring a steamboat to Texas "for the purpose of running in its Rivers." Pledges totalling 5,000 acres of land and \$800 were secured. By August 1834, the *Cayuga* operated on the Brazos River, at times as far upstream as San

²⁵*Sam Harris, et al. v. D. Harris and Robert Wilson*, Harrisburg District Court file, in Franklin Papers, Eugene C. Barker Texas History Center, Austin; Roark, 46-47.

²⁶Looscan, "Harris County, 1822-1845," 201; Andrew Forest Muir, "The Municipality of Harrisburg, 1835-1836," *Southwestern Historical Quarterly* 56 (1952): 49.

²⁷Roark, 10-13; *History of Texas. . .Houston and Galveston*, 437-438.

Felipe. Wilson and Harris continued their partnership, buying and selling ships occasionally, and operating their mill.²⁸

Meanwhile, Wilson had become increasingly involved in Texas politics. He was chosen to be a delegate to the convention held at San Felipe beginning October 1, 1832. The following April 1 he again acted as a delegate at a San Felipe convention. Each convention petitioned the central government for immigration reform. The second gathering also proposed separate Texas statehood. Neither idea received a warm reaction in Mexico City.²⁹ Some of Wilson's friends and closest business associates were leading the developing rebellion. William B. Travis led the second attack on the garrison at Anahuac, this time in June 1835. His weaponry included a cannon mounted on a cart used to haul logs at Wilson's mill, an indication that Wilson may have participated in the fight.³⁰

From October 5 until December 13, 1835, Wilson was a volunteer in the army. His War of 1812 experience probably explains his selection as a colonel in the volunteers. Colonel Wilson and another officer carried a flag of truce to the Mexican fortifications at San Antonio in November 1835. They offered General Cos the opportunity to surrender. The picket detained Wilson, but he was released after Cos ordered the Texans to return to their lines immediately or be shot. A small force of the volunteers finally made an attack on the enemy positions, leading to the Mexicans' surrender. Wilson was elected a first lieutenant of infantry on November 28. After his bravery at Bexar, the Texas General Council voted him an army captaincy on December 28, 1835, which he refused.³¹

Wilson sailed for New Orleans before independence was declared, but he remained active in supporting the revolution by raising large numbers of volunteers and providing supplies to send to Texas. After first purchasing a ship for the Texas government, Wilson commanded the vessel that brought these men to Texas. Along the way they encountered a serious storm. Passenger J. Pinckney Henderson, later Texas's first governor, considered the ship unseaworthy. Nonetheless, Captain Wilson brought the vessel and its men safely to Velasco by June 3, 1836. The Battle of San Jacinto which ended the Texas Revolution had occurred six weeks earlier, resulting in the capture of Mexican dictator and general Antonio López de Santa Anna.

²⁸William R. Hogan, *The Texas Republic: A Social and Economic History* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1946), 69-70.

²⁹H. P. N. Gammel, *Laws of Texas, 1822-1897* (Austin: Gammel Book Co., 1898), vol. 1, 479.

³⁰"The Reminiscences of Mrs. Dilue Harris," *Quarterly of the Texas Historical Association* 4 (1900): 124-125.

³¹"Account of the Campaign of 1835, by William T. Austin," *Texana* 4 (1966): 314; "Robert Wilson," *Handbook of Texas*, vol. 2, 921; *History of Texas. . .Houston and Galveston*, 438.

Many, if not most, Texans wanted him executed for the massacres at the Alamo and at Goliad. The Texas government instead wanted to keep him alive as partial insurance to maintain the peace treaties he had signed. Implementing the unpopular decision to return Santa Anna to Mexico was begun on June 1 by placing him aboard the Texas schooner-at-war *Invincible*. The collection of rowdy, unbloodied volunteers aboard Wilson's ship arrived in time to block Santa Anna's ship from sailing. The general was removed from the *Invincible* despite the protests of the civilian authorities. Almost six months passed before Santa Anna's departure was finally effected.³²

Wilson's attitude toward the mutiny is unknown. Had he been aware of the destruction of his property at Santa Anna's specific orders, however, he might well have encouraged the volunteers. In March and early April, the Texas government had fled eastward to elude the Mexican army. Their first stop was in Harrisburg. Santa Anna tried to capture President Burnet and his cabinet there, but they escaped. The disappointed general burned the town to the ground on April 16. Returning home a few months later, Wilson found nothing left of his sawmill and gristmill, his store, or any other part of his enterprise of the last six years. He would devote considerable energies for the rest of his life seeking compensation from the Texas government, on the grounds that the loss resulted from the Texas government's temporary stay at Harrisburg during its flight, thus attracting the Mexican army. Through the years he received encouraging support from various politicians, and gained a recommendation from at least one legislative committee, but nothing was ever paid.³³

Victory at San Jacinto on April 21, 1836, ended armed conflict with Mexico until 1842, but the Texans could not know that. Wilson's ship, the *Ocean*, grounded on a sand bar at the entrance of Galveston Bay. President Burnet encouraged Wilson to expend every effort to release the vessel as soon as possible, as "every means of defense must be employed." Like other Texans, however, Wilson's thoughts soon turned from war to politics. He announced as a candidate for the Senate in the new Republic, and was elected from the District of Liberty and Harrisburg on September 5, 1836, for a three-year term.³⁴

For two years, Wilson attracted little attention in the Senate. During the First Congress, the capital was located at Columbia. When the Second

³²*History of Texas. . .Houston and Galveston*, 438-440; Roark, 22-23.

³³*History of Texas. . .Houston and Galveston*, 438-440; Roark, 22-23, 48-50; "Information Note," *Southwestern Historical Quarterly* 12 (1908): 172.

³⁴William C. Binkley, ed., *Official Correspondence of the Texas Revolution 1835-1836* (New York: D. Appleton-Century Co., 1936), vol. 2, 830; Roark, 23-24.

Congress convened on September 25, 1837, the seat of government had been moved to the new city of Houston, a much more convenient location for Wilson. During the Second Congress, he served as chairman of the Committee on Naval Affairs, and near the end of the session chaired the Finance Committee. One matter of interest was his joining of a memorial on April 25, 1838, asking Congress to grant a black man, Nelson Kavanaugh, "most of the privileges of a white man," such as holding real estate, suing and being sued in court, and the right to swear an oath in court. But Wilson's business interests dominated his time far more than the two- and three-month Senate sessions.³⁵

In 1836, the Allen brothers approached Wilson to represent them in negotiations for the league of land owned by Mrs. T. F. L. Parrot. As pay for his successful efforts, Wilson received a one-tenth interest in the lots of the new city, Houston. From his holdings, Wilson donated 12 lots in the new city to Sam Houston in October 1836. Promoting this new site, including the attempt to make it the new country's capital, occupied much of Wilson's time.³⁶

With other partners, Wilson was also involved in laying out and promoting the town of Hamilton, located on the opposite side of Buffalo Bayou from Harrisburg. Wilson's involvement was evident in plans publicized in 1838 for a sawmill and gristmill. The next year Wilson offered President Mirabeau Lamar land in Hamilton, but he settled in nearby Richmond. Hamilton and Harrisburg were too close together for separate development, and the single town of Harrisburg was formed on June 29, 1839, "with a view of preventing the injurious effects of unfriendly rivalry." Wilson received one quarter of the shares for the new town corporation. Harrisburg promoters viewed the laying of a railroad to the Brazos as indispensable to the city's growth. On January 9, 1841, the Harrisburg and Brazos became the fourth railroad chartered by the Republic, and Wilson was named as one of the eight original commissioners. Land sales were expected to finance the construction, but did not yield sufficient income. Although the enterprise came to naught, it was the only one of the Republic's chartered lines that actually began construction.³⁷

³⁵Harold Schoen, "The Free Negro in the Republic of Texas," *Southwestern Historical Quarterly* 41 (1937): 86; *Journal of the Senate of the Republic of Texas, Second Congress*, September 29, 1837, printed in the *Telegraph and Texas Register*, October 7, 1837; *ibid.* for April 17, 1838, printed in the *Telegraph and Texas Register*, April 21, 1838.

³⁶*History of Texas. . . Houston and Galveston*, 441; *Writings of Sam Houston*, vol. 2, 21.

³⁷Roark, 43-45; *Telegraph and Texas Register*, December 30, 1837 (advertisement, p. 1); Andrew Forest Muir, "Railroad Enterprise in Texas, 1836-1841," *Southwestern Historical Quarterly* 47 (1944): 355-370.

The long-standing dispute between Robert Wilson and John Harris's heirs over the Harrisburg property was finally settled on June 8, 1838, two weeks after the adjournment of the Second Congress. With this important matter out of the way, Wilson apparently felt ready to become more active in the political arena. On June 30, his name was listed for the first time as a candidate for president in the *Telegraph and Texas Register*. Wilson apparently admired Sam Houston and wished to identify with him. In 1837, Wilson had written the president to say, "I hope you will appreciate my friendship. I will never deceive you and I can make myself of service to you." Several letters written by Wilson to Houston have been preserved. Some are merely newsy; others recommend friends for appointments. All are fawning and almost apologetic for presuming to impose. President Houston's feelings about Wilson are only hinted at in a long and friendly letter of November 12, 1836, which Houston closes by saying, "Bob, you talk so well that it is wrong for you to write. I would rather hear your voice than read your letters."³⁸

Wilson's candidacy attracted virtually no attention. The political leaders loyal to Sam Houston first tried to encourage Thomas Jefferson Rusk to run for president, but he refused. Then Peter Grayson reluctantly consented. An old Houston ally, James Collinworth, also received support. The extant personal papers of Lamar and Houston contain considerable correspondence concerning the campaign. Speculation about the relative strength of Grayson dominates many letters. Collinworth appears of much lesser concern. In none, not even after Wilson was left as Lamar's only opponent with the deaths of Grayson and Collinworth only six weeks away from the election, is there the briefest mention of Robert Wilson. Indeed, Grayson's death seemed to have ended the campaign for president. Lamar received 6987 votes to Wilson's 252. Though Wilson received a handful of votes in each county, in none was he a serious factor. His poor showing suggests that even Sam Houston did not significantly support him. After the more serious Houston candidates were dead, Wilson remained as the willing, unrespected sacrificial lamb, but appears to have been too little respected by his peers and the public to mount a serious challenge.³⁹

³⁸The following letters between Wilson and Houston are in the A. J. Houston Collection, Texas State Archives, Austin: November 9, 1837 (document #609); January 3, 1837 (document #756); May 29, 1837 (document #1120); July 1, 1838 (document #1706); January 6, 1843 (document #2810); undated (document #4564).

³⁹Wilson to Houston, January 3, 1837 (document #756), A. J. Houston Collection; Michael R. Green, ed., *Calendar of the Papers of Mirabeau Buonaparte Lamar* (Austin: Texas State Archives, 1982), for absence of correspondence about Wilson. Several letters to Lamar that discuss his prospects, and fail to mention Wilson, are: Smith to Lamar, July 2, 1838, *The*

Wilson's hour in the limelight would come not from his candidacy for president but from a series of events in the remaining year of his Senate term. The issue in question was the new country's monetary problems. The Texas dollar had plummeted in value; the country was awash in paper currency. An adequate supply of hard money was critical to the young country's financial health.

A secret Senate session gathered on December 24, 1838, to hear financial proposals from Vice-President David G. Burnet. A Mississippi bank offered to grant the Republic a million-dollar loan in return for 8% Texas bonds, but insisted that the most stringent secrecy be maintained. If the loan were not repaid, the bonds would give to the bank a substantial quantity of Texas lands. President Lamar seemed doubtful of the offer, but Burnet presented the plan anyway. Some writers have theorized Burnet thought he could solve the nation's financial woes and thereby gain a term of his own as president. Burnet's explanation of the scheme to the Senate was not even finished before the senator from Houston interrupted. The bankers, Wilson claimed, were swindlers and speculators. A sea captain friend had warned him earlier in the year that the offer would probably be made. The bank allegedly had been devastated by the American financial Panic of 1837, and its officers thought Texas lands would solve the institution's own money ills.

Burnet undoubtedly took offense at Wilson's charge that the secret session Burnet had called "was a crime against the people of Texas." Burnet called him to order, and the senator said "he would be God damned if he would come to order." Since damnation was raised, for good measure he "invoked the vengeance of Almighty God to strike dead any member who voted for that bill, or any measure calculated to injure the country." The sergeant-at-arms was ordered to subdue Wilson, but only infuriated Wilson into further profanity. At one stage Wilson touched his Bowie knife—one wonders how well-armed senators felt they needed to be during debate—and demanded that the sergeant-at-arms "back off, and not touch him: swearing that no power but God's could seat him."⁴⁰

Wilson finally stormed out and told whomever he met about the proposal laid before the Senate. In his absence a committee of three was named to decide what action to take. By the time the committee returned to report,

Papers of Mirabeau Buonaparte Lamar, vol. 2, 179-180; T. J. Green to Lamar, July 11, 1838, *ibid.*, 181-182; McLeod to Lamar, August 4, 1838, *ibid.*, 196-197; A. Brigham to Lamar, November 5, 1838, *ibid.*, 280; Covington, 115-116. As to Wilson's lack of acceptance in the Congress, note Roark, 29-30; *Texas National Register*, March 1, 1845.

⁴⁰John H. Jenkins, *Audubon and Other Capers: Confessions of a Texas Bookmaker* (Austin: Pemberton Press, 1976), 88-90; Roark, 31-32.

Wilson had also reappeared. He asked for time to engage counsel, and also wanted a two-day cooling-off period. William H. Wharton urged immediate action, but the Senate deferred the issue until after Christmas. On the 26th, Senator Juan N. Seguin introduced a resolution that Wilson be considered under arrest until the matter was resolved. That passed with only two dissenting votes. George Washington Barnett then proposed that Wilson's seat be declared vacant. Before the vote Wilson pleaded his case:

And although you may expel me, I stand upon a rock of freedom, which I helped to build; and liberty is my motto. Although you now attempt to stigmatize my character, Texas will feel the loss of an honest legislator, and I will live in the hearts of my countrymen . . . I act on impulse, and that is to do what is best for my country . . . If you intend to allow me no counsel, no opportunity for my defense, why, assassinate me, but do it in open day, when the world can look you in the face, not in secret.

Wilson admitted he had been rude, but claimed he was only performing his duty. His speech was hardly calculated to gain votes, and it did not. Only one senator voted against the resolution of expulsion.⁴¹

The special election to fill Wilson's vacant seat was set for two weeks later, on January 11, 1839. On the second day of the new year, the former senator announced his intention to run. A respected opponent, Thomas W. Ward, was no match for the hero of the hour. Wilson trounced him on election day. Hundreds of supporters, many intoxicated, built a wagon for their candidate, put Wilson in it, and began to pull him through the streets of Houston. They arrived at the capitol, disdaining the session in progress, and shouted, "Hurrah for Uncle Bob," and "Down with secret sessions." Wilson was carried into the Senate on the shoulders of his rowdy friends, at least one of whom was blowing a bugle. Arriving at his seat, they lowered Wilson into his newly reclaimed place in triumph. He had, however, freshly antagonized his colleagues.

The Senate again moved for Wilson's arrest, after first moving the arrest of the bugler, and the poor sergeant-at-arms was told to bring Wilson from the grasp of his personal mob. The official unsurprisingly returned empty-handed. William Wharton suggested an arrest again be attempted, and that Wilson be returned "dead or alive." It would be no difficult task, said Wharton, as he could do it "with my toothpick. Are we to sit in this chamber to be insulted, unheeded, blackguarded by the mob? . . . Sir, I wish the sergeant-at-arms sent back with renewed orders. . . . He must execute his

⁴¹*Journal of the Senate of the Republic of Texas, Third Congress*, December 24, 1838, printed in the *Telegraph and Texas Register*, December 29, 1838; Ernest William Winkler, *Secret Journals of the Senate, Republic of Texas, 1836-1845* (Austin: Texas State Library, 1911), 120; Jenkins, 91; Roark, 32-36.

orders, and were I he, I would do so or die."

Wharton's absurd posturing led Senator Everitt to remark, "It is easier to talk than act." After other enraged senators called for vengeance on the renegade Wilson, a cooler head, Isaac Burton, sarcastically described the spectacle of the Republic's senators chasing through Houston's muddy streets after a mob, attempting to arrest one of their own members. The Senate finally voted to recess until evening and try again the next day.

On January 12, Wilson appeared under arrest in the Senate chamber. The vitriolic William H. Wharton moved that the recalcitrant brother be imprisoned for the rest of the session. Wilson spoke in his own defense. Other senators condemned Wilson, but passions had subsided. At last a reprimand was voted, drafted by the vice-president, whose proposal began the whole farcical episode. On January 14 the reprimand was read:

... So far as it is possible for human folly and indiscretion to descend on the scale of degradation, you have wrought an abiding disgrace to yourself and your misguided comrades. . . . Demagogues, big and little, have existed in all ages; and especially in free government, have been a pest and an annoyance to all communities. . .

Pause in your silly and thoughtless career . . . Reflect seriously on the error of your ways. . . .

Go hence: be more wise and do better.

Wilson's, and for that matter the Senate's, actions seemed to be exaggerated gestures of outrage, wounded pride, and defense of country. The fierce antagonism over this issue also highlights the deep distrust of the banking system that was widespread in Texas and the United States during the Jacksonian era. The incidents slowed consideration of the Mississippi banking scheme, which the Senate finally voted against. "Uncle Bob" received a new nickname, "Honest Bob," and its use was in the main derisive. Wilson's often-repeated remark on the episode was, "I was as honest as the circumstances of the case and the situation in the Country would allow."⁴²

The Senate adjourned just 10 days after the reprimand, on January 24. It was the end of Wilson's three-year term, and the end of any semblance of success in his public career. Passing up a chance to see if the voters still approved of his conduct, Wilson returned exclusively to his business. Mrs.

⁴²"Reminiscences of Mrs. Dilue Harris," *Quarterly of the Texas Historical Association* 7 (1903): 220; Jenkins, 90-96; Roark, 36-42; "A Texas-Size Reprimand," *Texana* 2 (1964): 148-149; S. O. Young, *True Stories of Old Houston and Houstonians* (Galveston: Oscar Springer, 1913), 81-83; *Journal of the Senate of the Republic of Texas, Third Congress*, January 12, 14, 1838, printed in the *Telegraph and Texas Register*, January 26, 1839.

Wilson spent much of her time in New Orleans. "Honest Bob" frequently alludes to her poor health in his letters to his son James. Other letters hint at a military or business venture in Central America in 1843, one that would take the senior Wilson there for a substantial period. The allusions to Central America seem intentionally vague, perhaps due to either commercial or legal risks. A letter of December 25, 1843, from his son James, refers to a vessel that was "well calculated for the purpose." Colonel Williams had "been down . . . also two gentlemen from France, an engineer, and indeed there is more Gentlemen who wishes to go than we at this time wish." The route was to be to the port of San Juan, and from there to Washington, D. C., arriving "before Congress recesses." Engineers, American congressional involvement, and an investment enticing to several "Gentlemen," add up to an intriguing mystery. The enterprise, whatever its nature, probably failed; a later letter suggests that Wilson had either been halted by an English blockade or was misled by one of the other participants.⁴³

On August 14, 1844, the *Clarksville Northern Standard* reported, "Honest Bob Wilson' is again a candidate for the Presidency. . . . If anybody has not seen his circular, they can find one at our office." No further mention of his candidacy appears to have been published, and there is no record that he got any votes in the election. The month after the election, Wilson served as one of several Texans assisting at negotiations with numerous Indian tribes at the Tehuacana Creek Council Grounds.⁴⁴

Wilson addressed the Texas House during the debate on annexation to the United States, on January 30, 1845. Instead of groveling for annexation, Wilson argued, Texas ought "to take advantage of the enemy; to take possession of our western confines." A military expedition headed by Wilson should receive official sanction. It would make Texas "the greatest nation that God almighty ever did look upon." If the bill passed, Wilson said, "I shall not come back, myself; I shall go to California; but I think the first measure should be to take Brazos Santiago, Point Isabella, and Matamoras," all located near the mouth of the Rio Grande. Wilson gratuitously advised the members that the Republic would not have been formed if he had not come to Texas 16 years before. Laughter and smiles were his response,

⁴³Roark, 48-50.

⁴⁴"Robert Wilson," *Handbook of Texas*, vol. 2, 921, says Wilson was defeated for president in 1838 and 1843 (meaning 1844—there was no presidential election in 1843). Wilson, who is mentioned in a letter as accompanying President Houston to the Council Grounds for the Indian treaty, signed the treaty on October 9, 1844, as one of several witnesses. Dorman H. Winfrey and James M. Day, eds., *The Indian Papers of Texas and the Southwest, 1825-1916* (Austin: The Pemberton Press, 1966), vol. 2, 100, 119; *Texas National Register*, February 22, 1845.

followed by an anonymous amendment giving Wilson the title of Napoleon III and making other "numerous provisions as to the internal and foreign policy of the empire to be established." The proceedings ended as Wilson was called to order for accusing his hidden ridiculer of being a "villain and scoundrel."⁴⁵ The proposal suggests that his 1843 Central America project may also have been a military venture. The public was not overly respectful, either, and Wilson was defeated in May as a delegate to the convention that would vote on annexation.⁴⁶

"Honest Bob" spent his last 10 years entirely out of the public eye. He was connected with several businesses, including promotion of a brick-making machine he invented and patented. The device must have been useful, as a substantial business in several states was established. Sadly, Mrs. Wilson's mental sufferings occupied much of his time. She had become insane, but her husband cared for her at home as best he could. After Wilson's death, she would be placed in an asylum, where she died on February 2, 1860. Wilson died at his home outside Houston on May 26, 1856. His younger son, John, had died in Houston barely a year before, on January 6, 1855, leaving a widow and three young children. Wilson's older son, James T. D. Wilson, would be elected mayor of Houston after Reconstruction.⁴⁷

A shrewd businessman, courageous soldier, unorthodox politician, and successful inventor, Robert Wilson was a colorful and dynamic figure. Often controversial, he was on occasion subject to ridicule or charges of unscrupulousness. On balance, "Honest Bob" was an intriguing, but not particularly significant early Texas politician whose career was emblematic of many other restless entrepreneurs and adventurers who sought to fulfill their personal aspirations on the frontier.

Part II of "The Texas Presidential Election of 1838," covering the careers of Peter Grayson and James Collinsworth, will appear in a subsequent issue.

⁴⁵*Texas National Register*, March 1, 1845; *Journal of the House of Representatives of the Republic of Texas, Ninth Congress*, 359.

⁴⁶*Telegraph and Texas Register*, May 21, 1845.

⁴⁷Roark, 50-57; Probate Records, Harris County Minute Book L, 451.

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