

## Robert P. Boyce: Nineteenth-Century Houstonian

*Margaret S. Henson*

In Glenwood Cemetery overlooking Buffalo Bayou a tall monument marks the grave of Robert P. Boyce and carries this message: "Peace Be Unto Thee Forever." If ever a man deserved quiet in the hereafter it was Robert Boyce because he led a tumultuous life indeed. He spent fifty-one of his seventy-four years carving himself a place in the history of Houston, and epitomises the restless, nineteenth century Irish-American immigrant to Houston and feisty Horatio Alger character. His obituary noted that he was "a powerful man though small in stature . . . quick and active . . . [and] . . . the best preserved man of his years in the world." Moreover, he was always "true to his friends" and "respected by his enemies, socially and politically."<sup>1</sup> Eventually, a street was named for him in the Denver Harbor neighborhood permanently stamping his name on the map of Houston. This essay will attempt to place him in his proper historical context and thus provide insight in the life of a representative Houston resident during the city's first years of development.

Robert Boyce arrived in Texas on April 19, 1836, about twenty-one years old. He did not take part in the battle of San Jacinto two days later; however, he was deeply involved in the founding of Houston. Being a carpenter, he built many of the first dwellings including the president's "palace" in 1837 and such notable structures as the Long Bridge over Buffalo Bayou in 1843. His career reflected that of the pre-professional architect/builder—the type of individual who was responsible for the Houston built environment prior to the turn of the twentieth century. His type of construction included the wooden frame structures that were most prevalent in the Bayou City during his lifetime. Also, Bob Boyce served the city as marshal and market master for a number of years thus involving himself in early community activity.

Boyce was born June 16, 1814 or 1816 near Cincinnati, Ohio. Before he was ten, his father had left, and Bob soon followed suit. The runaway managed to get a job on a river boat, and for the next few years, young Boyce worked his way up and down the Ohio and Mississippi rivers. When he was about

---

Margaret Swett Henson is adjunct assistant professor of history at the University of Houston at Clear Lake and has authored books on early Texas history.

<sup>1</sup>Obituary, *Houston Post*, February 17, 1890.

fourteen, he apprenticed himself to a carpenter in Cincinnati and worked hard to learn his craft. At the same time, he made peace with his mother, and in the future often sent money home. When his master moved to Detroit, Bob declined to go with him, and considering himself a competent journeyman, he struck out on his own. In 1832 he traveled to Natchez and later he went to New Orleans. In 1835 he was a subcontractor on the elegant new St. Charles Hotel in the Crescent City when "Texas fever" changed his life.<sup>2</sup>

Mexican Texas had attracted Americans for over a decade, but in 1835 the resumption of a civil war between the two Mexican political parties, Centralists and Federalists, drew even more residents from the United States. President Antonio Lopez de Santa Anna abrogated the republican constitution of 1824 by reducing the states to departments and dismissed elected governors and legislatures in favor of his own appointees. The Federalist faction included liberal republicans such as Lorenzo de Zavala and Jose Antonio Mexia, both in exile, who sought to enlist the Texans to resist the centralization of political power in the nation's capital. For a variety of reasons, Texas residents were slow to rally to the cause until September 1835, when Stephen F. Austin returned after a long incarceration in the capital and favored taking sides in the civil war. Federalist sympathizers in New Orleans organized a meeting on October 13, 1835, to raise money and seek volunteers to attack a Centralist stronghold. Bob Boyce enlisted, but providentially missed sailing with the expedition organized by Federalist general Jose Antonio Mexia destined to capture Tampico. The expedition met defeat at the hands of the Centralists and only a few survived.<sup>3</sup>

Boyce returned briefly to carpentering, but on April 13, after the fall of the Alamo and the massacre at Goliad, Thomas William Ward called a meeting in the Crescent City asking for volunteers to aid the "Texicans." Boyce attended the meeting and left the next day with seventy-four others on the schooner *Flora*. Their commander was William Graham, a native of Scotland and a former sea captain.<sup>4</sup>

The promise of excitement and republican idealism inspired many of the young men, but the tangible reward of 320 acres of land for each three month enlistment heightened their ardor. Enthusiasm diminished briefly during the four days spent in the Gulf on the way to Galveston. "Most of us was Sea Sick" and spent most of the voyage "lying around loose on the deck not caring much wick side of the Schooner was up." Two days out of Galveston they sighted a war schooner which they feared was Mexican. But the ship proved to be the *Brutus*, a slow sailing thirty-two-foot-long vessel, purchased by

Augustus C. Allen for use as a Texas privateer. The *Brutus* escorted the *Flora* to the island where they arrived on April 19.<sup>5</sup>

Boyce was not impressed with Galveston Island. It had "only a small clabord house sixteen feet square with a dirt floor . . . said to have been the Mexican custom house." The island itself was "Salt marshes, Salt bayous, Salt Grass, and Salt flats, out of the water one half of the time, and under the other half." He estimated that there were between 300 and 350 men, women, and children on the island, all refugees from the headwaters of Galveston Bay in fear of an invasion by the Mexicans.<sup>6</sup>

The president and cabinet of the newly created Republic of Texas had also retreated to Galveston where they remained ignorant about the victory on April 21 until five days after the event. On April 23, Burnet sent twenty-nine of the men in Captain Graham's command, including Boyce, to Sam Houston along with a dozen other volunteers and supplies. The party boarded the eighty-five foot steamer *Laura* for the trip up Galveston Bay.<sup>7</sup>

The newly arrived volunteers joined the victorious Texas army at the battleground where they stayed for about a week. Boyce and the others joined General Thomas Jefferson Rusk who was ordered to the Colorado River to follow the retreating Mexican forces under General Vicente Filisola on their march to the Rio Grande. By June 1, the Texans reached Goliad where Rusk ordered the burial of the remains of the massacre and conducted an appropriate ceremony a few days later. Boyce served out his six month enlistment thereby earning 640 acres of land which he eventually located in Bosque County on the Brazos River above Waco.<sup>8</sup>

Unlike so many of the volunteers, Bob Boyce did not have to depend on the sale of his bounty certificate for his sustenance. Carpenters were in great demand in the republic, and he and his friend, George Alexander Campbell, found work first in Brazoria and then in Houston.<sup>9</sup> Brazoria was the usual head of navigation on the Brazos and was about ten to fifteen miles below the temporary capital of Texas at Columbia. The capital was to be relocated at the new town of Houston on Buffalo Bayou in time for the second session of Congress in May 1837.

In Brazoria, Bob and his friend boarded with Mrs. Pamela Mann and her husband, Marshall Mann. The Manns asked their two young boarders to help them with their intended removal from Brazoria to Houston and the pair readily accepted. The party left the Brazos on January 16, 1837, in two wagons

<sup>2</sup>Boyce claims 1816 as his birthday in the memoir although his obituary says 1814. Memoir of Robert P. Boyce, p. 183, Robert P. Boyce Collection (Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library); hereafter cited as Memoir.

<sup>3</sup>Memoir, 183-184; Eugene C. Barker, "The Tampico Expedition," *Quarterly of the Texas State Historical Association*, VI (January 1903), 169-172; David B. Edward, *The History of Texas* (Cincinnati, 1836), 264.

<sup>4</sup>Memoir, 183-185.

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*, 185; *Ship Registers and Enrollments of New Orleans, Louisiana*, III (Baton Rouge, 1941), 30.

<sup>6</sup>Memoir, 185-186.

<sup>7</sup>David G. Burnet to Rusk, April 23, 1836; Burnet to Public, September 6, 1836, John H. Jenkins (ed.), *The Papers of the Texas Revolution, 1835-1836*, VI (Austin, 1973), 75; VIII, 400; Memoir, 185-186.

<sup>8</sup>Thomas Lloyd Miller, *Bounty and Donation Land Grants of Texas, 1835-1888* (Austin, 1967), 23, 122.

<sup>9</sup>Memoir, 111.

each pulled by four yoke of oxen; Mrs. Mann and sometimes her sons, ages nineteen and six, rode in the wagons while Mr. Mann, the two carpenters, and six slaves walked alongside the slow moving teams. Mrs. Mann intended to open a boarding house as soon as she reached Houston, and unsure of future supplies, she piled the wagons with hams, bacon, meal, flour, coffee, molasses, and a barrel of whiskey in addition to her furniture and bedding.<sup>10</sup>

The plodding ox teams took almost three weeks to travel the fifty miles across the prairie to the outskirts of the village on Buffalo Bayou. The leisurely pace allowed Mrs. Mann to buy butter, eggs, milk, and chickens from farms that they passed. Recalling her cooking forty years later Boyce wrote, "Just think of it, after seven months [in the army] feeding on Beef . . . then turned loose on Buisquits, and such Buisquits, soda and Butter milk . . . they would fairly melt in your mouth, especially with new fresh Butter, then fried chicken, then eggs, then Bacon . . . with plenty of milk or coffee. Oh! it was a meal for the Gods."<sup>11</sup>

They neared Brays Bayou, probably in the vicinity of its junction with Keegans Bayou, on February 2 where they had to build a rough bridge for the oxen and wagons. In spite of the drizzle, Mrs. Mann prepared a hearty dinner, and in the afternoon, Bob and his friend left the Manns to continue their journey alone. The two young men hurried towards the raw village "taking all of our world wealth with us." Boyce recalled his garments in amusement: cottonade pants, much too large, a ragged shirt, and a blanket. Bob had found the pants, "that would have fit the Cardiff Giant if he had been in the flesh instead of Stone," in an abandoned house, but desperate for trousers, he cut off the legs and the knees and rolled down the waist while at the same time wrapping the voluminous folds of cloth about his spare frame. The wet prairie "knee deep in water" failed to diminish their eagerness to see Houston and the pair found a camping spot near Buffalo Bayou and a gully where there was good drainage just before dark. They spread one blanket on the ground like the good soldiers they were, and covered themselves with the other and "we soon was sleeping the sleep of the just."<sup>12</sup>

The morning dawned clear and brisk and the two young men approached the town laid off by John Kirby and Augustus C. Allen. Boyce and Campbell could see a large white tent shining through the trees and upon investigation, found that it was a haberdashery owned by Bob's old friend from New Orleans, John Hall. Hall generously extended credit to Bob who immediately chose underwear, a shirt, and pants. Borrowing soap and a towel, the ragged young man hurried back to the bayou, now much swollen from the rain, and stripped off his ill-fitting pants that harbored a colony of lice and "swung them three or four times around my head, let them go." He returned clean to

Hall's tent where he selected \$400 worth of clothing and "looking like a gentleman for the first time in many a day," he set off to explore Houston.<sup>13</sup>

He found two former acquaintances, Hugh McCrory from Grand Gulf, Mississippi, and James Wright from Natchez, building a warehouse on the east side of Main Street near the bayou. They offered to hire Boyce at ten dollars in gold coin per day. Astounded at such high wages, he asked them what they charged to erect the crude houses that dotted the landscape. Bob instantly decided to become a contractor, not a laborer, knowing that "I was as good a mechanic as either of them." A visitor to Houston in April 1837, noted that carpenters earned \$3 per day and board because labor was scarce, but Mary Austin Holley who visited the city in December, confirmed Bob's figures of \$5 and \$10.<sup>14</sup>

Boyce's first job was building the two story Mansion House for Mrs. Mann on the northeast corner of Congress and Milam across from the block that was to become Market Square. The hotel had a large dining room downstairs and the upstairs bedrooms opened on to a gallery.<sup>15</sup> By the end of February, Bob recalled that he was employing thirty-six men and was worth \$3,000. In May he bought two lots for himself on the northwest corner of Texas and Caroline near the southern edge of town. He paid \$600 for the two and paid off the note within nine months. He built a sixteen foot square clapboard house with a wooden chimney lined with mud, the typical construction where stone and brick were in short supply.

Bob built another hotel in 1837 for George W. Baldwin, a relative of Mrs. A. C. Allen. It was opposite Hubbard's Coffee House and had a ballroom upstairs with a dining area below. The following year he began a theater for Henri Corri on the north side of Market Square next to the Mansion House. Forty feet wide on Congress, the structure widened to 68 feet at the back and was two stories high. Boyce agreed to build it for \$5 a square foot and to keep two carpenters on the job. The theatre opened in 1839 and Corri presented "School for Scandal" featuring the well-known Barnes family. Corri defaulted within two years and Boyce had to remodel the building for his own use, suffering he said, a loss of \$21,000.<sup>16</sup> As this was probably in Texas money, one can reduce that amount ninety percent and safely estimate Bob's loss at about \$2,000.

The most controversial of Boyce's undertakings was the President's house to be built with government funds. At President Sam Houston's request, Bob

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*, 112.

<sup>11</sup>*Ibid.*, 112-113.

<sup>12</sup>*Ibid.*, 113-115.

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*, 115-117.

<sup>14</sup>*Ibid.*, 117-118; Andrew Forest Muir (ed.) *Texas in 1837; An Anonymous Contemporary Narrative* (Austin, 1958), 29; J. P. Bryan (ed.), *Mary Austin Holley: The Texas Diary, 1835-1838* (Austin, 1965), 86.

<sup>15</sup>Memoir, 118; Muir (ed.), *Texas in 1837*, 117.

<sup>16</sup>Harris County Deed Records, C, 213; A, 575; G, 432; Memoir, 135-136; William Ransom Hogan, *The Texas Republic: A Social and Economic History* (Austin, 1969), 120-121; Harris County Probate Records, D440-442, 471-474, 457-500, 508-510. In later years Bob described the theatre as 150' x 50'.

submitted an estimate of \$6,000, but Congress had appropriated only \$3,000. Bob recalled that Houston insisted that he must have the new house for his personal comfort, and Bob well knew how inadequate the "miserable shanty" where Houston lived was for he had built it. Visitors in Houston always remarked on the squalid condition of the president's temporary accommodations. Nevertheless, Bob refused to be swayed by Houston's charm saying that he would lose money until finally Houston suggested that other government contracts would come his way to offset any loss on this building. Boyce gave in and asked the Allen brothers if he could cut the timber on the future market square for use in the president's house. Once that agreement was reached, Bob had to send to New Orleans for a whipsaw to cut the tree trunks into lumber because local saw mills were currently unable to supply suitable building materials.<sup>17</sup> Whipsaws were usually from five to seven feet long and required one man to stand in an excavated pit while the other mounted a scaffold in order to cut the tree trunk into long boards.

To save money on this government contract, Boyce allowed his crew to sleep in the unfinished presidential house where two brick fireplaces lessened the chill during the winter. This economy eventually caused difficulty because President Houston came to believe that Boyce was delaying finishing the building in order to use it as a dormitory. Houston made his accusations in front of a visiting English envoy which humiliated Boyce. Rising to the occasion in true democratic frontier style "that we was in name and fact all sovereigns," the carpenter called the president a "d—d L—r" and was headed for the "bad place." Boyce left slamming the door behind him.<sup>18</sup>

Boyce finished the house in early 1838 except for the panes of glass in a twelve light sash. Colonel A. S. Thurston, the commissary general, accepted the dwelling for the Republic withholding only three hundred dollars for the glass. President Houston moved in but was dissatisfied with the style of the folding doors Boyce had installed between the two front reception rooms. The president called Boyce in and both men grew angry about the doors. They called Thurston who was forced to write his personal obligation to the government for the \$2,700 he had already paid Boyce. Boyce took partial revenge in 1842 when both he and Houston applied for letters of administration in settling a mutual friend's estate and Bob received the papers. As administrator, Boyce refused to approve a thousand dollar claim from Sam Houston.<sup>19</sup>

The breach between Boyce and the Hero of San Jacinto was finally healed in the 1850s but not without friction. Texas, by then a state, had received a substantial sum of money from the federal government to relinquish its very tenuous claim to the upper Rio Grande around Santa Fe. Boyce thought the

<sup>17</sup>Memoir, 124-125; Bryan (ed.), Mary Austin Holley, 36; A. Pat Daniels, *Texas Avenue at Main Street* (Houston, 1964), 11.

<sup>18</sup>Memoir, 125-130.

<sup>19</sup>*Ibid.*, 127-131.

time propitious to collect his three hundred dollars, and through his friend, Francis R. Lubbock, made arrangements to speak with Senator Houston when he visited the city in July 1852 to lay the cornerstone at the new Masonic Temple. With hat in hand and "bowing profoundly," Boyce was at the head of the line to shake the great man's hand. "General," he said, "I am poor and the money would be a great help to me." Houston recalled that his secretary, David P. Richardson, had been authorized to handle the contract and asked why Boyce had not approached him, all the time knowing that Richardson had died in August 1837. Losing that encounter to Houston, Boyce applied to Thurston (who had moved to Kentucky) for the proper documentation which he presented to the state legislature. This effort for relief also failed, and Boyce approached Houston again in 1854. This time the senator refused to shake Boyce's extended hand saying that he had been exceedingly rude. Boyce contritely agreed but said that he had always supported Houston politically and added, "I have heard you say many times if a man cannot abuse his friends, who could he?" At this, Houston capitulated and agreed to endorse an order for the three hundred dollars if Bob would write an apology for "his scandalous language." The pair entered Fritz Mohl's store and the two documents were written. "I got my money after all them years. So ends this chapter." Bob remained one of Houston's admirers believing that he was "one of, and the peer of, the great men of the 19th century."<sup>20</sup>

Boyce's contracting business grew and in the 1860 census he was listed as "Master Builder." Part of his reputation rested on his work on the "Long Bridge" on Preston first built in 1843 and reputed to be one hundred feet in length. Damaged by a flood in 1853, Boyce rebuilt it in 1854, and again in 1872. About 1855 he helped design and build a dredge boat to improve navigation in Buffalo Bayou. This project was undertaken during the administration of Boyce's friend, Mayor James Stevens. As his reputation as a contractor grew, he expanded his activities to Galveston where he built a wharf and compress, the street railway system for horse-drawn cars, an ocean front hotel at the foot of 21st Street, and improved the two-mile long railroad bridge linking the island to the mainland for the Galveston, Houston, and Henderson Railroad. Most of the Galveston work was done between 1865 and the early 1870s, and in some cases, Boyce owned an interest in the company undertaking the construction. It appears that he also supervised the railroad bridge at Austin for the International and Great Northern in the 1870s, a facility that was incorporated into the Missouri Pacific system a decade later.<sup>21</sup>

Given Boyce's personality and democratic camaraderie, it is not surprising

<sup>20</sup>*Ibid.*, 133-135.

<sup>21</sup>U. S. Census, Harris County #701; Scrapbook, Robert P. Boyce Collection, (Houston-Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library); Galveston County Deed Records, R, 248-249; Y, 396; Z, 535-539; 7, 355. The pages of the scrapbook are not numbered, many are loose. Some of the articles are dated, many are not (hereafter cited as Scrapbook).

to find him in the political arena. His first venture was as alderman from the first ward in 1843, but about 1850, he became the city marshal. The marshal was not only the peacekeeper and the equivalent of the modern police chief, he usually was also market master in charge of collecting stall fees from those who leased space beneath and around the city hall. At different times, the marshal also assessed and collected city taxes, a position that traditionally rewarded the official with a percentage of his collections. The city records and newspapers of the period are very incomplete due to fires that sporadically consumed valuable historical documents, but Boyce was marshal in 1850 when the census was taken, from 1855-1858, and again in 1861. He collected taxes in 1856, and was market master off and on between 1855 and 1882 when it appears that law enforcement was separated from overseeing the market. In 1879 and 1884, Bob ran unsuccessfully for Harris County Treasurer, and in each case was beaten by the incumbent. His old friend, William R. Baker, who had been a clerk with the Allens in the 1830s, became mayor in 1880, and in typical fashion, named Boyce street commissioner. Baker supporters claimed that Bob did an excellent job keeping Houston's streets in repair, but the opposition wanted to destroy cronyism and upgrade the position to a professional level. Although Baker went out of office in 1886, Boyce apparently remained street commissioner as he inserted a notice in the newspaper on April 26, 1887, assuring Houstonians that the wagon bridge over Brays Bayou near the railroad bridge was safe for travel.<sup>22</sup>

Boyce was in his seventies during this period but obviously active and vigorous. His friend, Daniel L. McGary, the editor of the *Houston Age*, humorously commented that Boyce had come with Christopher Columbus and founded the Democratic Party. A Jacksonian Democrat all of his voting life, Boyce must have had some healthy arguments with his father-in-law, Sheriff James B. Hogan, a Henry Clay Whig.<sup>23</sup>

Patriotic to the core, Bob was ready to uphold his political views. Contemporaries, having heard his vivid tales and read his reminiscences that appeared in the *Age* during the 1880s, believed that he had served in the Indian wars of 1838-1839, the Mexican War, and various border struggles in addition to the Civil War. Ignorance on the part of Texans who arrived after annexation in 1845 was the reason for some of this confusion. Boyce mentions in his memoir about his enlistment with the Mexican Federalists in 1839-1840, but nothing about the campaign against the Cherokees. Juan Pablo Anaya, one of the leaders in the Federalist movement resisting the return to Centralism in the 1830s, came to Houston in September 1839 seeking volunteers among the Texans to restore the Mexican Constitution of 1824. Boyce was among those who joined the cause although his name fails to appear on any of the extant rosters. Bob recounts the difficulties for the 250

<sup>22</sup>Margaret S. Henson, "Roster: Houston City Officials, Harris County Officials, 1837-1975," manuscript, Houston Public Library, 121, 138, 142, 146.

<sup>23</sup>Scrapbook.

Texans who marched southwest of "Casa Blanca" near the Nueces River towards the Rio Grande. Thirst was the major problem for men and livestock, and the inhospitable desert made the recruits uneasy.

Boyce returned to Texas when it became apparent that some Federalists intended to betray the Texans to the Centralists. From what he says about Monterrey during the Federalist campaign and what veterans of the Mexican War told him, it seems apparent that Boyce did not join the army in 1846.<sup>24</sup>

Bob was almost fifty years old when the Civil War commenced. He enlisted for the duration in 1862 becoming Captain of Company F in General George W. Baylor's cavalry which was also known as the 2nd Regiment of the Arizona Brigade. The only documented incident in which he took part was an attack by row boat up Bayou Teche to Grand Lake and Brashear City, Louisiana. The Confederates quickly captured the depot, and besides 1,300 prisoners, they acquired valuable military stores and provisions. General Baylor participated in the Red River Campaign the following year where the Texans helped win a victory over the Federal troops at Mansfield, Louisiana. Bob returned home uninjured.<sup>25</sup>

The area of his personal life also provides a rare glimpse of nineteenth century Houston social history. He fell in love with a beautiful teenage Lydia Maria De Gentilis Page, the only daughter of Benjamin Page and his sixth wife, Lydia De Gentilis, who claimed to be related to Queen Maria Teresa of France. Lydia Maria had a number of suitors, and in spite of her youth, had inspired one to kill another—or so the story goes. Boyce promised to send her to school in Houston because such facilities were lacking in the Cedar Bayou neighborhood where her father lived. Boyce brought her to town and boarded her at Jack White's during 1843 when she attended Miss Abby Jane Avery's school.<sup>26</sup>

Bob and Maria were married in 1846 and their first child, Robert Page, was born later the same year, perhaps explaining why Boyce did not join the volunteers for the Mexican War. They lived opposite Market Square and the city hall in the old Corri theatre which Bob doubtless remodeled. Corri's undertaking had failed in 1841 and the building was used for amateur theatricals, masquerades, and balls. Boyce sold the structure to a friend who died owing Bob several thousand dollars, but Boyce received letters of administration to settle the estate in order to salvage his property.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>24</sup>*Ibid.*; Memoir, 137-179; for a complete history, see Joseph Milton Nance, *After San Jacinto: The Texas-Mexican Frontier, 1836-1841* (Austin, 1963), 191-377.

<sup>25</sup>Boyce makes no reference to the Civil War in either his diary or scrapbook. Mary F. Boyce to Controller Stevens, July 5, 1909, family letters in the possession of Mrs. L. F. Rosier, abstracted by M. S. Henson, hereafter cited as Boyce Letters; Application for Confederate Widow's Pension #7839, Texas State Archives; *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies* (Washington, 1898), Ser. I, Vol. XXVI, Pt. I, 224.

<sup>26</sup>Genealogical material in the possession of the author; Mary F. Boyce to Lena Lanier, September 24, 1906, Boyce Letters.

<sup>27</sup>Harris County Marriage Record, A, 389.

In 1848, a daughter was born who they named Maria Roxalena, or Lena for short. Maria was alive in September 1850, when the first federal census in Texas was taken, but she died soon afterward, perhaps in childbirth. Thirty-six-year-old Bob was left with two small children, an oil portrait of his young wife, and a comfortable estate inherited from her.<sup>28</sup>

When his daughter married, Benjamin Page had given her a dowry of two slaves and some livestock. Moreover, the Pages moved to town to live with the young couple and the old man left the managing of his ranch on Cedar Bayou in the hands of his son-in-law. In the late 1840s, Boyce paid taxes on Page's 4,500 acres, some 700 other acres, 5 town lots, 80 cattle, 6 horses, and 2 slaves. Some of the acreage and town lots seem to have been acquired from Pamela Mann's estate and that of her eldest son which Bob had administered in order to salvage something from debts owed to him. The Page acreage was held in trust for Maria's two children, but the income was at Bob's discretion.<sup>29</sup>

Now a man of substance in spite of what he told Sam Houston in 1852, Boyce journeyed to New England with his two children where he put young Robert in school in Connecticut. The youngster remained at boarding school until late 1860 or 1861 when he returned on board one of the last vessels to leave for Galveston before the outbreak of the war. Boyce noted that he was a "grown young man we had not seen for 8-9 years."<sup>30</sup>

Boyce remarried in 1855 to Mary Frances Hogan, the seventeen-year-old daughter of Sheriff James B. Hogan. She was a neighbor of the Boyces and had served as a nurse for Mrs. Benjamin Page during her last illness. Her older sisters had attended Miss Avery's school along with Maria, and it seems likely that Mary Frances received a similar rudimentary education. The new step mother was only ten years older than Lena, and they became more like friends than mother and daughter. The two remained close correspondents during their widowhoods in the early twentieth century.<sup>31</sup>

Mary Frances faced many problems during the first years of her marriage. Old Benjamin Page lived with the Boyces until just before his death in 1859; he moved to a friend's house during his last few months after a quarrel with Boyce over disciplining Lena. Between 1856 and 1876 Mary Frances bore seven living children but only four of them survived to adulthood. The first two were born before Robert Page Boyce returned from school in the northeast. Mary Rosalie died at eighteen months and was buried next to Maria Page Boyce in Holland Lodge's cemetery. Bob Boyce, like a great number of Houstonians, joined the masonic fraternity. Lodge records indicate that he was initiated in 1842 and was a member in good standing until 1888 when he

<sup>28</sup>U. S. Census, Harris County #51; Baptismal record, Annunciation Church; Harris County Tax roll, 1848, 1849, 1850; Mary F. Boyce to Lena Lanier, May 19, 1900, Boyce Letters.

<sup>29</sup>Harris County Tax roll, 1848, 1849, 1850; Mary F. Boyce to Lena Lanier, April 10, May 19, 1909, Boyce Letters.

<sup>30</sup>Mary F. Boyce to Lena Lanier, April 10, May 19, 1909, Boyce Letters.

<sup>31</sup>Harris County Marriage Record, C, 165; Mary F. Hogan to Lena Lanier, September 24, 1906, Boyce Letters.

was demitted. The second child, Rinaldo Prettyman, called Nally was killed in a railroad accident in 1879 when he was twenty. The next three children arrived during the war years. Mollie and Randall Percy did not reach their sixth birthdays, while Roderick Pearl lived until 1880 when he died at age seventeen of consumption. The last two children, Roberta "Bertie" and Robert P. Jr., born in 1869 and 1876, became indulged pets of their parents; Mary Frances was thirty-one and thirty-eight when they were born, and Bob was fifty-five and sixty-two.<sup>32</sup> Robert Page, the eldest, died apparently of yellow fever in September 1867 at age twenty-one, underscoring the high familial death rate in those years.

The Boyces likewise provide an example of problems commonly encountered by researchers of local history; namely, the loss of records. They experienced two fires at their Market Square property although the dates remain unknown. Also, a fire in 1865 at a suburban home on Brays Bayou destroyed family papers and the portrait of Maria Page Boyce. The loss of valuable papers caused problems for the widowed Mary Frances in later years because some of their property apparently had not been recorded at the court house. Boyce also found that losing his papers from the Texas Revolution presented difficulties in proving his participation, a common problem for many veterans who depended on the state's records that were destroyed by a fire in the Adjutant General's office in the 1850s. Moreover, the loss of their family Bible explains the discrepancies in the birth dates of some of their children as inscribed on their gravestones.<sup>33</sup>

After the 1865 fire, the Boyces moved to Galveston where they boarded at the Washington Hotel for awhile before leasing a house on Tremont near Sealy and later one on Avenue K. The move of people between Galveston and Houston was a common occurrence in that period. From a religious standpoint, the Boyces were interesting as well. Bob Boyce evidently was, or became, Catholic because he received last rites and was buried by a priest from Annunciation Church but Mary Frances apparently was a Methodist, at least in 1909. They had two of their children baptized as Catholics in 1866. The only other family member who became Catholic was Lena Boyce Lanier who was baptized by the priest at Annunciation Church in Houston in 1870.<sup>37</sup>

Bob and Mary Frances continued to live in Galveston until 1872 when they sold their interest in Ocean House, a hotel on the beach at 21st Street that had nearby bath houses and a bar to attract beach visitors. Bob, R. Rush Plumly, Dr. Edward Randall, and others had joined together as the Gulf Land Company to develop the resort property along the route of the street car lines

<sup>32</sup>Mary F. Boyce to Lena Lanier, September 24, 1906; Walter A. Chatham, Secretary Holland Lodge #1 to author, May 3, 1983; genealogical material in possession of author.

<sup>33</sup>Mary F. Boyce to Lena Lanier, May 19, 1909, Boyce Letters. The birthdays for #5 and #6 are six months apart; Lena's birthdate is 1848 on Annunciation Church records but 1849 elsewhere.

<sup>34</sup>Mary F. Boyce to Lena Lanier, September 24, 1906, April 10, May 19, 1909, Boyce Letters; U.S. Census, Galveston County #244; Galveston City Directories, 1866, 1870; Baptismal records, Annunciation Church; genealogical material in possession of author.

that ran from the Strand to the beach. Boyce also served as a member of the Board of Directors of the Galveston Street Railway Company in the late 1860s and was the superintendent for laying the tracks for the mule-drawn cars. From time to time Boyce visited the Ocean House on business, and in fact was there when the hurricane of September 1875 destroyed the resort.<sup>35</sup>

Back in Houston, the family moved into a new house that Bob built on the northwest corner of Jefferson and LaBranch, a sparsely settled neighborhood near the southern edge of town. They remained there with only a few interruptions until Bob died in 1880. Nally and Pearly perhaps attended the Houston Academy for a few years, but sociable and active like their father, they joined local military groups that were as much social clubs as militia-oriented. Nally was a member of the San Jacinto Rifles, and perhaps Bob was too as he carried the San Jacinto banner during the annual parade on April 21, while Rodney Pearl was a member of the Houston Light Guard. The death of the young men fourteen months apart was a blow to the rest of the family. The telegram announcing Nally's accident sent Bob, Mary Frances, and their friend, Dr. William H. Howard, one time city physician and a well-respected surgeon, to Schulenberg on the train in hopes that he had survived. But his injuries were too severe and the young brakeman died before his parents could arrive. He had been crushed between the cars. They returned to Houston with the body and held the funeral from their home, a common practice then, with the internment at the family plot in the Episcopal cemetery in present Sam Houston Park. Pearl had gone to live in Waco with a relative to undergo treatment for his consumptive cough, but two days before Christmas, 1880, he died and his body was returned home after the holiday. The funeral was held at the Armory and he was buried in a new plot Bob bought in the recently opened Glenwood Cemetery. Boyce ordered the remains of his first wife and those of the children removed to the new, spacious, wooded cemetery off Washington Avenue.<sup>36</sup> Life went on and the Boyces enjoyed Bertie's triumphs at Miss Brown's school for girls in Houston. At her graduation exercises in 1883 she demonstrated her accomplishments on the piano, in a French recitation, and an elocution exercise. The following year she attended the Andrew Female College in Huntsville, a Methodist institution, but eloped the following year, 1885, with young William Howard, a marriage that proved unhappy.<sup>37</sup>

Robert P. Jr., or Robby, benefitted from his parent's affluence in the 1880s

<sup>35</sup>Galveston County Deed Records, Z 535-539; Charles W. Hayes, *Galveston: History of the Island and the City* (Austin, 1974), 708.

<sup>36</sup>Houston City Directory, 1877, 1884, 1887; Resolution of the San Jacinto Rifles, C 28 October 1879 with obituary of Rinaldo P. Boyce; obituary, Roderick Pearl Boyce, *Houston Post*, December 25, 1880, Scrapbook; Mary F. Boyce to Lena Lanier, September 24, 1906, Boyce Letters.

<sup>37</sup>Undated clippings, Scrapbook; Mary F. Boyce to Lena Lanier, October 12, 1908, February 28, May 2, 1909, Boyce Letters.

and went with them on a trip to Canada, and accompanied his mother to California in 1887. In 1888, Bob leased his home in Houston and moved to Georgetown, northwest of Austin, to be with Robert Jr. who was attending school there. It was easy to leave their Houston property for a time because Bertie, her husband and little daughter, Mollie May, lived next door and could keep an eye on the tenant.<sup>38</sup>

Bob was sixty-six years old in 1880 and was still market master when the census taker visited the house on Jefferson. He soon would become the street commissioner, and he also ventured into some new businesses during the decade. He bought one-half interest in the 5th Ward Hotel in 1883 and was the active operator for about a year. In 1886 he developed a recreational park and pavillion at the end of Crawford Street which he called Cedar Grove Park. He leased it for parties, and in 1889, the year before his death, he vigorously encouraged paving Crawford and other Houston streets with brick. He denied that the paving would benefit him as much as residents closer to town, but he objected strenuously to the width proposed because it was unnecessary and too costly. He also was the superintendent of the Texas Artesian Well Company of Houston in 1886, and even journeyed to Chicago to see the new equipment demonstrated. When he returned, he began drilling deep wells in Houston.<sup>39</sup> Such water wells soon provided Houston with a reliable supply of palatable water.

While his business activities were unusual for a man of his age, his interest in the past was not. He began his memoir and contributed historical articles to the newspapers like other venerable citizens. His scrapbook abounds with reminiscences about the Texas Revolution, his service with Anaya, early Houston buildings and events, all, of course, focusing upon his role. He attended the reunions of the Texas Veterans Association during the 1880s and wrote letters to the editors about "too much empty honor" heaped on the veterans and "too Little Real Help" for those in need. He also wrote about the humiliation in the proposed pensions for Confederate veterans. Bob considered it demeaning to have to go to the county judge and admit one's insolvent condition, taking along two witnesses to testify to one's bankruptcy. Moreover, and worst of all, was the fact that the petitioner's plea for the eight dollars a month and his sad, indigent status was posted on the court house door for thirty days for all to see.<sup>40</sup> Little did he think that in 1900 his widow would have to undergo similar experiences in order to get her twelve dollar a month pension.

In April 1886 Bob received an appointment as special U.S. Marshal to attend a session of the District Court in Galveston. While there, it occurred to him that it was the forty-ninth anniversary of his arrival on the island. This

<sup>38</sup>Clippings, n.d., Scrapbook; Houston City Directory, 1887.

<sup>39</sup>U.S. Census, Harris County, enumeration district 75, p. 23; clippings, Scrapbook.

<sup>40</sup>Clippings, Scrapbook.

inspired him to hold a special party the following year in Houston in honor of the February night in 1837 when he first reached Buffalo Bayou. He had printed invitations made, but in his uniquely democratic fashion, also inserted an open invitation in the newspaper. His friend, the editor, gave ample coverage of the event both before and after February 2. Boyce leased a building and gave instructions to his guests to enter through the alley. The refreshments were ample, especially the wine, as Bob was known for his fondness for alcohol. The guests included former mayors, county judges, and many of Boyce's acquaintances. Everyone came to honor one of Houston's oldest living citizens.<sup>41</sup>

Boyce had bragged that he had survived all of the yellow fever epidemics in Houston except for 1839 when he was on the Rio Grande, and it seems evident that he had an immunity not only to that disease but to the others that felled his contemporaries. He died of kidney failure on February 16, 1888, at age seventy-two or seventy-four, and fifty-one years and a few days after he arrived in Houston. His funeral brought out a large crowd at the home of his daughter, Bertie Howard, where Father Thomas Hennessey of the Church of the Annunciation conducted services. Dignitaries and members of the Masons and the Odd Fellows followed the cortege to Glenwood Cemetery.

Mary Frances discovered to her dismay that Bob had not provided for his family; she had to sell the house for one thousand dollars in order to pay off the mortgage. Moreover, much of the property she thought he owned had been sold in the past according to her lawyer, and in later years, she believed that the attorneys had cheated her. Bertie died tragically during the decade of the 1890s, possibly a suicide although the evidence is not clear. Young Bob married in 1896, but Mary Frances did not get along well with his wife. Living in a rented room in a boarding house in the Fifth Ward, then a German neighborhood, the widow supported herself by selling cosmetics to friends and neighbors. She began collecting her Confederate widow's pension in 1900 which proved insufficient to sustain her and in 1908 entered a home for widows in Fort Worth. From there she urged her step-daughter, Lena, also a widow, to join her, but she apparently died before Lena Lanier was able to establish her eligibility for a pension.<sup>42</sup>

From a historical perspective, the lives of Bob and Mary Frances Boyce illustrate the evolution of a man and his family in Houston during the nineteenth century. As a representative immigrant to early Houston, Bob Boyce believed all things were possible. He was a young man who made his mark during the founding of the community, but by the end of the century, his sons were not so fortunate. They represented those types of young men who settled into dull, routine jobs in grocery stores or railroad shops.

<sup>41</sup>Clippings, *Houston Age*, January 15, February 3, 1887, Scrapbook.

<sup>42</sup>Application for Confederate Widow's Pension, Texas State Archives; Mary F. Boyce to Lena Lanier, October 12, 24, 1908; February 28, October 4, 15, 1909.

Likewise, urbanization took a toll on the lives of widows like Mary Frances when their Jacksonian entrepreneurial husbands left them without support and who found themselves a burden in the homes of their children who were themselves struggling to support young families. At an earlier day in a more rural setting, the care of an elderly parent might be inconvenient, but it was not the financial and emotional disaster of urban, middle-class America in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Nevertheless, carpenter and community activist Robert P. Boyce left his mark on Houston. He was an example of the builder/developer who merged private interest with public life, and established the model which so many in the Bayou City have emulated.