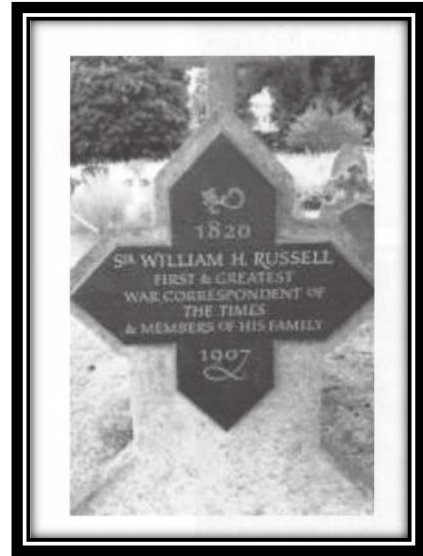


### George Wilkins Kendall

Recently I came across a most interesting article in the Winter 1967 issue of *Old West Magazine*. The article was a reprint of a story from *Frontier Magazine* and the author and the issue date were not given. The date is definitely prior to 1931, but that is all that I can be sure about. The article states, "On the memorial to Sir William Howard Russell in the crypt of St. Paul's Cathedral in London appears this inscription: 'The First and Greatest of War Correspondents.' I find no evidence that he is buried there. I do find evidence that he is buried in the Brampton Cemetery in London. In July of this year (2013) the *London Times* reported the placing of the monument, photo at right, on Sir William's grave in Brampton Cemetery. There is no doubt that Sir William is one of the greatest war correspondents to cover a war. His first assignment was to Denmark in 1850 to cover a brief conflict between Prussian and Danish troops. The new monument is more specific in that it says he was the *Times'* first war correspondent:



**1820**  
**Sir William H. Russell**  
**First & Greatest**  
**War Correspondent of**  
**The Times**  
**& Members of His Family**  
**1907**

And the point of all this and the story in the magazine is that the first war correspondent is one of our very own. George Wilkins Kendall was born on August 22, 1809, at Mont Vernon near Amherst, New Hampshire, the son of Thaddeus and Abigail (Wilkins) Kendall. He learned the printing trade in Vermont, practiced the trade in Washington, DC, and then for Horace Greeley in New York before he took the man's advice on westward travel. Okay, it was a cholera epidemic that caused his departure and New Orleans is south, but it is a great deal west of New York. He did make a stop in Mobile, Alabama, working for a year on the *Register*. Then in 1837, George and a fellow named Francis Lumsden founded New Orleans' first cheap daily, the New Orleans *Picayune*, so called because it sold for a picayune, the least valuable coin in Louisiana circulation. The first edition was four pages and it came off the press in January of 1837. Filled with Kendall's humor, the *Picayune* flourished and prospered. George seems to have become infatuated with Louisiana's next door neighbor, Texas. The *Picayune* became a powerful supporter for the annexation of Texas and for US expansion into the west. In 1841, with the paper's future secure, Kendall went to Austin, Texas, to join the ill-fated Texas Santa Fe Expedition led by Texas President Mirabeau B. Lamar. Out loud, Texas was hoping to get a share of the lucrative trade along the Santa Fe Trail and securing open trade agreements with Santa Fe and northern New Mexico. Secretly, they were going to appeal to the Santa Feans' distaste for being ruled by Mexico with a capital thousands of miles away. The Texans hoped to get the Northern New Mexicans to agree to join Texas.

The force of about 321, including George Kendall, set out on it's journey on June 19, 1841, and was officially designated the Santa Fe Pioneers. The expedition had misjudged the distance they would have to travel and the provisions that would be needed for that large a force. On September 17, 1841, as they were breaking up into groups to search for food, the governor of New Mexico and his army captured the entire expedition near

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Tucumcari and took them to Santa Fe. George produced a passport signed by the Mexican consul in New Orleans, but it was just a worthless piece of paper. From Santa Fe, 200 prisoners were marched 1500 miles to Mexico City. They were severely mistreated along the way. If a prisoner faltered, he would be shot in the back. Ears were cut off of some prisoners. In Mexico City, George and the other prisoners were confined in the palace of San Cristobal until some foreign powers interceded and they were released. By this time George had contracted smallpox and had been placed in a leper colony.

He was released and made his way back to New Orleans via Veracruz. He ran a serialized version of his story in the *Picayune*, and in 1844 published a 900 page book called *Narrative of the Texan Santa Fé Expedition*. For the next three years George and the *Picayune* pushed for a war between the US and Mexico.

When the Mexican War began in 1846, Kendall accompanied the first troops that went to the Rio Grande. This made him the first war correspondent by about four years. He made arrangements to get his reports transported back to the *Picayune* and then attached himself to Captain Benjamin McCulloch's Texas Rangers, a daring cavalry unit. He witnessed the battles of Resaca de la Palma and Palo Alto. He sent couriers through the chaparral with dispatches to Port Isabel with accounts of the battles. From Port Isabel, on the Rio Grande, the dispatches would sail by ship to New Orleans.



George then went with General William Jenkins Worth to Monterrey and he became the first, and I would venture to say, one of the very few, war correspondents to take part in an actual battle. It happened this way: At night, in a pouring rainstorm George and General Worth's troops waded across the swift Santa Catarina River in order to flank a key position of Mexican troops guarding the beautiful city of Monterrey. The small body of troops with whom George was riding encountered some Mexican Cavalry. Perhaps his mind flashed back to those terrible days of cruel captivity and the dungeons of the Mexico City prisons where he was held captive. For whatever reason, he jumped into the middle of the fray. He came out of the battle carrying the flag of the enemy, always a highly prized possession in battle. The flag was also sent to the *Picayune* and was frequently on display.

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It became clear to the American forces that a march from Veracruz to capture Mexico City would end the war. George marched with General Worth's command to meet General Winfield Scott at Veracruz. There he recorded Scott's landing and subsequent Mexico City campaign.

He also discovered that he was not the only correspondent covering the war. Traveling with Scott was James L. Freaner a reporter for *Picayune's* greatest rival, the *Delta*. George had one great advantage over any other correspondent; he was the owner and didn't have to get approval for chartering ships, bribing the locals or having to send his expense reports through a chain of command.

George continued with Scott's army through the summer of 1847 as they marched along the same route as followed by Hernando Cortez 300 years earlier as he defeated the Aztecs. As they marched to Mexico City George recorded battles at Cerro Gordo, Jalapa, Puebla and Churubusco. This army contained some of the most brilliant military minds ever assembled. Names that would predominate in the next great war Americans would fight; Robert E. Lee, U. S. Grant, George Pickett and Rafael Semmes to name a few.

During the war, George had remained untouched by enemy fire even though he had been in the thick of each battle. He had suffered and been incapacitated for a brief time by a fever. On the last day of fighting, September 13, 1847, he went with his friend General Worth as they stormed the battery defending Chapultepec Castle and George took a bullet in his knee.

As he lay in his bed that night, his wounded knee bandaged, he wrote, "The Stars and Stripes fly over the palaces of Montezuma." The dispatch was placed with a horse and rider racing for Veracruz where a ship was waiting. George's dispatch was received in Washington, DC, a full 24 hours ahead of the official army dispatch.

This was to be George's only war and, though it was a relatively short one, few correspondents have matched the achievements of George Wilkins Kendall. There are no great monuments or cathedrals to honor him, but there is a Kendall County in Texas named in his honor and a Texas Historical Marker on his grave.

After the war George toured Europe for a couple of years and in Paris in 1850 he met and married Adeline de Valcourt. The couple had four children. While in Paris he prepared his second book, *The War between the United States and Mexico*, which was published in 1851 with a profusion of illustrations by Carl Nebel. The photo below was taken in Europe.

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When the couple returned to the states they settled in Texas and in the 1850s George played a major role in the development of the sheep business in Texas. Starting with a flock of twenty-four Spanish merino rams and a flock of *chaurro* ewes on a ranch on the Nueces River, he battled blizzards, grass fires, and disease until 1856, when he began making a profit. By 1864 he had a flock of 5,000 sheep and the scab disease became an epidemic in Texas. He was the first to build large vats and dip all of his sheep. During all of these experiences he was regularly providing reports to the *Picayune* and praising the Texas hill country.

George died of pneumonia in Kendall County on October 21, 1867. Adeline survived him by about 57 years. She did marry a second time, a fellow named Dane. George and Adeline are buried together in the Boerne Cemetery in Boerne, Kendall County, Texas. Also buried in the cemetery are two daughters, Caroline and Georgina, Adeline's mother Caroline and brother Joseph.

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Thanks to Find a Grave member Mark Alberthal for this photo

Sources: Old West Magazine, Winter 1967, The First War Correspondent -1846  
Texas State Historical Society — KENDALL, GEORGE WILKINS  
Texas State Historical Society — TEXAN SANTA FE EXPEDITION