

The Story of This Place

History Overview

From the Brazos to San Jacinto

In the spring of 1836, this part of the Brazos Valley became an important setting in the final weeks of the Texas Revolution.

The land surrounding today's TexasLand USA site was once part of historic Bernardo Plantation, established by Jared Ellison Groce, one of Stephen F. Austin's original colonists. Nearby Groce's Ferry on the Brazos River provided a critical crossing, while Washington-on-the-Brazos lay just upriver.

In April 1836, the famed Twin Sisters cannons reached Sam Houston's camp at Bernardo Plantation before the march to the Battle of San Jacinto. Transported hundreds of miles by river, sea, and oxen, the cannons became a powerful symbol of the determination that helped secure Texas independence.

What happened here was part of a much larger story, one that stretched from the Alamo and Washington-on-the-Brazos to the banks of the Brazos River and ultimately to San Jacinto.

Houston's Retreat Across the Brazos

After the fall of the Alamo on March 6, 1836, General Sam Houston began a strategic retreat eastward, leading a ragtag army of Texian volunteers pursued closely by General Santa Anna and the powerful Mexican army. Houston's path brought him to San Felipe de Austin, the heart of Stephen F. Austin's Brazos Colony. Realizing the town could fall into enemy hands, he ordered it burned to the ground. Then, leaving a few trusted officers to guard the river crossings, Houston marched his troops upriver to a place called Groce's Ferry.

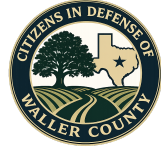
Groce's Ferry: A Crossing That Changed History

Here, Houston found more than just a place to regroup. Local landowner Leonard Waller Groce opened his home and resources to the army. He offered shelter and supplies and even turned his home into a field hospital. In a remarkable act of patriotism, he melted his lead pipes to make bullets.

It was at Groce's Ferry that the Texians received the "Twin Sisters," two small cannons that would play an important role in the victory at San Jacinto.

The Groce Family Legacy

Leonard Groce's connection to Texas history was part of a larger family legacy. His father, Jared Ellison Groce, was one of the wealthiest settlers in Austin's colony and a pioneer in Texas cotton



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production. In 1822, he planted one of the colony's first cotton crops. Leonard later brought the first cotton gin to Texas and produced some of the state's first bales.

Jared also built Groce's Retreat, on a three-acre tract south of present-day Navasota. There, George Childress began drafting the Texas Declaration of Independence before it was adopted at Washington-on-the-Brazos on March 2, 1836.

Later that month, President David G. Burnet and his cabinet stopped at Groce's Retreat while fleeing east from Washington-on-the-Brazos. For three days, Groce's Retreat served as the temporary capital of the Republic of Texas.

The Road to San Jacinto

Meanwhile, Santa Anna reached San Felipe, only to find it burned and the river uncrossable. Though Houston's forces were only 15 miles away, Santa Anna turned his attention to chasing Texas' provisional government, which escaped through Harrisburg and Galveston.

Back at Groce's Ferry, Houston seized the steamboat *Yellow Stone*, using it to cross the Brazos River and continue east. Today, you can still trace his route. Just outside Hempstead, Houston camped at Donoho Plantation on April 14–15, 1836. One week later, on April 21, the Texian army struck at San Jacinto and won one of the most decisive battles in American history, though it lasted only 18 minutes. The victory effectively ended the Texas Revolution and secured Texas independence. Nine years later, Texas became the 28th state.

The final fate of the *Yellow Stone* remains a mystery, but Houston never forgot its role. "Had it not been for its service," he later wrote, "the enemy could never have been overtaken... It enabled me to cross the Brazos and save Texas."

A Living Legacy

Today, visitors can explore the Brazos Valley through places like San Felipe de Austin, Washington-on-the-Brazos, the Groce's Ferry historical marker, and the San Jacinto Battleground. Together, they preserve the story of a young republic and the people whose determination shaped its future.

Generations of ranching and agriculture have continued that story ever since. Though much has changed over the past two centuries, the history of this land continues to shape the identity of Waller County today.

Most Texans know the Alamo and San Jacinto. Far fewer realize that the chapter connecting them unfolded here, along the Brazos River.