

# Port Aransas Preservation and Historical Association

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PAPHA Newsletter

August 2009

## T.H.C. Approves Historical Marker

ANITA EISENHAUER, N.C.H.C. CHAIR

The Nueces County Historical Commission (NCHC) is pleased to announce that a State historical marker regarding Mustang Island has been approved by the Texas Historical Commission. "The Settlement and Development of Mustang Island" was researched and crafted by J. Guthrie Ford, Ph.D., a Port A resident and an officer of the NCHC. The forthcoming marker will tell the Mustang story from pre-historic times through the current day theme of the Island as a third coast destination.

After a marker is approved, writers at the Texas Historical Commission (THC) create the marker words and then send a galley proof to the researcher for approval of the fidelity of the text. Next comes the metal casting and fabrication of the marker by a San Antonio foundry,

followed by the onsite installation and commemoration of the marker by the pertinent county historical commission and invited guests. I anticipate that the NCHC will commemorate the new Mustang Island marker in the early spring of next year.

By the way Mustang Islanders, this is the third historical marker that Professor Ford has acquired for your fair island (see "Defense of the Aransas Pass During World War II" and "The United States Coast Guard on Mustang Island" in Roberts Point Park). And I happen to know that Guthrie is far from finished: he is submitting two marker applications this year and has numerous other marker goals on the back burners. You folks on Mustang are indeed fortunate to have such an energetic and productive "history" person aboard. Enjoy!



## New Exhibit Up and Running

Come on in to see the new exhibit, Taming the Channel: An Epic Story at the Port Aransas Museum.

As reported last month, this exhibit tells how the channel made this town Port Aransas. It begins with the first Winter Texans, the Karankawas, continues through the creation of the lighthouse (see the Lydia Ann Lighthouse lens on display as shown above), and the six

## Correcting the Mistakes

BY PORT ARANSAS MUSEUM DIRECTOR RICK PRATT

*For some reason closely related to my schedule of late, I sent in a draft instead of a final copy of the article that appeared in the last newsletter. Some glaring errors were contained therein. Please note these corrections.*

The rock dike structure built by the group of businessmen from Rockport was 600 feet long not 6000!

Further they built it in 1868 not 1858.

The private consortium that took over at the pass after the Feds built the Mansfield jetty was the Aransas Pass Harbor Company (not the Aransas Harbor Co.); and one of the players in this enterprise was the son of President Benjamin Harrison (not William H. Harrison).

Thankfully the rest was correct.



attempts at jetties resulting in those which lead into the Corpus Christi Ship Channel today.

Ring the bell off the train that brought the granite for the jetties. Browse our fabulous gift shop and more.

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**Want to become involved?**  
**PAPHA offers many opportunities: Offer skill**  
**in any area (leave message at 749-3800)**

# The Tarpon Inn: An Example of Making and Testing a History Hypothesis

BY JOHN G. FORD

History is organic. It can change and grow by the creation and evaluation of informed hunches-hypotheses-about past phenomena. I thought readers would like to see the process of hypothesis making and testing relative to my research on the origin of the Tarpon Inn.

The starting point—the initial or working hypothesis—is the opening sentence of the State historical marker in front of the inn, “In 1886 Frank Stephenson... opened an inn at this site in an old barracks.” Let me restate the working hypothesis: The Tarpon Inn opened in a barracks having some age to it, and the barracks was located where the inn currently is. Can that hypothesis be supported and amplified by Mustang Island history?

Yes. An Iowa infantry regiment established a fortified position on Mustang to deny the Confederates the strategic Aransas Pass—Post Aransas was active from November 1863 to July 1864. The archives report the building of troop barracks, which now allows the working hypothesis to be modified to read that the Tarpon Inn opened in a barracks formerly used by Federal troops between late 1863 and mid 1864.

Computing the distance between the Aransas Pass and the barracks is relevant to testing the Civil War hypothesis. When built, the barracks was 8,000 feet, 1.5 miles, away from, south of, the pass. That large distance made me suspicious about the whole Civil War barracks idea; namely, to defend the Aransas Pass against a Rebel attack, the Iowa troopers would have barracked right beside, or close to, the pass, not 1.5 miles away from it.

Nevertheless, I stayed in the archives looking for a reason why a barracks would be so distant from the pass, and I think I found one. In addition to the white Iowa regiment, there were also African-American troops on Mustang Island. These troopers, members of the Corps d’Afrique (see the June ‘09 newsletter), did not bear arms; they served as engineers, building and emplacing various structures and fortifications.

In a two-fold way, black troops on Mustang restored my confidence that

there was a Civil War barracks a considerable distance from the Aransas Pass. 1) Because they were unarmed, there was no need for the African-American troopers to barrack close to the pass, the probable site of an enemy attack. 2) Because troops were racially segregated, then with the armed Iowa troops barracked at the pass, the Corps d’Afrique troops would have barracked away from it.

Those considerations support the belief that the structure in which the original Tarpon Inn opened was indeed a Civil War barracks located away from the Aransas Pass. Additionally, there is a reasonably good chance that this barracks was used by troops of the Corps d’Afrique. (An alternative explanation is that the black troops barracked elsewhere, and that the “Tarpon” barracks was occupied by a detachment of Iowans deployed to defend the pass from an attack coming from the south.)

In summary, my research on the origin of the Tarpon Inn began with the working—initial—hypothesis that the inn opened “in an old barracks.” That was honed to the intermediary hypothesis that the barracks was a Civil War structure, and that was refined to the Tarpon Inn having opened in a barracks used by African-American troops belonging to the famous Corps d’Afrique. (The Corps was the first African-American military organization to serve the United States during the Civil War.)

If that is accurate, then the Tarpon Inn can add to the FDR tarpon scale another American History laurel, namely, the inn originated in a barracks that had housed members of a famous Civil War unit. And even if the black-barracks hypothesis is later discarded, there is no doubt that men of the Corps d’Afrique served on Mustang Island, which opens a new and unique chapter of Mustang Island history.

Given that the “old barracks” was at the inn’s cur-

rent locale, the 1.5 miles to the Aransas Pass may seem too great a distance; after all, the Tarpon Inn is currently only 0.4 miles from the pass. What must be taken into account is the southward geologic movement—the migration—of the pass, as explained in *A Texas Island*.

Further testing of the Civil War barracks hypothesis would engage the search for physical remnants of, for example, the Federal uniform. However I doubt the new inn owners would, for good reason, allow their beautifully manicured lawns to be plowed up by a team of military archeologists.

**Epilogue:** Might the original inn barracks, the old barracks, have been something other than a Federal Civil War structure? Unlikely, given that... The U.S. Army was briefly in the area in 1845, but no mention is made of a Mustang barracks. The Island was settled in 1855, but I doubt a settler’s homestead looked like a military barracks. The Confederates had an artillery emplacement on the Island from April to November 1863, but it was close to the pass, and the troops lived in tents. The U.S. Life Saving Service (precursor of the USCG) started ops on the Island in 1880, but its station was not a barracks structure. The Army Corps of Engineers arrived to work on the jetties in 1880, and no doubt the ACE had workmen quarters. However when the Tarpon opened in 1886, the ACE was still at the pass and would not have given up a structure for Stephenson’s private enterprise; furthermore, an 1880 ACE barracks would not have qualified as “old” when the inn opened in 1886.

*[John G. Ford is a local, award winning history writer. His book, A Texas Island, is offered at the Port Aransas Museum.]*



# Merchants, Donors Treated to Preview

BY KRISTI GOLSTON, PAPHA BOARD MEMBER

The Port Aransas Museum was pleased to recognize the 2008-2009 merchant donors and museum trustees at



## Here's the story

Museum Director Rick Pratt captures the imagination of museum guests with his talent for telling a tale as Boo Hauser and Jane Gnazzo listen.

a preview of the newest exhibit, Taming the Channel: An Epic Story. More than forty supporters gathered at the museum on July 25 to hear Rick Pratt tell the tale of how the continual southerly movement of the channel was finally, and permanently, halted with the completion of the jetties in 1919. Donors and benefactors are the lifeblood of any museum, and our museum is no exception. We have greatly benefited from myriad donors – donors providing financial support as well as countless volunteer hours in making the dream of Mercer house as a Museum a reality. The idea for a merchant donor program was conceived toward the end of last year. The mission of the program was to complement the personal membership program and provide various levels of membership for local merchants to be involved with the museum. These

levels include Lifetime, Gold, Silver, Bronze and Supporter members. The Port Aransas Brewing Co. was the first merchant to become a member and fifteen other merchants quickly followed. This year, Gold, Silver and Bronze Merchant members were presented with lovely prints of Flint Reed's Mercer House painting. The 2009-2010 Merchant Membership drive kicks off in August. The Museum wishes to thank Miss K's Catering, Family Center IGA and Dot Emerson for their donations to the event.



## Mingling

Attendees enjoy themselves with the lighthouse light as a backdrop.

## Old and Distant History... But Is There Any Other Kind?

BY DR. JOHN FUCIK

Comes the first week in August my brother and I ponder the idea of attending the Denison family reunion and corporate meeting in Mystic, CT.

It's always fun meeting and remeeting attendees whose relationship dates back to the 1600's and earlier, but the meeting's meat involves the upkeep and future of our 1730's house museum and surrounding 320 acres. Most of the latter is a nature preserve with its own management and funding. Leased for a buck a year, it's one of a few privately owned preserves in the state. The house museum, however, is owned by the descendents of Capt. George Denison who build his first house on the site around 1640.

The house was willed to the "family" ca. 1934 by Anne Borodell Denison Gates, the last descendent to live in the house since it was built. The "family"... all who can claim Denison heritage... now operate the residence as an open-to-the-public house museum, a fairly unique provenance as museums go.

Hmmm, speaking of funding, I wonder

if Anne was related to ol' Microsoft Bill??

An interesting feature of the house, which attests to a family tendency to never throw anything away, is decorating each room in the house in a style marking some period of the house's existence.

E.G., the kitchen is colonial; the parlor, Federal; one bedroom, Victorian; and the library, 1930's art deco/eclectic. Nearly 100% of the furnishings were recovered from the barn loft where they had been stored for several centuries. The moral of our very moral family, is, of course, NEVER throw anything away!!

A recent and growing source of funding for the museum is sponsoring a farmer's market every Sunday in a large meadow near the homestead.

If there be anything pertinent to our Port A Museum in all this, it's the comforting (??) thought that no matter the location OR age, wherever and whatever the museum, its operation and management problems are about the same worldwide. The FUN is in the FUNding!!

## Docent Update

BY MARY HAMMOND-McKNIGHT  
DOCENT COORDINATOR

Linda Hansen, one of the top sellers in the gift shop, provided the program for the July Museum docents meeting.

The docents gathered for their wine refreshments and listened to Linda explain how she makes her absolutely beautiful jewelry. She mostly uses a dichoric glass as the basis for her many creations of necklaces with earrings or bracelets, many coordinating with the original piece.

The docents met again in early August for a new exhibit training session, learning how to better guide visitors. Rick Pratt, museum director and creator of the new exhibit, was the speaker. Another training session is scheduled for 10am Wednesday, Aug. 26.

The next docent meeting date is set for Tuesday, September 15.



## Focus On ...

Each month a focus will shine on a different docent that volunteers to work for the Port Aransas Museum.

### Karen Larson

Karen and her husband, Ken, are loving their new life in Port Aransas, and the museum is especially enjoying her great service as a docent.

Karen intends to work two days a month, plus attending the fun docent meetings, but she says she usually ends up working a little more than that.

"What I enjoy most about volunteering at the museum is meeting all the people who come by the museum," she says. "It is fun to see them getting excited about Port Aransas' history. Most don't realize that we've been here so long," she adds.

One day a week you can find Karen working as a 'Book Doctor' at the Ellis Memorial Library in Port Aransas. She comments that her medical tools mostly consist of glue and rubber bands, but the repairs she does enables the library to have more books without spending more money.

While Karen is volunteering, her husband, though retired, works at Woody's Sports Center. Sounds like a dream job for a guy who loves fishing.

## A Closer Look [at our Gift Shop]

### Candie Melvin:

As guests arrive in the Port Aransas Museum and are directed to the table to sign in they are immediately drawn to the beautiful stained glass pieces on the windows in that room. These are the hanging pieces of the Candie Melvin stained glass that's offered for sale in the gift shop.

Candie calls her business Glass Crafts by Candie and she offers not only the beautiful windows pieces, but one of her most popular pieces is a small glass pyramid that holds sand and small shells. When the pyramid is moved the shells and sand move around and take on a



different look inside the pyramid. Candie and her husband, Curt, spend the summer months in Lansing, Michigan, their former home town. She designs pieces while there, but executes the stained glass in her studio behind her park model home in Rockport where they live the rest of the year.

The artist began her interest in stained glass many years ago and took a three-day class in Michigan. At the time she was still employed. Five years later, after retirement she re-entered the craft and loved it.

### Jack Dreessen

Jack Dreessen has lived in Port Aransas full-time for seven years. In that time he has become involved and volunteered his time for many of the organizations in town. He is on the board of directors and serves as treasurer for the Port Aransas Community Theatre. But the most fun he has there is when he is in the cast of a production.

Jack also is on the board of directors of the Art Center and volunteers his time there. One of his favorite jobs there is being the greeter for the First Friday events each month. He gets to see all the guests that evening.

Another favorite of Jack's is his work with Keep Port Aransas Beautiful. He is on the board and serves as treasurer for that organization.

On Sundays you can see him singing in the choir at the Presbyterian Church, too. When asked if he was into gardening, he replied, "just what is necessary."

We're fortunate to have him as a volunteer docent with the Port Aransas Museum. Jack usually works on Saturdays, at least two a month, and also attends the fun docent meetings. He especially likes to be there when there's many visitors coming through.



## Chef delivers

Taddy McAllister, "chef extraordinaire", delivered the goods for Denny and Suzanne Ware on Monday, Aug. 3.

The winners were treated to a delicious "down home cooked" meal of pork roast, sautéed mustard greens, baked orzo rice and followed by a Texas sized caked smothered in strawberries and ice cream.

Chef McAllister, former restaurateur, stated, "Your meal will be totally different than what may be found in most restaurants." And it was.

The gourmet dinner was accompanied by a vertical tasting of 1999, 2002 and 2003 vintages of Quintessa's Cabernet Sauvignon provided by the Wares.

The Wares, residents of the Moorings at Mustang Island, won the dinner at the auction fundraiser for the Port Aransas Museum held in March.

Other dinner attendees were San Antonio and Port A resident Edith McAllister, and Moorings' residents, Patty Henry and Jerry and Jane Gnazzo.

All agreed that it was a truly memorable evening and that they are eagerly awaiting next spring's Port Aransas Museum dinner and auction.

**Port  
Aransas  
Museum**

**361-749-3800**

**portaransasmuseum.org**

**Museum hours:  
Thurs-Sat, 1-5pm**

# The Fort Semmes Flag

BY J. GUTHRIE FORD

As the first streaks of dawn tinted the Gulf, a skirmish line of Federal infantry made its way stealthily across the rolling sand hills of Mustang Island. Even though these men felt worlds apart from their beloved Maine, those living on that state's coastline smiled at the breaking of dawn over the ocean—not even war could spoil that universal, timeless image. A shot and then a brief volley rang out as the skirmishers contacted the enemy picket line a few hundred yards south of the Confederate fort. The gray clad men hurried back to their headquarters to report a large body of Yankees advancing from the south. It was about then that the first 11-inch shell from USS Monongahela burst over Fort Semmes. The fort commander, Captain William Maltby, quickly decided his small contingent of troops and three artillery pieces were no match for what faced him. Reluctantly, he ordered the

colors hauled down and sent out a party to surrender to the Federals.

It was November 17, 1863, and Fort Semmes was an objective of a major Federal offensive that would sweep up the Texas barrier islands. The man who planned and led the attack on Fort Semmes, which guarded the strategic Aransas Pass, was delighted: the fort was neutralized without loss of life, on either side. General T.E.G. Ransom consolidated his gains, ordered the 20th Iowa Infantry Regiment and Corps d'Afrique to stay and garrison Mustang, and then pushed off toward his next objective, Fort Esparanza on Matagorda Island.

The flag Captain Maltby struck on that fateful morning was awarded to the 15th Maine Infantry Regiment for leading the assault on the Rebel stronghold. That ensign, shown in the accompanying photograph, found its way to the state



treasurer's office in Augusta, Maine, where it hung before being returned to Texas in 1928. The Fort Semmes flag eventually came into the loving hands of a chapter of the United Daughters of the Confederacy. Could this piece of Island history be brought home? I am opening those negotiations as I write these words, but even if that does not work out, I will have the Fort Semmes flag precisely replicated so that it may hang in our museum. I am uncertain of the meaning of the South "rising again," but I do know that one of its banners will!

## World War II in the Words of its Witnesses

BY BETTY BUNDY

Have you ever talked to a World War II veteran about his experiences or a "Rosy the Riveter" about hers? If so, did you write them down for your children and grandchildren? Our time is running out to preserve these stories and pass them on in order to know and remember the experiences of those who preceded us and made possible our survival as a free and independent nation.

On Saturday, Aug. 22, you will have a "free" opportunity to learn how to engage our remaining soldiers both military and civilian in conversation about their experiences and the impact they had on their lives.

The Port Aransas Museum in cooperation with the Texas Historical Commission is hosting a workshop on techniques for recording ORAL HISTORIES with an emphasis on preserving the personal experiences of those who lived and served through the 1940s. Modern technology has made it possible for us to record and save not

only their voices but also their faces for posterity. Come, learn how to do it so that you can add voices and faces to the mosaic of history.

As part of the National Effort to personalize the story of the war years, this training is being offered throughout the nation, in order that from all of our communities the voices of those who served may be preserved. The effort in Texas has been led by the Texas Historical Commission funded by the Houston Endowment and donations from the Summerlee Foundation of Dallas. The workshop is open to any and all who are interested in helping record the history of Texas and Texans. The materials and techniques to be discussed will be as uniquely suitable for Jr. and Sr. High Students interested in learning new skills and broadening their experiences as it is to history buffs of all ages and even to those who participated in World War II and have stories to share.

The Port Aransas Museum will be

open at 8:30 for early arrivers to enjoy coffee and to look about our newly completed museum before they move to the adjoining Community Center at 9am for the business of the day.

The workshop will be conducted by Dr. Stephen Sloan, director of Baylor University Institute for Oral History and William McWhorter, Texas Historical Commission Historian and his staff. Resources will include historical brochures, a comprehensive workshop manual covering information specifically preparing interviewers to interact with former military personnel of all branches, techniques for conducting oral interviews in general and equipment best suited to accomplish your goals.

The Port Aransas Museum Staff, and the Board of Directors of PAPHA welcome your interest and encourage you to attend.

Register with THC by calling William McWhorter at 512-463-5833 or by e mail at [williammcwhorter@thc.state.tx.us](mailto:williammcwhorter@thc.state.tx.us).