

Patricia A. Kaufmann



Texas Secession News from Castroville

Texas Governor Sam Houston (1793–1863), shown in Figure 1, was the most prominent Unionist in Texas. He considered secession unconstitutional and felt certain that such a “rash action” would lead to a conflict in which the North was sure to win.

Houston urged Texas to revert to its former status as an independent republic and stay neutral. Houston took his legislative seat on March 16, 1861, the date state officials were scheduled to take an oath of allegiance to the Confederacy. He remained silent as his name was called out three times and, after failing to respond, the office of governor was declared vacant and Houston was deposed from office.¹

Houston forecast,

“Let me tell you what is coming. After the sacrifice of countless millions of treasure and hundreds of thousands of lives, you may win Southern independence if God be not against you, but I doubt it. I tell you that, while I believe with you in the doctrine of states rights, the North is determined to preserve this Union. They are not a fiery, impulsive people as you are, for they live in colder climates. But when they begin to move in a given direction, they move with the steady momentum and perseverance of a mighty avalanche; and what I fear is, they will overwhelm the South.”²

Although Texas is often thought of as being one of the “sev-

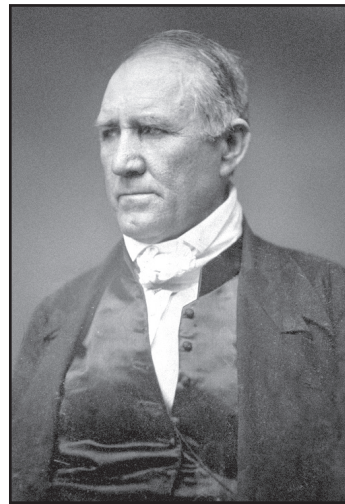


Figure 1. Samuel Houston (1793–1863), Texas governor, politician and soldier; best known for bringing Texas into the United States.

Sam Houston, Scott 1242



en” founding states, this is legally not the case. Yet historians and postal historians continue to debate this when the legalities are clear and indisputable.³

It is no wonder that postal historians are confused when you consider that the first produced Confederate flag patriotics show seven stars. The automatic presumption is that Texas seceded before February 4, 1861, and, indeed, the process had been started, but it was not complete nor legally binding.⁴

On January 8, 1861, Texans elected delegates to a state convention to consider secession. The convention convened in Austin on January 28 and adopted an *Ordinance of Secession* on February 1, by a vote of 166–8. Houston slowed, but could not stop, the secession movement when public pressure became too great.

It then had to be put to the voters in a popular referendum, which was done on February 23. The measure won overwhelming approval of the voters. But it did not become effective until March 2,

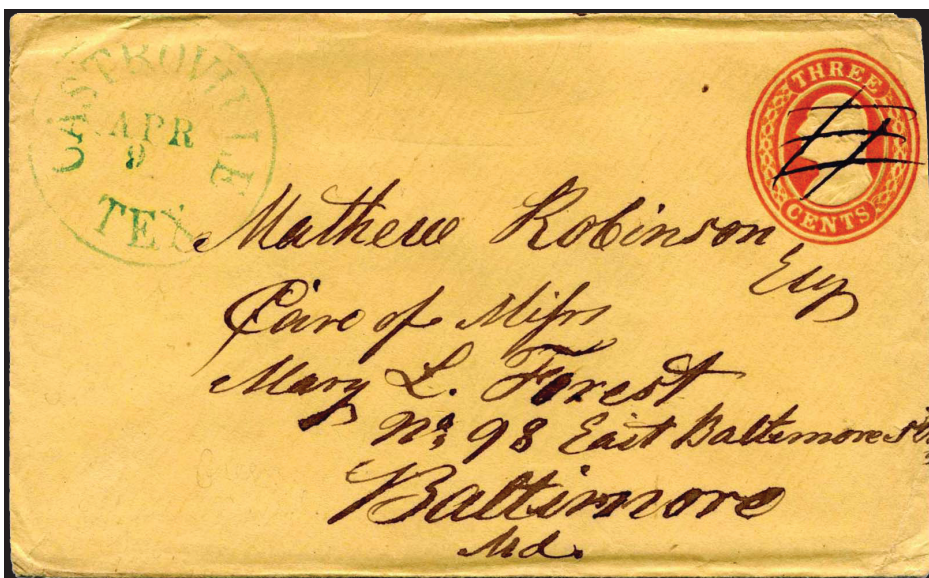


Figure 2. Cover from Charles De Montel in Castroville, Texas, to Baltimore.

1861, as stipulated in the *Ordinance*. The date was particularly significant and was likely chosen because it was the anniversary of Texas Independence Day — the adoption of the Texas Declaration of Independence on March 2, 1836, when settlers in Mexican Texas officially declared independence from Mexico and created the Republic of Texas. Coincidentally, it was also Sam Houston's birthday.⁵

In the 1850s, many Texans believed that slavery was vital to the Texas economy and to its future growth. By 1860, slaves constituted roughly 30 percent of the population. Most of those who lived in the slave-holding region in eastern and southeastern Texas had come from the lower South.

The U.S. 3¢ Nesbitt entire shown in Figure 2 demonstrates Confederate Use of U.S. Postage. During the period between secession and the Confederate Post Office Department taking over its own affairs on June 1, 1861, both North and South agreed to let the United States Post Office Department continue to deliver the mail in the Southern States; Southern postmasters were accountable to the USPOD during this intermediate period and the rate remained at the then U.S. 3¢ rate.⁶

The subject cover is neatly canceled by a green “Castroville/ Tex//Apr/9[1861]” circular datestamp and is addressed to “Mathew Robinson, Esq, Care of Miss Mary L. Forest, N^o 98,

“I suppose you are aware that Texas has seceded from the U.S. and annexed herself to the Confederated States in spite of Old Sam Houston, ex Governor, the secret friend of the black republicans.”

East Baltimore Street, Baltimore, Md.” Matthew Robinson was the son of Mary Leek Dashiell Robinson and Matthew Robinson, Sr., a ship captain who died in 1833.⁷

The original two-page letter enclosed in the cover is headed “Media [County, Texas] April 5th, 1861.” It is full of historic Texas secession news from Charles De Montel. (Figures 3 and 4)

Charles De Montel opens his letter by saying that he is sending a tax receipt (Figure 5) for the land owned by Robinson's mother. Some of the spelling is “inventive” and is left here-in as was originally written, often with a misplaced “h” such as “whas” instead of “was” and “where” in place of “were.”

De Montel continues by saying, in part,

“I suppose you are aware that Texas has seceded from the U.S. and annexed herself to the Confederated States in spite of Old Sam Houston, ex Governor, the secret friend of the black republicans.

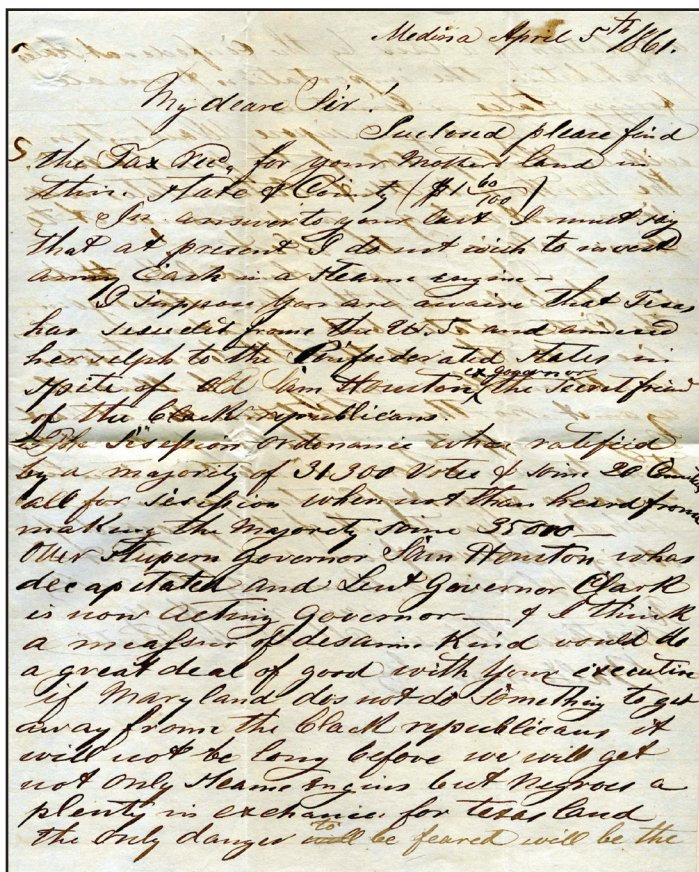


Figure 3. Page 1 of letter from Charles De Montel to Matthew Robinson, Baltimore.

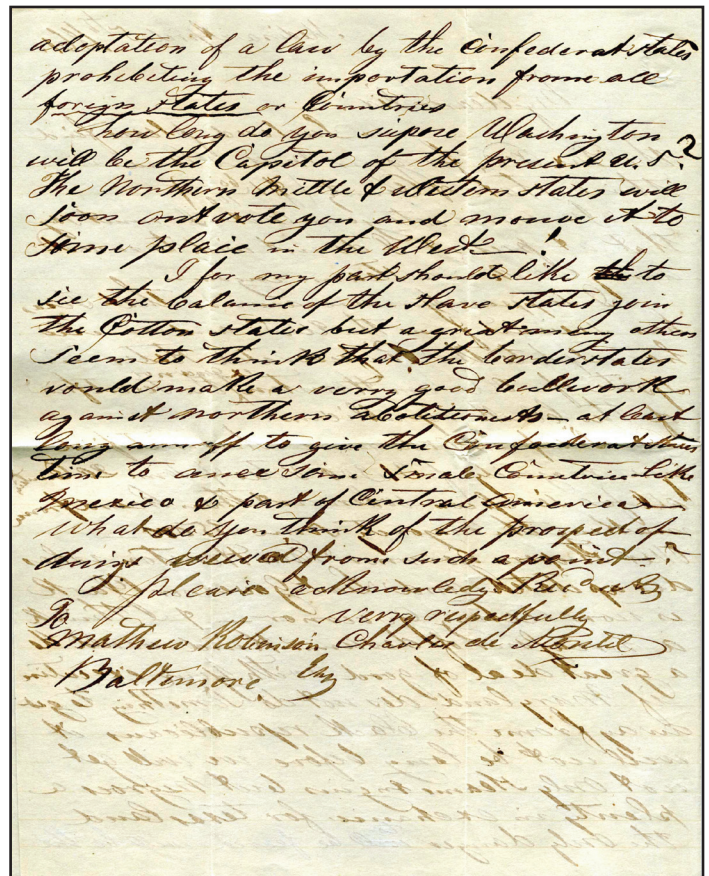


Figure 4. Page 2 of letter from Charles De Montel to Matthew Robinson, Baltimore.

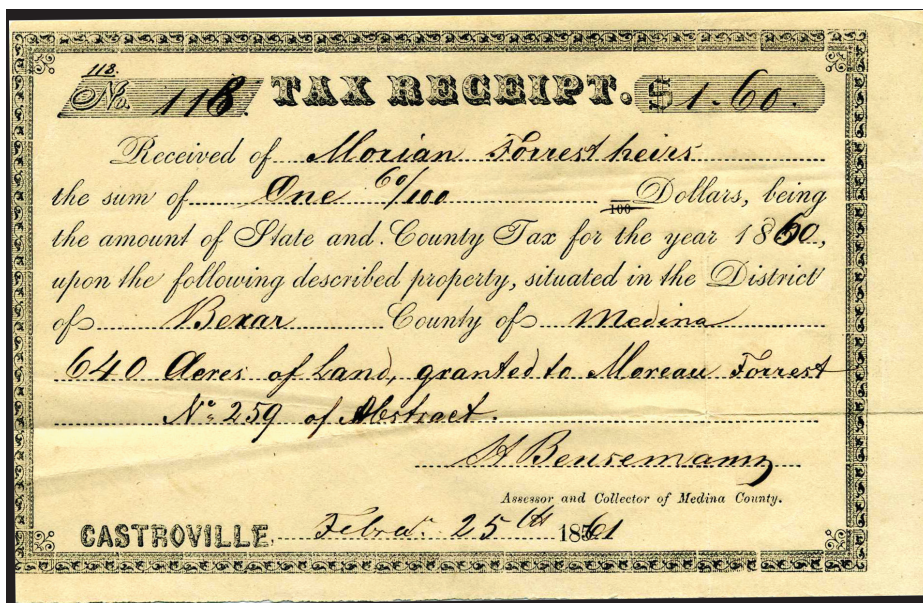


Figure 5. Tax receipt for land owned by Matthew Robinson's mother, enclosed with letter.

employment of Henri Castro to help lead the original Castro colonists to San Antonio, where, on September 1, 1844, he and the colonists joined Castro's first trek to his land grant. De Montel was present at the founding of Castroville on September 3, 1844. Castroville is known as the "little Alsace" of Texas, 25 miles west of San Antonio in eastern Medina County. The architecture and style of the town was distinctly European.

The first post office in Medina County opened in Castroville in 1847 with M. Laroch as postmaster; Castroville became the county seat the following year. During the Civil War, wagon trains loaded with freight stopped overnight at Castroville on their way to Mexico; the town thrived. By the mid-1860s. Castroville was the 12th largest city in Texas.⁸

After the Mexican War, in 1848, De Montel commanded a company of Texas Rangers. In 1853, he acquired 15,000 acres of land in the Hill Country in partnership with John Hunter Herndon and John James. James had surveyed Castroville in 1844. Together James and De Montel surveyed and plotted a townsite, constructed a commissary, sawmill and cabins and helped to sponsor many of the Polish settlers in what soon became the town of Bandera. De Montel subsequently returned to Castroville to continue farming and ranching. There, he had great success raising cotton and had earned the nickname *Cotton Planter* by 1858.⁹

He was the Medina County delegate to the Secession Convention in 1861. Convention records indicate that De Montel was 48 years of age, a lawyer and the owner of nine slaves and slightly more than 30,000 acres. Figure 8 shows his home in Castroville.

Montel was appointed by Brig. General Hamilton P. Bee to the position of provost marshal of Bandera, Uvalde and Medina counties. By appointment of Governor Francis R. Lubbock, he also served as captain of Company G (later changed to D), Mounted Rangers, for Bandera, Blanco, Medina and Uvalde counties in the Frontier Regiment. The Frontier Regiment was raised in December 1861 for the protection of the northern and western frontier of Texas.

De Montel was discharged from service on February 9, 1863, and commissioned by Confederate President Jefferson Davis on March 14, 1863, as commander

The Secession Ordinance was ratified by a majority of 31,300 votes & some 20 counties all for secession where not than heard from making the majority some 35,000. Our stupern governor Sam Houston whas decapitated and Lieut Governor Clark is now Acting Governor. I think a measure of desarme Kind would do a great deal of good with your executive if Maryland dos not do something to get away from the black republications it will not be long before we will get not only steam engines but Negroes a plenty in exchange for Texas land the only danger to be feared will be the adoption of a law by the Confederat States prohibiting the importation from all foreign states or countries.

How long do you suppose Washington will be the Capital of the present U.S.? The Northern Mittle & Soutern States will soon out vote you and move to some place in the West!

I for my part should like to see the balance of the slave states join the Cotton States but a great many others seem to think that the border states would make a very good bullwork against northern abolitionists at least long enuff to give the Confederat States time to annex small countries like Mexico & part of Central America."

Charles De Montel

Charles De Montel (1815–82) was a colonizer, lawyer, engineer, soldier and public servant. He was born in Königsberg, Prussia, on October 24, 1812. Also known as Charles Scheidemontel, he attended the University of Heidelberg, where he was a member of a student military guard unit. He probably first acquired an interest in Texas while attending the Sorbonne at the University of Paris. In 1836, he changed his name to De Montel (Figures 6 and 7).

De Montel traveled to Indianola in the

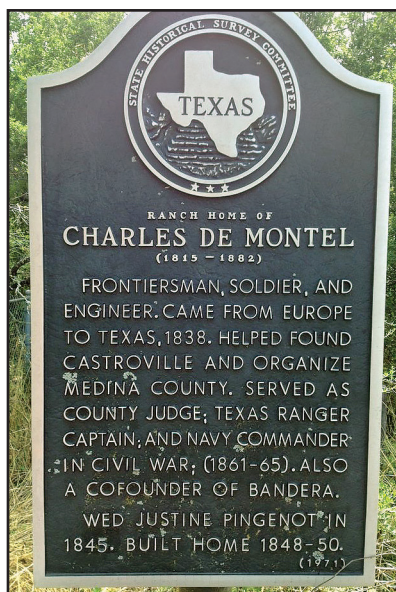


Figure 6. Texas Historical Survey highway marker for the home of Charles De Montel.

of the steamer *Texas*, a privately-owned vessel of the Confederate States. In 1864, De Montel returned to Medina County and raised a company of cavalry to serve under Col. John S. "Rip" Ford. William "Big Foot" Wallace was his lieutenant.

After the war, he traveled to Mexico to sell cotton and other farm products produced, in part, by Polish farmers. He frequently attended social and cultural functions in San Antonio and served as a master Mason of the Alamo Lodge. In 1871, he organized the Charles De Montel Company in Medina County, which combined his business interests in real estate and lumber and shingle production. In the late 1870s De Montel led the unsuccessful drive to bring the Southern Pacific Railroad through Castroville. His last act of public service was as Indian advisor to Company G of the Texas Volunteer Guards. The company, known as the Montel Guards, was organized at Montel, Texas, in August 1881.

De Montel died on August 3, 1882, at Castroville and was buried with Masonic rites in the family plot on the old Montel ranch north of Castroville. He was married to Justine Pingenet (1829–1901) in 1845 and they had seven children. Justine was born in Belfort, France, a daughter of one of the Castro colonists.¹⁰ Charles De Montel influenced Texas history for 50 years. His positions included surveyor, founder, lumber mill operator, Confederate Navy commander and guard captain, county judge and farmer. Like Sam Houston, his impact was to be felt for many years into the future. The town of Montel, Texas, was named in his honor.

Sam Houston, General of the Texas Revolution, befriended Charles shortly after the Battle of San Jacinto. It is said that Houston noted the chiding Charles suffered because of his long name and it was Houston who suggested that he shorten it to Montel or De Montel.

Houston and De Montel were giants in a state where the well-known tag phrase is "everything is bigger in Texas."

[Editor's Note: Kaufmann enjoys feedback and hearing from readers. She may be reached at: trishkauf@comcast.net.]

Endnotes

1. Thomas H. Kreneck, *Handbook of Texas Online*. <http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/fho73/> Accessed Aug. 12, 2017.
2. Alfred Mason Williams, *Sam Houston and the War of Independence in Texas*, Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1893, p. 354.
3. Patricia A. Kaufmann, "Independent State Mail and Confederate Use of US Postage; How Secession Occurred: Correcting the Record," *Aspects of American Postal History*, La Posta Publications, 2016.
4. Patricia A. Kaufmann, Francis J. Crown Jr., Jerry S. Palazolo, *Confederate States*



Figure 7. Grave of Charles De Montel, De Montel Family Cemetery; Masonic symbol at top.

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5. Secession, *The Handbook of Texas Online*, Texas State Historical Association, <https://tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/mgs02/> Accessed Aug. 12, 2017.

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7. Finding Aid to the Forrest Family Manuscript Collection, 1834–1864, Maryland Historical Society. Accessed August 12, 2017. <http://www.mdhs.org/findingaid/forrest-family-manuscript-collection-1834-1864-ms-3158>

8. Ruben E. Ochoa, Castroville, Tx, Texas State Historical Society. *Handbook of Texas Online*. <https://tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/hjc05/> Accessed August 12, 2017. Charles De Montel, Find-a-Grave, <https://www.findagrave.com/cgi-bin/fg.cgi?page=gr&GRid=81170789/> Accessed Aug. 12, 2017.

9. Justine Pingenet De Montel, Find-a-Grave, <https://www.findagrave.com/cgi-bin/fg.cgi?page=gr&GRid=81170860/> Accessed Aug. 12, 2017.



Figure 8. Charles De Montel's house in Castroville, Texas.



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