

MERIWETHER MILLING

CONTEXT

Before the German Emigration Company (Adelsverein) sent settlers to the Republic of Texas in 1844, the area later called New Braunfels was inhabited by hunters and gatherers. Native American artifacts have been discovered throughout the town and particularly in the vicinity of the Comal Springs.¹ The springs were also a stopping point along the el Camino Real or King's Highway since early times. This settlement on the part of the Adelsverein led a native Virginian, William Hunter Meriwether, to purchase a large amount of land in the Comal Springs area for the purpose of developing a milling industry. Meriwether was a plantation owner in Virginia and Tennessee before coming to Texas in 1846. His interest in the Comal Springs prompted him to use slave labor to dig a mill race canal from the Comal Springs to the Comal Creek, creating water pressure to run a grist mill, cotton gin and sawmill.² This digging of the canal affected the future of the springs area which would be later called Landa Park, and affected the rapid growth of New Braunfels.

Meriwether was the first entrepreneur to develop the springs that laid the foundation for many other businesses along and near the canal. Meriwether and the slaves had a significant impact as the town of New Braunfels became the fourth largest city in Texas in 1850, just five years after its establishment.³

OVERVIEW

“The Balcones Fault displacement of rock formations caused the underground barrier which forced the water in the Edwards Aquifer to rise through fissures and thus the Comal Springs, the largest springs in Texas, are formed.” The springs are the source of the Comal River which merges with the Guadalupe River within the city limits of New Braunfels and has as its final destination, the Gulf of Mexico.⁴ It is these springs that William Hunter Meriwether manipulated in the form of digging a canal in 1847 to produce water power to run his first industries.⁵ The community of New Braunfels was changed forever.

Long before the German Emigration, the Comal Springs became a favorite camping spot for Tonkawa, Lipan, Karankawas, Coahulticans, Kickapoos and Waco Indians. By the mid 1700s, Comanches were occasional visitors.⁶ Arrow heads, flint darts and lances have been found in the fields of the Comal Creek and Comal River. These collections can be viewed at the Sophienburg Museum in New Braunfels.

When the Spanish came and used the Camino Real as a travel route, “it is a logical supposition that a host of travelers must have feasted their eyes on the Comal’s crystal clear waters” as written by Oscar Haas. Spanish Royal Governor Martin de Alarcon in 1718 and Baron de Bastrop in 1806 both reportedly saw the Comal Springs.⁷ The springs are also mentioned in Mazanet’s *1691 Diary of Terán’s Expedition* and *Ramon’s Expedition of 1716*.⁸

On November 10, 1831, in San Antonio, Bexar County, Texas, Jose Antonio Navarro, Commissioner of the State of Coahuila and Texas gave a special grant for two leagues of land to Juan Martin De Veramendi. This transaction was the first deed transfer with the property associated with William H. Meriwether. See Attachment # 1 for a 1931 map of the location. The Byrd Lockhart Survey is for two leagues of land known as the Comal Tract. A league is 4,428.4 acres, so the Comal Tract was 8,856.8 acres. Juan Veramendi’s wife Josepha was the daughter of Jose Antonio Navarro and Margarite de la Garza Navarro. The Comal Springs property was a part of this acreage.⁹

Under Mexican rule, Juan Martin De Veramendi became the 9th Governor of Texas. He died in 1833 and on June 27, 1844, his daughter, Maria Antonia Veramendi, was awarded 1265 acres of land by a Petition of Partition for all the land in the two leagues distributed among surviving children.¹⁰

Prince Karl of Solms-Braunfels, Germany, Director of the Adelsverein, purchased a portion of the two leagues from Rafael C. Garza and wife Maria Antonio Veramendi Garza. On March 21, 1845, the Adelsverein German Emigration Company emigrants crossed the Guadalupe River and made camp on a bluff overlooking the Comal Springs.¹¹ Prince Carl of Solms-Braunfels had recognized the importance of the area’s location between San Antonio and Austin and realized its valuable water supply. The site was located between the Comal and the Guadalupe Rivers. Dr. Ferdinand Roemer, in his travels in Texas in 1847, commented “The

location and general aspect of New Braunfels is very pleasing and in all of Western Texas no more beautiful and suitable spot could have been chosen for a settlement". Also from Roemer, "The Comal which has an equal volume of water but which excels the former (Guadalupe) in the clearness of its water and the luxuriant growth of trees on the banks, forms a junction with the Guadalupe above the city. The Comal owes its existence to the confluence of the Comal Springs and the Comal Creek which takes place near New Braunfels. The unexcelled beautiful Comal Springs have their source at the base of a mountain range, hardly a half mile distant from the city. See Attachment # 2. The Comal Creek has its source about ten miles southwest of New Braunfels in several unimportant springs".¹²

In 1847, William H. Meriwether of Shelby County, Tennessee purchased 480 acres called the Comal Spring Tract from Maria Antonio de Veramendi Garza and husband Rafael C. Garza.¹³ The Comal County Deed records this transaction to Meriwether by Garza for the price of \$936.25.¹⁴ In addition 200 more acres were purchased from Gustavus Dresel, Trustee by Substitution of the German Emigration & R.R. Co. to William H. Meriwether.¹⁵ These transactions encompass the Comal Springs area.

Who was William Hunter Meriwether? He was from an old Virginia family, born March 29, 1793, in "Clover Field", Virginia to William Douglas and Elizabeth Lewis Meriwether. The family was in the milling business. He married Frances Poindexter in 1821 and later married Catharine "Kate" Whiting Meriwether in 1856 in Virginia. He was 63 or 65 at the time and she was 18. Even though they had the same last name, the relationship is unclear.¹⁶

Records show that he and his family had been in the milling business for generations. Before he came to Texas in 1846, records show that in 1829 he purchased the right to build a dam across the Rivanna River in Virginia and then in 1846, a year before he came to New Braunfels, he is credited with selling 150 acres, his interest in a dam and a toll bridge there.¹⁷ He would have previous experience and ample funds for future development in the milling industry before coming to Texas. The Industrial Revolution was just beginning worldwide and through his connections with mill owners, he possibly heard of this area and the springs.

In 1847 William H. Meriwether built a mill race with slave labor in order to have water power to run his saw mill, grist mill and gin. He dammed the geyser springs, locally called Las

Fontanas, “The Fountains”, to create a mill race. Still extant, the narrow channel runs southeast from the current Landa Park spring-fed pool to an industrial area in which Meriwether built and operated a water-powered grist mill and saw mill. The current Landa Park spring fed pool is on the original course of the Comal River which was dammed off to divert a portion of the river into the mill race. The mill race was dug first, then the grist mill and later he added a flour mill, a saw mill and a cotton gin.¹⁸

The manipulation of the springs coincided with the rapid permanent development and industry in the growing city of New Braunfels. Abundant natural water resources and industrial improvements like Meriwether’s that channeled and increased water pressure contributed to industry success in the town that became an agricultural, production, and artisan center.¹⁹

According to Viktor Bracht who traveled extensively through Texas in 1848, “Mr. Meriwether, an intelligent and enterprising Virginian, has erected a saw mill and a corn mill, and intends to build a flour mill as soon as the needs of the people demand it”. “He also pointed out to us the advantages and natural beauties of this matchless river”. “The Comal has its source a few hundred paces from Mr. Meriwether’s house. There are four main springs and many smaller ones; they gush forth bodily at the foot of the mountains. In fact, the water wells out of the rock at different levels within an area of several hundred paces, and each branch forms a strong, swift, mountain brook. They present the strange phenomenon of waters meeting from the east, west, north and south. As we stood there enjoying the romantic scenery, one of our companions, a Virginian, called out, ‘There is nothing in the Old Dominion (as Virginia is generally called) to compare with this!’ Formerly he had considered Virginia unsurpassed in fertility of soil, beautiful landscapes and water power, but now he was thoroughly convinced that Texas excelled in all of these.”²⁰

The Comal County Census of 1850, lists William Meriwether, age 56, mill owner, native of Virginia. Living with Meriwether were James Calhoun, age 31, overseer; Eliza Calhoun, age 28; William H Calhoun, age 5; John Calhoun, age 3; Georgiana Calhoun, age 1. Mr. Calhoun was thought to be the foreman of the mills.²¹

The 1850 Federal Census Slave Schedules Results lists under Wm. H. Meriwether 30 slaves ranging from age 1 to age 65, 16 of whom were males.²² On November 21, 1846,

William H. Meriwether owned and shipped as a departure, four slaves aboard the ship Palmetto from New Orleans, Louisiana to Galveston, Texas. The slaves were Jacob, male, black, born abt 1795; Mathilda, female, yellow, born abt 1798; Peter, male, black, born abt 1795; and Nancy, female, black, born abt 1788.²³ Very few additional records are available concerning the slaves.

The Comal Springs begin above the current Landa Estates, flow through the lake area and originally made a turn going through the current spring-fed pool. After leaving the spring-fed pool, the original river wound down to the Elizabeth St. Bridge, going through the current Schlitterbahn Water Park property and finally dumping into the Comal Creek (now called the Comal River). The canal was dug from the spring-fed pool end of the current lake and parallels Landa Park Drive where it goes under the bridge into the mill pond and out over the falls finally falling into the Comal River (Creek). The mill race not only provided water for the mills but also formed the small Landa Lake.²⁴ See Attachment # 3 and # 4.

How did these men dig the canal? The majority of Germans were against slave labor but Meriwether was an American and he brought his slaves with him to Texas. Having experience in other states he must have had them use some sort of an implement to dig. The “buck scraper” was a crude wooden tool pulled by mules, a common implement at the time. It was the forerunner of the fresno, called that because it was invented in Fresno, California. Local old-timers said that a fresno-like tool was used by the slaves to dig the canal.²⁵ Or perhaps, since Meriwether was an inventor, as proven by the fact that he took out patents on fence wire and other things, he developed something else to remove dirt.²⁶ Considering the length and size of the canal, it can be assumed that it wasn’t dug by hands alone.

Much controversy has existed as to where 30 slaves lived. According to Oscar Haas chronology of historical facts in September 1847, “Meriwether purchased the John Thompson 2876 ½ acres of land beginning at Nacogdoches Street and running along the west bank of the Guadalupe. Meriwether’s slaves worked the land as irrigated plantation for which water was pumped by means of water wheels. Huts of brick and loam for the slaves were along Nacogdoches Street from the Guadalupe to Seguin Street”.²⁷

On the entire Meriwether property, the only known domestic structure that remains is the small home, the Meriwether Mill House, at 133 Landa Street, across from the mill pond.

According to the Institute of Texan Cultures, San Antonio, Texas, the house was built between 1850 and 1860. In 1979 the New Braunfels Conservation Society issued a certificate that the date was firmly established and a certificate was issued verifying the date. See Attachment # 5. The house itself is constructed of hand-hewn cedar beams and fachwerk walls made of rough, hand-made adobe brick. See Attachments # 6 and # 7. The cedar beams are held together by wooden pegs and the wood bead board is nailed with square nails. It was a four room house with out-buildings according to owner, Joy Alexander. Laris Priesmeyer and Joy Alexander purchased the Meriwether Mill House on February 6, 1976 and restored the structure.²⁸ On May 8, 2006, the City of New Braunfels approved an ordinance granting “Historic Designation of the Structure located at 133 Landa Street, known as the Meriwether Mill House” as a HISTORIC LANDMARK for the city.²⁹

In 1859 William and Catharine Meriwether left New Braunfels. He sold his holdings in the Comal Springs Tract to Joseph Landa. Harry Landa, Joseph’s son, wrote that Meriwether was a very old man 65, with a very young wife 22 and as he wished to comply with the desire of his wife, she wanted to return to their home in Tennessee and to her Mint Juleps.³⁰ They left New Braunfels and two years later, William Hunter Meriwether died in Shelby, Tennessee.³¹

Joseph Landa’s purchase of Meriwether’s land included the existing businesses and water rights for \$14,000. Landa and his son, Harry, expanded the milling operation to include a rock mill, cottonseed oil complex, ice plant, and hydro-electric plant.³² The Landa Industries continued to operate until the Landa family began to liquidate their assets in the mid-1920s. At the height of Landa Industries, the complex consisted of two power plants, flour mill, corn sheller, cattle pens, cotton oil company, seed storage, steam power plant, two railroad terminal tracks and ice plant.³³ See Attachment # 8 and # 9. In 1936, Landa Park was purchased by the City of New Braunfels for recreation.³⁴ The old Landa Industry buildings are currently used for Wurstfest, Circle Arts Theater, Landa Recreation Center and by the New Braunfels Parks and Recreation Department.

In 1926 the LCRA (Lower Colorado River Authority) Comal Power Plant opened along the canal opposite the Landa Industries. It operated providing electric power for New Braunfels until closing in 1973. Thus the canal has provided hydro and hydroelectric power for the early

mill operations as well as electrical power generating plants, Landa Power Plant in 1891 and Comal Power Plant in 1926.³⁵ See Attachment # 10.

SIGNIFICANCE

The significance of William Hunter Meriwether's slave dug canal cannot be underestimated, as it changed the scene in New Braunfels, opening up the area for industry and eventually to one of the most successful recreation areas in Texas. Those slaves about whom we have so little information made a significant contribution to the town. Digging a canal of the magnitude of the mill race and then operating the mills, required a large labor force.

The German settlers were mainly farmers who needed mills to process their grain and cotton. Meriwether provided the ingenuity and expertise to accomplish channeling the gushing springs into usable water pressure to operate the mills. See Attachment # 11.

The Landa family utilized the mill race and mill pond formed by Meriwether, to develop the Landa Industries that were very successful well into 20th century New Braunfels. In the 1920's the LCRA utilized the canal for a hydro-electric power plant until the 1970's. The LCRA building which has a NRHP designation, has been restored and now is the Landmark Apartments.

After changing owners and finally being bought by the City of New Braunfels, much of Meriwether's original property (approximately 1/2 of his original property) including the mill race and mill pond has become the beautiful Landa Park. The Meriwether Mill House at 133 Landa St. continues to be preserved by current owner, Joy Alexander, and is leased for business use.

It is hard to imagine New Braunfels without the influence of milling pioneers such as William H. Meriwether and the slave labor. He probably would not even be able to dream of what his enterprises would become.

¹ Gregory, Rosemarie Leissner and Goff, Myra Lee Adams: *New Braunfels, Comal County, Texas*, Nuhn, editor, 1993, p. 12.

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- ² Haas, Oscar; *History of New Braunfels and Comal County, Texas*, 1968, p. 178.
- ³ Handbook of Texas Online www.tsha.utexas.edu. Keyword New Braunfels, Texas.
- ⁴ Gregory, p. 11.
- ⁵ Haas, p. 178.
- ⁶ Gregory, p. 12.
- ⁷ Haas, p. 15-16.
- ⁸ McGraw, A. Joachim, Clark, John W., Robbins, Elizabeth, editors; *A Texas Legacy The Old San Antonio Road and The Caminos Reales – A tricentennial History, 1691-1991*, Texas Department of Transportation, January 1998, P. 78, 91.
- ⁹ Comal County Deed Records; Special Grant, dated Nov 10, 1831, filed for record April 30, 1855, Volume D, p. 350.
- ¹⁰ Handbook of Texas Online www.tsha.utexas.edu. Keyword: Veramendi, Juan Martin De.
- ¹¹ Gregory, p. 21.
- ¹² Roemer, Ferdinand; *Roemer's Texas*, 1935, p. 92-93.
- ¹³ Haas, p. 178.
- ¹⁴ Comal County Deed Records; Vol. A, page 20-21, Dated June 14, 1847.
- ¹⁵ Comal County Deed Records; Vol. A, Pages 182-183, Dated April 11, 1848.
- ¹⁶ Anderson, Sarah; *Lewis, Meriwethers and Their Kin*. Baltimore, MD, USA-Geneological Publishing Co, 1995 p. 153. Accessed through www.ancestry.com 8/2011.
- ¹⁷ *Charlottesville Woolen Mills Chronology*, www.woolenmills.org Accessed 8/2011.
- ¹⁸ Gregory, p. 146.
- ¹⁹ Handbook of Texas Online www.tsha.utexas.edu. Keyword: New Braunfels, Texas (from the intensive-Level Historic Resources Survey Report-October 2003, Landa Park, New Braunfels, Comal County, Texas).
- ²⁰ Bracht, Viktor; *Texas in 1848*, translated by Charles Frank Schmidt, 1931, p. 97-98.
- ²¹ 1850 Comal County, New Braunfels, Texas, Census (online); Roll: M432_910; Page: 57B; Image: 113. Accessed through www.ancestry.com 8/2011.
- ²² 1850 U.S. Federal Census-Slave Schedules (online); US Bureau of Census, Seventh Census of the United States, 1850. Washington, D.C.; National Archives and Records Administration, 1850. M432, 1,009 rolls. Accessed through www.ancestry.com on 8/2011.

²³ Slave Manifests of Coastwise Vessels Filed at new Orleans, Louisiana, 1807-1860; National Archives and Records Administration (NARA); Washington, D.C.; Microfilm Serial: M1895; Microfilm Roll: 24. Accessed through www.ancestry.com 8/2011.

²⁴ *Herald-Zeitung*, November 29, 2006, p. 4, Around the Sophienburg and Archives by Myra Lee Adams Goff.

²⁵ Moore, Sam; Farm Collector online January 2002. Accessed through www.farmcollector.com/equipment/fresno-scraper.aspx 8/2011

²⁶ First Patented Wire Fence, Texas Historical Commission marker, www.tsha.utexas.edu Accessed through the THC Atlas 8/2011

²⁷ Haas, p. 178.

²⁸ Comal County Deed, Vol. 235, p. 690-692.

²⁹ City of New Braunfels Historic Designation of 133 Landa Street, known as the Meriwether Mill House. Approved by New Braunfels City Council Minutes May 8, 2006.

³⁰ Landa, Harry; *As I Remember*, 1945. P. 18.

³¹ *Neu Braunfeler Zeitung*, August 9, 1861, Meriwether death notice.

³² Comal County Deed Vol. G p. 133-137 dated May 15, 1860.

³³ Hardy, Heck & Moore; *Intensive-Level Historic Resources Survey Report- October 2003, Landa Park, New Braunfels, Comal County, Texas*. P. 7.

³⁴ Gregory, p. 147.

³⁵ Comal Power Plant, National Register of Historic Places, Accessed through the THC Atlas at www.thc.state.tx.us 8/2011.

Information compiled by Joy Alexander, Myra Lee Goff and Karen Boyd.

Attachments:

- #1 1831 Veramendi Survey map with Meriwether area circled
- #2 1881 Birds Eye View of New Braunfels, Comal County
- #3 1860 Comal Springs Survey map of Meriwether property when purchased by Joseph Landa
- #4 1860 Comal Springs Survey map as overlay of 2011 Google map by Al McGraw
- #5 Conservation Society Certificate

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- #6 Meriwether Mill House photo in 1995 by Joy Alexander
 - #7 Outside fachwerk wall of Meriwether Mill House photo in 2006 by Joy Alexander
 - #8 Landa Milling Complex in 1922 from *As I Remember*, by Harry Landa
 - #9 1930 view of milling area
 - #10 LCRA Power Plant (Landmark Apartments) photo in 2008 by Joy Alexander
 - #11 Photo collage of 2011 views of mill race canal by Karen Boyd