

Sam Houston Rode a Gray Horse

A Lesson in the Use of Primary Sources

History does not repeat itself, the historians repeat one another."

Anonymous

Twenty-five years ago, just about every history that mentioned Sam Houston's horse at the Battle of San Jacinto mistakenly described the horse as a "**white stallion.**"

The author, Marquis James, appears to have been the culprit who started this myth. James describes Sam Houston's horse as a "white stallion" on pages 246, 250, and 251, of his 1929 Pulitzer Prize-winning biography of Sam Houston, *The Raven*.

Page 246

"The Twin Sisters were primed and loaded with broken horseshoes. General Houston, on a great white stallion, rode up and down the front of the infantry."

Page 250

"On the big white stallion Sam Houston rode up and down the front."

Page 251

"General Houston spurred the white stallion to a gallop."

Writers and historians have mistakenly copied Marquis James' mistake numerous times since 1929. In the 2004 Disney movie, *The Alamo*, the historians and advisors who assisted in making the movie historically accurate blew this detail. They placed Dennis Quaid as Sam Houston upon a white stallion yet again!

It's very romantic and heroic, it is just not true! I hope you enjoy reading about this great bit of Texas trivia.

Sam Houston Rode a Gray Horse

by Kameron K. Searle

A Horse of a Different Color

Sam Houston was not riding a white stallion at San Jacinto. Houston was riding a gray stallion at San Jacinto and it was that gray stallion that was killed under Houston in the great battle for Texas Independence. This can be established beyond any reasonable doubt from the numerous writings and eyewitness accounts of participants in the battle of San Jacinto, including General Sam Houston himself.

Note that the number of horses ridden by Houston is sometimes debated. As the number of horses ridden by Houston in the battle becomes clear in several of these sources, they will also be included and discussed briefly. The source of each of the writings quoted herein is provided along with the date each source first appeared. My research began with a letter written by William Zuber in 1902.

William Physick Zuber

1902

Nacogdoches Archives

William Zuber in his 1902 letter to A. W. Morris writes the following to describe the horse Houston purchased from Isom Parmer:

"Before leaving home for Washington he [Isom Parmer] purchased a very large, fine-looking horse, for which he paid four hundred Mexican silver dollars, and rode him to Washington. Later, I often saw that horse. He was a large, handsome animal, but I think not very nimble. General Houston having been re-elected commander-in-chief of the army, left Washington for Gonzales on the 6th of March, but he was sorrily mounted and wanted a better horse, and proposed to purchase Isom Parmer's fine gray, offering to pay to him the price that he had paid for the horse--four hundred Mexican silver dollars. Parmer

prided very much in that horse and wished to keep him, to accommodate General Houston though, he accepted the offer, and his memory of this favor to Houston was always a pleasure to him. This was the horse that was killed under General Houston in the battle of San Jacinto."¹ [underlines added for emphasis]

William Zuber describes the horse for us in some detail. Zuber was very familiar with the horse. As a fifteen-year-old soldier in the Texas army, Zuber traveled with Houston across Texas in the San Jacinto campaign and he specifically writes, "Later, I often saw that horse." Zuber describes Houston's horse "as a very large, fine-looking horse." Zuber continues with, "He was a large, handsome animal.." From this quote, we find that the horse was male. Zuber finishes his description with, "...General Houston...proposed to purchase Isom Parmer's fine gray,..." Here Zuber provides the color of the animal which is stated as gray.

Isom Parmer was the Sergeant-at-Arms of the Convention at Washington [Washington-on-the-Brazos] where Houston had signed the Texas Declaration of Independence from Mexico a few days before. Houston left Washington for Gonzales on March 6, 1836, the same day he purchased the horse from Isom Parmer. Of note, the Alamo fell on the morning of March 6, 1836. The last letter from Travis had been read to the Convention on March 6, 1836. However, by the time the letter was read, Travis and all the defenders of the Alamo were already dead.

The above quote from W. P. Zuber's 1902 letter to A. W. Morris was taken from the Robert Bruce Blake Research Collection, Compiled in the Eugene C. Barker Texas History Center Archives Collection, 1958-1959, Volume LX, pages 58-57. The East Texas Research Center located at Stephen F. Austin State University in Nacogdoches, Texas, has the Zuber letter Blake copied in its collection.

Below are the eyewitness accounts from several different primary sources that corroborate Zuber concerning the color of Houston's horse. These quotes put to rest the myth that Houston's horse was white. As stated before, the evidence would suggest that Marquis James' Pulitzer Prize-winning book *The Raven* is the history that started the myth of the white horse. The first primary source is from Sam Houston himself.

¹ At the time Zuber wrote this letter to Alfred William Morris, Morris was serving as a Representative in the 27th Texas State Legislature.

Sam Houston

April 3, 1836

From The Papers of the Texas Revolution 1835-1836, Jenkins, Presidial Press,
Austin, 1973,

p.311

[2557]

[HOUSTON ORDER]

Head Quarters, Camp on Brazos

3rd April, 1836

Orders

Mr. J. Groce will take charge of a Grey Stallion now on the opposite side of the river, and hold him subject to the orders of the Commr in Chief of the Army - by order.

Sam Houston

Commr. In Chief

Geo. W. Hockley

***Inspr. Genl.* [underlines added for emphasis]**

According to Zuber, Houston purchased "Isom Parmers fine gray" on March 6, 1836, and then rode to Gonzales. After hearing of the fall of the Alamo, Houston began his tactical retreat. We now find Houston on the west bank of the Brazos River across from Groce's Plantation. The gray horse is still with Houston. We find out from Houston that the horse is a stallion. Houston still has the gray horse with him at this point in the retreat. He sent the horse over to Groce's Plantation on the

east side of the Brazos River and placed the horse in the care of Jared Groce, the owner of Groce's Plantation. Houston still has the gray horse on April 3, 1836, almost a month after he left the Convention at Washington and 18 days before the battle of San Jacinto.

James Monroe Hill

(Written by his own hand.)

Austin, Texas, October 19, 1897

From *Heroes Of Texas*, James Monroe Hill, Battle of San Jacinto,

Union National Bank, Houston, 1935, p.5 & p.6

Recollections of James Monroe Hill

"At about 3:30 o'clock in the afternoon of the 21st the order was given to fall in line, we were going to fight now. The order was hardly given sooner than obeyed, for we kept ready all the time. We had nothing else to do - and we did that with a will. Each company took its place in the line and we marched through the north end of the island of timber. Houston passed by me riding a gray dapple horse, his big saber swinging by the buckskin strings to his belt, and I thought him the finest looking man I had ever seen - or ever yet have seen. I thought it probable that either, he or his horse would be shot. A noted mark for the enemy. I had all confidence in his bravery." [underlines added for emphasis]

James Monroe Hill was in Burleson's regiment.² James Monroe Hill places Houston on the gray horse as the battle of San Jacinto is about to begin. He describes how fine he thought Houston looked and writes that he thought Houston or his horse would be shot, "[a] noted mark for the enemy."

Both Houston and his horse would be shot. Houston would ride in front of the Texas infantry up to the Mexican center. The Texas cavalry would flank the Mexican left and Sherman and his men would flank the Mexican right. No one can

² Company H of Col. Edward Burleson's First Regiment, Texas Volunteers.

question Houston's bravery as he rode in front of the Texas infantry toward the Mexican center, the so-called "breastworks."

The infantry being on foot and Houston being on horseback, Houston and his horse became the largest and tallest single target in the middle of the field of battle for the Mexicans to shoot at. And shoot at him they did from the best-fortified position on the entire field of battle. Can anyone really doubt Houston's bravery given the fact that he was effectively drawing much of the Mexican fire upon himself and away from the Texas infantry?

James Monroe Hill further wrote:

"As I passed down the flat lands I saw General Houston on a different horse. I afterward heard that it was the third one, two having been killed under him. I did not know then that he himself was wounded." [underlines added for emphasis]

At this point, the gray stallion Isom Parmer sold to General Sam Houston on March 6, 1836, at the Convention at Washington was dead having been killed during the initial attack against the Mexican center. As will be shown in other accounts, Houston rode three different horses during the battle.

In James Monroe Hill's October 20, 1895 letter in the "McArdle Notebooks - The Battle of San Jacinto" in the Texas State Library and Archives, Hill wrote, "Gen Houston's horse that he was on going into battle was a dapple gray." See this page below.

James Monroe Hill

James M. Hill to McArdle

October 20, 1895

he took from the Mexican courier
near Harrisburg, Gen Houston's horse
that he was on going into battle
was a dapple gray.
4. The twin sisters, waist on,
wheels, dark collar, & the Cannons
Pulled them with leather straps
on going into battle
5. The ^{Spanish} uniforms dark tanned with red
with very high bell crowned
hats, or caps, as you might call
them, the Infantry had the old
fashioned British flint lock
muskets, had them nearly
bright, & in good order, & the
Cavalry had mostly straight
sabres, & the Escopet & Lance, some
had large horse pistols, flint
lock,
6. I do not ^{offhand} where could be found an
Escopet, a British musket,

3

<https://www.tsl.texas.gov/mcardle/sanjac/sanjac158-02.html>

Top of page, "...he took from the Mexican courier near Harrisburg. Gen. Houston's horse that he was on going into the battle was a dapple gray."

³ James M. Hill to Henry Arthur McArdle, October 20, 1895, The Battle of San Jacinto Notebook, The McArdle Notebooks, Archives and Information Services Division, Texas State Library and Archives Commission, Austin, Texas. Henry Arthur McArdle painted two paintings depicting *The Battle of San Jacinto* (1895 painting in Texas Senate Chamber measures 8 feet by 14 feet and 1901 painting discovered in 2009 measures 5 feet by 7 feet).

Moses Austin Bryan

July 2, 1859

From *The Battle of San Jacinto - April 21, 1836*

Union National Bank, Houston, 1936, p.32

This account of the battle was written by Moses Austin Bryan in a letter to General Sidney Sherman in 1859.

"Soon after the General ordered Capt. Turner's men back to the Mexican camp, and was about to return himself, being shot through the ankle, when a Mexican officer's horse, upon which he had been mounted after losing the gray upon which he went into battle, fell with the General and expired in a few minutes. Some men standing by catching the General as he fell - I, with others, looked at the horse and found he was shot through with a ball. The General mounted again and left for the Mexican camp, which was the last I saw of him that evening." ⁴ [underlines added for emphasis]

Moses Austin Bryan was a nephew of Stephen F. Austin. In this 1859 letter to Sidney Sherman, he provides the order and number of horses ridden by Houston in the battle and the source for the second horse ridden by Houston in the battle.

Moses Austin Bryan's account says that Houston first lost "the gray upon which he went into battle." Here as in the other accounts that describe the color of Houston's horse, we find the color given as gray once again for the first horse, the horse upon which Houston rode into the battle.

After the gray fell, we know from several accounts that Houston acquired a second horse. Now this presented a problem for this researcher at first. If Houston was mounted on a horse in front of the infantry, i.e. soldiers on foot, and the Texas cavalry was way off to Houston's right, how would Houston obtain the second horse in the middle of the battle? There is no account of a mounted Texas officer or cavalryman being killed or wounded in the vicinity of Houston at this point in

⁴ Also see *Defence of Gen. Sidney Sherman Against the Charges Made by Gen. Sam Houston in His Speech Delivered in the United States Senate, February 28th 1859*, Moses Austin Bryan to Gen. S. Sherman, (Galveston: "News" Book and Jobs Office, 1859),reprinted (Houston: Smallwood, Dealy & Baker, 1885), p. 30.

the battle. Then Bryan gives us the obvious answer. Houston mounted "a Mexican officer's horse." No color is given for the Mexican officer's horse which Houston rode during the battle, but at least Bryan provides the source for the second horse. We know the second horse Houston rode was also wounded and killed from this account, "...he was shot through with a ball." The account of James W. Winters, later in this paper, describes a Mexican officer falling from his horse after being shot and gives the number of horses ridden by Houston in the battle.

Bryan's account says that Houston mounted a third horse and rode back to the Mexican camp. But by this late point in the battle, riderless horses would have been much more plentiful. No source is given for the third horse but Dr. N. D. Labadie provides the color of the third horse. See his account below.

S.F. Sparks

March 16, 1895

These reminiscences were written by Mr. Sparks in the form of a letter to Reverend J. L. Walker, of Bruceville, Texas, and dated March 16, 1895. From *Heroes Of Texas*, "S. F. Sparks, His Recollections," Union National Bank, Houston, 1933, p. 11.

Recollections of S. F. Sparks

"While I was standing there leaning on Bailey, there was a stir among the prisoners. They were jumping to their feet, and clapping their hands, and saying, "Santa Anna." I looked and saw two of our men on horseback and a Mexican in front pointing his finger, and saying "Houston." He was carried to where Houston lay under a tree, suffering from his wound. I told Bailey that that was Santa Anna, and to carry me to where Houston was. He did so. When we got there, Zavala was there, and Santa Anna was introduced to Houston. About the first question he asked was, whether General Houston rode in front of his men on a dapple gray horse, with drawn sword. Houston answered he rode such a horse, and was in front..."⁵ [underlines added for emphasis]

⁵ Also see *The Quarterly of the Texas State Historical Association*, "Recollections of S. F. Sparks," Volume 12, No. 1 (July, 1908), p. 72.

Here S. F. Sparks claims he overheard Santa Anna himself specifically ask Houston if he "rode in front of his men on a dapple gray horse with drawn sword." If Sparks' story is accurate, we must conclude that Santa Anna did survey the battlefield for some time in the battle before he fled. Sparks maintains in his account that Santa Anna specifically referred to a dapple gray horse.⁶

James Gillaspie

1859

From The San Jacinto Campaign of 1836 - As Given in the Depositions in the

Case of John Forbes vs. Nicholas D. Labadie,

No. 2509, In the District Court of Nacogdoches County, Texas,

Volume I, pages 84, 88 and 97 to 98

Compiled by R. B. Blake,

Texas State Library Archives Division

From the Deposition of Witness James Gillaspie

Direct Interrogatories by Plaintiff

No. 2.--Were you engaged in the service of the country and in the army during the campaign of the year 1836 in the then Republic of Texas? If yea, what post or position did you fill in the army? If you were in command, state in what command, and to what Regiment you belonged?

A.--I was. I was a Captain in the Texas Army and belonged to the Second Regiment.

⁶ Sparks fought in the First Company of Col. Sidney Sherman's Second Regiment, Texas Volunteers.

No. 12. Did you see Gen. Houston in the Battle of San Jacinto? If yea, state if you know what kind of horse or poney he rode, if any or either?

A. I saw Gen Houston in the Battle of San Jacinto. He was riding a gray horse.

Cross Interrogatories

X No. 10.-If in your answer to the 12th Direct Interrogatory by plaintiff, you state the kind of horse or poney Sam Houston rode in the said Battle of San Jacinto, tell how you came to recollect so particularly the description of said horse or poney after a lapse of twenty-three years? May you not be mistaken at this late period as to the description of said horse or kind of horse he was?

A. After the Second Regiment was formed for battle, Gen. Houston passed down in front of the regiment and spoke to every captain belonging to it. He passed within ten feet of where I was standing. I am not mistaken in the kind of horse that he rode. I afterwards saw the horse after he was wounded. [underlines added for emphasis]

Here we have James Gillaspie testifying in a deposition under oath on direct and cross-examination that Houston rode a gray horse at San Jacinto.

Sam Houston

1859

From *The Texas Almanac 1857 - 1873*, Compiled by James M. Day,

Texian Press, Waco, 1967, p. 283

From Sam Houston's Speech to the United States Senate on February 28, 1859

Houston Speaking About Himself in the First and Third Person:

"I will, in concluding this point, read the testimony of General Rusk, to show that the Commander-in-Chief remained on the field, and continued in pursuit of the enemy until his horse, pierced with five balls, fell under him." [underline added for emphasis]

In this quote from his speech to the United States Senate, Houston indicates that the first horse was hit "with five [musket] balls."

James Washington Winters

June 7, 1901

From *Heroes Of Texas*, James Washington Winters, History of the Battle of San Jacinto,

Union National Bank, Houston, 1931, p. 3

[Extract from Quarterly Texas State Historical Association]

An account of the Battle of San Jacinto

James Washington Winters

"Their breastworks were composed of baggage, saddle bags, and brush, all four or five feet high. There was a gap eight or ten feet wide through which they fired the cannon. I saw Houston in the midst of the enemy's tents near the first regiment to the right. A Mexican officer tried to rally his men, but was soon dispatched by a rifle ball and fell from his horse. Our regiment passed beyond the Mexican's breastworks before we knew it, while our other two regiments came up in front of them, so then we did them up in short order. I never heard any halt ordered. We never halted. The battle was won in fifteen or eighteen minutes. The Mexican cavalry broke in disorder, while ours was hotly pursuing them. Houston had two horses killed from under him, and was on his third one before we passed the Mexican's works. We ran and fought fully two miles."⁷

[underline added for emphasis]

J. W. Winters fought in Sherman's regiment (the left wing of the Texas attack) under Captain, William Ware.⁸

⁷ Also see *The Quarterly of the Texas State Historical Association*, "An Account of the Battle of San Jacinto. James Washington Winters.," Vol. 6, No. 2 (October, 1902), p. 142.

⁸ Ibid.

N. D. Labadie

1858

From *The Texas Almanac 1857 - 1873*, Compiled by James M. Day,

Texian Press, Waco, 1967

San Jacinto Campaign.

By N. D. Labadie

"Having reached the spot where I left my wounded comrade, I observed Gen. Houston on a bay pony, with his leg over the pommel of the saddle. "Doctor," said he, "I am glad to see you; are you hurt?" "Not at all," said I. "Well," he rejoined, "I have had two horses shot under me, and have received a ball in my ankle, but I am not badly hurt." [underlines added for emphasis]

Here Dr. Labadie provides the color of the third horse Houston rode at the Battle of San Jacinto. Labadie says Houston was "on a bay pony." A bay horse is reddish brown. N. D. Labadie was a doctor. He fought with the Second Regiment under Sherman and treated the wounded following the battle.

Benjamin McCulloch

1859

From *The Texas Almanac 1857 - 1873*, Compiled by James M. Day,

Texian Press, Waco, 1967, p. 164

From Sam Houston's Speech to the United States Senate on February 28, 1859

General Ben McCulloch's Recollections of the Battle of San Jacinto,

February 28, 1858

"At the battle of San Jacinto, I was in command of one piece of artillery. The fire from it opened upon the enemy about two hundred yards distant. We advanced after each discharge, keeping in advance of the infantry, until we were within less than one hundred yards of their breastwork, at which time I had aimed the gun, but was delayed in firing for a moment by Gen. Houston, who passed across some thirty yards in front of the gun, and was at that time nearly that distance in advance of every man in that part of the field. After this, I saw him advancing upon the enemy, at least one third of the distance between the two armies, in front of Colonel Burleson's regiment, when it was not more than seventy or eighty yards from the enemy's breastworks. About this time the enemy gave way, and the route became general." ⁹ [underlines added for emphasis]

Benjamin McCulloch's recollections were read by Houston in his February 28, 1859 speech to the United States Senate regarding the Battle of San Jacinto. To a point in the battle, the artillery was moving and firing out in front of the infantry. We see from McCulloch, the commander of one of the Twin Sisters, that Houston was not only out in front of the infantry at this point in the battle but that he was also in front of the artillery. Every man in the center of the field had a very good view of Houston and his horse. The explosion of two six-pounder canons going off a mere 30 yards almost directly behind Houston must have been deafening, to say the least.

This quote is also interesting and unusual in that it gives some description by a commander of one of the Twin Sisters as to how the Twin Sisters were deployed during the Battle of San Jacinto.

⁹ Also see Stephen L. Moore, *Eighteen Minutes: The Battle of San Jacinto and the Texas Independence Campaign* (Dallas: Republic of Texas Press, 2004) p. 334.

Conclusion

It bears repeating. No one can question Houston's bravery as he rode in front of the Texas infantry and artillery toward the Mexican center. With the infantry and artillery being on foot and Houston being on horseback, Houston and his horse became the largest single target in the center of the field of battle for the Mexican army to shoot at. And shoot at him they did from the best-fortified position on the entire field of battle, their breastworks. On his "very large, fine-looking" gray horse, Houston rode on anyway. Houston himself was shot through the left ankle. After his horse was shot five times and killed beneath him, he got on another one, a Mexican officer's horse. After the second horse was shot and killed beneath him, he got on a third, a bay. General Houston and the Texas army went on to win the independence of Texas that day, April 21, 1836.

I would appreciate being notified of any corrections and inaccuracies in this paper. If you have another primary source regarding Houston's horses in the battle, let me know and I will include them in future copies of this paper. Thank you.

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"A history whose author draws conclusions from other than primary sources or secondary sources actually based on primary sources, is by definition fiction and not history at all."

Kameron K. Searle

A Horse of Many Owners

- In William Physick Zuber's 1902 letter to State Representative A. W. Morris, Zuber wrote that Isom Parmer sold Houston the gray stallion at Washington-on-the-Brazos when they were both present at the Convention (March 1-17, 1836). See above. Zuber was the last survivor of the San Jacinto campaign and was married to Isom Parmer's niece. Isom Parmer was the Sergeant at Arms at the Convention at Washington. Houston made the motion for the adoption of the Texas Declaration of Independence on March 2, 1836 and signed the document. Houston was made Commander-in-Chief of both the regular army and the militia at the Convention. Houston left the Convention for Gonzales on March 6, 1836.
- Though a claim that Alfonso Steele sold Houston the gray stallion has been made by the Steele family for many years and repeated as gospel by others, no mention was made of it in the *Biography of Private Alfonso Steele (Deceased) Last Survivor of the Battle of San Jacinto*. I have not been able to locate a single primary source for the claim. If you have a primary source for the Steele claim, I'd love to see it. Alfonso Steele was the last surviving combatant of the Battle of San Jacinto.
- In *Eighteen Minutes*, we find, "According to Private Jesse Walling of the Nacogdoches Volunteers, Houston had exchanged his own pony for the gray stallion, which belonged to Private Dexter Watson of Captain Kimbro's San Augustine company. "Sam exchanged horses to get one of a different color, and mounted Dexter Watson's fine gray, and Watson rode the bay pony," wrote Walling. The quote is from the 1859 book *Defence of Gen. Sidney Sherman Against the Charges Made by Gen. Sam Houston in His Speech Delivered in the United States Senate, Feb. 28, 1859*. If we look at Walling's account of the events occurring on April 20 and 21 of 1836, we should be slow to accept his assertion that Houston exchanged a bay horse for a gray. We know from Houston's own order of April 3, 1836 (see above) that Houston already had the gray stallion with him at Groce's plantation more than two weeks before the battle.

“Saracen”

A Source, As Source, My Kingdom for a Source!

We have all heard it and we have all repeated it to others ourselves, “Saracen was the name of the horse Sam Houston rode in the Battle of San Jacinto.” However, in two decades, I have been unable to locate a single primary source for the name of Sam Houston’s horse. We know of all the *secondary sources* that claim that the horse Houston was riding at San Jacinto was named Saracen. But these secondary sources never cite a primary source. Does anyone have a primary source for this? I will give you credit as the discoverer if you can locate a true primary source for the name.