

LYNCHBURG FERRY, TOWN SITE, AND CEMETERY

Lynchburg and the Lynchburg ferry landing are reached by exiting on to the Crosby –Lynchburg Road off Interstate 10, about 15 miles east of Houston. The area is known to the local citizens as Four Corners. Following the Crosby-Lynchburg road to the south southwest, Burnet Bay is to the east and shortly thereafter is the Lynchburg Cemetery, the town site of Lynchburg, and the northern Lynchburg Ferry Landing. The town is bordered on the west by the San Jacinto River and on the south by the confluence of the San Jacinto River and Buffalo Bayou.

The early 1820's marked the beginning of the settlement of Texas by the white man. Before this, few had ventured to this land and fewer had visions of settling here. The Spanish and French explorers envisioned gold and silver. Jean Lafitte, the pirate, was seeking safe harbor. In 1804 there were thirteen applicants accepted for settlement in Texas by the Spanish government, but only one settled and he in a different place than prescribed by the government. Among the first colonists to arrive in Texas, according to various sources, was Nathaniel Lynch, from Missouri."

Lynch and his wife, Frances "Fanny", two sons, Benjamin Franklin, and William, and one daughter Elizabeth arrived in Texas in the summer of 1822. Another son John L. Lynch was born to the family in 1823. The Lynch's arrival predates Austin's permission from the Mexican government to settle colonists in 1824. As such Lynch was entitled to and received a grant from the Mexican government for a league of land, 4428 acres. Upon his arrival in Texas, Lynch proceeded to clear a 150 acre homestead, build a home and a store, out of logs on the east side of Crystal Bay. Noting that the waters in this area were safe and only affected by the tides, Lynch began what would become a successful a ferry service. His first ferry was reportedly a raft which "only carried one wagon or buggy at a time because of the danger of spooked horses". The 1826 census listed Nathaniel Lynch as a farmer and stock raiser.

Several complaints from ferry riders compelled Lynch to move his homestead and ferry upstream to mouth of St. Mary's Bay (now Burnet Bay), along the San Jacinto River, in 1829. On February 1, 1830 the Ayuntamiento, the administrative group of duly elected officials for the free and independent state of Coahuila and Texas met at San Felipe. The Ayuntamiento ordered that Nathaniel Lynch be authorized and empowered to keep a public ferry to cross the San Jacinto River at Buffalo Bayou from January 1, 1830 and continue for one year thereafter. Rates for the use of the ferry were previously set by the Ayuntamiento. By 1834, Lynch had platted the town of Lynchburg, moved the ferry landing to the present site, which was on the opposite shore of the his newly platted town of San Jacinto. Lynchburg was a 100-acre town site, being 450 varas wide by 1254 varas and fronting on the San Jacinto River. Although the town had an established ferry, grocery, dry goods store, and an inn for travelers according to Colonel William Fairfax Gray of Virginia, who visited Lynchburg, he wrote "it would never be a town".

The Lynchburg ferry played an important role during the Texas revolution against Mexico in 1836. Many non-combatants fled Texas toward Louisiana to escape the Mexican army pursuing General Sam Houston. It took more than three days for most of the fleeing people, estimated at about 5000, to be ferried across the San Jacinto River by Lynch's ferry. After the defeat of the Mexican army at the battle of San Jacinto, many of the same people were ferried back across the

San Jacinto River to reclaim their land. Lynch made his will and signed it on February 12, 1837. Two days later, February 14, 1837, Nathaniel Lynch died, and was buried in the Lynchburg Cemetery.

A month later, the Lynchburg Ferry was noted by the Commissioners Court as one of four ferries operating in the area. Ferry fees were set at 6 ¼ cents per person or live animal and 25 cents a wheel for light carriages or wagons. Loaded wagons were charged 37 ½ cents per wheel. The fractions of cents originated during the reign of Mexico, when a Mexican *Real* was valued at 12 ½ cents. The ferry passed into the hands of Lynch's son Benjamin, who was instructed by the probate papers to set up the ferry at the "Water Point." This location was a little closer to Buffalo Bayou than the previous one. Benjamin Lynch died by June 13, 1842. Mrs. Lynch had re-married to a Mr. Martin Hardin. The ferry and ferry license changed hands several times over the next four decades, until in 1888 when Harris County took control of the landings and the ferry.

The Lynchburg Ferry ranks among the oldest continually running ferries in the United States of America. From 1888 to 1890, Harris County charged tolls to cross the river on the Lynchburg Ferry. The rates were ten cents for foot passengers, fifty cents for one horse vehicles, one dollar for two horse conveyances, and one dollar and twenty-five cents for a four-horse vehicle. Since August 14, 1890, no tolls have been charged on any Texas ferry including the Lynchburg Ferry. Today, it is the only County-operated ferry in the State. Up until 1920, the Lynchburg ferry was operated by cable/pull method. A horse with a pulley would pull the boat across the river. Harris County put the first motor driven ferry boat in service at Lynchburg in 1920. The boat was diesel powered and named the *Chester H Bryan*. Another boat, the *Tex Dreyfus* was added in 1945, making the crossing at Lynchburg a two boat system.

At peak hours, the two boats would pass one another in mid-channel. These two boats, which carried about 150,000 autos per year, were retired in 1964 when the *Ross S. Sterling* and the *William P. Hobby* were put in operation. The *Sterling* and the *Hobby* ferry about 800,000 vehicles per year across the Houston Ship Channel, but the large ocean going vessels take right-of-way over the ferries.

It has been noted, by the ferry deck hands, that some enterprising employees of the companies on the south side of the channel, who were being delayed from boarding the ferry by long lines of cars at the rush hours, purchased an old car, which they parked on the San Jacinto side of the channel. When they arrived at the ferry during the rush hour, they would park their personal cars on the Lynchburg side, board the ferry on foot, and disembark on the San Jacinto side to find their old car waiting to take them to work, without the hassle of a traffic jam.

The ferries predate the town which was platted by Nathaniel Lynch between about 1831 and 1834 and was named Lynchburg in honor of himself. The town site encompassed about 100 acres and was about 3 times longer (east to west) than wide. When Nathaniel Lynch was still alive, M. T. Rodgers had purchased an interest in the old town site. After Lynch died, Rodgers sold that interest back to Martin Hardin, Frances Lynch's then husband, John J. Lynch, and Charles A Lawrence on April 21, 1846, for \$ 500.00.

However, on March 26, 1847, Martin Hardin, J. J. Lynch, and Charles A. Lawrence reconveyed the undivided interest back to the Estate of M. T. Rodgers. In 1850 there were approximately six families and four single men living in the city limits of Lynchburg. The families consisted of the Habermehl, Gerhart, Lewis, Lynch, Faulk, and Patching. The single men were three sailors named Dodge, Sweeney and Miers, and a shipwright named Robinson, from Pennsylvania. The Lynch family owned one slave and the Lewis family two. The balance of the Lynchburg community lived on farms outside of the old town city limits.

In 1855, the heirs of Nathaniel Lynch sold 847 acres of the Lynch tract, which contained Old Town Lynchburg and the ferry landings to Hamilton Washington. Washington was a slave owner with eight slaves, who had lived in Lynchburg area on the Brooks Farm since 1850. The sale excluded the one-acre cemetery where Nathaniel Lynch was buried.

The new town of Lynchburg was about twice the size of the old one, with lots and blocks of a different configuration. Streets were named after heroes of the Texas Revolution and notable persons of the day. Centre Street, of course, ran east to west through the center of town. Four blocks near the center of town were set aside for public use or buildings. Washington not only sold town lots and blocks; but in 1860 it is noted that he sold 100,000 barrels of shell, for five cents each, to P. B. George and P. F. Williams. The shells were left from Native Americans long since vanished and were *Rangia* clam shells, predominantly. The barrels of shell were sold to the City of Houston for street paving.

The 1860 United States Census alludes to growth in the Lynchburg area, indicating seventeen families residing there. During the War Between the States, Lynchburg played an important role for the Confederacy. The Confederate Army converted the local sawmill into a munitions factory, producing ball and cap weapons out of flintlocks. Post war Lynchburg was a thriving town with new shops, a mill, saloons, hotels and residences. Washington sold lots in Lynchburg up until his death in 1870, then living in Polk County, Texas. One of his best customers was A. P. Tompkins who purchased several of the Lynchburg lots, opened businesses, and supported visions of constructing a shipyard and turning basin in St. Mary's Bay. Following a fire during 1874, the owners immediately rebuilt.

Between September 17 and 21, 1875 a gigantic hurricane hit the Texas coast. It sunk ships and barges, destroyed homes, warehouses, and the Tompkins Hotel, in addition to killing eleven Lynchburg citizens. According to one survivor, the storm surge at Lynchburg during this hurricane was thirty feet. Believing the worst had past, R. V. Tompkins, brother of A. P., reopened the family hotel and warehouse business. However, in 1880 these improvements were also destroyed by an unusual storm. The great Galveston storm of 1900 also wiped out the town buildings of Lynchburg. R. V. Tompkins survived by riding a timber up the Old River. R. V then left his dreams and business to his sons.

1904 saw a slight resurgence for the town with the dredging of the Houston Ship Channel. Dredges docked at Lynchburg creating new business in the form of warehouses, ice houses, hotels, stores, and visiting tourists. The hurricane of August 1915 destroyed all of the structures in Lynchburg, not to mention, heavy damage to the ferries and ferry landings. The remaining Tompkins family members departed Lynchburg, never to return. The population fell below 75

persons, and it was not until 1950 that any kind of business started to return to the town. Slowly marine service companies and ship repairing facilities began to emerge. The Coastal Water Authority is now the largest industry in the immediate area. In any case, hundreds of thousands of people still pass the town site of Lynchburg every year, to ride the ferries to and from there to the old San Jacinto Town site.