



This depiction of the "Come and Take It" skirmish is one segment of a mural by artist Buck Winn located inside of the Gonzales Memorial Museum. Image provided by the Gonzales County Historical Commission.



CLARIFYING HISTORY

A Second Cannon at the Battle of Gonzales

By Pamela Murtha

*“I cannot, nor do I desire to deliver up the cannon...
We are weak and few in number, nevertheless we are
contending for what we believe to be just principles.”*

*— Joseph Clements, a Gonzales town official,
September 30, 1835*

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Hoy a las cinco de la mañana fui atacado en la
 habitacion de la casa por doce colonos Americanos
 mas q. menos, con una pieza mediana y un
 Dimecil, y tanto por la superioridad de las
 fuerzas contrarias como por las repetidas ordenes
 de V. S. he emprendido mi retirada para
 esa Ciudad en donde dare a V. S. un parte
 circunstanciado de todo lo ocurrido = No
 ha sido mas de gracia q. un soldado
 de la Com. permanente de Samaulipas de bala
 de Carabina = Dios y Libertad. Campo del
 Carrizal Octubre 2 de 1835 = al S. de la tarde
 = Fran. de Castañeda = Sr. Com. de Real
 Cos. de San Domingo Coahuila.
 La copia. P. de la tarde 9 de 1835.
 Francisco Castañeda

Lieutenant Francisco Castañeda wrote this brief summary of the attack by Texian colonists. On the afternoon of October 2, 1835, he reported the death of one of his soldiers from a "carbine bullet." Document from the Muse Collection, Benson Latin American Collection, The University of Texas at Austin. Image courtesy of Dr. Gregg Dimmick.

The Battle of Gonzales, better known as the “Come and Take It” confrontation, is credited as the event that launched the Texas Revolution. The refusal by DeWitt colonists to return a brass, six-pound caliber cannon to Mexican military authority culminated in a hastily organized act of armed resistance. The standoff between an army of approximately 160 Texian volunteers, led by John Henry Moore, and a contingent of 100 Mexican dragoons, commanded by Lieutenant Francisco Castañeda, occurred on October 2, 1835.

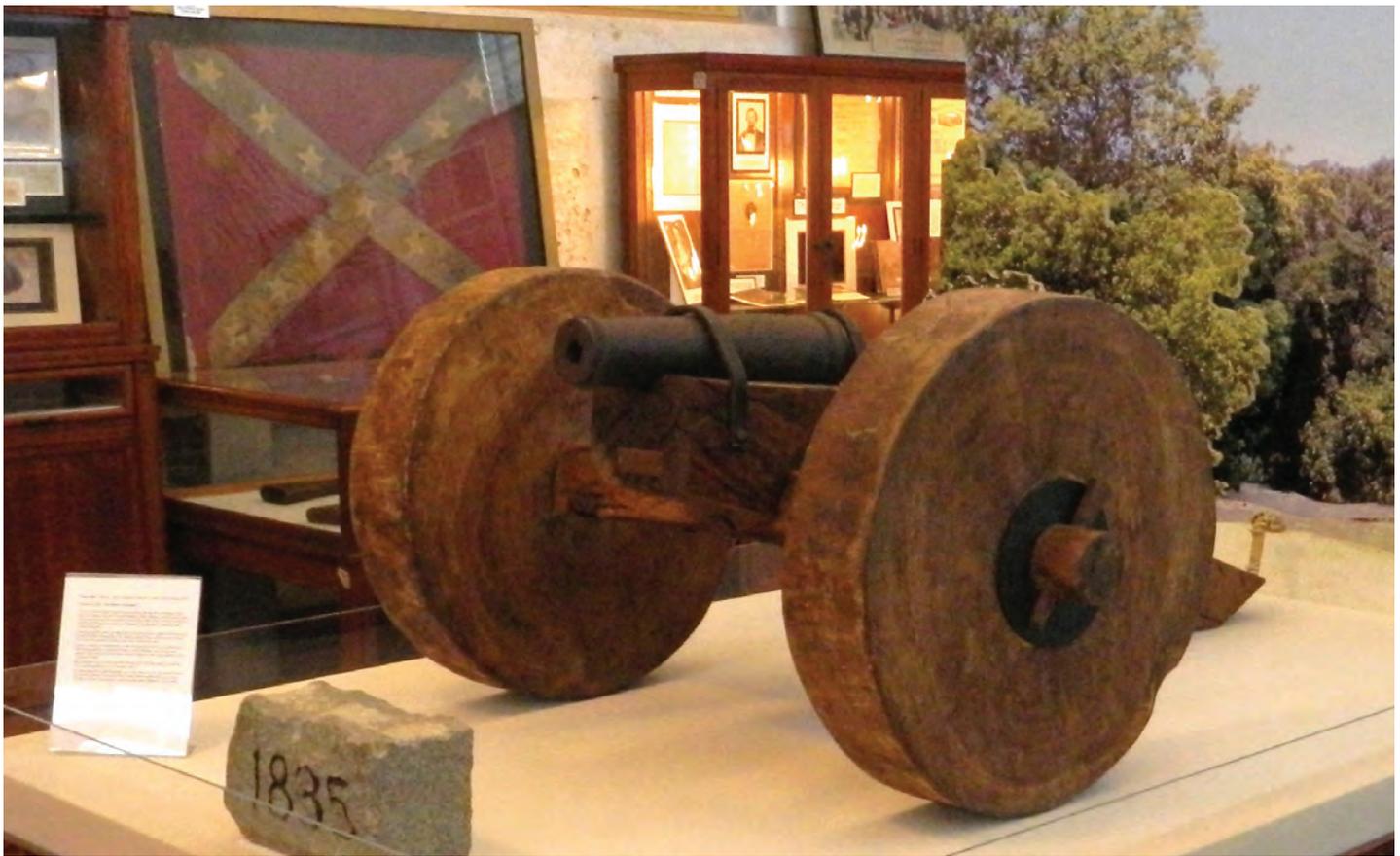
The engagement consisted of three brief exchanges involving field artillery and rifle fire that took place in a farm field outside of Gonzales (near present-day Cost). The first incident was a pre-dawn altercation between two Texian scouts who crossed paths with a few Mexican soldiers patrolling the area. At daybreak, a more brazen attack by the Texian cavalry on the Mexican Army’s position resulted in the lone fatality of the battle—a dragoon wounded by a rifle ball, who later succumbed to his injury. The more dramatic offensive took place later that morning and shortly after representatives from both sides met in mediation. The Texian leadership encouraged Castañeda to surrender his troops or to stand with them in opposition to the policies of the Mexico’s Centralist regime. While sympathetic to the colonists’ cause, Castañeda refused to do either but affirmed that his orders were to retrieve the loaned cannon without aggressive action. However, the Mexican officer’s rejection of the proposals prompted a third skirmish, during which the Texians fired the “Come and Take It” cannon twice as they advanced on the dragoons. Castañeda ordered an immediate retreat and subsequently returned to San Antonio.¹

The Texians’ first armed face-off with the Mexican Army in 1835, while not necessarily a military battle in the traditional sense, was significant as a show of bravado and determination that was to be repeated throughout the fight for independence. Since that time, the Gonzales “Come and Take It” cannon has come to represent the proud heritage of that South Central Texas city as well as the characteristic spirit of the people of the Lone Star State. The Battle of Gonzales is an im-

portant milestone event in an era that continues to invite further study.

Dr. Gregg Dimmick is a Wharton physician with more than a passing interest in Texas and Mexican military history as well as archeology. He is the author of *Sea of Mud*, which follows the retreat of General Santa Anna’s forces after the Battle of San Jacinto. Three years ago, in anticipation of writing a two-volume book about the Mexican Army during the Texas Revolution, Dimmick was searching for primary source information on the Battle of Gonzales and the “Come and Take It” cannon. He enlisted the assistance of James Woodrick, a retired chemical engineer and fellow independent scholar, who has also written several books on Texas history. While Woodrick pored over relevant documents in the Bexar Archives, Dimmick focused his attention on the Muse Collection, part of the Benson Latin American Collection at The University of Texas at Austin. He found a brief field report by Lieutenant Francisco Castañeda, which was written on the afternoon of October 2, 1835, and Dimmick’s translation of that document revealed some surprising information.

Although testimonies by Texians at the Battle of Gonzales allude to only the “Come and Take It” (six-pound) cannon being shot that day, Castañeda’s statement recounted that the Mexican dragoons had been fired upon by two: “un pieza mediana y un esmeril” (a medium-size and a small piece of ordnance).² Dimmick paid particular attention to the soldier’s choice in vocabulary, and from his perspective, the military officer clearly distinguished between the use of two different sizes of artillery. He shared his findings with Woodrick who then sought out a more



Courtesy of Gonzales County Historical Commission.

This image is of the signal cannon that fired the “first shot” of the Texas Revolution and is on exhibit at the Gonzales Memorial Museum.

After receiving a reference from Brad Jones, manager of archeology collections at the Texas Historical Commission, Woodrick consulted a 1955 publication, *Artillery through Ages: A Short Illustrated History of Cannon, Emphasizing Types Used in America* by Albert Mauncy. That book delineates the variations of 16th-century Spanish cannons; these designations remained relevant in the 1800s. The *esmeril* is identified as the smallest class, firing one-quarter to one-half pound balls to a maximum range of 750 yards. Its size and lighter weight (less than 70 pounds) allowed for the field gun to be carried and fired by a person while on horseback. Commonly referred to as a signal cannon by Anglos, these portable guns were shot in warning to threaten or intimidate enemy combatants and were carried by mounted soldiers in pursuit of hostile Indian tribes.³ In comparison, Woodrick noted that Castañeda’s use of “*pieza mediana*” (medium piece) is consistent with the 16th-century Spanish cannon classification, *media sacre*. This type of field artillery fired six-pound balls (indicating the caliber) or grape shot (several smaller balls), weighed as much as a ton, and required mounting on a wheeled carriage for transport by oxen or

specific definition for *esmeril*, which would offer a historical context that went beyond the generic English translation of “a small piece of ordnance.”

horses. The majority of historical accounts describe the “Come and Take It” cannon as a bronze (another word for brass) four- or six-pounder.⁴

In the course of broadening the scope of his research, Woodrick located another military report contained in the Muse Collection that was also written by Castañeda. In that lengthier document, dated two days after the battle, the Mexican officer again reiterates the discharge of two field guns, stating that the Texian cavalry shot the smaller gun, “*tiraron un esmerilaso*,” during the second skirmish. He then uses “*fuego de canon*” (cannon fire) in his description of the third altercation.⁵ Woodrick points out that Castañeda’s shift in phrasing clearly differentiates between the types of weapons discharged, and as such, the use of two artillery pieces by the Texians is made more apparent.

As Woodrick further examined primary documents and published works on the Battle of Gonzales, he looked at other ways that the *esmeril* fit within the broader narrative of that story. This type of field gun was definitely in the hands of the Texian Army during the fight for independence. Records showed that there were seven or more of these small, portable cannons under Texian control in 1835; in fact, one *esmeril* was included in an inventory of the Alamo’s arsenal in December of that year.⁶ However, a question remained as to why eyewitness accounts by Gonzales’ volunteer recruits all speak of only the six-pound cannon during the standoff. Throughout his research,

Woodrick shared and discussed his findings with colleague Greg Dimmick, and the two men are of the opinion that the colonists held little regard for this class of artillery. Due to its small caliber, which was akin to an oversized shot gun and caused little damage, the Texians likely did not consider these arms worthy of mention. On the other hand, Mexican documentation demonstrated that military officers were much more disciplined and detailed in reporting on enemy arsenal.

Woodrick's scrutiny of Mexican and Texian historical records also sheds new light on the true fate of the six-pound bronze cannon. There has long been a debate surrounding what appeared to be conflicting statements regarding the disposition of the "Come and Take It" cannon. However, the "first shot" artillery piece offers explanation for the two widely-known eyewitness claims that seemingly indicated the six-pound piece was abandoned and buried at Sandies (Sandy) Creek in western Gonzales County. According to Woodrick, the description given by these men of an "old, iron cannon" that had once been spiked (made inoperable for firing) fits with the characteristic size and weight of an esmeril. This is the artifact that was unearthed in 1936 and now resides in the Gonzales Memorial Museum. Conversely, there is testimony from five credible sources indicating that the six-pound bronze cannon was added to the Alamo's arsenal. There has not been any evidence uncovered that reveals what happened to the "Come and Take It" cannon in the aftermath of the Battle of the Alamo.⁷

The two researchers recognized that their findings did not appear in history books and as such, required due diligence on their part. In December of last year, Woodrick published *The Battle of Gonzales and Its Two Cannons*, a comprehensive report documenting his research and analysis. His contribution provides public access to evidence that clarifies a prevailing oversight in historical accounts. In the past two years, Dimmick has spoken to several historical groups on the topic. Mike Vance, executive director of Houston Arts and Media, attended one of those lectures, and his organization then provided the first published account of the two cannons. The documentary, *Washington-on-the Brazos: The Politics of Revolution*, the fourth installment in HAM's *Birth of Texas Series* and released in October 2014, differentiates between the roles of both the "first shot" and the "Come and Take It" cannons. The series producer acknowledges that while the distinction may be jarring to an audience that grew up hearing an iconic story of "The Cannon," the scholarship of Dimmick and Woodrick merely improves upon the existing knowledge of that pivotal event. Vance comments, "We want our documentary work to be as up to date as possible, just like a new book release, and like every right-minded person in the history world, we strive to get the story as correct as current knowledge allows. That should also be the ultimate desire of every fan of our history, to know the truth."



More on Cannons in Gonzales History

The 1835 "Come and Take It" confrontation serves as a dramatic launching point for the Texas Revolution, but Gonzales' pivotal role in the fight for independence is not limited to that incident. According to Glenda Gordon, chair of the Gonzales County Historical Commission, an effort is now underway to further explore a part of local history that dwells within the shadows of another Texas Revolution milestone: the Runaway Scrape. During this event, there was a mass exodus of the civilian population escaping from the advancing Mexican Army. The focus of the current investigation is also on Texian cannons—but not the two artillery pieces used during the Battle of Gonzales.

In a 1906 recounting, D.H.H. Darst, son of one of the city's founding settlers, described his experiences as a 15-year-old who was among the group that set fire to Gonzales on the heels of the Runaway Scrape. In that testimony, he reports that three cannons were ditched in nearby waterways as the colonists fled the city. One big gun was disposed of in a "slough" north of town, and two others were pushed into the Guadalupe River "where the Sunset Brickyard now [in 1906] stands."

According to Richard Crozier, an Austin attorney who grew up in Gonzales, one of the cannons was allegedly recovered from the Guadalupe River in the 1850s and moved to somewhere near Corpus Christi. Reportedly, after relocation and around the time of the Civil War, that artillery piece was severely damaged when fired with an overload of gunpowder. As part of the GCHC's effort to expand on Gonzales and Texas history, Crozier is pursuing avenues that would facilitate a search for the two unrecovered cannons. Darst's descriptions provide sufficient landmark details indicating the general locations of the disposal sites. At this time, Crozier is seeking guidance and assistance from the Texas Historical Commission to ensure proper excavation and conservation of artifacts before moving forward with the recovery project.

—Pamela Murtha

Chris Kappmeyer, an Austin realtor who grew up in Gonzales, attended the HAM screening, and his experience addresses a common reaction among the newer generation of locals. He admits to being stunned by information that contradicted what had been taught by teachers in his “Come and Take It” hometown. However, he also describes having an “aha” moment once he learned more about the research supporting the two cannons narrative. Kappmeyer recalls that, not unlike many first-time visitors to the Gonzales Memorial Museum, he was taken aback by the rather underwhelming size of what he considered could only be the “Come and Take It” artifact. The appearance did not fit with the descriptions in history books. He says that the documentary’s inclusion of the signal cannon as the “first shot” artillery on display at GMM made sense of that disconnect.

Glenda Gordon, chair of the Gonzales County Historical Commission, says that the research done by Dimmick and Woodrick provides further authentication that the Gonzales Memorial Museum relic did indeed fire the first shot of the Texas Revolution. More importantly, she says, local dialogue regarding the two cannons has generated renewed excitement and interest in Gonzales’ pivotal role in the Texas Revolution. The GCHC chair explains that community leaders have seized the opportunity to use that enthusiasm for a long-term project that will expand and enrich both state and local history. “There are many more stories waiting to be told,” Gordon says, “and these will be the ones that evolve from what we already know.”

Historian Dr. Stephen Hardin, author of *Texian Iliad* and the on-camera host for the *Birth of Texas* documentaries, often finds himself responding to what he calls “cognitive dissonance.” He defines this term as the bewilderment that people experience in the wake of clarifications to what generally is considered “established” history. In fact, the McMurry University professor says that whenever he is asked a question that begins with “Is there a consensus among historians...,” he quickly interrupts with an emphatic “No!” before the query can be completed. He explains, “The nature of history is that of refinement, and we are continually finding new pieces to add to the puzzle that is the past. What we think we know about events long ago is continually challenged as more information is uncovered or by re-evaluating the interpretation of what is known.” The recognition that there were two cannons at the Battle of Gonzales, according to Hardin, is merely one example of that process of refinement. ★

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Author’s note: All numbered citations (1-7) correspond to information found in The Battle of Gonzales and Its Two Cannons by James Woodrick and available on Amazon.



Bill Telford, left, and Larion Crumley, right, assisted at a Spanish Colonial site in San Antonio. Photo by Kay Hindes

Metal Detectors Aid in Historic Discoveries

In June 2014, Gregg Dimmick and James Woodrick were among a group of 15 individuals who surveyed the Battle of Gonzales site with metal detectors. An artifact found in the area where the Mexican Army was likely positioned may be a fragment of grapeshot (cut-up pieces of scrap metal) fired from the “Come and Take It” cannon.

A century of innovations in metal detection technology have made it an effective locating tool that, when guided by an experienced hand, has helped uncover new knowledge about the past. The invention of the metal detector is famously attributed to Alexander Graham Bell who, in 1881, used his “induction balance” device to search for a bullet lodged in the body of President James Garfield. The inventor’s model, like others of the day, was clunky, inefficient, and inaccurate.

In the 1920s, Gerhard Fischer introduced the first patented portable detector; his Metallscope used radio frequency to find metal. Jozef Kosacki, a Polish officer in World War II, further refined the instrument for battlefield mine searches. Powered by electromagnetism, it signaled through headphones (worn by an operator) when it identified explosives underground. These early improvements in metal detection would open the door to its use in other types of field searches, including archeological surveys.

After World War II, surplus supplies, including metal detectors, were available for public purchase, and the device became popular among a new generation of hobbyists seeking buried artifacts. Unsatisfied with the limitations of commercial metal detectors, Charles Garrett applied his experience in space engineering to this pursuit. In the mid-1960s, he pioneered a series of innovations that enhanced detection accuracy. Businesses, including Garrett’s company, refined the ability of the devices to discriminate between different types of buried metals. The latest models allow operators to set parameters of detection sensitivity tailored to the targeted search environment.

With modernization and increased affordability, however, the illegal excavation of public lands became problematic as some metal detection enthusiasts were looting precious historic finds. Although disagreement existed between hobbyist artifact hunters and archeologists, the two groups have found common ground. With historic battlefield surveys in particular, they have forged a successful partnership where the experience of both has led to important discoveries that revised or added to historical documentation.

—Bonnie Tipton Wilson