

Mount Bonnell Namesake

The issue of the namesake of Mount Bonnell arose more than eight years ago, when members of the West Point Society of Central Texas began campaigning in favor of Joseph as a replacement for George Bonnell. The reports submitted included considerable information about fellow West Point officer Captain Joseph Bonnell, but did not produce any documented reference or other specific evidence connecting his name with Mount Bonnell. There is only conjecture that fellow West Pointer Albert Sydney Johnston possibly had the motivation to apply Captain Bonnell's name to the mountain, obviously had the opportunity and surely would have done so.

George Bonnell arrived in Nacogdoches from Columbus, Mississippi, in August of 1836, with a group of 35 volunteers that he had recruited for service in Texas. General Sam Houston made him a captain of his men when they arrived in August 1836 and ordered them to remain at Nacogdoches to help secure that area. Bonnell and his men had arrived too late to participate in the battle at San Jacinto. But while the victory confirmed the new republic, there was no immediate promise that the Texians were in complete control of their destiny. Secretary of War Bernard Bee still considered Texas at war in late 1837. Mexico remained a potential source for new military attacks into the 1840s. Peace was really not assured until annexation in 1846 and U.S. military victory over Mexico in 1848.

George Bonnell was not an unknown person in the infant new republic. In December 1837, he joined 25 other "gentlemen from different parts of the republic" as founding members of the Philosophical Society of Texas. Included among his associates in this endeavor were Mirabeau B. Lamar, Thomas J. Rusk, Anson Jones, Hugh McLeod, Sam Houston, Thomas Jefferson Chambers and David G. Burnet.

During President Sam Houston's first administration, George Bonnell served as Commissioner of Indian Affairs. However, Bonnell's recommendations for harsh measures against the Indians led to a falling out with Houston, and Bonnell shifted his support to the new president, Mirabeau B. Lamar. He confirmed his support for Lamar by moving to the newly created capital at Austin on the Colorado River, in the fall of 1839. President Lamar and part of his cabinet arrived there on October 17 and were led into town by Colonel Edward Burleson and General Albert Sidney Johnston, under the arrangements made by Burleson, who was in charge of the ceremonies.

In January of 1840, Bonnell began publication of the *Austin Texas Sentinel*, which he published that year. In an advertisement in the *Sentinel* on March 11, 1840, he mentioned his property in Austin. He warned wood cutters from cutting timber on his land which was located "...four miles and a half above the city of Austin, upon the west side of the Colorado river, and extending up that stream to within one mile of the mouth of the Pierdenalis [sic] river; and back to

Williamson's creek –containing 54,684 acres.” This is in the immediate vicinity of the summit known as Mount Bonnell.

In his book “*Topographical Description of Texas, to which is added an account of the Indian tribes*, he described the mountain —“Four miles above the city, upon the east side of the river, is a high peak, called Mount Bonnell. From the top of the mountain there is a perpendicular precipice of seven hundred feet down to the water.” The editor of the book, John Henry Brown, was an employee at the *Sentinel*. Brown later edited *The Encyclopedia of the New West*, published in Marshall, Texas, in 1881. His entry for George Bonnell states: “In his honor, in 1838, General Edward Bureson bestowed the name (yet retained) of Bonnell on the now pleasant resort and beautiful mount four miles above Austin.”

Bonnell later served in the Travis Guards while living in Austin and was frequently out on campaigns to protect against Indian attack. Edward Bureson – Indian fighter, vice president during Houston's second administration and a friend of Bonnell's – thought enough of Bonnell to bring him a Comanche hat as a trophy from the battle of Plum Creek in August of 1840.

In addition to his continued civic interests – including the Texas Patriotic and Philanthropic Society and the Austin Lyceum – Bonnell also served as a Spanish translator in the General Land Office and was involved with the Texas Trading, Mining, and Emigrating Company. But he maintained his combative nature as well. He took part in the Texan Santa Fe expedition in 1841, under the military leadership of Hugh McLeod, and was imprisoned in Mexico. He was released in time to join the punitive, and ill-fated, Mier expedition in 1842. It was on December 26, 1842, near the Rio Grande, that George Bonnell was killed by a Mexican soldier while part of the retreat of the camp guard.

George Bonnell was thus a well-known individual in the early Texas Republic and played a significant role in the early history of Austin.

Contemporary verification clearly supports the case for George Bonnell as the namesake for the mountain.

In August 2012, a researcher in The Newberry Library in Chicago located a copy of “Bonnell's observations, 1838-39,” made in 1844 by William Bollaert, who had come to Texas in 1842 to collect information for a report for the British Admiralty. The portion of the manuscript that chronicles Bonnell's trip from Houston to the area of present Austin contains the following information:

On July 25, 1838, Bonnell, in company with General Edward Bureson and Simon Mussina, climbed a mountain on the Colorado, upstream from Mr. Barton's. They ascended to the summit, and his journal notes: “My companions called it ‘Mount Bonnell’ ...” He goes on to describe the

view that they could see westward up the Colorado drainage, as well as the geologic features at the summit.

Bonnell's later 1840 publication, *Topographical Description of Texas*, includes this same descriptive information.

Excerpts from the original journal also appeared in the May 1, 1839, issue of the Houston newspaper, the *Telegraph and Texas Register*.

This has been an interesting and somewhat exasperating project over recent years. However, we feel that there is now sufficient documentation to close the discussion on the naming issue.