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Some Notes on the Pioneer McGaffey Families of Sabine Pass, Texas

By W. T. Block

About 1920 a feature writer published the legend of "McGaffey's gold" at Sabine Pass. He inadvertently misidentified 'Neil' (sic) McGaffey, brother of John McGaffey, as the first settler at Sabine Pass. John's wife, Sarah "Sally" Garner McGaffey, was known throughout her lifetime as the "mother" of Sabine Pass. The writer also credited "Neil" McGaffey with being an immigrant Irishman, who wanted only "to return to Ireland and build a castle..." Actually the brothers Neal (Sr.) and John McGaffey were fourth generation Americans of Scottish descent, born in Sandwich, New Hampshire.^{[1](#)}

Errors also exist in T. J. Russell's history of the McGaffey family, published in Beaumont Journal in Jan.-March, 1906; nevertheless Russell's articles remain valuable for the wealth of information they contain.^{[2](#)}

The writer, being age 78, has long ago retired from writing stories of this length, but he fears he might have information about the pioneer McGaffey families that otherwise might be lost if he does not write this monograph.

The pioneer McGaffeyes of Sabine Pass included John McGaffey and his second wife Sarah Garner Murphy; their only two children to reach adulthood, Neal (Jr.) and Mary McGaffey Jackson; Lucy Ann McGaffey and Wesley Garner; Neal (Sr.) and wife Hannah McNeil McGaffey; their two sons Otis McGaffey (Sr.) and wife McCollister McGaffey and children; Oliver McGaffey, who left Sabine early and played no significant role in Sabine Pass history; and Neal and Hannah's daughter, Julia Maria, who married Increase R. Burch. A nephew of John and Neal, Wyatt McGaffey, only lived in Sabine Pass for four years before he drowned in 1843, but during that time, he served as Sabine Pass' first postmaster, first school teacher, and first notary public.^{[3](#)}

The original McGaffey family immigrated from Scotland Sandwich, New Hampshire before 1700,^{[4](#)} and being Presbyterians, they were perhaps persecuted by the Anglican or

Church of England. They certainly would not have been welcomed in Puritan Massachusetts. John and Neal McGaffey were sons of Samuel and Lydia Sanborn McGaffey, whose fathers, uncles and grandfathers were numbered among the Continental soldiers, who sought to throw off the English yoke. John McGaffey was born on May 28, 1787, and he was 7 years old when his younger brother Neal was born on June 26, 1794.⁵



John and Sarah Garner McGaffey

John McGaffey married his first wife, by whom he had two daughters, all born in New Hampshire. Lucy Ann McGaffey's (b. 1812-d. 1838) birth year of 1812 certainly indicates that she was born before her father moved to Ohio about 1815, soon afterward to be followed to Circleville, Pickaway County (south of Columbus) by his younger brother Neal. In 1822 John McGaffey's wife and oldest daughter died during a small pox epidemic, and grief-stricken by their loss, he left Ohio with his surviving daughter Lucy Ann, traveling by steamboat down Ohio and Mississippi river and thence up Red River to Natchitoches, La.

By 1823 John and Lucy Ann had reached Big Woods (now Eloy, Calcasieu Parish, La.), then in St. Landry Parish, where he met and married in 1825 a young widow, Sarah Garner Murphy, who had an infant son. John raised Sarah's son as his own, and although his deceased father's name was Murphy, the son was known throughout his lifetime at Sabine Pass as Wesley Garner. In 1848, Wesley married Helen Smith, daughter of John and Neal's real estate partner, Dr. Niles F. and Abigail Smith, formerly of St. Joseph, Michigan.⁶

Sarah "Sally" McGaffey's parents and siblings all moved to Mexican Texas (present-day Bridge City, Orange Co.) between 1825 and 1828. One brother-in-law, Claiborne West, signed the Texas Declaration of Independence; another, Benjamin Johnson, fought at the Battle of San Jacinto; and three brothers, David, Jacob, and Isaac Garner, fought under Col. Ben Milam at the Battle of San Antonio. Her parents, Bradley Sr. and Sarah Rachel Harmon Garner died in Orange County Ca. 1845.⁷ Bradley Garner Sr., born in Virginia in 1768, fought at the Battle of New Orleans in Jan. 1815.

John McGaffey, his wife Sarah, and children Lucy Ann and Wesley moved to Old Jefferson settlement on Cow Bayou (now Bridge City) in 1825, where they built their first log cabin. In 1826 they were soon enumerated in the Atascosita District census of that year.⁸ Two letters from John McGaffey, dated "River Niece (Neches R.), Jan. 10, 15, 1826," are published in the Stephen F. Austin Papers (copies of them being at Lamar University Library), wherein he requested of Stephen F. Austin the right to erect a ferry over lower Neches River, which was never accomplished. McGaffey's letters were countersigned by George Orr, the Mexican alcalde of Liberty, Texas, who carried the letters to Austin in San Felipe.⁹

While living at Old Jefferson, John McGaffey soon saw the potential of Sabine Pass as a seaport for the export of cotton, despite the vicinity's surplus of marsh lands and lack of any forests. About 1830 John began cutting pine logs to a given size, which he then carried to Sabine Pass on his sloop. At intervals he began completing his new cabin, the crevices of which he chinked with Spanish moss, marsh mud and clay. In 1832 he moved his family

and two slaves to Sabine, along with his herd of Spanish cattle that he had branded over the years. In 1773 Spanish padres abandoned 44,000 cattle in coastal East Texas, and by 1820, one only needed to rope any of the herd's increase and burn his brand on them.

The "Legend of John McGaffey's Gold" has been published in at least three different forms since 1920, the latest in *Old West of Winter*, 1977. The legend is absolute folklore, about a man named Josiah Carton, who claimed to have been aboard a wrecked pirate ship, that had buried its cargo of Spanish treasure on the nearby beach.¹⁰ Although of most questionable origin, the legend accounted for many treasure hunts at Sabine Pass. In 1936, one hunt resulted in considerable vandalism to an above-ground brick burial vault in McGaffey Cemetery, so desecrated that bones were left scattered about on the ground.

In Oct. 1835, John McGaffey and Dr. John Veatch dragged measurement chains and survey instruments across the McGaffey league (4,426 acres) and McGaffey labor (177 acres), mostly through marsh land. However, by the time he reached the Zavala land office in Nacogdoches with the field notes, the Texas Revolution had begun and the land office was closed. John McGaffey applied again for his patent for the McGaffey league, consisting of 25 labors. It was granted by the Republic of Texas in 1839, but almost immediately a fraudulent claim clouded the league's title until 1844.¹¹

Before proceeding, a story told by K. D. Keith deserves retelling. Sarah McGaffey told him that in 1836, a slave ship under Capt. John Taylor anchored in the Pass; some crewmen came to the McGaffey home to buy cattle to feed the slaves, and John sold them the cattle. The slave ship remained anchored at the "Brig Landing" for six weeks, while Taylor sold slaves in the vicinity, which were actually kidnapped Barbados freedmen. Taylor was later captured by the British frigate *Pilot*, and he was sentenced to 14 years imprisonment, a fact verified in several sources.¹² Sarah also related that some crewmen were attacked by bears that were inhabiting the high sea cane in the front marsh. The bears, panthers, huge alligators and wolves that occupied the marsh must have taken a large toll on range cattle.

By 1837 John McGaffey's herd had increased enough that he began making annual trail drives to New Orleans to sell cattle. In Gifford White's 1840 *Census of The Republic of Texas*, pp. 94-98, John McGaffey was credited with owning 1 league of land, 275 cattle, and slaves. The writer believes that his herd numbered closer to 1,200 heads, because cattlemen always refused to disclose the exact number of their cattle to tax assessors. It was on one of the New Orleans trail drives in 1848 that John died in Louisiana, the circumstances of which will appear later.

In 1839 President Sam Houston and others organized the Sabine City Company, and they appointed Dr. Niles Smith as their local land agent. By 1839 Smith had already sold about 500 lots in the new townsite, using a section of land that had been conveyed to Smith on a fraudulent land certificate. The certificate, prepared by two superb counterfeiters who made banknotes, coins, etc., was so skillfully completed that it took the Texas Land Office in Austin until 1844 to declare it a forgery, thus invalidating all the titles to lots that Smith had sold. (Much is known of the expert counterfeiters, John C. Moore and Edward Glover. The latter was sheriff of Orange County in 1856, when both were assassinated by Moderators.) In 1846 Gov. Pinkney Henderson issued John a patent to the McGaffey league with a clear title. Later Smith and John and Neill McGaffey founded a partnership to develop the second townsite of Sabine Pass. At first the partnership was between Smith and John McGaffey, but John sold the entire league to his brother Neal on Dec. 8, 1845.

Other info about the townsite will follow.[13](#)

Between 1825 and 1840, Sarah McGaffey gave birth to seven children, but only two, Neal and Mary, survived to adulthood. Lucy Ann and Wesley Garner reached adulthood too, but Lucy died when she was 26. After John McGaffey left on his final trail drive in Feb. 1848, he sold his herd of 900 heads in New Orleans. He was returning to Texas, carrying with him \$9,000 in gold, when he suffered a heart attack at a cattle "stand" near Breaux Bridge, La., and he died almost instantly. His neighbor and drover, Lucar Dubois, and his slave Wash buried John in the cemetery at St. Martinsville, after which they returned and delivered the gold to Sarah McGaffey. Later Sarah and her children visited the gravesite and erected a marble headstone, which no longer survives. Sarah was 23 when she married John McGaffey; she was married to him for 23 years; and she survived 23 years as his widow until she died at Sabine Pass on July 12, 1871.[14](#)

Of John and Sarah McGaffey's two children to reach adulthood, Neal (Jr.) was born in 1837 and Mary in 1840. In July, 1859, Neal married Rachel Jane Burch, a much younger sister of Increase Burch, by whom he had several children before she died on Sept. 8, 1881. She is buried in McGaffey Cemetery. Neal married a second time to name unknown, and he and his second wife were still living on the old homestead as of 1906. Their death dates are unknown at this writing, and places of burial are presumed to have been McGaffey Cemetery, although stones for them do not survive. Neal McGaffey (Jr.) served in the Confederate Army in Co. B, Spaight's Battalion, later the 21st Texas Regiment. And the defeat in the Civil War had not diminished the McGaffey assets much as it had done for most Southerners. By 1870, the year before her death, Sarah had already divided her assets among her two children, and in that year Neal's combined assets in land and cattle equaled \$9,200, including a large herd of cattle (steers in 1870 were worth about \$4 each). Neal (Jr.) and his wives raised a large family. The only surviving McGaffey descendants still living at Sabine Pass, named Welch, are great, or great-great grandsons of Neal, Jr., descendants of his daughter, Flavilla McGaffey Wiess and her husband, Capt. Edward Wiess.[15](#)

Mary McGaffey married Thomas R. Jackson, probably in 1856, and by 1860 she had infant children named Sally and Mary. Thos. R. Jackson became 1st Lieutenant of cavalry Co. A, Spaight's 11th Battalion, and he survived some bitter fighting in Louisiana in 1863. T. R. Jackson died about 1895, but his widow was still living in Beaumont as of 1906. In the 1860 census, the widow and heirs of John McGaffey were still fairly well-to-do according to the standards of that day, also still owning sizeable cattle herds. The widow, Sarah McGaffey was enumerated as "lady of leisure," with assets worth \$7,400. Neal McGaffey (Jr.) owned assets worth \$6,690, and Mary and T. R. Jackson owned assets worth \$30,500. In 1870 Mary and Thomas Jackson owned combined assets totaling \$20,600 in land and cattle.[16](#)



Neal McGaffey (Sr.) and Otis McGaffey Sr.

Neal McGaffey (Sr.) followed his brother John to Circleville, Ohio, probably by 1816, since he married Hannah McNeil in 1819 and was still living in Circleville in August, 1820, when his oldest son Otis was born. Hannah McNeil was born on Sept. 3, 1801 in Tiffin,

Seneca County, Ohio, which certainly indicates that Neal met her somewhere in Ohio. By 1825 Neal and Hannah had removed to Fort Ball, Ohio, where son Oliver McGaffey was born. By 1832, they had relocated once more to White Pigeon, St. Joseph County, Michigan (near the Indiana line), where daughter Julia Maria McGaffey was born in that year. It seems doubtful that Neal was hunting good farm land, because somewhere between New Hampshire and Michigan, Neal McGaffey (Sr.) had studied law. In the early 1800s, such was usually accomplished by apprenticeship to a practicing attorney.^{[17](#)}

In her autobiography, Mary McCollister (Mrs. Otis) McGaffey told of her birth at Salem, New York on March 4, 1822, and at age ten in 1832, of her family's trip, by canal boat, steamboat across Lake Erie, followed by wagon to White Pigeon, where she started to school at the "Seminary." There she met Otis McGaffey (Sr.), who was also a student at the 'Seminary,' and who boarded at the home of her sister Delia. However, before she married Otis, he and his father, Neal McGaffey, left on an 18-months trip to Texas. Their route of travel was probably by steamboat down the Wabash, Ohio and Mississippi rivers to New Orleans, from whence it was easy to catch a cotton schooner, bound for Sabine Lake.^{[18](#)}

Neal and Otis McGaffey took the oath of allegiance to the Republic of Texas at Beaumont in 1839. As of 1839, a realtor named Dr. Niles F. Smith was living in Texas, while his sister-in-law kept his two orphan children in St. Joseph, Michigan, near White Pigeon. It seems plausible that Neal and Otis McGaffey first met Smith on one of the latter's two annual trips to and from Michigan between 1834 and 1840 prior to Smith's marriage to his former sister-in-law Abigail. In 1839, however, President Sam Houston authorized Smith to survey the first townsite of Sabine City (on the Pass) on a 640-acre land certificate that Smith had bought from Barney Lowe. From 1839 until 1844, the title to John McGaffey's league was cloudy because Sam Houston's Sabine City was also located on the McGaffey league, although neither Smith nor Houston knew that the Barney Lowe certificate was counterfeit.^{[19](#)}

When Neal and Otis McGaffey arrived in Sabine Pass about Jan. 1, 1840, they probably were not at all sure that they wished to remain there, for the place certainly did not show much promise, overpopulated as it was with savage mosquitoes, and with a distinct shortage of good drinking water, firewood, or forest for building material. Also the McGaffey league was in process of determining rightful ownership. As late as 1844, the French minister to Texas, Dubois de Saligny, described the town as "consisting of eight or ten sorry wooden shacks," certainly a harsh assessment by the debonair Parisian.^{[20](#)} As of 1840, Augustus Hotchkiss and S. H. Everett already owned two cotton commission stores there, but fortunately for Otis McGaffey, neither of them remained there very long.^{[21](#)}

The writer believes that for a few months of 1840, Otis and Neal McGaffey lived at the residence of Dr. Niles Smith at Wiess Bluff, southwest Jasper County, and that in 1840 one of the McGaffeys ran unsuccessfully for Jasper County congressman for the Republic of Texas legislature. The writer cannot locate his source at the moment for that opinion, but if one reads Mrs. McGaffey's autobiography (Yellowed Pages, p 5, 7, 'Bevilport, Wiess Bluff'), that opinion is sufficiently verified.

Neal and Otis McGaffey returned to White Pigeon in the spring of 1841, and Otis and Mary Tomb McCollister were married there on May 18, 1841. The McGaffeys remained in Michigan for about one year, or until after the birth of Mary Jane on May 11, 1842. Apparently Neal and Hannah returned to Bevilport, Jasper County, alone. The Otis

McGaffey family spent ten weeks visiting relatives in Michigan, Indiana, Illinois and Iowa, before continuing their leisurely journey by wagon to Texas, which consumed the remainder of 1842. At St. Louis they boarded a south-bound steamboat on the Mississippi, and later, another steamboat at Simmesport, La., which took them up Red River to Alexandria. In her autobiography, Mrs. McGaffey reported an incident in which "Mr. McG" killed a "tiger cat," which most likely was a black panther, but much less likely a spotted Mexican lion (small jaguar), which was occasionally but rarely reported in East Texas. On the wagon trip into Texas, they arrived at Jasper first, then Bevilport. She described arriving at "Father" (Neal) McGaffey's house, more or less confirming that Neal McGaffey already owned a 2-room log cabin in Bevilport.[22](#)

Mary T. McGaffey also mentioned that Neal and Otis tried to farm, which also was in Jasper County, since it preceded the remainder of their journey to Sabine Pass. Then she added that the Neal and Otis McGaffey families left Bevilport when daughter Delia Francis was "four weeks old," certainly timing the move to Sabine Pass as about Sept. 15, 1845. Along the way they stopped "several days" at the Wiess Bluff home of Mr. and Mrs. Simon Wiess, "they being old acquaintances." But the Wiess family never lived elsewhere but Wiess Bluff, indicating that Neal and Otis met the Wiesses during their Wiess Bluff residence in 1840. Mrs. McGaffey mentioned another incident when a neighbor told her that, if she wished to see a Sabine Pass sunset, she would have to stir up the mosquitoes with a 10-foot pole in order to create a "hole in the sky" large enough to see through.[23](#)

The date of their Sabine Pass arrival, roughly Oct. 1, 1845, certainly coincides with much else that is known about Neal McGaffey. Mary T. McGaffey added that John McGaffey gave them several lots to build on, probably in town near the ship channel. The writer believes that Otis McGaffey opened a store and cotton commission business at Sabine Pass in late 1846, at a time when there were several other merchants there. John Hutchings and John Sealy of Galveston also began their cotton export business there in 1846, and by time of the 1850 census, Otis McGaffey and Hutchings and Sealy had frozen out all of the others until they were the only two merchants left there in the 1850 census.[24](#)

After title to the McGaffey league was cleared, John McGaffey sold his league and labor (4,605 acres) to his brother, Neal McGaffey, for \$5,000. Although Neal owned all or most of the land, he continued the partnership with Dr. Niles Smith as land agent for the second townsite of Sabine Pass. Also in March, 1846, Major Sidney A. Sweet of San Augustine arrived in Sabine Pass, where he built a steam sawmill (he towed logs in circle booms across Sabine Lake), a sash and door factory, and a shipyard. Neal McGaffey sold/traded to Sweet a half-interest in the townsite in exchange for an interest in Sweet's businesses, also for land that Sweet owned in San Augustine. In June, 1846, Sweet traded to William Simpson of Nacogdoches a half-interest in his half-interest in the Sabine Pass townsite. Sweet died in Jan. 1849, and in April 1849, Neal McGaffey sold his remaining half-interest in the townsite and league to Wm. M. Simpson for \$7,705.[25](#)

Neal's sale was in preparation for a move to West Texas, probably to join his son Oliver. Neither Neal nor Oliver McGaffey were enumerated in the 1850 Sabine Pass census, and some deeds signed by Neal McGaffey in 1850 verified his residence in another county. However, Neal and Hannah McGaffey must have disliked their new location because within two years they were living in Sabine Pass once more.

Also Neal McGaffey was identified with other activities before he left Sabine Pass in 1849.

In Sept. 1848, Sidney Sweet, Neal McGaffey, and Niles . Smith sold their "Shipways of Sabine Pass" to Dexter B. Jones.^{[26](#)} In Feb. 1848, Sweet, Neal McGaffey, and Niles Smith donated the land and lumber (Lot 5, Blk. 2, Range 5) for the Methodist Episcopal Church, South at Sabine Pass, "being located on the lot adjoining the school house lot where the school house now stands."^{[27](#)} Although Neal McGaffey continued his vocation of attorney until his death in 1867, his principal income was derived from real estate sales. In 1860 Neal and Hannah McGaffey were enumerated at res. 348 in Sabine Pass, and they owned \$20,000 worth of real estate and a personal estate worth \$500, a sizeable figure for that age in Texas.^{[28](#)}

During the 1850s, Otis McGaffey served as both postmaster and notary public at Sabine, and scores of his notarized deeds and documents bore his signature and still occupy areas of the county clerk's office.^{[29](#)}

Mrs. Otis McGaffey's biography is the best source for life at Sabine Pass between 1846 and 1875, although she sometimes glossed over subjects that caused her extreme bitter memories. Of her nine births, she noted that three preceded her arrival at Sabine Pass. She mentioned too the huge alligators that would crawl out of the water near her home to sun themselves, and hence the need to keep her small children constantly at her side. For 9 years, the Otis McGaffeyes ran a boarding house in addition to their store. Otis McGaffey listed his net worth as \$700 in the 1850 census, which was solely his store inventory. By 1860 his realty holdings totaled \$8,000 and his store inventory was \$10,000. As lawyer or merchant, father and son had little cause to own slaves except perhaps a female domestic to help care for children. However, as a grocer and cotton commission merchant, it was often necessary in that age to accept titles to land and slaves in a transaction, the slaves usually being resold as quickly as possible.^{[30](#)}

By April, 1861, the population of Sabine Pass was mushrooming, some say to 5,000, but the 1860 census enumerated only 500. However a number of new stores opened up there. For the period after 1856, the two sets of memoirs of . D. Keith, the first son-in-law, are also excellent sources for McGaffey history. Keith moved to Sabine Pass on Sept. 1, 1857, hoping to open a commission business and having just saved \$460 from his previous employment as store clerk in Beaumont. Instead he bought a half-interest in Otis McGaffey and Co. on Sept. 8, 1857, paying \$460 in cash and issuing notes for the remainder. On Dec. 3, 1857, he married Mary Jane McGaffey the oldest daughter.^{[31](#)}

In 1857, during a short period when Sabine's name was changed to Augusta, Otis McGaffey was elected an alderman when the city was first incorporated.^{[32](#)} Keith described the Sabine Pass of 1858 as "a small village of 250 people... The houses were all of wood and strung out all along the Pass... There was not a doctor in the place, but the people were the happiest, most social, healthy and generous people I ever saw..."^{[33](#)}

In 1858, McGaffey and Keith became agent for the Morgan and Harris Steamship Line, which carried all mail and most passengers along the Texas coast. The steamship line decided they needed an agent separate from the store, and Otis McGaffey chose to remain as shipping agent, selling his half-interest in the store to John C. Craig. The firm remained Keith and Craig until the Civil War began in 1861 when Craig moved to Beaumont.^{[34](#)}

Until 1861, the McGaffey and Keith families fared fairly well, considering the primitiveness of the age, until news arrived that the feared American Civil War had

actually begun. A militia company, the 'Sabine Pass Guard,' was enrolled on April 20th, which mustered 120 men for 90 days. By Sept. 1861, most of them were re-enrolled into two companies, the 'Sabine Pass Guard,' which became a Infantry Co. B, of Spaight's 11th Battalion; and the 'Ben McCulloch Coast Guard,' which became cavalry Co. A of the battalion. Co. B was at first commanded by Julia's husband, Capt. Increase R. Burch. After he resigned, K. D. Keith was elected captain of the company, which he remained until the end of the war. (4 Block brothers, one being the writer's grandfather, served in Keith's company.) The companies were inducted into the Confederate Army in March, 1862.^{[35](#)}

Although Keith was from Georgia, the McGaffey families were from the North, a dilemma faced by at least one-quarter of the Sabine Pass families. Of course, that meant that an enemy force might contain some of the McGaffey relatives. Some Sabine families evacuated to the North as soon as hostilities began, whereas three other Northern-born residents went over to the Union Navy, and thereafter plotted Union warships offshore. The McGaffeys accepted their situation stoically, and ultimately furnished several soldiers for the Confederate Army. Other than Keith, John Wyatt McGaffey served the Confederacy during the last year of the war in cavalry Co. A of Spaight's Battalion at the Battle of Calcasieu Pass. Delia F. McGaffey married Lieutenant R. J. Parsons, adjutant of Spaight's Battalion, on July 30, 1862, and after his death of yellow fever two months later, she married a former soldier, Thos. P. Harris, on Nov. 26, 1865. On Nov. 19, 1863, Sarah Emily McGaffey married Capt. Samuel Evans of Co. D, Griffin's 21st Battalion. As mentioned earlier, Neal, son of John McGaffey, and his brother-in-law, T. R. Jackson, were also Confederate soldiers.

K. D. Keith also headed Sabine Pass' "Committee of Safety" at the outbreak of the war, charged with building the original Fort Sabine out of logs from Wingate's Sawmill. He also made a trip to Galveston, where he obtained two 18-pound and two 32-pound cannons, powder and solid shot to arm the fort. Keith was in command there on Sept. 24, 1862, a time when his company only had 5 able-bodied men not afflicted with yellow fever, when 3 Union warships began bombarding the fort. Keith was ordered to spike the guns and evacuate on the last train to leave Sabine Pass until long after the war ended.^{[36](#)}

A much more deadly enemy, a virulent form of yellow fever, arrived on a blockade runner in July, 1862. Before the epidemic ended in October, it had inflicted 300 soldiers and civilians, of whom 150 died. And no family was left untouched; the McGaffey family members died during the plague. Hannah McNeil McGaffey and Amelia Cornelia McGaffey died in Sept. 1862, and Lt. Parsons, the husband of Delia, died about Oct. 1st. The Niles Smith family, including the Wesley Garner family, suffered badly too, losing 4 adults and 3 children. Keith wrote: "...The fever was very fatal... Our principal business was to bury the dead..."^{[37](#)}

Eventually the McGaffey family fled for safety to Wiess Bluff, where they lived for several months, but they were not allowed to visit a neighbor, who feared they might still carry yellow fever germs. They returned to the Pass before the battle of Sabine Pass on Sept. 8, 1863, but found that their home was occupied by Confederate officers. As a result they had to live in a home four miles out of town. Mrs. McGaffey wrote that they never suffered for lack of food during the war. An abundance of fish, crabs, oysters, all shellfish, geese, ducks and fruit were plentiful, also deer and wild cattle in the marsh.^{[38](#)}

Before proceeding, it should be mentioned that the role of the Burch brothers from Ohio

and Julia Maria McGaffey Burch was vital to Sabine Pass, but it is unknown how her family fared during the yellow fever epidemic. Her husband, Capt. Increase Burch was owner/master of the steamboat Sabine, and was usually gone up the rivers hunting cotton while Julia ran her boarding house. Capt. Charles Burch was master of the steamboat Mary Falvey as early as 1858, and Capt. Sherwood Burch was master of the steamer Comargo. One of Julia Maria's daughters (Sophia?) married another steamer master, Capt. Aaron Sheffers. Increase Burch died about 1890, but Julia Maria Burch was still living in Beaumont with her daughter in 1906.

After living four years at Sabine Pass as postmaster and school teacher, Wyatt McGaffey, Otis McGaffey's first cousin (nephew of John and Neal), drowned in Taylor's Bayou in Jan. 1843. He and a friend, W. P. Herring, had attempted to swim their horses across while en route to Beaumont. Wyatt was wearing heavy boots and a heavy overcoat when his horse went underwater, and they never surfaced again. Wyatt's body was later found and returned to McGaffey Cemetery for burial.^{[39](#)}

By May 15, 1865, news of the Confederate surrender in Virginia filtered down to Sabine Pass, and on May 24th, all the soldiers of at Sabine Pass, including Capt. K. D. Keith and Lt. T. R. Jackson, went to Beaumont to be discharged. The town's residents knew it would be only a few days before Federal troops would arrive to occupy the town, and every attempt was made to destroy the guns, cannonballs, and gunpowder at Forts Griffin and Manhasset. The next tragedy to face the McGaffey family was the death of Neal McGaffey (Sr.) in 1867. He and Hannah are buried in McGaffey Cemetery, but no grave markers survive.

Mrs. Otis McGaffey wrote many pages about religion, or the lack of it, in her autobiography. She noted that both sides of her family had been Presbyterians, who in that age opposed dancing. But by 1848, the only church at Sabine Pass was Methodist, the one that Neal donated, and all church-going Protestants began attending there. She noted too that as the town grew, square-dancing became popular, probably the only social pastime in town, and gradually the adult McGaffeys learned to dance and enjoyed it.^{[40](#)} In 1860, the Methodist pastor, Rev. Alexander Hinkle, was the only full-time preacher living in Sabine Pass.

By 1859 or 1860 there were the beginnings of two more congregations, Cumberland Presbyterian Church and Tremont Baptist Church, but each congregation was very small, with no full-time pastor. Late in 1860, Rev. John Goble arrived as pastor of the Presbyterian church, but he also had to teach a school to support his family. In Aug. 1862 Goble and his congregation fled on steamboats to avoid the fever and they never returned. Mrs. McGaffey did not mention ever attending the Presbyterian church.^{[41](#)}

The preacher who would ultimately convert the McGaffeys to the Baptist faith was Rev. S. G. McClenny, who arrived late in 1865 and was to be enumerated as the Baptist pastor there in the 1870 census. Mrs. McGaffey wrote that at first Otis McGaffey was bitterly opposed to her joining the Baptist congregation, but with time and patience on her side, she finally succeeded in converting him too.^{[42](#)}

By 1865, war and epidemic had reduced Sabine Pass' population to about 200 souls, and it had also reduced most families to indigence, most having only worthless Confederate currency. Yet two Sabine merchants, Otis McGaffey and J. H. Alexander, survived the war

in fair to good economic condition. The writer can document Alexander's very profitable activity in the blockade-running of cotton, which earned large profits in gold. In 1860 Sabine Pass exported 20,000 bales of cotton and continued to load blockade-runners throughout the war, but cotton exports dropped to 6,000 bales in 1865. While the writer has no documentation that Otis McGaffey and K. D. Keith engaged in blockade-running, he believes that gold earned from that activity would be the only way both men could rebound so swiftly from total defeat. Nevertheless, by 1870 Otis McGaffey's assets had dropped to \$10,000, much less than they had been in 1860.

In late 1865, Otis McGaffey rebuilt his business very quickly, but he chose for some reason not to include K. D. Keith. For one thing, Keith wanted to engage in cotton export only. Instead Keith reentered the cotton trade in partnership with A. N. Vaughan, the husband of Keith's sister Alabama.^{[43](#)} In 1868 the partners bought the steamboat Orleans (Capt. Lewis King), and for three years, they hauled many loads of cotton down Neches and Sabine rivers. In fact during the 1869-1870 shipping season, the Orleans was one of only two steamboats operating in Sabine River.^{[44](#)}

The writer is fortunate to own a photocopy of the entire Sabine Pass Beacon for June 13, 1871, which contains ads and articles that tell much about both the Keith and McGaffey businesses. In the small hurricane which struck Sabine on June 9, 1871, the Orleans broke its moorings, and it would have sunk except for the exertions of Pilot Niles H. Smith, who steered it into shallow water in Sabine Lake.^{[45](#)} On Sept. 1, 1871, another hurricane sank the Orleans, destroyed the Keith and Vaughan cotton business, and stripped the Keith family of everything they owned except the clothes on their back.^{[46](#)}

The advertisement of Otis McGaffey and Co. in Sabine Pass Beacon of June 13, 1871 verifies that that firm was actually a department store. The store carried in stock every conceivable item of groceries and canned goods, clothing and sewing supplies, ready-made ladies and gents wear, farm implements and supplies, harness, saddles and old leather items, all hardware and glassware, furniture, musical instruments - in fact, every possible item or need that existed at that time.^{[47](#)}

From 1845 until 1865, the Sabine Pass McGaffey's endured no major hurricanes, the fever epidemic and miserable war having been enough to endure, but beginning in Sept, 1865, a hurricane would strike Sabine Pass during every odd year through 1879, and two in 1871. The hurricane of 1865 totally destroyed Orange, Texas, but did minimal damage at Sabine. The hurricane of Oct. 2, 1867 drowned many people at Galveston, having struck in the middle of Texas' worst yellow fever epidemic, which killed 1,100 in Galveston County and 1,900 more in Harris County. The hurricane of 1869 is rarely mentioned in 1870 Social Statistics as having killed all the apple (yes, apple) orchards at Sabine Pass. It was the two storms of 1875 (that destroyed Indianola and Wallisville), that prompted the McGaffey's to leave Sabine Pass, and what a fateful decision that was. Two more hurricanes hit Sabine Pass in 1877 and on Aug. 22, 1879, but it was the killer storm of Oct. 12, 1886 that destroyed Sabine and Johnson Bayou, La., drowning 200 persons.^{[48](#)}

The K. D. Keith family lived briefly in Galveston and other places but finally settled permanently at Luling, Texas, where Keith became a hardware dealer. Keith's eyesight failed while he was writing his second set of memoirs. He died in 1909 and is buried in City Cemetery beside many other Keith and McGaffey family members. Mary Jane Keith died at Sealy, Texas on Jan 29, 1921.^{[49](#)}

In 1875 the Keiths induced the Otis McGaffeys to move to Luling, and by 1876 they had completed their move, Otis packing and transporting all his merchandise on a boat. Apparently Otis continued in business in Luling until age forced him to quit. Mrs. McGaffey had been an invalid for about 5 years, beginning in 1891, and when she began writing her memoirs at Luling in 1895, she soon died there on March 28, 1896. For many years Otis lived with his sons in Dallas or Houston before he died at the advanced age of 88 on May 27, 1908.⁵⁰ Both of them are buried in Luling.

Since this story has gotten quite long and the writer has accomplished what he sought to do, he will finalize it at this point. In summary the old McGaffey families were very much a part of Sabine Pass history for 75 years, having been its founders, its builders and realtors, its soldiers and merchants, in fact, its very existence. That is why the writer dare not let this story fade away. He probably would never have written it, except that he feared he might possess much information that others might not have, and that he should publish it while he was able to do so.



Endnotes

1 W. T. Block, "The Legend of John McGaffey's Gold," Old West, Winter, 1977, pp. 10, 37-40.

2 T. J. Russell, "McGaffey Biography-Pioneer Reminiscences of Jefferson County," Beaumont Journal, Jan. 14, 1906, other Sabine articles through March, 1906.

3 Ibid.; G. W. McGaffey, Genealogical History of The McGaffey Families (Bradford, Vt.: 1904), pp. 30-36; "Autobiography of Mrs. Otis McGaffey Yellowed Pages, XXVIII No. 3, (Fall 1998), pp. 1-14.

4 Ibid.

5 Ibid.; also Block, "Legend of John McGaffey's Gold," Old West, p. 10.

6 Russell, "McGaffey History-Pioneer Reminiscences of Jefferson County (book: Beaumont, 1986); also histories of related families-Garner, Johnson, West, by Russell, pp. 26, 31-47. Also Block and W. D. Quick, "Jefferson County Manuscript Census of 1850," Texas Gulf Historical and Biographical Record, VII, No. 2 (May 1971), res. 194, 195, 200, 206, pp. 115-118.

7 Bradley Garner Family in Garner-Keene Genealogy (Charlottesville, Va.: 1952); also history of the Garner, Johnson, West families by Russell, "Pioneer Reminiscences etc." pp. 26, 31-47. The writer has also written long histories of the Garner, Johnson and Niles F. Smith families, some of which are on his website <http://block.dynip.com/wtblockjr/>

8 M. Osburn (ed.), The Atascosita Census of 1826," Texana, I (Fall 1963), p. 14.

9 John McGaffey letters in Barker, S. F. Austin Papers, II, pp. 1247-48, 1257. Copies also appear in Old West, Winter, 1977, p. 10.

10 Block, "Legend," pp. 10, 38-40.

11 Records, Texas General Land Office, Jefferson County, 1st Class Patent, File 25; also Vol. C, p. 217, and E, pp. 189, 301, 438-39, Jefferson County Deed Records.

12 K. D. Keith, "Memoirs of Capt. K. D. Keith," Texas Gulf Historical and Biographical Record, X, No. 1 (Nov. 1974), p. 56. The account of Taylor's slave ship is recorded at least 3 times elsewhere.

13 The history of Houston's Sabine City Company and the fraudulent certificate is quite detailed to discuss here. For details, see W. T. Block History of Jefferson County etc. (Nederland: 1976), pp. 30-31; also Block, "Some Early History of Sabine Pass," Texas Gulf Historical and Biographical Record, XXV (Nov. 1989), pp. 80-91.

14 Block, "Legend," Old West, Winter, 1977, pp. 38-40; Block, "Enumeration of McGaffey Cemetery," Yellowed Pages, I, No. 2 (May, 1971), p. 76.

15 Yellowed Pages: Vol. II No. 1 (Feb. 1971), p. 12; Vol. 2, No. 2 (May 1971), p. 76; Russell, Pioneer Reminiscences etc (Beaumont: 1986), p. 35; (1850 Census of Jefferson Co., Texas Gulf Historical and Biographical Record, VII No. 2 (May 1971), pp. 116, 118; "Muster Roll of Co. A," Texas Gulf Historical Record XIII No 1 (Nov 1971), p. 28; also "Diary of 1st Sgt. H. N. Connor of Co. A, Spaight's Bn." on my website.

16 Ibid.; 1869 Sabine Pass census, res. 366; "Muster Roll of Co. A," Texas Gulf Historical and Biographical Record XIII No. 1 (Nov. 1972), p. 28.

17 Genealogical History of the McGaffey Family; also genealogical info supplied by Mrs. Frances McMichael.

18 "Autobiography of Mrs. Otis McGaffey," Yellowed Pages, XXVIII No. 3 pp. 1-5.

19 See details in W. T. Block, "Some Early History of Sabine Pass," Texas Gulf Historical and Biographical Record XXV (Nov. 1989), pp. 80-91; also oath of allegiance, Judge Henry Millard, Beaumont, Dec. 31, 1839.

20 N. Barker, The French Legation in Texas (Austin: 1973), I, p. 554.

21 Galv. Civilian and Galveston Gazette, Nov. 4, 1840; New Orleans Weekly Picayune, Feb. 24, 1840.

22 "Autobiography of Mary McGaffey, Yellowed Pages, XXVI No. 3 (Fall 1998), pp. 4-6.

23 Ibid., pp. 5-7.

24 Block and Quick (comp. ed.), "The 1850 Manuscript Census of Jefferson County," Texas Gulf Historical and Biographical Record VII No. 2 (May 1972) pp. 114-116.

25 Vol. G, p. 171, Jefferson County Deed Record; also W. M. Simpson, "Map of Sabine Pass," July, 1847.

26 Vol. G, pp. 100-101 and K, p. 94, Jefferson County Deed Record.

27 Vol. F, p. 163, Deed Record.

28 1860 Sabine Pass Census, res. 348.

29 Russell, *Pioneer Reminiscences of Jefferson County* (Beaumont: 1986), pp. 24, 37.

30 "Autobiography of Mrs. Otis McGafey," *Yellowed Pages*, Vol. XXVIII no. 3; also 1850 census, res 119, p. 116; also 1860 census, res. 326; also 1860 Slave Schedule II.

31 "Memoirs of K. D. Keith," X (Nov. 1974) pp. 41-64.

32 *Galv. Weekly News*, July 28, 1857.

33 "Memoirs of K. D. Keith," p. 53.

34 *Ibid.*, pp. 53-54.

35 For details of Spaight's Bn., see W. T. Block, "The Swamp Angels: A History of Spaight's 11th Texas Battalion," *East Texas Historical Journal*, XXX No. 1 (1992), pp., 44-57.

36 "Memoirs of K. D. Keith," pp. 58-61.

37 "Autobiography of Mrs. Otis McGaffey," p. 8; Keith Memoirs, p. 58; Block, "History of Niles F. Smith Family," p. 19; also K D. Keith Memoirs, "Military Operations, Sabine Pass," in *Burke's Texas Almanac and Emigrant's Guide for 1883* p. 65-66.

38 "Autobiography," pp. 8-9.

39 Russell, p. 25.

40 "Autobiography," p. 9.

41 Books A-B, Marriage Record; Manuscript Census, 1870, sched. I, res. 27; also Sch. VI, Social Statistics, Reel #48, Texas State Archives, Austin.

42 "Autobiography," pp. 9-10.

43 See R. Robertson, "Beaumont on Eve of Civil War," *Texas Gulf Historical Record*, XXX No. 1, (Nov. 1994), p. 22.

44 W. T. Block, *Cotton Bales, Keelboats and Sternwheeler History of Sabine River etc.*, (Woodville: 1995) p. 22.

45 Sabine Pass Beacon, June 13, 1871.

46 W. D. Keith poem, "To My Parents," *Oklahoma*, Nov. 16, 1907.

47 Large Ad of McGaffey and Co., in *Beacon*, June 13, 1871; reprinted in *Yellowed Pages*, XXVIII No. 4 (Winer 1998) p. 15.

48 See Block, "Texas Hurricanes of The 19th Century," *Beaumont Enterprise*, Feb. 5, 1984, reprinted in Block, *Frontier Tales of The Louisiana-Texas Borderlands*.

49 Block, "Capt. K. D. Keith, Confederate Hero," *Port Arthur News*, Jan. 2, 1974. See also

Footnotes 31, 37.

50 Genealogical Info furnished by Mrs. Frances McG. McMichael of Houston.



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