



Tales of Texas



September 2026

This issue of Tales of Texas has as its setting the Neches River in East Texas.

The Neches River in East Texas is the site of the battle that ended Cherokee settlements in the piney woods.

The photos are all taken on location in and around present day Tyler, Texas, with the exception of the sketch of Chief Bowles, courtesy of the state archives.

Comments? Go to website listed below.

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Broken Promise of the Neches

As an author, I research my books a great deal. I run across many fascinating stories that don't make it through the editing process. The cutting room floor claims many victims. The Battle of the Neches is one such story.

As we all know, Sam Houston was elected president of the Republic of Texas. Texas had an unfortunate term limit provision in the constitution at the time. The presidential term was only two years long, and no man could succeed himself. This issue harmed Texas and many other people as we shall see.

Sam Houston was a dual citizen. He was a citizen of the Republic of Texas and of the Cherokee nation. Many of

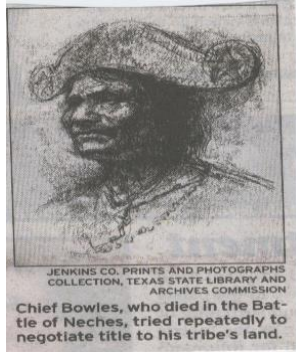
the pioneering families that came to Texas from Tennessee and the Carolinas were familiar with their neighbors, the Cherokee. President Jackson continued enforcing the Indian Removal Act and sent the Cherokee west to the Indian Territory. This was known as the "Trail of Tears." I won't get into the complexities of that event here, but Sam Houston, Davy Crockett, and other frontiersmen were not for this removal. The Cherokee were neighbors who lived in villages and weren't nomadic. The Scottish settlers intermarried into the tribe. Many Cherokee children were half white.

One such Cherokee man was named Duwali Bowles. As his name suggests, he was Cherokee and Scottish. During the Trail of Tears, he went to the Mexican province of Tejas. After the Texas Revolution in 1836, he was welcomed into the Republic of Texas by President Houston.

Houston, of course, was a "lame duck" as all presidents of Texas were. He tried to keep his pro-



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Chief Bowles



Landowner's Sign

Indian policies effective. He also believed there was a place in Texas for free blacks and Tejanos. When it came time for election, his hand-picked candidates didn't survive. They basically committed suicide or died as Stephen F. Austin did. Therefore, his opposition, M.B. Lamar won the presidency.

Lamar was an illiberal man. He believed strongly that there was no place in Texas for Indians or free blacks. Sam Houston hated that idea. Everything Houston did to provide a country of decency that the United States would annex, Lamar undid. Although over 90% of Texans favored annexation, Lamar hated the very idea of it.

The matter of national debt was another very contentious matter between Houston and Lamar. Houston, like his mentor Andrew Jackson, hated national debt. Lamar, on the other hand, never imagined a dollar he couldn't spend.

This brings us to the Battle of the Neches. This was Lamar's battle to remove the Cherokee and other bands from Texas. The battle occurred in East Texas on the Neches River.

In July 1839, about five hundred Texas troops moved into Cherokee country under Kelsey H. Douglass, with forces led by Thomas J. Rusk, Edward Burleson, and Willis H. Landrum. Commissioners offered payment for abandoned property and crops, but the Cherokees objected to being marched from their homes under armed guard. Negotiations failed.

On July 15, Texas troops advanced toward Chief Bowles's principal village. Fighting began a few miles west of present-day Tyler. The engagement continued until darkness, leaving three Texans and an estimated eighteen Native defenders dead. The Cherokees withdrew during the night, taking their families with them.

The Texans resumed their pursuit the next morning. Near the headwaters of the Neches River, the fleeing Cherokees and their allies made another stand. Contemporary estimates placed their numbers between seven hundred and eight hundred, though that figure likely included women, children, and others attempting to escape as well as warriors. Under sustained attack, the defenders were forced from a cabin and nearby cornfields toward the river bottom.



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Markers for Indian Dead.

The markers at the site are: Cherokee, Choctaw, Delaware, Tahocullake, Kickapoo, Coushatta, Alabama, Caddo of the Neches, Quapaw, Ioni, and Biloxi. All the markers are similar in style as the ones pictured.

More than one hundred Cherokees and members of allied tribes were reportedly killed or wounded during the campaign. Texas losses were reported as five dead and twenty-eight wounded. Most survivors fled north across the Red River into Indian Territory. Others scattered into Texas or Mexico, but organized Cherokee settlement in East Texas had been broken.

General Houston was furious. These Indians were farmers. They had taught their Tennessee and Carolina neighbors to produce the “three sisters”: beans, squash, and corn. Chief Bowles himself was elderly, estimated to be over 80 years old. He died with a sword in his hand gifted to him by Sam Houston.

The seesaw back and forth positions during every Texas administration took a toll on citizens and the budget. It would not be until 1845 that Texas would enter the Union. The debt that Lamar ran up caused Texas to cede its claims on present-day New Mexico, Colorado, and Wyoming in exchange for the United States to pay the debt off.

My grandsons and I were able to experience the site of the Battle of the Neches thanks to the private landowner who maintains the site and allows the public to enter the property. The photos in this article show the site as it exists today.

One subject of the second book in my Faith and Fiddle series, *Isobel's Hidden Melody*, is the political feud between Houston and Lamar. The times were, of course, more complicated than an article can describe, but the positions of each man drove the course of the new nation. One can only wonder how the Republic of Texas would have turned out had it been under the leadership of one person or at least one political philosophy.



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