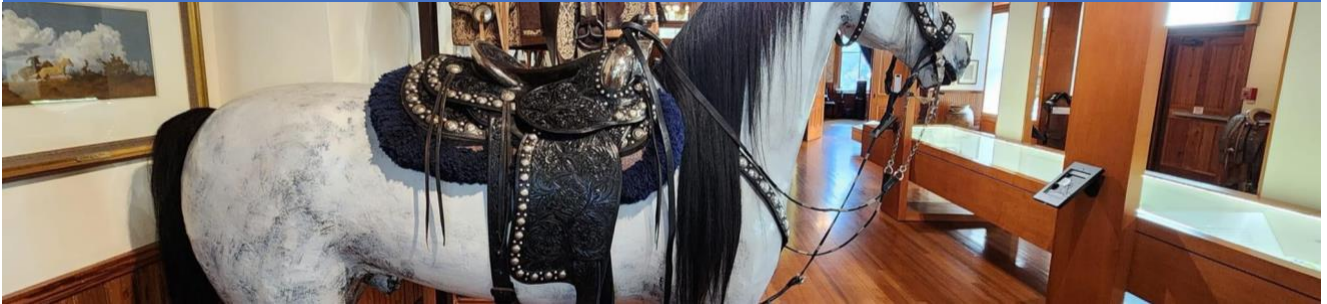




Tales of Texas

NEWSLETTER



Happy New Year

This New Year's issue of Tales of Texas details a true "Renaissance Man" who impacted Texas as much as any man.

It's the story of a medical doctor who had an interest in virtually everything associated with 19th Century Texas.

The two photos, by the author, in the masthead are the first Republic of Texas flag and a Texas saddle on exhibit at the Bryan Museum in Galveston. The photo of Margaret is from the Sam Houston Memorial Museum. The Photo of Sam is from the National Archives. Ashbel's photo and "Evergreen" are from the Texas State Archives. The Executive Mansion is from the Southwest Collection at Texas Tech University. B&W photos colorized by *palette.fm*. The Silverthorne photo is from her obituary in the *Salado Village Voice*.

Comments? Go to website listed below.

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Renaissance Man

What is a "Renaissance Man"? Simply put, he is a person who has knowledge and expert proficiency in a wide range of fields. Michelangelo Buonarroti, for example, was an artist, sculptor, and biblical scholar among other things. Leonardo DaVinci is another such man. Their genius lay in more than one field of study.

Renaissance Woman

Although not as well-known as men, there were women who were just as brilliant as anyone. Émilie, from 1700's France, translated Isaac Newton into French because she was a linguist, scientist, and mathematician. Another woman you may want to research is Juana Inés de la Cruz, a Mexican who lived in the 1600's. She was a scientist, composer, and poet. Genius knows no biological boundaries.

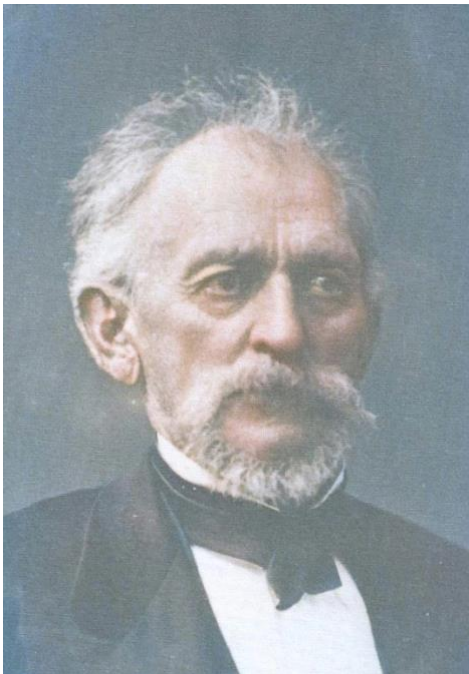
Any time a country is trying to get off the ground so to speak, it sends out a desperate call for geniuses to lend a hand. Our country looked for such individuals in the American Revolution and located Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson. No doubt, there were many intelligent persons involved in the setting up of America. Think of people like George Washington and John Adams. Of course, women were there. Most famously, Abigail Adams, a self-taught genius along the lines of Abraham Lincoln, who wrote the celebrated "Remember the Ladies" letters to her husband as the Founding Fathers set up the foundations of our nation. You should read them. Genius!



Tales of Texas



*The Executive Mansion 1837
Houston, Texas*



Ashbel Smith, M.D.

Texas was no different than other countries when it came to the need of a Renaissance Man. Ashbel Smith, M.D. stepped onto the Texan stage and filled the empty boots with his intellect and practical application of science. Ashbel was a Connecticut Yankee and graduate of Yale University. He and Sam Houston enjoyed a life-long friendship although they didn't see eye to eye on everything. Ashbel's first appointment was as Surgeon General of the Texas Army.

In Galveston, the largest city of Texas in the 19th Century, Smith met another man of scientific mind, Mr. Gail Borden. Borden was the appointed tax collector for the country's busiest port city and he and Smith formed a friendship as Smith imported medical supplies for the country. Borden and his brother, Thomas, had their hands in many endeavors. They were the printers of the Revolution until Santa Anna threw their press into the waters of Buffalo Bayou. Perhaps you know about their invention of condensed milk which led them to move back to their native New York and found a dairy empire.

President Sam Houston desperately needed an ambassador to the crowned heads of Europe. Specifically, the Court of St. James (England) needed to recognize the Republic of Texas so that the United States could annex Texas as a state. Houston called upon his friend, Ashbel Smith, to go to Europe and seek recognition. Besides Smith's intellect and natural intelligence, Houston had to have someone who could pay their own way. The Republic of Texas was about as broke as a country could be. In those days, "public service" meant "public service." (Note the Executive Mansion Photo) Smith served in London at Houston's request.

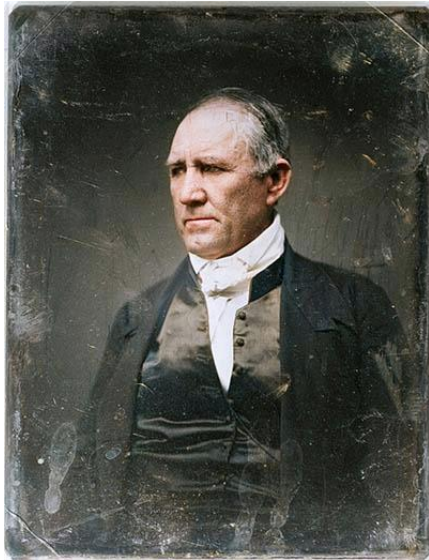
Smith, a competent and well-regarded physician, accepted land and other tangible property in payment of services rendered. He lived all around the Houston-Galveston area, but he liked Galveston the best for its healthy atmosphere and sea breezes. The Texas climate, then and now, attracted mosquitos. Billions of mosquitos. Of course, we know now that mosquitos carry diseases like Malaria and Yellow Fever. During the heady days of the Republic, that connection hadn't been made, and tropical diseases flourished along the Gulf Coast. Yellow Fever, Malaria, and Dengue Fever made themselves known with plagues that kept Smith's practice busy.



Tales of Texas



Margaret Houston



Sam Houston

Although Smith never made the connection to mosquitos, his care for patients allowed most of them to survive. He kept journals and notes that have allowed researchers to see the effects the plagues had on Texas. Those plagues were probably the most impactful things to hit Texas during the 19th Century. The mosquitos of Galveston Bay were lethal and plentiful. It's difficult to overstate how the swarms spread disease and death in Galveston and Harris Counties. One cemetery on Broadway in Galveston was created for the sole purpose of burying the victims of the 1867 Yellow Fever Plague.

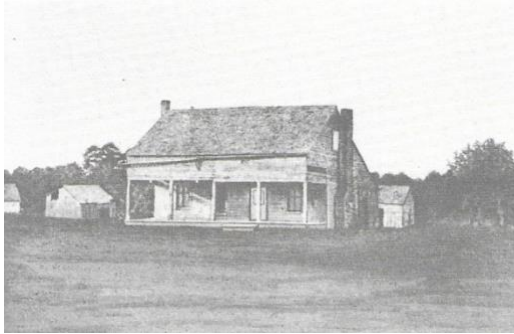
One patient of Smith's was the beautiful Margaret Houston, First Lady of Texas. Margaret and Sam lived in present-day Baytown upon their marriage in 1840. Margaret's first introduction to Texas included contracting Malaria. Then she had a miscarriage. Galveston Bay did not agree with Margaret and the couple ultimately moved to Huntsville. Margaret and Sam were separated many times when he was in Austin or D.C. as an elected official. The railroad did not come to Texas while Sam was in office, so the separations were lengthy and painful.

Margaret had an agonizing tumor in one of her breasts while Sam was in D.C. She called for Smith to come as was her custom. He examined her and discovered the tumor. He needed to remove it, but Margaret was a nursing mother at the time. Although complicated and inflamed, Margaret wanted Smith to operate. There was no anesthetic at the time other than whiskey. Margaret, a pious Baptist, would never consider taking a drink, so Smith removed the tumor from the fully conscious patient. Margaret lived and Sam was eternally grateful.

Smith studied history and military campaigns. When the Civil War came along, he shed his surgeon's scalpel and picked up a sword. He was a captain of the 2nd Texas Infantry Regiment and was wounded during the Battle of Shiloh. After the war, Smith took up the cause of education in Reconstruction politics. Although he was a former slave owner, he believed education was the answer to bringing all Texans, regardless of color, into a more progressive future. The University of Texas, the University of Texas Medical Branch, and Prairie View A&M are three places he helped to found.



Tales of Texas



Ashbel Smith's "Evergreen"
Baytown, Texas



Mrs. Elizabeth Silverthorne
Texas Renaissance Woman

The old enemy of Texas, Yellow Fever, kept striking the state at regular intervals. Smith, himself, contracted the disease and kept notes of his own case. When he thought his last day on earth was at hand, he wrote about it. Then his fever broke, and he recovered. Not so with Margaret Houston, she died of Yellow Fever in 1867. She was in Independence, Texas at the time of her death. Her wishes to be buried with her husband in Huntsville were not honored because Yellow Fever bodies were considered contagious. Yellow Fever victims were buried where they died. She rests in Independence with other family members.

Ashbel Smith purchased a small plantation from another Texas Revolution character named Moseley Baker. It was near Sam and Margaret's first place in what is now Baytown. Sam and Margaret's home was at Cedar Point. It is believed their actual homesite is now under water. Smith's homesite was at Evergreen Point and named "Evergreen." The home is no longer there. The Evergreen Golf Club was there for some years, but ultimately closed due to competition from other places and the incessant swarms of mosquitos.

Ashbel Smith, the Renaissance Man of Texas, lived a long life and carries a proud legacy. There is a statue and historical marker dedicated to him in Baytown if you want to visit them. He died at "Evergreen" and rests in the State Cemetery in Austin.

I would be remiss if I didn't acknowledge a true Renaissance Woman of Texas. She wrote the definitive biography of Ashbel Smith and numerous other books of Texas History and Culture. Elizabeth Silverthorne passed away in 2021 at the age of 97. Her research provided many of the photos and facts of this issue.