



Tales of Texas

NEWSLETTER



May 2025

This issue of Tales of Texas concerns a tragic incident during Civil War Reconstruction.

The headline photo above is of Toubin Park in Brenham.

If you are interested in Brenham history, please consult the book "The Burning of Brenham" by Sharon Brass. Her book is rare, but it is still sold at The Washington County Visitor Center, according to their website.

Comments? Go to website listed below.

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Brenham, Texas

Washington County is a fabulous place for all sorts of Texas History. A pair of brothers put the place on the map when they opened the Washington County Railroad. Their railroad linked Brenham with the existing line to Houston and Galveston. Brenham became a boom town in cotton and other goods. Businessmen came to Brenham to produce exports in the Brazos Valley and ship them around the world.

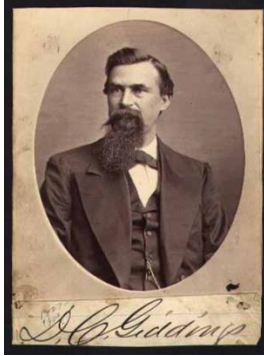
The Giddings Brothers

J. D. and D. C. Giddings built the twenty-one-mile-long line to Hempstead. From there, they believed, prosperity would come to their hometown of Brenham. These guys were not "absentee owners or investors." They started things and then served as line employees. For example, they built two schools and served as the teachers. They were "can-do" people living in a can-do world.

They started construction in late 1858 and everyone took their first ride on April 25, 1861. Of course, it coincided with the opening of the Civil War. The Giddings boys were undeterred, and their goods reached lucrative markets. They surrounded themselves with the hard-working people of Washington County and the town thrived when other parts of the Confederacy suffered. As the prosperity came, so did bands of gunslingers and troublemakers. But plantation owners and farmers from other southern states fled there as well. Many brought slaves which caused the black population to swell. There were about 9,000 slaves in the county.



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D.C. Giddings

The Civil War ended, which in a way turned prosperity to disaster for Brenham. The cotton fields were in full bloom when the Yankees arrived to supervise Reconstruction. Former slaves would not work as field hands and the harvest rotted in the earth. The crop failures were a disastrous turn of fortune for the former boom town.

Federal Troops

General U. S. Grant had a particular mistrust of Texas. The vast size of the state meant the entire U. S. Army at its height couldn't subdue it. He was concerned Texas would turn into a lawless frontier ruled by bandits and thieves. He put General Phillip Sheridan in charge of Reconstruction on the entire Gulf Coast from Florida to the Rio Grande.



Maj Gen
P. Sheridan

Sheridan shared Grant's distaste for Texas. He was quoted often, "If I owned Texas and Hell, I would rent Texas and live in Hell." *Lil Phil* as he was known was a great combat leader in the field with regular troops. But he didn't have regulars anymore. The Yankee mamas wanted their boys home again. Sheridan had to recruit his own 50,000 men to disperse across Texas and Louisiana. Unfortunately for him and everyone else involved, all the good men were taken. He was left with the dregs of society to patrol Texas.

Brenham got stuck with Company E, Third Battalion,

Seventeenth Infantry. This group of unruly, untrained, unsupervised misfits created havoc. They were mostly black soldiers who, unlike other distinguished black units, were troublemakers. They were under the command of Brevet Major George Smith, and he allowed his men to run the streets of Brenham unsupervised, drunk, and cursing and insulting everyone, including ladies and children.



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Brenham's Fire Museum



D. C.
Giddings

Governor Throckmorton wrote President Andrew Johnson and revealed the entire truth to him. The Legislature purchased ads in regional newspapers across the country to get the truth out about martial law. Sheridan was embarrassed and alarmed, but he didn't file any criminal charges.

The Giddings Brothers built innovative cisterns in Brenham to capture rainwater for firefighting. They created a Hook and Ladder Company with a horse drawn engine to engage fire. The company of firefighters was also trained in military tactics and armed to fight arsonists – even if the arsonists wore blue coats. Federal martial law prohibited citizens in Washington County from owning firearms. The Giddings boys did not see that as a hindrance. They armed the firemen/militia.

The groundbreaking cistern and information on this fire can be accessed in Sharon Brass' book, *The Burning of Brenham*, and Toubin Park in Brenham

Disaster

Mr. Henry Foster, a black businessman, was holding a charity ball to raise funds for a school for freed children. Upstanding black citizens gathered to support the new school and have a nice time at the dance.

The drunken foolish soldiers crashed the dance and refused to pay the door donation for the school. Mr. Foster asked them to leave, and the soldiers flung insults and threats to Mr. Foster and his guests. Mr. Foster closed his dance down, but the drunken soldiers went on a wild melee around town.

They showed up at a white dance and the ensuing disturbance escalated into a riotous calamity that included a gunfight and the burning down of a large part of Brenham's business district.

The army conducted an investigation which stated the perpetrators were Texans in Union uniforms. Sheridan stood by that until he realized no outside witness statements were taken and the drunken soldiers "deserted."