

American odyssey: From Waxhaws to Texas politics

On his own by 14, man found success in Dallas

NEARBY HISTORY

Louise Pettus



John Crockett was born at sea in 1730, grew up in Pennsylvania colony, and came to the Waxhaws of Lancaster County in 1755. Several generations of Crocketts married into the McClannahan family. One member of that family tree was Robert McClannahan Crockett. He was born in 1779 and attended the Waxhaw Academy and UNC Chapel Hill.

Robert McClannahan Crockett married Elizabeth White of York District. They had 7 children. The year their second child, John McClannahan Crockett, was born (Dec. 26, 1816), Robert Crockett, "a man of enterprise and popular-

ity," was elected to the S.C. House of Representatives from Lancaster District.

When John McClannahan Crockett was 9 years old, the Franklin Academy was opened by teacher Henry Connelly from Pennsylvania. The Crockett family moved into the village of Lancasterville. John was enrolled but less than a year later, on Feb. 20, 1826, his father died at the age of 52. Two years later his mother died.

John, somehow, managed to get three more years of education at Franklin Academy where he ex-

celled, "acquiring a good English education and a fair knowledge of Latin." At the age of 14, and on his own, he was hired as a salesman and bookkeeper by a local merchant.

John M. Crockett's biography in "The Encyclopedia of the New West," refers to this period of his life this way: "With much leisure time he improved every idle moment by severe study, and made rapid progress in the acquisition of substantial and useful knowledge, abjuring all dissipation."

When his employer's business failed, young Crockett moved on to Camden where he found employment with a Mr. Lanier at a cotton-buying house. In 1836, he joined a sister and brother-in-law in Troy, Obion County, Tenn., where many fellow Carolinians had emigrated. There he found a

friend of his youth, Catherine Polk, whose father had moved their family from the York District Indian Land, and married her in March 1837.

John Crockett bought a farm and prospered, but he yearned for more. In 1841, he began a 2-year apprenticeship in reading law with Samuel Cochran. He learned law but made the mistake of lending money to someone who could not repay him. Carrying a debt of \$9,000, Crockett took up school teaching for 10 months.

Seeking a better life, Crockett made his way to Texas, found work as a bookkeeper but "despite medical aid and starvation diet, continued to fail, till a portion of his baggage, including a splendid violin, arrived."

He was a skilled violinist and owned the only violin in a large

area. His violin-playing created such a demand for his services that he was well-paid and "finding his health rapidly improving, he devoted himself to music and dancing."

John and Catherine (they had no children) rode into Dallas, Texas, on horseback, April 1, 1848. He was 31 years old. The Mexican War had ended barely 2 months before, on Feb. 2, 1848. Texas was now a part of the United States.

There were no more than 50 people living in Dallas. The Crocketts lived in a log cabin that served as both office and bedroom. John's brother-in-law, William H. Hord, was district judge and appointed John a deputy county clerk. In 1851, he was elected to the Texas state legislature.

Dallas was incorporated in 1856

and John Crockett became its second mayor and served until 1860. During that time he also served as a meteorological observer for the Smithsonian Institution. Like his father, he was an active Mason. Next, John Crockett was elected lieutenant governor of Texas (1861-1863).

In the post-Civil War period, Crockett retired to his farm but remained active in various enterprises.

John Crockett died Dec. 30, 1887, and is buried in the Pioneer Cemetery in downtown Dallas. In 1996, a Texas Historical Grave Marker was placed at his burial site.

Louise Pettus is a retired Winthrop University history professor. Her column appears Sundays.

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