

## **Native American Confrontations, Civil War and Higher Education: East Texas of 1840-1870**

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The years of the 1840 have unprecedented hardships, particularly for the citizens from Tennessee, Mississippi, Georgia and the Carolinas. The southern states were hard hit by the northern created tariff of 1828; known in the south as the “Tariff of Abominations.” This tariff, created to protect northern industrial interest caused widespread concern in the south. Increasing the cost of cotton to the markets in England, the English sought cotton elsewhere around the world (McNamara, 2013). Yellow fever and malaria were ever present dangers along the coastal cities of the south. Cholera and smallpox were constant companions and regularly visited the farmers and city dwellers. Mortality rates were high and, a child born in a southern city had only a 50% chance of surviving to adulthood (Stella, nd.) Determined to make new lives for themselves and their children, these pioneers moved to the wild woods of East Texas.

Larissa, Native American confrontation, Larissa College, Killough Massacre, Thomas Rusk, Cholera, Malaria, East Texas

### **Introduction**

In Theodore Roosevelt’s(1899) classic speech, “The Strenuous Life,” Roosevelt gave his impressions on adversity:

The highest form of success ... comes, not to the man who desires mere easy peace, but to the man who does not shrink from danger, from hardship, or from bitter toil, and who out of these wins the splendid ultimate triumph.(p.1)

The year of the 1840’s continued unprecedented hardships, particularly for the citizens from Tennessee, Mississippi, Georgia and the Carolinas. The southern states were hard hit by the northern created tariff of

1828; known in the south as the “Tariff of Abominations.” This tariff, created to protect northern industrial interest caused widespread concern in the south. Increasing the cost of cotton to the markets in England, the English sought cotton elsewhere around the world (McNamara, 2013). Yellow fever and malaria were ever present dangers along the coastal cities of the south. Cholera and smallpox were constant companions and regularly visited the farmers and city dwellers. Mortality rates were high and, a child born in a southern city had only a 50% chance of surviving to adulthood (Stella, nd.)

Determined to make new lives for themselves and their children, these pioneers moved to the wild woods of East Texas. Adversity was their constant companion as they bundled their families and all of their belongings into wagons of wood and canvas and set out from all that they had known, traveling toward the far horizon and what they believed would be a better life.

This paper will examine the desires and dreams to bring to the wildwood of East Texas a semblance of life they left behind, in their home states. It will document their challenge to create a new community and educational opportunity, as well as the untimely failure of the group of people determined to seek and achieve the “splendid ultimate triumph” Roosevelt later spoke. I draw my narrative of Larissa from the written accounts of those nearest to the events. It is my hope to show the ever-present determination of those in our past, those who sought a better life for themselves and their children and who pursued that life in the development of a town and a local college. This paper will show how, while the desires and hopes for the town and college provided the sparks for action, adversity ultimately stood in their way and put out the dreams of these pioneers.

### **The Story Begins: Settling Larissa**

Nellie Jean Evans, in her 1941 Master’s thesis *A History of Larissa College*, provides an idyllic description of East Texas in the 1840s:

If it were possible to step backward for more than one hundred years, and look at that part of Texas which was one day to be Cherokee county, the picture would be one of great beauty. The changes in the land have been due to the upward march of civilization that has brought an increase [in] population and advancement in industry. But the land . . . was rolling hills covered with pine, oak, and mulberry trees, fertile valleys whose soil changed from a rich, red clay to a sandy loam watered by many creeks and small rivers. (p.26)

Evans’s (1941) description goes on to end with the words, “the land was a veritable paradise” (p.26). The description reads like one in a travel brochure or travel guide, but not one a traveler would have wished to depend on as he slowly moved his family to a new land. The description is remarkable, with its colorful and serenely painted words, but Evans needed the brush of reality across her canvas to give the story of Larissa’s settlers and the picture of what they met in East Texas the ring of truth.

The true picture, as described by Robert Bernstein, in his article, *Public Health* (n.d.), is one of stark contrast to the one painted by Evans. Hunger and disease were ever-present. The smallpox epidemic of 1831-1834 had devastated the local Native American populations. In 1841, Yellow Fever arrived and claimed many lives of all races, natives and settlers alike. By 1847, the first of the world pandemics of influenza arrived and again claimed many.

During this period, wide areas of land in East Texas were under title dispute, challenged by the area’s Native Americans as well as by the local Mexican population. The Mexican government, of the time, promised land to Eastern immigrants, but did not produce formal title (Kios, 2013). As the courts began to rule against the two groups’ vigilantism, pioneers’ claims became the law of the day.

The picture of East Texas of the 1840s was stark and hostile; yet, the pioneers came in their canvas and wood wagons with hope for a better future for themselves and their children.

### **Pioneers and the Killough Massacre**

In 1837, families from Alabama and other states began to arrive in East Texas. The Killough Colony became an active community of farmers determined to make a living from the red and black soil of East Texas. In Ford and Brown's (1951) book describing the early days in East Texas, Killough Colony is described as being forty miles from the nearest white settlement, Fort Lacy (p. 27). Evans (1941) writes that it took great courage for these colonists to build their cabins and cultivate the soil (p. 27). The families settling in East Texas were well aware that the indigenous population did not accept the pioneers, and that the natives resented the settlers' presence on what they considered to be their land (Whittington, 2005). The George W. Woods, C.O. Williams's family and other families nevertheless arrived in East Texas, built cabins and cultivated the soil, all facing ever-present hostility from the natives (Evans, p.27).

By 1838, hostile relations between the settlers and the natives had reached a level of extreme combustibility. Ford & Brown (1951) simply state that "the Indians were giving them trouble" (p.17). But the amount of trouble the settlers were facing was more remarkable than the official record was letting on. For protection, the little colony moved its small population to nearby Nacogdoches and remained there for the better part of 1838 (Evans, p.27). Historical documentation of this time is scarce, but Ford and Brown (1951) and Nellie Jean Evans (1941) both imply that peace negotiations were attempted and that a peace treaty was signed (Ford & Brown, p. 17; Evans, p. 27). The families of Killough Colony returned to their cabins and farms later in the fall to harvest their crops. Ford, Brown and Evans indicate that the peace treaty did not hold, but there is no clear written explanation as to why hostilities broke out. It seems that, while the men were in the fields harvesting their crops, some angry Cherokee "fired from ambush" (Evans, 1941, p. 27). Eighteen men and boys were killed or taken prisoner (Ford & Brown, 1951, p. 18). Ford and Brown's book and Evans's thesis both give a list of the casualties of the attacks and the ultimate destruction to private property. Cabins were burned and crops destroyed, and the remaining colonists retreated to Fort Lacy. Ford & Brown (1951) included a petition written by Nathaniel Killough to the House of Representatives and the Senate of the Republic of Texas. In this petition, Mr. Killough lists those killed in the massacre, the property, lost cattle and houses, as well as the monetary value of each. Mr. Killough then requests payment by the republic for these losses (p. 23-25).

Late in the fall of 1838, General Thomas J. Rusk, newly arrived from Georgia, began a military campaign against the Cherokee. Rusk's campaign ended in a decisive victory at the Battle of Kickapoo Village in East Texas. On July 16 and 17 of 1839, in the wake of Rusk's victory in East Texas, the land claims for the settlers were finalized (Hawkins, 2001, p.739).

It is intriguing to note the differences in the details of the massacre between the writings of Ford and Brown (1951) and Evans (1941). While both authors sought to provide written documents describing the firsthand accounts of hostilities perpetrated on the settlers by the natives, only Ford and Brown's (1951) *Larissa* adds the information that hostilities were between the white settlers and the combined forces of the local Cherokee—including settlers who had been adopted into the local tribe—and Mexican populations (p. 22).

### **The Township of Larissa**

Evans (1941) reflects on the resiliency of the pioneer spirit in the face of adversity, writing that "even Indian massacres could not daunt the pioneer's desire for settlement of new lands, and in the next ten years, the country that had once been the scene of a bitter tragedy... also [became] the scene of the founding of a town" (p. 28). By 1846, the Larissa Township was surveyed and a town square was designated (Evans, 1941, p.31).

In the midst of peace, prosperity and growth, a brief struggle for supremacy began between the township of Larissa and another town several yards away, a town by the name of Talladega. Evans (1941) remarks that a man named Jesse Durin opened a saloon in Talladega. The Reverend T.N. McKee of Larissa, seeing the growth of his small community threatened—both morally and financially—did not cease in his efforts to annihilate the influence of the other town, and, as a result, the villagers moved back to Larissa, making Durin's saloon-based town of Talladega short-lived. (Evans, 1941, p.32).

### **Larissa's First School**

The day-to-day struggles of Larissa never dampened the settlers' desire to educate their children. The early pioneers had traveled from states that had prided themselves in higher education, and this pride carried into the wildwood of East Texas. The community group, predominately Presbyterian, created the first school for the township of Larissa in 1847. The small one-room school prospered under the direction of Sarah Rebecca Erwin (Evans, 1941, p.36). The next teacher on record was Reverend T.N. McKee, the same McKee who preached against the township of Talladega for having a saloon (Evans, p. 32). It was with Reverend McKee's active participation that not just the township of Larissa, but the town's school as well, grew. Reverend McKee referred to Larissa's little school as "his school" and "spent much time in arousing interest [in the school]" (Evans, 1941, p.37).

Rapid growth in the community of Larissa during the years of 1847 through 1855 created the desire in community leaders to further the educational opportunities of their children. Records show that Thomas McKee and Nathaniel Killough both donated \$1,000 to the community to build a permanent building for the Larissa school. (Evans, 1941, p.37; Ford & Brown, 1951, p. 32). Evans (1941) describes the building as a two-story frame structure made of pine timber (p. 37). She goes on to say the building faced the south, and it stood on a hill overlooking the village (Evans, 1941, p. 37). This area is now heavily wooded, and all signs of the community structures that had once stood there are gone. Evans (1941) records the first teacher for the new building as J. A Zinn (p.38), but Ford and Brown (1951) imply that there were several teachers before Zinn (p.11). By 1854, the community and school reached such a point of growth that it was decided to seek permanent status for its little school, and settlers approached the Brazos Presbyterian Synod for a charter as an academy. Synod records of the time indicate that the academy at Larissa, Texas had an excellent building, a good teacher and thirty-five pupils (Evans, 1941, p. 38). The record further indicates that the building was worth \$1,000 (Evans, 1941, p. 38).

Less than two years went by before the community again approached the Synod, presenting it with a request for a charter to establish a college (Evans, 1941, p.38). In less than ten years, the community of Larissa went from having a one-room schoolhouse to having a chartered Texas college (Evans, 1941, p.39). Though the new college was chartered under the Brazos Presbyterian Synod, it was open to students of all faiths. The community leaders of Larissa created a permanent fund amounting to \$7,000, and had \$1,900 for building purposes. The Synod records further indicate that the building was complete and in excellent condition by 1856 (Evans, 1941, p.39).

### **Larissa's Township**

The town of Larissa was located just seven miles northwest of the present East Texas town of Jacksonville, in Cherokee County. At the time of the establishment of the college, it supported a town square with many community buildings. The first dry-goods store was built by Christine Rierson, a man who had emigrated from Norway. S.L. McKee had a mercantile business and the first hotel (Evans, 1941, p. 32). The hotel was two stories with a tall pole in front, bearing the one word "inn" in gilded letters (Evans, 1941, p. 32). There were also several wood-working shops, general stores, dry-goods stores and a blacksmith shop, all

located around the town square (Evans, 1941, p. 32). The town had its own lodge of Free and Accepted Masons, with a roll call of sixty-six members (Ford & Brown, 1951, p. 151).

### **Larissa College: 1855**

Ford and Brown do not describe the Larissa College building, either inside or out, so we have only Evans to rely on for details. Luckily Evans's thesis gives a detailed description. Evans (1941) talked to a Monroe Hall, who described the building to her (p. 41). It is well worth the read to understand the texture and feel of the school by this description:

The frame building, two stories high, was weathered boarded. Its dimensions were approximately fifty by ninety feet. The only entrance to the lower floor was in the end of the house that faced the south. Above the door were windows, the second floor was reached by an outside stairway built on the side of the house. One of the old settlers of Mt. Selman, (Monroe Hall) who climbed the stairway as a little boy, said that the outside stairs never ceased to hold a fascination for him. An old picture of the college building revealed that there were ten windows on one side, and presumably there would have been about the same number on the other side. The shingled roof formed two steep gables topped by a belfry in its center. The belfry was ornate in comparison with the severe lines of the other part of the building. It looked like a small square top hat balanced on the wearer's head. Two tiny windows admitted light. A balustrade with four corner posts higher than the rail completed the belfry.

The inside of the main building was roughly finished. The second floor was divided into several rooms, two being used as laboratories of chemistry and natural and physical science. In the lower floor, there were no partitions. This floor was used as a study room and also it was used for recitation purposes. At one end of this long hall, there was a raised platform, used as a stage, and at the rear of the stage were dressing rooms. (Evans, 1941, p. 41-42)

Few pictures survive of the actual building, and only a small portion of its foundation still exists. The precise nature and size of the building is in dispute. An article in the "Portal to Texas History" describes the frame building at three stories with two large dormitories ("Ghost Towns of East Texas," Dick King, 1953). The two principal sources of information used for King's (1953) article, however, are vague and do not provide a thorough overall description. Suffice to say the size of the college complex was large for its day.

While written college catalogs of the time are rare, those that do exist indicate a robust and large campus. The Fifth Annual Announcement of the Trustees of Larissa College for the Collegiate Year 1859-60 describes a college with twenty-six members on the Board of Visitors, eleven members on the Board of Trustees (one deceased but still on the rolls), four faculty (with one vacancy, the professor of Ancient Languages), eighty-one male students and forty-five female students (Ford & Brown, 1951, p. 50-60).

One of the major contributions the college made to the community was in the purchase and use of a large telescope. Many articles mention this scientific device located in the wilds of East Texas, as an important legacy of Larissa College. As King (1953) notes in his "Ghost Town of Texas" article, "the college's telescope was three times as powerful as that of Yale University..." (p. 98). Ford and Brown (1951) describe the telescope as magnifying 2,500 to 160,000 times more than the telescope at Yale College, a telescope that was proudly hailed at the time as the "the most powerful South of Mason and Dixon's Line" (p. 61).

The actual history of the purchase of the telescope for Larissa, as with most history of the college, is wrapped in myth and conjecture. Ford and Brown (1951) speculate that the telescope was purchased in 1859-60 (p. 43). The telescope was made by Dr. Henry Fitz of New York; it was made in the United States at the cost of seven hundred dollars, and was made specifically for Larissa College (Ford & Brown, 1951, p. 43). The historical record gets somewhat convoluted in regard to who paid for the telescope. Historical notes

seem to imply that the telescope was purchased by the then-President of Larissa, Dr. F. L. Yoakum (Ford & Brown, 1951, p.85). Though Ford and Brown (1951) clearly make reference to a purchase, it is Evans (1941) who clarifies the story lines. Writing of the “various stories being told regarding the telescope,” Evans documents that a former student—Ben Long of Bullard, Texas—said that Yoakum sold a slave for \$1,000, and with this money paid for the telescope (p. 64). Ford and Brown (1951) have a chapter in their book entitled “The Big Telescope;” but in spite of providing the description, date, purchase and placement of the instrument, they do not clearly identify where the funds were acquired for the purchase (p. 43). A small section in the book draws the reader’s attention to a quote from “Speaker Ben Long, Bullard, Texas July 4, 1915” (Ford & Brown, 1951, p. 126). Here is the exact quotation:

About the telescope, it is my belief that Dr. Yoakum bought the telescope himself. He had a Negro boy they called Daniel, and when they were buying that telescope, old Dr. Yoakum got my father to take that Negro to Louisiana to sell him in order to buy a telescope, and I think he got \$1,000 for the Negro. I know my father took him off and sold him. I was there in college when they sold him, and I was under the impression that the doctor paid for the telescope himself. I know he sent that Negro boy off, saying that if the trustees did not buy a telescope, he would, and the only way he had to buy it was to sell a Negro. (p.126)

As a final note and description, in regards to the telescope, Evans (1941) records that it was eight feet long and four inches in diameter (p. 68). As with many things of the past, even a great telescope purchased for a college is now lost to history and time.

### **Storm Clouds Gather Around Larissa College**

J.B. Harris, then president of the Larissa Board of Trustees, ended the year of 1856 with these words:

There is danger, when the stars are right and omens are good, of two [sic] much reliance being placed on what we have and see and of trusting to a good beginning for the ends to be obtained, but we feel that we cannot too strongly urge upon you, and all the friends of Science and Religion, their very necessary prayer, patronage, and contributions to aid us in sustaining our well begun and progressive enterprise. (Evans, 1941, p.46)

In the beginning, the college had a strong female student population, and the country folks around the college supported the education of their daughters. There was a change by 1857, just two years into the life of the college. It is up to readers to carefully study the two leading articles and piece together what happened to the robust female student population in just two years, and to extrapolate the reason for the population’s ultimate decline. In the written material of the Brazos Synod, there is notice of the size of the ministerial students on campus (Evans, 1941, p.46). Dr. F.C. King remarked to the Synod of 1856, “I fear that there are more Ministers of the Gospel directly connected with the school than Heaven will approbate their being there” (Ford & Brown, 1951, p. 39).

Evans (1941) does not attempt to clearly define what occurred that made for the loss of the female students at Larissa College, but working through the quotes, recollections and other items within both Evans’s (1941) piece and Ford and Brown’s (1951) book allows a clearer picture to come into view. Evans (1941) wrote of a “decline” in the Female Department, and the program for women at Larissa College was suspended in 1857 (p.72). Yet Evans (1941) does not provide any direct information as to why this suspension occurred. Ford and Brown (1951), on the other hand, reflect on a letter by Mrs. John Wade of Mt. Selman, written in 1915. In Wade’s letter, she writes on the subject of the loss of the female students:

Miss Joiner was a native of the State of Vermont, a woman of thorough culture and of many and varied talents and attainments...For about three years, if I mistake not, she held her position as principal for our school, and it strengthened and grew in usefulness and interest under her energetic and efficient

management and control, but the year preceding the war, when sectional prejudice grew to white heat and men and women almost lost the power of sane reasoning, this brave and tireless worker was expelled from her chosen field of labor because of her Northern birth and her different social and political views. (Ford & Brown, 1951, p.151)

As one reads through the material, the information seems to imply two possible scenarios that might explain the loss of the female students. One is that the growth of the ministerial students in a male dominated religious institution of its time crowded out the female students, and the other explanation is that the removal of the only female teacher for her political views on the eve of the Civil War led to a female exodus from the college. Further study and more historical documentation are yet to be discovered to give a clear reason. It is clear, however, with reference to Wade's 1915 letter, that "...the year preceding the war, when sectional prejudice grew to white heat and men and women almost lost the power of sane reasoning" had much to do with the context for this loss of female students (Ford & Brown, 1951, p. 151).

A final remark is noteworthy here: in 1855, Reverend D. S. Crawford was the Principal of the Female Department (Evans, 1941, p. 58). Evans (1941) records that "he enlisted in the Confederate Army where he served the duration of the Civil War in Hood's Brigade" (p. 60). As Wade remarked in her letter, the sectional prejudice produced a white heat that caused the loss of sane reasoning; and the above information about Reverend Crawford seems to shed additional light on the loss of Joiner, a loss that seems to have been so pivotal to the suspension of the Female Department.

### **Setting Larissa College's Course of Study**

Evans (1941) describes the course of study at Larissa College as follows:

The Collegiate Department of Larissa College was divided into four classes; namely, freshman, sophomore, junior, and senior. In the Conspectus of Studies and Text books found in the 1859-1860 catalogue of the College, the following studies and texts were listed for the Collegiate Department: mathematics (Davies), Latin (Bullion's Reader, Caesar, Virgil, Sallust, Cicero, Horace, Tacitus), Greek (Bullion's Reader and Grammar, Gracia Majora), French (Ollendorf's System), Spanish (Velasquez's Reader, Don Quixote), natural and physical science, natural philosophy (Wells), Geology (Hitchcock), mineralogy (Dana), astronomy (Olmstead), botany (Gray), animal physiology [sic] (Hitchcock), moral science (Leatherman), mental science (Watts and Abercombie), rhetoric (Quackenbos), logic (Hedge). (Evans, 1941, p. 62)

The reader needs to remember this was East Texas of the 1850s. The course of study was extensive and challenging, an impressive feat tackled by the country people of Larissa who studied there. All textbooks were ordered and supplied from a publishing house in New York (Evans, 1941, p. 62). Ford and Brown (1951) speak with clarity of the course of study and go into some detail about the faculty engaged in constructing of Geological and Mineralogical museums and the development of a library (p.43). Ford and Brown (1951) also give us a copy of the "Fifth Annual Announcement of the Trustees of Larissa College . . . for the Collegiate Year 1859-60" (p.50-59).

These summaries of course material, unfortunately, are all we have to rely on for our understanding of the college. There was only one catalog available to this researcher; and, with the demise of the college in 1860, there was little time to create more documentation to preserve the college for posterity. The year 1860, when Larissa College closed its doors, saw a premature halt a growing and thriving learning institution in the wild woods of East Texas.

### **Larissa College Faces Suspension**

There was only one graduating class for the small college, the class of 1860. Ford and Brown (1951) give us the actual Graduation Address of that year, an address delivered by two prominent students. The beauty of the written word is a wonderful read, and the record of the two students' speech beckons the reader back to a more genteel style of writing. Both students' addresses can be read in their entirety in Ford and Brown's (1951) book on the history of Larissa (p. 62-72).

In poetic prose, Evans (1941) writes of the demise of the college in the midst of the nation's call to war:

Then, just at the peak of prosperity, disaster came. The Civil War engulfed the South, and the high hopes for the future of Larissa College were never realized. The manhood of the south forsook all and followed the battle cry. Teachers, as well as pupils of Larissa, joined in the great struggle. (p. 74)

Evans tells us that Larissa College reached its zenith in June of 1860, with its first commencement. She tells us that the enrollment for the year had been one hundred and thirty-four and that the reestablishment of the Female Department had been a success (Evans, 1941, p. 74). However, the Civil War brought a halt to the successful growth of the college. Evans (1941) remarks, "the manhood of the South forsook all and followed the battle cry (p. 74).

On February 1, 1861, Texans voted to secede from the Union. General P.G.T. Beauregard fired upon Fort Sumter on April 12, 1861, thus "officially" starting the Civil War. It wasn't long before Larissa College closed its doors.

### **Larissa College into the Ages**

In 1865, an attempt was made to reopen Larissa College. Indeed, "all omens pointed toward a revival of interest. Yet, it was beginning again, for the period for the war had taken heavy toll of the youth of Larissa and the surrounding territory" (Evans, 1941, p. 75). A lack of support from the Brazos Synod, along with the student-siphoning growth of the University of Texas and the political desire to move Larissa College and all of its material to another site were all impediments to reopening Larissa College (Ford & Brown, 1951, p. 82-83). From this point on, the existence of Larissa College became a test of wills between Dr. F. L. Yoakum (its original President) and members of the Brazos Synod to consolidate all existing material and funds (Evans, 1941, p. 77). By 1867, thanks in large part to the Larissa-eclipsing efforts of J.B. Renfro (who devoted his entire life to the creation of Trinity University), the light of East Texas's Larissa College in East Texas grew exceedingly dim (Evans, 1941, p. 76).

Larissa College's final days were concurrent with the opening of Trinity University in San Antonio. Ford and Brown (1951) tell us that "the big telescope, other scientific equipment together with the collection of Geological specimens were donated and transferred to Trinity University" (p. 85). It is also worth noting that "Dr. Yoakum was paid for his many contributions to Larissa in the amount of \$300.00, in gold" (Ford & Brown, 1951, p. 85). Material—such as small telescopes, magic lanterns, other instruments and a collection of fifty volumes—moved from Larissa College to Trinity University (Ford & Brown, 1951, p. 85).

### **Larissa College Today**

The pioneers of the late 1830s of East Texas proudly worked to create a better life for themselves and their children. They created a school from its humble beginnings of a one-room log cabin to a light of the promise of higher education in the wild woods. They had struggled through hostile attacks, skirmishes, disease and, ultimately, war. Through all of this, they had prevailed. It took the desire of others to remove their dream and leave them with the bitterness of loss.

Today, where once stood a thriving community of pioneers with shops, stores, hotels and a college is now nothing but heavy woods and open fields. Little remains of the community of Larissa or its college except a small state historical marker on the side of the road. We can take comfort in remembering these brave souls. In studying about them, writing about them, speaking their names and deeds back into the twenty-first century air, we can once again give them credit for their struggles. We take comfort in their challenges and with the understanding of their determination; we can look more resolutely upon our own lives and learn to face adversity.

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