

In late 1862, Sam Houston might have sat on the steep steps leading up to the front doors of his home, an odd folly of a structure known in Huntsville as the Steamboat House, and announced to his assembled household that he was freeing his slaves.

Or he might not have.

The only credible source for the event is a published recollection nearly 80 years later of Jeff Hamilton, who at the time would have been a young enslaved man. Given the possibility that Hamilton's memory of that long-ago day might have been iffy at the age of nearly 100 and that Houston's will, probated soon after his death several months later, would still list his several slaves as personal property, it's entirely possible that the private emancipation proclamation never happened.

Even if it had, Houston surely would have foreseen the outcome of the Civil War and the inevitability that his slaves would be set free, in any event. Plus, he would have known that the Texas Constitution, having been hastily revamped upon entry into the Confederacy, expressly forbade the manumission of slaves. So, he might have staged the whole thing to assure his slaves that they would soon be liberated.

In short, we don't know what happened that day, if anything did.

But we do know a good many other things.

We know Houston was conflicted about the concept of slavery. He showed an uncommon kindness to his own slaves, making sure they were provided for and lived in clean quarters. He was quick to voice a low opinion of slaveowners who were cruel taskmasters. He allowed his slaves to keep the wages they made doing odd jobs in town (an unheard of policy then), and he taught some to read, which was against the law in Texas.

But, always a pragmatist, he also understood how inextricably entwined the institution was to the economic infrastructure of the South.

And we know that he, when serving as one of the first two senators sent to Washington from the new state of Texas, stood with only one other Southern senator in opposition to the introduction of slavery into new western states.

We know that there is no record in the personal recollections of his former slaves, his acquaintances or his enemies (he had plenty of those) that he ever mistreated his slaves. Only once did he whip one, when a young Hamilton caused Houston's daughter Nanny to fall into a pond during a bit of horseplay. Hamilton always maintained that he deserved it, and it would have taken more than a spanking to dislodge his devotion to the man who had purchased him when he had been 13. Houston had shown up in town while a man was in the process of selling Hamilton, so he could pay for several barrels of whiskey that had already been consumed. When Houston learned that Hamilton, then a child, would become the property of a scoundrel known for mistreating slaves, he outbid him and took Hamilton home, where he became almost a member of the family.

Still, there is no excuse for keeping human beings in bondage.

And it is a sticking point for those of us who admire Sam Houston that he could have been such a vocal proponent of the inherent rights of Native Americans and not raised his voice more adamantly when it came to chattel slavery.

Local news focused last week on a group claiming to be committed to having the iconic statue of Houston in Hermann Park removed, though it turned out to be a hoax instigated by people solely interested in stirring up anger and trouble.

Even so, I would invite anyone who considered joining any such crusade to read one or more of the biographies of the man you might feel opposed to.

Better yet, drive up to Huntsville, and visit the Sam Houston Memorial Museum, the finest repository of all things Houston in existence. Learn about what he stood for and what he stood against. More importantly, learn about the things he did for Texas, for the entire Southwest and for the nation.

He had his faults, the most significant of which would have to be his not taking a stand against the institution which he believed to be morally wrong.

But weigh that fault against his deeds and his sacrifices. Against leading the army that won Texas' independence and later handing the state into the federal union to which he was so dedicated that he refused to take an oath of allegiance to the Confederacy, costing him the governorship of Texas and sending him into virtual exile at the end of his life.

Taking down a statue is a relatively easy task.

It will be significant harder erasing the memory of a man who, more than any other single person, won the state you live in with his actions and, at San Jacinto, with his blood.

Ron Rozelle's newest book, *Exiled: The Last Days of Sam Houston*, will be published by Texas A&M University Press this November.

Bookmark Gray Matters. Learn about what it stands for and what it stands against.

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