

Texas Ranger Tales

by Mike Cox



More than a century-and-a-half after the fact, the Texas Rangers have been dragged into an episode called the Archives War.

History is what happened in the past, but later generations get to change that history if they want to. That's certainly happened with the Archives War, a long-ago incident rooted in fact that later day wordsmiths have seen fit to graft with legend.

First, the facts:

In 1842, Mexico invaded Texas twice, each time briefly holding San Antonio. The military action amounted more to punitive expeditions than full-scale takeover attempts, but citizens of the new Republic of Texas felt a justified concern.

President Sam Houston, invoking executive power, ordered the capital at Austin vacated. Most of the citizenry, fearing occupation by Mexican troops, didn't need a message from Houston to leave the frontier town. Only a dozen or so Austin-as-capital stalwarts remained.

The crisis with Mexico blew over, but Houston had never liked Austin as the seat of government. In fact, he referred to it as "that damned hole."

But the records of the republic, its archives, had been left in the hole when government officials pulled out. The few diehards who had stayed in Austin correctly figured that as long as they possessed the young nation's papers, they possessed the capital.

Houston understood the same thing. He issued secret orders to veteran Indian fighters Thomas I. Smith and Eli Chandler to raise a militia company of men from Milam and Robertson counties to seize the records and take them to Washington-on-the-Brazos, which had offered itself as the new capital.

A vigorous norther blew on the morning of Dec. 30, 1842 as three big wagons escorted by a score or so of

armed men moved up Congress Avenue. When they reached the log building that served as the republic's Land Office, the militiamen began loading boxes of records into the ox-drawn wagons.

Now, the legend:

Angelina Belle Eberly, who ran a boarding house, happened to be up and sounded the alarm by touching off a loaded cannon kept on Congress Avenue for use in case of Indian attack.

Back to fact: Someone fired the cannon, which had been loaded with grape shot, in the general direction of the Land Office and Houston's men. No one was hurt, but the log cabin had a few pieces of iron imbedded in its timbers.

With 10 boxes of government records, Houston's henchmen hastily headed out of town. They made it as far as Brushy Creek, about 20 miles to the north, before a posse of Austin men caught up with them the next day. Smith, realizing he was outnumbered, could see no need for unpleasantness on New Year's Eve. He agreed to return the records to Austin.

Back in Austin, as a journalist who probably had known some of the participants later wrote, "The scene was a rich and rare one when the returning victors were met and welcomed by the ladies of Austin." He went on to write that the "archive warriors" were honored by the women "not only with their smiles and embraces, but with their loudest huzzas of approbation."

Houston knew when he was beat, and backed off on his attempt to get the government out of Austin. It has been the capital ever since.

One hundred and sixty-two years later, on Sept. 25, 2004, many times more people than even lived in Austin in 1842 gathered on

Congress Avenue for the dedication of a 7-foot tall, 2,200 pound statue honoring Eberly and the cannon she supposedly fired.

Legend again:

News stories about the new piece of public art referred to the militiamen who tried to remove the government records as Texas Rangers, even though they were specifically recruited as militiamen, not Rangers. Smith had earlier served as a Ranger, but to call the company that rode to Austin on Houston's orders Rangers is a stretch.

In fact, referring to the archives raiders as Rangers is about as accurate as calling Eberly a lady. She did run a boarding house (as a matter of fact, Houston had stayed there) but to use a modern word, for an additional charge the rooms she rented could be "upgraded" with an accommodating female.

The late historian A.E. Skinner, researching the archives incident in 1981, could find no contemporary account that Eberly had any significant role in the affair other than storing the papers once they were returned to Austin. Not until 1875 did a writer claim that she fired the cannon, and all subsequent accounts seem to have been built on that version.

"So long as mankind continues to drive its dark trade in heroes (and in heroines)," Skinner wrote of the Eberly-and-the-cannon tale, "we can only offer...that most damning verdict of Scottish law – NOT PROVEN."

Whatever the truth, the story of the Archives War with Angelina Eberly as heroine has now been cast in bronze for all time.