

Robert Elijah Neill

(1827 - 1878)



Texas Ranger Cross Dedication
20 October 2007

Brite Cemetery
Atascosa County, Texas

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(1827-1878)

ROBERT ELIJAH NEILL, son of John A. Neill and Hester R Humphreys,¹ was born in Williamson County, Tennessee, 6 January 1827. He died in Atascosa County, Texas, 22 August 1878, and is buried in the Brite Cemetery, east of Leming, Atascosa County.² Robert married in Caldwell County, Texas, 14 November 1850, **ELIZABETH SHELTON**,³ born in Morgan County, Illinois, 21 September 1828,⁴ a daughter of Johnston Shelton and Sarah “Sallie” Fergerson.⁵ Elizabeth died 3 July 1894,⁶ and is buried in the Brite Cemetery, alongside her husband.

Robert E. Neill was approximately four years old in 1831 when he left Tennessee and entered the Mexican State of Coahuila y Tejas with his parents, John A. and Hester R. (Humphreys) Neill. They settled on Plum Creek, near present-day Lockhart in the DeWitt Colony.⁷ By the age of nine, it appears Robert was already helping with the operation of the family grist mill on Plum Creek. In the spring of 1836, Capt. Mathew Caldwell came to the Neill mill to order corn meal to be ground for the Texas Army. While operating the mill “in said employ,” young Robert’s left arm, from shoulder to elbow, was crushed in the mill’s machinery. The arm was later said to have “perished away.”⁸ By way of compensation, young Robert, then aged 12 years, was later granted one league of land by the Republic of Texas.⁹ Because of circumstances beyond the control of either Robert or his father, the grant certificate expired before it could be executed. It was reinstated on 11 February 1850, when the State legislature passed “An act for the Relief of Robert E. Neill.”¹⁰ Robert soon transferred this grant to Matthew Cartwright. His “withered arm” did not keep him from participating fully in life on the Texas frontier.

During the War with Mexico, Robert enlisted as a private in Captain Highsmith’s Company of the 1st Regiment of Texas Mounted Volunteers, under Col. John Coffee Hays. He mustered in to

¹ John A. Neill will (1846), Probate File #194, Gonzales County Archives, Gonzales, Texas; Letter from B. J. Fullilove, County Clerk, Gonzales County, Texas to Mrs. C. R. Porter (aka Marcy Porter), 20 August 1975; held in 2006 by Porter, 4311 Arapajo St., Pasadena, TX 77504. Letter was a response to query regarding John A. Neill’s probate.

² Robert E. Neill (Sr.) tombstone, Brite Cemetery, Atascosa County, Texas

³ Caldwell County Marriage Book A: 24, Office of the Caldwell County Clerk, Lockhart, Texas.

⁴ Elizabeth Neill, tombstone, Brite Cemetery, Atascosa County, Texas (approx. 6 mi NE of Pleasanton), read and photographed by the author, 25 December 1996.

⁵ Johnston Shelton household, 1850 U. S. Census, Caldwell County, Texas, page 467b, dwelling 109, family 109, National Archives Micropublication M432, roll 909.

⁶ Elizabeth Neill tombstone.

⁷ Texas General Land Office Spanish Collection, Box 30, Folder 22; “DeWitt’s Colony,” 165.

⁸ “Neill, Robert E. Petition for Land, January 1850.”

⁹ “Neill, Robert E. Petition for Land, January 1850.”

¹⁰ “Neill, Robert E. Petition for Land, January 1850”, Memorials and Petitions, Records of the Legislature, Archives and Information Services Division, Texas State Library and Archives Commission., Austin, Texas.

serve for a term of one year at Austin on 10 May 1847, and mustered out at Enchanted Rock, south of Fredericksburg, on 18 May 1848. His occupation was still shown as “soldier” in 1850.¹¹

Robert and Elizabeth Neill began their move to southern Bexar (now Atascosa) County by December 1853. They brought with them Robert’s mother and his brothers Sam and Ben, but left behind the graves of Robert’s father John and brother Marcus on the old home place on Plum Creek. Survey number 1101 of 320 acres in District 6, on the waters of the Atascosa River about twenty-five miles south of San Antonio, was completed for Robert E. Neill on 23 August 1854.¹² The Neill property was situated just to the north of property owned by Thomas R Brite. Robert E. Neill later purchased that property, which included the present Brite Cemetery, from Brite’s sons. Robert’s mother, Hester, was buried in the cemetery in 1865, while the Brites still owned the property.

Robert E. Neill served in the Texas Rangers on at least two more occasions after the Mexican War. On 6 August 1855, he joined Captain Levi English’s Company of Mounted Rangers for the Protection of the Western Frontier as a private. His service encompassed the full life of the company, from 6 August 1855 to 13 November 1855.¹³ The Company muster list, compiled and signed by Capt. English, states that the company was organized at the members’ expense.¹⁴ A monthly payroll sheet accompanies the muster list. Although undated, the names on the pay roll are identical to the muster list. It shows that Robert E. Neill received \$11 per month for his own service, and an additional \$12 per month for his horse.

In 1859, Texas Gov. Runnels approved the formation of bands of mounted volunteers to deal with disturbances along the Rio Grande caused by the Mexican bandit Cortina. On 12 November 1859, Robert again joined up, this time serving as a private under Capt. Peter Tumlinson.¹⁵ This unit defeated Cortina at Rio Grande City, 27 December 1859.¹⁶ They later fought in the Battle of La Bolsa Bend on 4 February 1860.¹⁷ Robert apparently mustered out shortly after this encounter. The fortunes of the State of Texas seem to have improved since the time of his previous enlistment, as Robert was paid \$12 per month for his own service and \$16 for the use of his horse. The clothing allowance was \$3.33, and the combined forage and subsistence allowance was \$29.40. He received mileage pay in the amount of \$13.25.¹⁸

¹¹ 1850 U. S. Census, Caldwell County, Texas, population schedule, page 461, dwelling 57, family 57.

¹² Bexar 3rd Class Pre-emption File No. 4636, Texas General Land Office, Austin, Texas.

¹³ Dan Kilgore, *A Ranger Legacy*, (Austin, Texas: Madrona Press, 1975) : 46.

¹⁴ “A List of the Names of Capt. English Company of Mounted Men, Organized 6 August 1855 at their own Expense for the protection of the western frontier...” 1 Dec 1855, Pre-Civil War Ranger Records, 1846-1862, Ranger Records, Texas Adjutant General’s Department., Archives and Information Services Division, Texas State Library and Archives Commission, Austin.

¹⁵ “Non Commissioned Officers and Men of Capt. Peter Tumlinson’s Company of Mounted Volunteers in the Service of the State for the Suppression of the Cortina Disturbances on the Rio Grande...” Pre-Civil War Ranger Records, 1846-1862, Ranger Records, Texas Adjutant General’s Department., Archives and Information Services Division, Texas State Library and Archives Commission, Austin, Texas.

¹⁶ Kilgore, *A Ranger Legacy*: 46

¹⁷ John Salmon Ford, *Rip Ford’s Texas*, (Austin, University of Texas Press, 1990), 283.

¹⁸ “...Capt. Peter Tumlinson’s Company of Mounted Volunteers... Suppression of the Cortina Disturbances...”

During the Civil War, Robert E. Neill served as 1st Lieutenant, Atascosa County Mounted Minute Men, Texas State Troops, enlisting with his younger brother Ben at Pleasanton, Atascosa County, on 7 May 1861.¹⁹ Ben and their brother Sam were later attached to the Confederate Army, but Robert apparently stayed in Atascosa County. After the war, Robert was allowed to register to vote in 1867.²⁰

Robert never held any public office, serving his neighbors quietly. His name appears in the early court minutes of Atascosa County as he fulfilled civic duties, and served for a while as a court-appointed guardian for two minor boys whose father had died. That he had faith in the inherent goodness of his fellow-man is probably best illustrated by a story that his great-granddaughter, Dieliew (Neill) Williams Eddy, once related :

Shortly after the move to what would become Atascosa County, Robert decided that his family needed a good house. At the time, the nearest port of entry for necessary materials was at Indianola. A teamster in the area regularly hauled freight to and from that port. Robert contacted the man and gave him a bill of goods and an amount of money in the range of \$500. The man and his wagon and team left for Indianola. Upon his return, the teamster failed to make delivery of the goods that Robert had ordered. When Robert inquired about his goods or his money, the teamster apologized and explained that he had neither, having squandered the money. Robert's only reaction was to request that the teamster let him know when he planned to make another trip to Indianola. Within a few weeks, the man let Robert know he was about to make the trip once more. Robert again gave him the bill of goods, and another \$500. This time, the teamster came through, delivering Robert's building materials and some change, and proving worthy of the faith Robert had shown by giving him a second chance.²¹

Robert E. Neill lived in difficult times. Although handicapped in a manner that would be difficult to deal with even in this day and age, he managed to support his family and serve with his neighbors against the inherent dangers of frontier life. We are honored to be able to dedicate the Ranger Cross in his memory.

¹⁹ Robt. E. Neill entry, Confederate Index (card file). Texas State Archives, Austin.

²⁰ 1867 Texas Voter Registration, microphotocopy RMD202, (Austin : The Texas State Library, State Records Center, 1987), reel 1: 69.

²¹ Interview, Dieliew (Neill) Williams Eddy to Marcy (Williams) Porter, 4 July 1975.