



Message from the President

Katherine Goldberg

It is an impossible task to catalog all the stories and events in the lives of our ancestors. In all honesty, I sometimes have trouble remembering all of the events that have occurred in my life, both personal and the larger national or international events that we all live through. Every once in a while, when researching a Polley history trail, I come across some unique intersection of time a place that makes putting together the pieces of the story so fascinating.

For one example, when Brit Bailey's family came ashore on Galveston in 1818, the island was under the control of the pirate Jean Lafitte, and it was called Little Campeche. Lafitte's time on the island was just a short couple of years, but it was a significant moment in the 19th Century clash of empires, as Napoleon's short control of Spain showed the Latin American colonies that Spain's weakness could be exploited for their own independence. The pirate Lafitte was a spy for the Spanish (among his many nefarious activities) in the Mexican War for Independence. In the same year that the Baileys arrived, a large camp of Napoleon's (now living in exile) supporters were camped in Galveston, hoping to start a colony in Texas. Mary Augusta Bailey, the future Polley matriarch, was just a 9 year old girl as she crossed Little Campeche within sight of Lafitte's famous Maison Rouge (Red House).

There are countless examples of these moments when the family's history meets up with well-known historical moments. Sometimes the family plays a direct role in shaping the events, such as Bailey's settlement in Texas being formative in the early years of Austin's colony. More often, we see how our ancestors were shaped by the times they lived through. Knowing about the wars, natural disasters, societal changes, revolutions, migrations, and more that they experienced, we can give so much shape to our understanding of how our ancestors lived, and what influenced their choices.



October Sunrise over the Heritage Garden at Polley Mansion

It is good to remember that our ancestors lived real lives, in real places, affected by real events, and it is a joy to make connections between the family stories that we know so well and the historic events that were going on all around them.

We, too, are shaped by the events of our era in history. And yet, we still have so much in common with our ancestors. We love our families, we worry about our kids, we fight over politics, we grieve the loss of dear friends, we celebrate milestones, we suffer through bad weather, we move around for new opportunities, we toil over tough tasks, we ache after a hard day's work, we savor a good meal, and we toast to the future. We are not so different in our humanity.

While we don't have Jean Lafitte and Napoleon in 2024, those fascinating historical connections are what keep us searching for more...wanting to feel connected to the people who came before us, alive in such extraordinary times.

John Grammer: Friend & Legend



John Grammer

On April 1, 2024, John Grammer passed away in Nacogdoches, Texas. John and his wife Shirley were instrumental in locating, cleaning up, restoring, and caring for the Polley Cemetery in Wilson County, Texas.

After serving in the military, John came home to Texas and began working in the oil fields, and eventually with investors purchased

and successfully developed the Linne Oil field in Sutherland Springs, Texas. John and Shirley were avid historians who loved to discover and preserve local history, including cemetery restoration and attaining numerous historical markers for Wilson County.

In 2005, the Grammers, along with local friends began the clean up and restoration of the Polley family cemetery on FM 539, across the highway from the Polley Mansion. Our Polley Association exists because of the work of John and Shirley who took the lead in caring for the cemetery and gathering together Polley descendants who could carry on that work into the future.

John was an honest and patriotic man loved by all. He was kind, humble, and generous to all who knew him. His words were good on a handshake. He will be greatly missed.

Polley Family Cemetery

The primary function of the Polley Association is to keep the Polley Family Cemetery in good order, and we are happy to report that the cemetery is in good shape.

We thank all of our members for your generosity and commitment to preserving our Polley family legacy.

For a list of who is buried in the Polley Cemetery, visit www.PolleyAssociation.org/polley-family-cemetery

Join Us in Membership!

Your membership is important and your dues help the association to preserve the legacy of Joseph H. Polley and his family. Association dues remain at \$25.00 for the year, and we would appreciate payment by July 15th. You can do this by credit card online by going to www.PolleyAssociation.org/get-involved, or you can mail a check to:

Melissa Lingwall
3326 Dunes Circle
Montgomery, Texas 77356



This Polley Association newsletter serves as an annual communication to Association members, but it also highlights current Polley Mansion renovations, Polley family research, and Polley descendant gatherings. It is a connection point for all descendants and friends who are kin to the cause of preserving the history of this pioneering Texas family. If you enjoy receiving this newsletter, please consider membership in the association that helps us to do this important work!



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Updates from Polley Mansion

Keith and Robin Muschalek continue their restoration of the Polley Mansion, highlighting the historic home, natural landscape, and gathering spaces on the property. Updates from this past year include:

- Painting the front left parlor a sage color to match the sage that they have found on almost all of the wood surfaces. They discovered small copper tacks on the ceiling every few inches in that room that indicate a material once hung on the ceiling. This is the only room in which the tacks have been found.
- Rebuilding the back porch upper deck and lower ceiling because of rot.
- Pouring concrete in half of the old barn and creating another gathering area, complete with a rustic bar that was built and gifted to them by one the neighbors.
- Hosting a site as part of the **National Nature Challenge** on April 28th. People walked the property and documented any signs of nature...plants, animals, insects, etc. on the iNaturalist app. Almost 2,000 observations were collected on 775 species in Wilson County (the Polley footprint was one of three sites).
- The Heritage Garden in back of the Polley Mansion was certified as a **National Wildlife Federation wildlife habitat**.
- The Muschaleks continue to provide tours to people who request to see the mansion, including last year some Polley family descendants from the Joseph Egbert line that hailed all the way from California!

Friends of the Polley Mansion

If you would like to contribute to the ongoing restoration and care of the Polley Mansion, you may send a donation to the **Friends of the Polley Mansion**, a non-profit organization, set up by Keith and Robin Muschalek. This is a separate entity from the Polley Association. All donations are used for the care, maintenance, and improvement of the Polley Mansion.

Optional donation card enclosed.



Left: Robin and Keith Muschalek

Lower Left: Wildlife Habitat designation for Heritage Garden

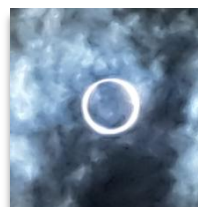
Bottom: New concrete in old barn.



Solar Eclipse of 2023

On October 14, 2023, a small band of Polley descendants gathered with the Muschaleks at the Polley Mansion to view the annular solar eclipse.

After some patchy clouds threatened to turn our watch party/picnic into just a picnic, we got lucky with a good view right as the ring around the sun was at its most perfect. It is always a treat to gather with friends and family at the Polley Mansion, and with a little solar excitement thrown in, a great time was had by all.



*Viewing the Annular Solar Eclipse (Ring of Fire)
October 2023*



Enslaved People of Whitehall

Melinda Creech presented an exhibit at the Sutherland Springs Historical Museum on Saturday, February 3, 2024, entitled "The Enslaved People of the Polley Mansion, Whitehall, Sutherland Springs, Texas, 1836-1865."

The exhibit was honored by a record number of visitors. It gives a biographical sketch of each of the people enslaved by the Polleys and honors their memory with a unique historic Texas quilt square. Although the stories of the Polley family have been preserved through the family archives located at the Briscoe Center for American History, the Daughters of the Republic of Texas Museum and Library, various other libraries, museums, and archives, family publications, newspaper articles, and legal documents, the stories of the enslaved people that built and maintained Whitehall are untold. A glimpse into the tenacity, strength, resilience, and fortitude of the lives of the enslaved at the Polley Mansion has been stitched together from Slave Schedules, Census Records, J. B. Polley's "Historical Reminiscences" newspaper articles, Josephine Golson's Bailey's Light, Deed and Tax Records, Cemetery Records, Death Certificates, and local history books.

A copy of the exhibit now hangs in the dining room of the Polley Mansion. The exhibit was covered by KSAT News San Antonio and received with interest by the San Antonio African American Community and Museum, the San Antonio Office of Historical Preservation, and several African American scholars in the area.

We have added the exhibit images and biographical sketches to the Polley Association website for those far and near to view and learn about the people who were so integral to life at Whitehall. Visit www.PolleyAssociation.org/enslaved-people-at-polley-mansion



Melinda Creech
presenting her work at
the Sutherland Springs
Historical Museum



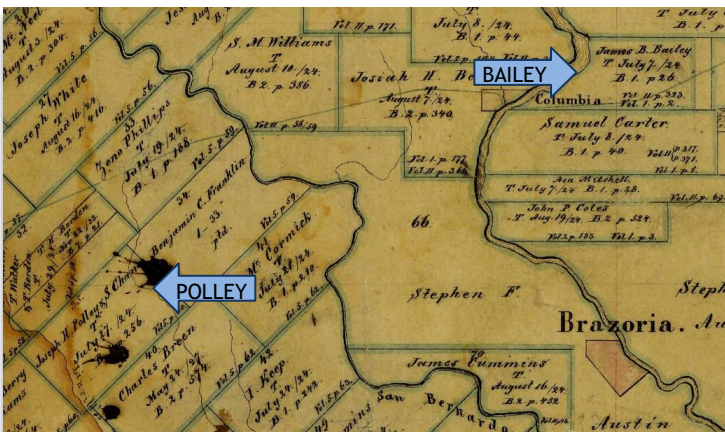
Bicentennial Connections

As mentioned in previous newsletters, the history community in the state of Texas will be celebrating many bicentennial milestones in the coming years, leading up to the 2036 bicentennial of Independence from Mexico. As we know, many people had settled in Texas in the preceding decades, The Bailey family, and Joseph Polley among them.

In fact, 2024 marks the anniversary of the first official land grants issued by Stephen F. Austin to the settlers in his colony. Families had started arriving as early as 1821-22, but the Mexican Independence from Spain necessitated Austin's trip to Mexico City to once again secure the right to settle families in SE Texas.

Brit Bailey almost did not receive a grant, as he preceded the colony and Austin thought him a character of ill-repute. We are not sure how that conflict was resolved, but by July 7, 1824, Brit Bailey received his grant from the first batch of land grants issued. Polley received two grants, one in combination with Samuel Chance, near modern day Old Ocean, Texas, and another on his own, which now forms the northern border of Brazos Bend State Park.

You can learn more about these land grants and other bicentennial milestones on our blog at www.PolleyAssociation.org/news-1



Polley's shared land grant and Bailey's Grant in Brazoria County, Texas
Polley's other grant was located in Fort Bend County.

What Brought Joseph Henry Polley to Texas in 1821?

We know that Joseph Polley was born and raised in Whitehall, New York in late 1700's and early 1800's. He was a teamster in the War of 1812 (he would have been aged 17-19 during the war). The teamsters were men, and very often teenage boys, who would run ox-carts of supplies. But what did Joseph Polley do after the war? How did he end up near Natchitoches, Louisiana in 1821 where he would meet up with Stephen F. Austin as the latter journeyed to Texas to begin his famous colony?

While we do not have any definitive answers to this question, one possibility lies almost 10,000 miles away in Indonesia. On April 10, 1815, the volcano known as Mount Tambora exploded 148,000 feet into the air. This massive explosion, which lasted for six months, put so much volcanic matter into the atmosphere, that the sun was limited, and even blocked out, in many places around the northern hemisphere for years. In fact, the following year, 1816, is known as the "year without a summer" because the atmosphere was so hazy, that the sun never fully warmed the earth that year. Heavy snow storms hit New York in June, with "ice as thick as window glass" seen on Independence Day. One source recorded that "frozen birds fell from the trees" in Upstate New York.

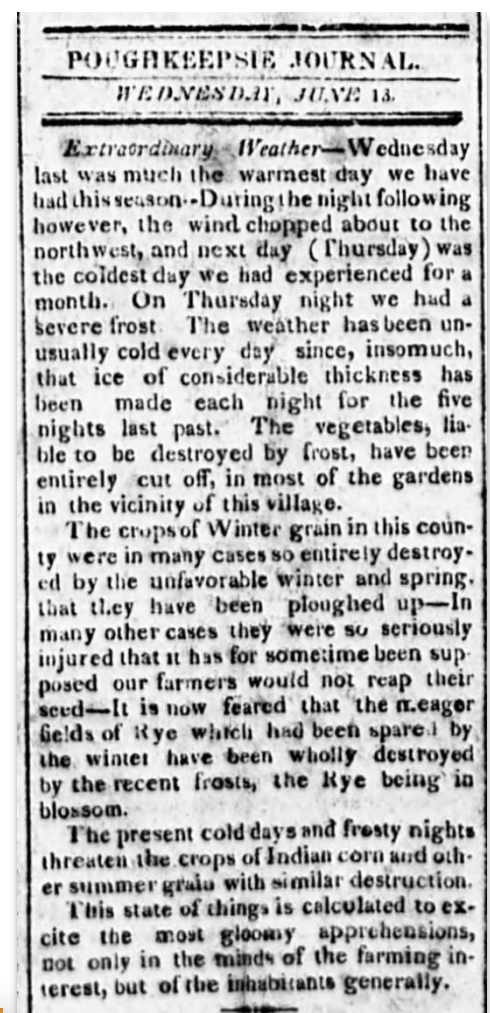
Crops failed across the region, and the resulting hunger and poverty affected so many people that a great wave of emigration left the northeast of the United States. This "Great Migration," as it was called, lasted from 1815 to 1819, as tens of thousands of people headed to warmer climates. It would be many years before people understood that the 'year without a summer' was a direct result of the volcanic explosion on the other side of the world.

Our young Joseph Polley was a man of 20 years when the volcanic eruption began. While he was the oldest son in the family, carving out a successful start to life on his own under such harsh natural conditions was going to be difficult at best. It is likely that he joined the many thousands of people seeking a better opportunity in lower latitudes. What specifically drove him to Louisiana remains a mystery.

We do know that on July 17, 1821, Joseph Henry Polley joined up with Stephen F. Austin as Austin travelled on the Camino Real to San Antonio to secure his father's Spanish land grant to settle 300 families in Texas. Polley is mentioned in Austin's diary a couple of times, including on July 28th when, "Mr. Polly killed a fine Buck this morning." The young man was proving himself to be useful and was developing a reputation that would serve him well in Austin's colony.



1816 Image that circulated widely in New England publications.



Above: 1816 Article from Poughkeepsie, NY, 150 miles south of Whitehall, NY



Left: Two paintings by JMW Turner, British artist, who studied the vivid sunsets in England in the aftermath of the Tambora blast (due to so much volcanic ash in the atmosphere).

Whatever the Weather

We see how the Mount Tambora Volcanic explosion might have led to Joseph Polley leaving home for warmer opportunities. However, landing in Southeast Texas did not relieve him of the tribulations that weather can bring. We tend to think of the heat and humidity as being the worst part of Southeast Texas weather, but the Bailey and Polley families survived through far more than just sweaty summers.

Hurricanes

*When the Bailey family arrived to Galveston Island in 1818, they saw “the mast of a wrecked schooner which was stranded on the sand on one of the highest points of the Island.” How did a schooner get wrecked on the highest part of the island? Well, on September 12, 1818, a major hurricane passed over Galveston Island. In the aftermath, only 6 structures (out of a reported 200) were left on the island. This also tells us that the Baileys pioneering journey from Eastern Tennessee to Texas, which began in March of 1818, took over six months.

*The hurricanes of 1837 (the famous Racer’s Storm), 1839, and 1842 were all felt by the Polley family living along the banks of the Brazos River, just 25 miles inland from the Gulf.

Winter Cold

*In 1821, a polar vortex reached its icy tentacles down to the Texas Gulf Coast as the famous “Mother of Texas” Jane Long recorded that on Christmas Day of 1821, Galveston Bay was frozen over, and the ice was so thick that she saw a black bear standing on it. While black bears were common in Southeast Texas before vast settlement pushed them out, a frozen Galveston Bay was quite the oddity.

In late December 1821, Stephen F. Austin had come back into Texas on his second trip, and noted how bitterly cold it was on New Year’s Day. The ship he was supposed to meet at the mouth of the Colorado River, the famous schooner *Lively*, recorded stormy weather as they passed the Galveston area, which may be why they were set off course and found the Brazos River, instead of the Colorado, a mishap which became bit of Texas history lore.

The Baileys in Brazoria County, and Joseph Polley, if he was in Texas at this time (We are still tracking his exact whereabouts) would have certainly contended with this extreme cold.

*Four days before Mary Augusta Bailey Polley passed away in 1888, an extreme cold blast hit Texas, bringing sub-freezing temps to the region. We do not know if this

hastened her passing, but it would have been a struggle to stay warm in her final days.

Flooding

*The Brazos River flooded for miles around in 1833 and 1842. The Polleys lived very near the banks of the river during these events. Bailey’s Light records that the Polleys second child, James Bailey Polley died in the first flood. His death is recorded in August of 1834, which was after the great flood. He may have drowned in the river, or died from the various sicknesses that affected all members of the family for months.

As you can imagine, in an agrarian society, floods take out crops, livestock, wildlife, homes, infrastructure...everything. People suffered greatly from a lack of food, proper shelter, mosquito and water-borne illnesses, and general despair. Yet, within a strong community of hardy pioneers, the people band together, take care of each other, and they move forward. It is, however, not surprising that we hear that Mrs. Polley looked forward to moving out West to get away from all of the water and weather related dangers of the Texas Gulf Coast.



Great Ways to Connect



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