

STILLMAN, CHARLES

STILLMAN, CHARLES (1810–1875). Charles Stillman, son of Francis and Harriet (Robbins) Stillman, was born at Wethersfield, Connecticut, on November 4, 1810. In February 1828 he went by way of New Orleans to Matamoros. In Mexico he developed a network of mercantile and industrial enterprises, including cotton brokerage and real estate firms, silver mines in Nuevo León and Tamaulipas, merchandise outlets, a shipping company that carried passengers and goods from the Gulf Coast up the river as far as Rio Grande City, and an off-loading, warehousing, and transportation company that carried goods to the Mexican interior as far as Guadalajara. Stillman and his partner, José Morell, established retailing outlets and founded one of the first textile factories at Monterrey. Stillman's Vallecillo mines, between Laredo and Monterrey, produced more than \$4 million in silver and lead during the 1850s, and he sold their stock on the New York Stock Exchange.

During the **Mexican War** Richard King and **Mifflin Kenedy** joined Stillman in the transport company hauling American troops up the river and supplying them. In the aftermath of the Mexican defeat Stillman purchased massive properties of the Garza grant north and northwest of Matamoros from the children of the first wife of José Narciso Cavazos. The sellers, however, had no legal right to make such a sale, since their father had remarried and the heirs of his second wife, led by the eldest son, **Juan N. Cortina**, inherited the land from their father upon his death. The excluded children of the first wife "sold" not only the family estates but also the ejido or community property of

STILLMAN, CHARLES

Matamoros, which was inalienable under Spanish and Mexican law. Nevertheless, Stillman started a town company to sell lots for as much as \$1,500 each and named the place Brownsville. By 1850 a population of between 3,000 and 4,000 had concentrated there. Stillman later sold the enormous ranch property north of Brownsville to his partner Kenedy. The lands to the west of Brownsville were left to his son, **James Stillman**. As a result of land transactions and rising violence, many of the Mexicans fled south of the river and, led by Cortina, carried out a range war that continued for twenty-six years. In 1851 Stillman helped bankroll the attempted invasion of Mexico by José María Carbajal^{qv} for the purpose of setting up the Republic of the Sierra Madre, which was to extend from Matamoros and Tampico inland to Monterrey, Saltillo, and Nuevo Laredo.

Between 1862 and 1865 Stillman, King, and Kenedy transported Confederate cotton to Matamoros under contract for payment in gold. Stillman bought much of the cotton and sent it to his textile complex at Monterrey, but he sold even more of it in New York through his mercantile firm, Smith and Dunning. The United States government was a major purchaser. On one sale at Manhattan Stillman netted \$18,851 on a gross of \$21,504. His cotton buyers in Texas included **George W. Brackenridge**, and one of his major suppliers was **Thomas William House**. By the end of the war Stillman was one of the richest men in America. He concentrated his investments in the National City Bank of New York, which his son James later controlled, and supplied Brackenridge with \$200,000 in the 1870s in order to establish the San

STILLMAN, CHARLES

Antonio National Bank. Stillman married Elizabeth Pamela Goodrich of Wethersfield, Connecticut, on August 17, 1849. He built a notable home in Brownsville in 1850 and lived in Brownsville and New York City until 1866, when he moved permanently to New York. He died there in December 1875.

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John Mason Hart

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As Stillman's Ranch House Is Set Up Here, Let's Not Forget The Shadier Parts Of History

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By [Juan Montoya](#)

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At the time that the Brownsville Independent School District board of trustees decided to name a new elementary school after Brownsville “founder” Charles Stillman, Eliceo Muñoz cast the only dissenting vote.

You see, Cheo had a personal beef with naming the school after the Connecticut Yankee who came to South Texas and cleaned up on land and riches at the expense of the local yokels.

One of his ancestors – one Miguel Salinas – was the real owner of the tract of land where Ft. Browns and the original town site was located. This Salinas had purchased the land from the original owners (Doña Josefa Cavazos) and had a legitimate title, which Stillman did not. In fact. Salinas operated the ferry service which Stillman coveted and – with the help of the military and the newly-arrived U.S. authorities – stole from Salinas.

Cheo, like those of us who read the three-part Sunday series by local fairy tale writer Carl Chilton, probably can't believe the fabrications and contortions of logic that this coffee-table writer has made up to glorify this filibuster.

A Wikipedia article written by John Mason Hart states that even before the Mexican-American War, the United States Government was looking to build a permanent Fort along the Rio Grande River. Charles Stillman having acquired questionable deeds from squatters on the land offered to lease it to the Government to build a fort.

As Stillman's Ranch House Is Set Up Here, Let's Not Forget The Shadier Parts Of History

This land was part of the Espiritu Santo Land Grant but due to a complication involving the owners not listing the land with the Mexican or Texas Government, a land dispute ensued which reached the U.S. Supreme Court.

To make a long story short, the original title held by Josefa Cavazos – and the heirs of Miguel Salinas – were upheld numerous times by the State of Texas and U.S. courts, but legal maneuvering by Stillman's representatives ended up with the U.S. government paying Stillman \$160,000 for the land with which he was to share with at least 12 to 15 other claimants.

To his credit, Stillman not only cheated the Cavazos and Salinas heirs out of their share, but stiffed his own attorneys also . He was the original equal-opportunity offender.

Try as you might, you won't find that out if you read Chilton's fable. Hart's article is much more revealing and goes thus:

“In the aftermath of the Mexican defeat Stillman purchased massive properties of the Garza grant north and northwest of Matamoros from the children of the first wife of José Narciso Cavazos. The sellers, however, had no legal right to make such a sale, since their father had remarried and the heirs of his second wife, led by the eldest son, Juan N. Cortina, inherited the land from their father upon his death. The excluded children of the first wife ‘sold’ not only the family estates but also the ejido or community property of Matamoros, which was inalienable under Spanish and Mexican law. Nevertheless, Stillman started a town company to sell lots for as much as \$1,500 each and named the place Brownsville.”

The land which was less than a mile from the Fort was also disputed. Stillman offered the Cavazos family \$33,000 for their land even though

As Stillman's Ranch House Is Set Up Here, Let's Not Forget The Shadier Parts Of History

it was worth \$214,000. The Cavazos family accepted the offer to avoid paying legal fees. However, Stillman never paid the Cavazos family the \$33,000 for the land (Takaki, 1993). Since the land belonged to the heirs of his second marriage, this was one of the reasons the "Cortinas Wars" happened.

Shortly before the Civil War Stillman hired a clerk by the name of Francisco Yturria who would become an instrumental partner to Richard King, Mifflin Kenedy and Co. during the Civil War. Yturria, being born in Matamoros, could register boats under Mexico allowing them to fly the Mexican flag. Since Mexico was a neutral country American ships blockading the Texas Coast could not board Stillman's ships.

Yturria also worked with Stillman, King, and Kenedy to dispossess countless Mexican-Americans of their land. For that, he was duly rewarded by the trio. That was the origin of the Yturria Ranch.

Stillman, King and Kenedy arranged for bales of cotton to be sent to Brownsville where it was ferried across the Rio Grande to Matamoros. It should be noted that the Rio Grande could not be blockaded as it was an international border and would have caused an incident with the Mexican Government. Despite Union Forces capturing Brownsville in 1863 and 1864 smuggling cotton was still a profitable venture.

Let's leave old "Don Carlos" there. He was a thief, a smuggler, and a turncoat who made a fortune stealing people's land and selling to both sides during the Civil War which meant profiting from the death of young Union and Confederate soldiers.

According to historian Hart, "between 1862 and 1865 Stillman, King, and Kenedy transported Confederate cotton to Matamoros under contract for payment in gold. Stillman bought much of the cotton and

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sent it to his textile complex at Monterrey, but he sold even more of it in New York through his mercantile firm, Smith and Dunning.

The United States government was a major purchaser. On one sale at Manhattan Stillman netted \$18,851 on a gross of \$21,504. His cotton buyers in Texas included George W. Brackenridge, and one of his major suppliers was Thomas William House.

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And an added footnote here: The land for Annie S. Putegnat Elementary and Washington Park were not “donated” to the people of Brownsville by Charles. They were instead “legally released” by his attorneys. In other words, they were not his to “donate.”

It is fitting that Ahumada, and now Martinez, should recognize the contributions of the Stillmans to the current development of Brownsville. But it is also fitting and proper that a full airing of his deeds that affected so many local Hispanic families should counterbalance the honors.