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THE PROMISED LAND - A HISTORY OF BROWN COUNTY, TEXAS

by James C. White

"Father of Brownwood"

GREENLEAF FISK is a name that is engraved indelibly upon the tablets of Brown County's history, and is known throughout West Texas where his descendants have settled during the past eighty years. The title, "Father of Brownwood" has been given to him because he established the present site of the city and gave a large acreage to the town site. Supplementing this gift which obviously was inspired in part by the purpose of gain, because he owned a tremendous acreage contiguous to the town, he gave many years of intelligent and faithful service to the city and county.

Judge Fisk had a romantic career. Born in Albany, New York, May 19, 1807, he began at the age of twenty years to prepare for entrance into the ministry of the Presbyterian church, after securing a liberal education in ordinary academic subjects. He spent one year at Lane's Theological Seminary at Cincinnati, and then went to Hanover college at Hanover, Indiana for further study.

At this period of his life the Austin colonization scheme in Texas was taking tangible shape. Many families from the settled areas of the East and middle West were moving toward this section and marvelous tales of adventure were in circulation. The orderly procedure of the classroom was entirely lacking in glamour, and young Fisk, and a companion, finally decided they would seek their fortunes in the new land.

Embarking in a skiff on the Ohio River, the two young men started to Texas, reaching this Territory while the Mexican flag was still flying, and while the colonists were beginning the long series of negotiations, which ended finally in their declaration of independence.

What became of his companion in adventure is not known, but Fisk settled at Bastrop, and after a time married Miss Mary A. Manlove there.

When Houston organized his small army and the war for Texas independence was begun, Fisk went with the great liberator to San Jacinto, and was one of the valiant patriots engaged in that historic battle April 21, 1836. After this history-making engagement, the soldiers of Houston began returning to their homes, to reestablish civil life in the new Republic of Texas. Fisk went back to Bastrop, to find that during his absence of a year his wife and her family had fled before the Mexicans to east of the Sabine river.

After a long search he found her and with her his first born son, almost a year old, who had been born during his long absence with the Texas army. Returning to Bastrop, the family rebuilt their home. Fisk sought and obtained election as a Senator of the Republic of Texas, and the record shows that he served faithfully and well. Later he moved to Williamson County, and it appears that he lived there until his removal to Brown County in 1860.

In 1838 Fisk visited this territory, looking over the vast area with a view to selecting his land grant to which he was entitled because of his service at San Jacinto. In 1846 he made a rather detailed survey of portions of Brown county, and on the 8th day of December, 1846, received a grant signed by J. Pinckney Henderson, giving him title to 1280 acres of land, known as the Marcus Hulen survey, in Brown county. A copy of this original land grant is in the possession of Mrs. O. B. Porter of Brownwood, a daughter of Henry Ford. The survey includes much of the land now incorporated within the city limits of Brownwood.

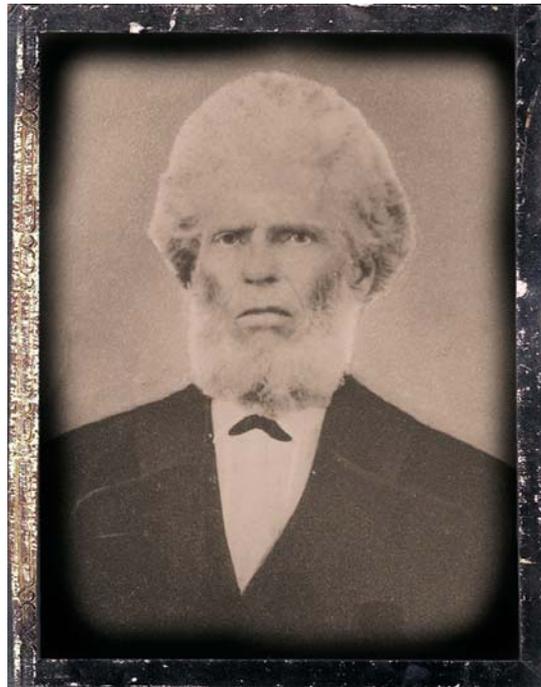
Evidently in pursuance of a project that long had been in his mind, Judge Fisk moved his family here in 1860, and camped where Milton Avenue now is. Seven children were born at Bastrop to Fisk and his first wife. His second wife was Mrs. Mary Hawkins Fisk, and to this union eight children were born. Judge Fisk was elected chief justice (county judge) of Brown county in 1862, and afterwards served as district clerk, county clerk, county treasurer and justice of the peace.

Whether he ever qualified as an attorney is not known, but his title of "Judge" came from his service in these offices. At his death in 1888, the whole town was closed and his funeral at the old First Presbyterian church, at the corner of East Anderson and Fisk Avenue, was attended by everybody who could get there. His body was laid to rest in Greenleaf cemetery, the land for which he had given to the community and which is named in his honor, as is Fisk Avenue.

Judge Fisk had lived here for several years before his project for moving the town crystalized. The first court house was built on the Chandler farm east of the Bayou, but in 1859 it was moved to the Connell farm, two miles south of the first location. A court house was built there and in 1865. The Masons added a second story to the structure, to be used as a meeting place. When title to this land appeared to be defective, Judge Fisk proposed to give a site of sixty acres for the town and a hundred acres for county purposes, if the court house were moved, along with the town, to its present location. The offer was accepted. Exact date of the removal of the town is not known, but appears to have been in the period between 1867 and 1870. Records of the transaction were destroyed when the court house burned in 1880, and a substitute deed written in 1880 Fisk mentioned "my former deed of about ten years ago."

Not content with moving merely the court house, Judge Fisk set about moving residents, too. He sold T. D. Harriss 800 acres of land adjoining the town site, lying in what is now known as "The Flats, on condition that Harriss would move his family onto the tract from their home on Stepps creek. The Harriss children were needed to support the school, and the late C. V. (Uncle Charlie) Harriss often spoke of his attendance at the school.

During the years that followed Judge Fisk bought and sold many other tracts of land in or near the original town site, and had the satisfaction of seeing the town incorporated as a city in 1877. Among the sales was the transfer of a large acreage adjoining the court house tract to Major John Y. Rankin, Brownwood's first real estate dealer and promoter, who immediately subdivided the tract and sold business blocks from it. This was Rankin's addition, which embraces the heart of the business section. Like many other early settlers, Judge Fisk in spite of the adventurous spirit which brought him to Texas and to the wilderness of Central Texas, was a well-educated scholarly gentleman with a record as a patriot, statesman, explorer, business man and far-seeing town builder. At the same time he was universally respected as a neighbor and friend, and his family relations were regarded as ideal. Truly, the "Father of Brownwood" was a man worthy of the name, and of the honor which has attached to it through the past eighty years.



First Texas Capitol Building at Houston 1837 - 1839

