

CONFEDERATE REUNION GROUNDS

state historic site

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VISITORS GUIDE

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Welcome to Confederate Reunion Grounds State Historic Site. People have gathered at this place where Jack's Creek enters the Navasota River for thousands of years. Evidence within the site suggests the earliest campers were nomadic hunter-gatherers more than 5,000 years ago. However, this property is most notable for its use by the Confederate veterans

of Limestone County for their annual reunions from 1888 through 1946. As reunions grew larger, veterans from North Texas down to Houston and across East Texas joined them. Families camped under the giant bur oaks, enjoying speeches, dances, fellowship, and food while remembering their comrades who fought and died in the Civil War.



Front cover: Living historians during the annual Civil War Living History Days event. Background: Cannons are fired by living historians during the annual Civil War Living History and Reenactment event.

TEXAS HISTORICAL COMMISSION



Left: A living historian makes cobblers in Dutch ovens.
Above: Living historians encamp during the annual Civil War Living History and Reenactment event

SOUTHERN SYMPATHIES

Southern landowners settling in the Navasota River valley brought the culture of cotton and slavery to Limestone County. In 1861, they overwhelmingly voted for secession. Although no Civil War battles were ever fought in Central Texas, three out of every four free men in Limestone County served in the Confederate army. After the war ended in 1865, the emancipation of African American slaves, the collapse of the old plantation farming system, and the imposition of martial law kept the county in turmoil for years.

The Reunion Movement

In the 1880s, Northern and Southern veterans alike wished to gather for fellowship and shared memories of their war experiences and sacrifices. Reunions captured the emotions and imaginations of many Southerners. Earlier small groups of Limestone County Confederate veterans met informally to socialize and reminisce. In 1888, they began meeting annually in this spot along Jack's Creek. The next year they organized the Joseph E. Johnston Camp of the United Confederate Veterans (UCV), named for the commander of the Army of Northern Virginia and the Army of Tennessee. The chapter became the 94th affiliate of the rapidly expanding UCV.

As many as 7,000 people attended the annual reunions held in late July or early August under a full moon. They arrived by horse, buggy, and special trains from Dallas and Houston. The Camp financed the purchase of the reunion grounds by selling camping lots to the veterans and their families. Families built summer cottages or camped in tents or brush arbors, planting crepe myrtle and irises that still bloom each spring.

Each day at dawn and dusk the veterans proudly fired "Old Val Verde," one of several Federal cannons captured by Confederates in the battle at Mansfield, Louisiana. Two of these guns saw action for the Confederates in the Louisiana campaigns with the Val Verde Battery. At the end of the war, Captain T.D. Nettles buried the two cannons under a buggy house in nearby Fairfield rather than surrender them to Union troops. Today "Old Val Verde" is on display beneath the flagpoles at the center of the historic site near the intersection of Robert E. Lee and Stonewall Jackson avenues.

During the reunions, veterans eulogized those soldiers who, in the words of General Stonewall Jackson, had "cross[ed] over the river and [now] rest under the trees." The gatherings also included parades, brass band concerts, patriotic speakers, games, and traditional Southern foods. Attendees danced the nights away on the wooden floor of the pavilion, now recognized by the National Register of Historic Places for its unusual architecture. By the end of World War I, time had taken a noticeable toll on the aging veterans. The gatherings continued, but on a smaller scale.



The Great Mexia Oil Boom

In November 1920, wildcatter Albert E. Humphreys struck oil in Limestone County. Everything changed: the county population exploded and Mexia became a boomtown at the center of one of the largest oil fields in the world. The entrepreneurial Humphreys contracted with the Joseph E. Johnston Camp 94 for water and built a pump house on Jack's Creek to supply his wells.

Affectionately known as "The Colonel," Humphreys was a devotee of Confederate history and offered to improve the Confederate Reunion Grounds. He built the Pure Oil Company clubhouse and a large bathhouse on the creek.

Miss Mamie Kennedy, one of the last officers of Camp 94, hosted lavish parties for "The Colonel" during those oil boom days. She designed and landscaped gardens leading to the "Colonel's Spring," which became known as the "flirtation walk." Eventually the membership of Camp 94 named Humphreys an honorary member in recognition of his generosity in preserving and beautifying the grounds.

By the 1930s, as the number of Confederate veterans dwindled, the reunions became smaller and less elaborate. Finally, in 1946 the charter of Camp 94 expired and the grounds fell into disuse. In the 1960s, community members began restoring the grounds, which continues today. The historic site remains a gathering place for family reunions and group activities. The Friends of the Confederate Reunion Grounds host events each year to promote awareness of the state historic site.



Built in 1893, the dance pavilion became the social center of the reunion grounds.

The Old Val Verde cannon summoned the veterans to daily activities during reunions.