

Charles C. Burch, History; Cameron Parish,
Louisiana

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CHARLES C. BURCH: EARLY SABINE LAKE STEAMBOAT CAPTAIN

By W. T. Block

During the mid-nineteenth century, cotton steamboat captains on Sabine Lake were held in high esteem in both East Texas and Louisiana, for often they were the only link between an isolated village with the outside world. Captain Charles C. Burch of Johnsons Bayou and Sabine Pass was one of those captains; in fact, there were three Burch brothers, each of whom sailed as a steamer captain on various occasions. Sherwood K. Burch was the oldest of them, having been born in New York in 1816; he was also the last of the brothers to arrive at Sabine Pass. It is believed that he traveled with his parents and the Neil McGaffey family when he was about age three to Circleville, Ohio. Charles. Burch was born in Ohio in 1823, and Increase R. Burch was born in the same state in 1820.1

The writer believes that the Burch brothers were apprenticed as cabin boys and laborers aboard the Ohio River steamers at an early age, and thus had worked their way up to such vocations as captains, mates, steam engineers, and clerks (supercargoes) by the time they reached Sabine Lake, for none of them were ever employed below those ranks in Texas.

Increase R. Burch, husband of Julia Marie McGaffey, followed his father-in-law, Neal McGaffey, to Texas about 1846. McGaffey, a lawyer, had become well-to-do for that age, having become the owner and proprietor of the new townsite of Sabine Pass. About 1849 C. C. Burch and his wife Hannah followed him, and in the 1850 Sabine Pass census, were living in the Increase Burch household. However, Hannah Burch died in 1851, probably during childbirth, and on Feb. 22, 1852 Charles Burch married Johanna Orr of Sabine Pass.²

Orr, daughter of George and Priscilla Orr, were formerly of Johnsons Bayou, but about 1822 Orr followed Henry Griffith, Reuben and Solomon Barrow to Chambers County, Texas. In 1825 Orr was appointed the Mexican "alcalde" for the Liberty Municipality, which then contained an area the size of ten present-day Southeast Texas counties. In 1826 Stephen F. Austin appointed Orr to accompany and guide John C. Williams, who had been appointed by Austin to map and chart all navigable waterways, which fed into Sabine Lake.³ By 1860 Charles and Johanna Burch were the

parents of four children, to wit, George, Elizabeth, Priscilla and Hannah.

About 1855 C. H. Ruff of Beaumont hired Charles Burch as captain aboard his steamboat, the *Mary Falvey*, which picked up cotton along the lower Neches River twice monthly. In Nov. 1859, as H. R. Green rode the *Falvey* up Pine Island Bayou to Concord, he noted that: "....Charlie Burch, her popular commander, sociable, generous, clever, is a whole team in all respects..." Green also added that the *Mary Falvey* had: "....good accommodations, excellent fare, and kind and gentlemanly officers...."* The *Falvey* was 120 feet long, weighed 298 tons, and could carry 450 bales of cotton.

In 1860 a new steamer, named the *Sabine*, arrived at Sabine Pass, it being wholly owned by the Burch brothers, and Captain Charles left his command on the *Falvey* to become pilot aboard the *Sabine*. Like the *Falvey*, the *Sabine* could also load 450 bales of cotton. Increase R. Burch became the captain; S. K. Burch became the clerk; and among others in the 15 man crew were 2 engineers; a steward, cook, and bartender; a fiddler, 2 carpenters, 3 seamen and i cabin boy. Both the *Sabine* and *Falvey* were tied up at Sabine Pass when the Civil War began in April, 1861, and the writer believes that both vessels entered the blockade-running trade, loaded with cotton.

In Nov. 1862, Ruff, who formerly owned the *Falvey*, was one of the owners of the steamer *Uncle Ben*, which was 135 feet long and could carry 1,000

bales. And when Texas' Confederate Gen. J. B. Magruder chose to arm the *Uncle Ben*, he commandeered the *Ben* and its crew into the Texas Marine Department. Ruff brought a variety of seamen aboard the *Uncle Ben* as masters, mates, and pilots, which also included Capt. C. C. Burch.

On Jan. 21, 1863, Magruder sent the armed steamboats *Uncle Ben* and *Josiah Bell* to sea to break the Sabine Pass blockade by 2 sail ships, the *Morning Light* and *Velocity*. The blockaders fled for 30 miles at sea before the slow steamers caught up and the fight began. Magruder had sent a habitual inebriate, Major Watkins, to command the engagement, but the latter lay drunk in a bed during the fight. After an hour the blockaders surrendered and were towed back to Sabine Pass. However the 32-pound guns and 400 tons of supplies on the *Morning Light* were lost when the major refused permission to kedge the vessel over the bar to safety.⁶

Sherwood K. Burch, the oldest of the brothers did not arrive in Sabine Pass until 1858, for all of his children were born in Ohio. In 1864 Increase R. Burch died, but it is unknown whether or not his death was war-related. In 1870 Julia Marie Burch was the head of her household, and her youngest child was born in 1864. In 1865 Charles Burch chose to become a farmer, so he moved Johanna and his 5 children to Johnsons Bayou. However, in the fall of each year when cotton and other produce were sent to market in Orange, the steamers *Emily P.* and *Lark* were constantly in the

Johnsons Bayou-Orange trade and the schooner Dreadnaught plied constantly in the Bayou-Galveston trade. And Charlie Burch agreed to captain the *Emily P.* until the cotton season ended.⁷

Between 1880 and the year of the storm, 1886, Johnsons Bayou enjoyed immense prosperity, with about 1,200 residents on the bayou, and 700 acres planted in cotton and 100 acres planted in sugar cane. During some years, cotton production reached 900 bales, with Ferdinand Pavell, Frederick Schmidt (my great grandfather), and Caswell Peveto owning cotton gins. Pavell also owned one of the two sugar mills located there. And as captain of the *Emily P.*, it was Burch's duty to bargain for the cotton, cattle, and other produce shipped to market.⁸

On one of his trips to Orange, the *Emily's* steam boiler exploded, and Capt. Burch was killed instantly on Jan. 28, 1884. His body was returned to Johnsons Bayou for interment, but no headstone exists there for him today.⁹

In Feb. 1873, Capt. S. K. Burch was the last of the brothers to command a steamboat named the *Comargo*, and he made voyages that year in both the Sabine and Neches rivers. In Jan. 1874, the *Comargo* struck a snag at Townsends Ferry on Angelina River and sank, a total loss.¹⁰

Nothing else is known about S. K. Burch. Julia Marie Burch resided in Beaumont for most of the remainder of her life, and her tombstone notes

that she died in 1918. Johanna Burch continued to live with her children on Johnsons Bayou, and the last information about her was in 1906 when she applied for a Confederate pension.

1 Seventh Census of the U. S., Jefferson County TX, 1850, .200; Eighth Census, 1860, Jefferson County, res. 327,328, 392.

2 Seventh Census, 1850, res. 200; "The 1850 Census," Texas Gulf Historical and Biographical Record, (May 1972), p. 116.

3 Pension Application of Johanna Burch, 1906, Louisians State Archives; W. T. Block, "History of Jefferson County, Texas from Wilderness to Reconstruction," (Nederland, 1976), p. 19.

4 "Beaumont in the 1850s: Extracts from the Writings of Henry R. Green," Texas Gulf Historical and Biographical Record, XI (Nov. 1975), pp. 61-62.

5 W. T. Block, "Cotton Bales, Keelboats, and Sternwheelers," (Woodville: Dogwood Press, 1995), p. 50.

6 Ibid., pp. 64-68.

7 Pension Application of Johanna Burch 1906; 1960 Sabine Pass census, S. K. Burch, res. 328; 9th U. S. Census, 1870, Cameron Parish, La., res. 210-244.

8 "Oct. 12, 1887: The Night that Johnson Bayou Died," Beaumont Enterprise, Oct. 10, 1979.

9 Pension Application of Johanna Burch, 1906, Louisiana State Archives.

10 (Galv.) Weekly News, June 26, 1871, June 29, 1875; Galv. Tri-Weekly News, Jan. 10, 1872.