



THE HANDBOOK OF TEXAS **Online**

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NOLAN EXPEDITIONS. In the decade between 1791 and 1801 four expeditions were made to Texas from neighboring Spanish Louisiana under the leadership of Philip Nolan.^{qv} Due to Nolan's links with the nefarious Gen. James Wilkinson,^{qv} these expeditions are generally considered to have had a political character and were regarded by early historians as filibusters. In view of the lack of documentary evidence, however, these expeditions are more correctly described as horse-catching operations motivated by personal profit rather than as revolutionary efforts to free Texas from the rule of Spain. Nolan made his first entry in 1791, armed with a passport from the governor of Louisiana (Esteban Miró) and bringing a small quantity of trade goods. He was viewed with suspicion by the Texas authorities, and his goods were confiscated. Nolan then spent two years among the Comanches and other northern tribes above the Spanish settlements. He turned hunter, sold skins, and captured fifty wild horses, which he drove to Louisiana in late

1793 or early 1794. There are virtually no records documenting his activities during this three-year period, but subsequent events show that Nolan had made some valuable contacts in Texas and had favorably impressed officials like Governor Manuel Muñoz.^{9v} Nolan was back in Nacogdoches by June 1794, this time with a passport from Miró's successor, the Baron de Carondelet, to secure horses for the Louisiana militia regiment. He made inquiries relative to introducing trade goods for the Texas Indians and evidently reached a confidential understanding of some sort with Governor Muñoz. By January 1796 Nolan had returned to New Orleans with 250 horses, the best of which he sold at Natchez and Frankfort, Kentucky. He confided with Wilkinson and received a shipment of Spanish silver for him from a secret agent (Thomas Power) before again turning his attention to Texas. In July 1797 Nolan departed on his third expedition, having won the favor of Governor Manuel Gayoso de Lemos^{9v} at Natchez and having secured another passport from Governor-General Carondelet. His official objective was to bring more horses for the Louisiana regiment, and with him went eight men to assist in the endeavor. A contract with one of them, John Murdoch, shows that it was strictly a business proposition based on the purchase and resale of Texas mustangs.^{9v} During this lengthy stay Nolan managed to collect over 1,200 horses, father a child out of wedlock to a young lady at Béxar, and thoroughly arouse the suspicions of the authorities in New Spain as to his

motives. Only the sympathy of Governor Muñoz saved him from arrest, as orders had come from Com. Gen. Pedro de Nava^{qv} to that effect. In his absence Nolan had been denounced by Gayoso, his erstwhile friend and business partner who was now governor-general of Louisiana.

Notwithstanding this opposition, Nolan organized a fourth expedition-which proved to be his fatal one. Before going he married Fanny Lintot of Natchez and planned to visit Thomas Jefferson at Monticello, a meeting which seemingly did not take place. By the end of October 1800 Nolan headed for Texas with twenty-seven men, and perhaps a few more who later escaped detection. His departure had been vigorously opposed by José Vidal at Natchez, a Spanish official who then alerted the entire frontier to the "hostile intentions" of Nolan's party. Troops marched out from Nacogdoches under Commandant Miguel Músquiz, who located Nolan's force at some horse pens thought to be near the site of Blum in northern Hill County. A battle was fought with the defiant Americans on March 21, 1801, and Nolan was killed by a random shot to the head. His men were captured and sent to Chihuahua, where they were tried and imprisoned. Nolan's friends in Texas were also brought to trial in an attempt to discourage further association with American interlopers and to stop the lucrative horse traffic. Nolan's fate, and that of his party, did much to arouse American hatred of the

Spanish "dons," but there is little reason to consider his final expedition as anything but a brazen commercial venture that was poorly planned and had a tragic outcome. Nonetheless, he has long been regarded as the precursor of the Burr Conspiracy, the Gutiérrez-Magee expedition,^{qv} the Long expedition,^{qv} and other armed attempts of the early nineteenth century to wrest Texas from Spanish control and give it an independent status. Nolan, therefore, has attained a sort of symbolic status to Texans that is not supported by the historical record.

BIBLIOGRAPHY: John Edward Weems, *Men Without Countries* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1969). Maurine T. Wilson and Jack Jackson, *Philip Nolan and Texas: Expeditions into the Unknown Land, 1791-1801* (Waco: Texian Press, 1987).

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