MILITARY HISTORY OF HOUSTON.

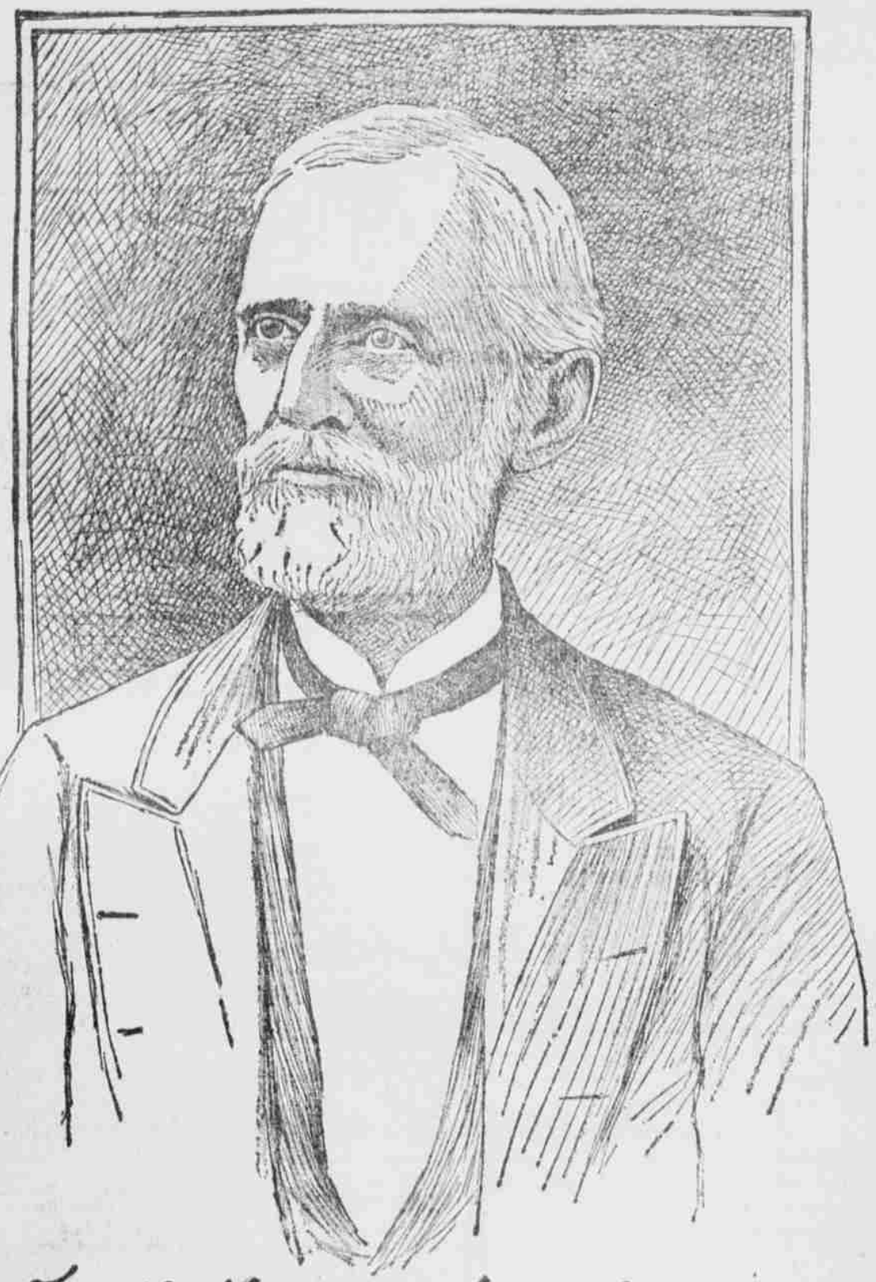
The Milam Guard the Militia Company of the Republic.

The Washington Guard Merged into the Houston Light Guard, Which Was the Greatest Drilling Machine Ever Organized.

Adjutant General Thomas Scurry.

Major Spencer Hutchins.

Captain F. A. Reichardt.



For the Houston Light Guards with the kind remembrance and best wishes of

Jefferson Davis

5th Aug. 1875

Memphis Tenn.

Fortunately Houston has never been the scene of the execution of the foul designs of war, but she has been the forum where many military councils have been held that were fraught with grave consequences to a people who were as intrepid as any who ever brooked a tyrant to keep their places or bid defiance to a horde of murdering minions. She has no Alamo to boast or La Bahia to tell about, but her streets have resounded oftener to the tread of her sons as they marched away to do her bidding on the ensanguined field than any other community in this State.

None of the disasters that visited Texas in her early history or those that overwhelmed the South in later years found their stage here, but Houston sent the flower of her manhood to the scene of action and her sacrifices in behalf of the common country have not been surpassed by the patriots of any city.

The military organizations that had their birth in this city have won fame alike on the field where death and carnage were the hour's rule, and where in manic evolution they competed for the palm and the first place in the decision of the judges as to how successfully they had prepared themselves for the trying ordeals of a soldier's life. This State was born when the roar of cannon and the crack of rifles drowned the sad pleadings of the voice of peace, and on the battlefield of San Jacinto was wrested from Santa Anna the right to a free and independent life. This place soon became the capital and rendezvous of those brave men who had so successfully contended for the right of free men. Is it any wonder that, with such specimens of honorable and chivalrous warfare in their midst as an inspiration, the martial spirit should find a congenial home in the breasts of this city's youths?

From the beginning of the Republic until the Territory was admitted as one of the States of the Union Houston has had an interesting military history. This resume, however, is information obtained from living participants in the record here attempted to be set down, and necessarily in some regards the details will be meager.

MILAM GUARDS.

The first militia company of which we have knowledge that was organized here was the Milam Guards. J. E. Eldredge was their first captain, and they had in their membership some of the brave and famous men who helped to make the early history of Texas. They had been ordered out on duty familiar to militia companies at various times. The first real engagement in which they participated was in 1838, when they went out to chastise a band of marauding Cherokee Indians. They met the red men in a short time and an engagement ensued in which the Guards were victorious. How many Indians were killed or whether the white men suffered any casualties can not be learned.

The next service that this company saw was in 1842. In that year it was announced that Santa Anna would again invade Texas, and the Guards were the first company in the State to respond to the call for a force to repel the expected invasion. They marched to San Antonio, which point was to be made the base of operations against the Mexicans. Fortunately the rumor was false, or Santa Anna changed his mind, and the war cloud rolled by without further injury than to cause a great deal of uneasiness. After three months they returned home and settled down to the routine of a militia company's life, until in 1844 at the order of General Sam Houston, who was then president of the Texas Republic, they marched to the Nacogdoches country to put an end to the famous Regulator and Moderator trouble then existing there.

The expedition was under command of General James Smith. He was highly successful in his mission. He had 500 men with him and he succeeded in disbanding the two factions. There were more than 1000 men involved in that serious outbreak, but they were induced by General Smith to lay down their arms and return to their homes and farms without having to use any force.

The Guards again returned home without the loss of a man, though it was believed when they started that they were going to see a great deal harder service, and would be in a great deal more danger, than when on the expeditions against the Indians or the Mexicans.

From then until 1848 we have no information of any notable event in their history. In that year, however, the civil authorities here had arrested several desperate men who belonged to gangs that were living by gambling, thieving and highway robbery. There were a great many such people here in that early day, and a peace officer's life was anything but an enviable one.

The arrested men were placed in the primitive and insecure jail that was then in use, and their friends threatened to liberate them. The people of Houston were determined to see the law in their case executed, and at their instance the authorities called on President Jones for military assistance. He ordered out the Milam Guards to protect the jail, and they were on duty during the pending excitement.

That is the last record of any specific or exciting service done by that company, although it maintained its organization intact until near the beginning of the civil war. It was a brilliant company and was worthy to wear the name of the brave Milam, who fell in the charge made by the Texans when they captured the Alamo from General Cos.

WASHINGTON GUARDS.

Their first commander was Captain William Edwards. Just when this company came into being or when it was disbanded could not be learned, but certain it is that it was the immediate predecessor of the

HOUSTON LIGHT GUARD.

This company was organized in 1871 with Fairfax Graves as its first captain, and from its very beginning it has been a source of pride, not only to the city of Houston but to the entire State. Its membership has been composed of the very best citizenship of the community, and its officers and privates have always occupied the most responsible positions in the city. Some of those who were members of it in its early history have become men of State and even National reputation. From the date of its charter until the Spanish war it never had a chance to distinguish itself in battle, but on the mimic field, in contests as to physical endurance and the proprieties of military tactics, it has displayed an excellence that has been the wonder of a nation. That company has demonstrated what an organization can do that has the sympathy and assistance of an admiring community to back it up.

When but three years old, in 1874, it started in Austin, in competition with the State Volunteer Guard in an encampment there, on its tour of conquest, and got on a single field has it since disappointed the proud people of its loving city. At that drill the company was under command of Captain Joe S. Rice, the present State superintendent of penitentiaries.

Under command of Captain J. A. Baker, the company attended the first interstate drill at New Orleans during the year 1881. In that drill were such crack companies as the Chickasaw Guards, League Guards of New Orleans and Mobile Rifles, and yet in that mobile State effort on their part they captured third money.

In 1882 they attended an interstate drill in Nashville, Tenn., Thomas Scurry, the present adjutant general of the State, being the captain. The Mobile Rifles took first money and the Light Guard second.

By this time the people of Houston began to take genuine pride in their excellent company, and it did not take the members long to work up enthusiasm sufficient to raise funds enough to pull off an interstate drill in this city, and in 1884 the first one that ever occurred in Texas took place here. The first prize was $5000 cash, and companies from all over the South as well as various members of our State guard were present to participate. Among the companies from other States which attended may be mentioned the Montgomery Greys, Montgomery True Blues, Mobile Rifles, Treadway Rifles of St. Louis, and Columbus (Ga.) Guards. The Sealy Rifles and Washington Guards of Galveston were also in attendance.

It was within the precincts of their own home, within the sound of the cheers of their fellow citizens and within sight of the bright smiles of their own mothers, wives, sisters and sweethearts, that the Houston Light Guard captured first money for the first time in an interstate drill. The encouragement they received that day never lost its power and they have never marched on to a field from which they did not refire the conquerors. Since that date they have met the chivalrous and trained south of the North as well as the South and not once have they failed to distance them so far as to leave no doubt as to whom the palm of victory, as well as the material proceeds, should be awarded.

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In 1885, with Captain Scurry in command, they went to Mobile to attend an interstate drill and there again met their old rivals. Notwithstanding these drills were conducted in the greatest good humor, and nothing allowed to occur to mar the harmony of the occasions, yet a spirit of rivalry had been engendered and at all the interstate drills the crack companies were always in attendance. The contest at Mobile was during the hot weather, and the managers determined that in order to win the boys should give evidence that they were physically able to endure the hardships of a soldier's life. For this purpose the program was of such a character and of such length that their endurance should be tested to the utmost. The result was that, with the exception of the Light Guard, every company that went on the field lost from two to ten men by being overcome. When the Chickasaws, the real rivals of the Guard, came on, they were watched with a great deal of interest. Finally, however, the intense heat began to tell, and their men fell out on by one; as a Chickasaw was overcome one of the Light Guard took his place until there were at least ten of the Houston company in the Chickasaw ranks. All at once and very unexpectedly the captain of the Chickasaws fainted and was carried from the field, and Captain Scurry ran in and took immediate command of the unfortunate company. The disaster, however, to their commanding officer quite overcame them and they went all to pieces. The result was that Captain Scurry was compelled within a few minutes to march them off the field in the best order possible.

The Houston Light Guard was the next company to drill and it was expected that they would share the same fate the Chickasaws did, especially as their captain and so many of their men had more or less exhausted themselves in trying to assist their rivals. In a few minutes the company double-quicked to their position before the judges and went through one of the most brilliant and trying maneuvers ever witnessed on the mimic field. Not a man did they lose, nor did any of them give evidence of being near exhaustion. When Captain Satterlee, the regular army officer detailed by the war department to sit as a judge at the various drills, saw the work of the Houston company he remarked to their commanding officer:

"Captain Scurry, your men must be made of iron."

It was undoubtedly a great achievement, and the acts of Captain Scurry and his men in trying to keep the Chickasaws intact was the beginning of a friendship between the two companies that is warm and bright today.

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That same year (1885) they went to New Orleans to attend another interstate drill. The prizes offered were $4000 in cash and a medal by the World's Fair Commissioners, the famous cotton exposition being then held in the Crescent City. As usual they stood first when the judges rendered their decision, and they have the beautiful medal they won then still in their possession.

From New Orleans they went almost direct to Lampasas, Texas, to attend a State military encampment. There for a week they gave exhibition drills for the benefit of the Texas companies. After that was over they embarked for Philadelphia. It had often been sneeringly said that the Light Guard were a fine Southern company, but that they would not even get a third rating if they came in contact with the drilled soldiers of the North. They were anxious to prove that they were capable of meeting any body of men on earth who practiced evolutions according to the Upton's tactics. The result was that they availed themselves of the opportunity to go North when Philadelphia invited them to participate in a drill in that city. Before the drill day came the guard went out on the field for practice, and that night as a banquet Captain Chew, commander of the State Fencibles of Pennsylvania, the crack company of all the Northern States, announced that he would not be a contestant at the drill; that he recognized that his men absolutely had no chance to win against the Houston company, and declared that he had never in all his experience seen men drilled to such perfection; that the company was practically a machine built to execute military tactics. That shows that the Light Guards had inspired the same wholesome respect for their powers as soldiers in the minds of Northern military men that they did in the South.

Drill day came and with it the largest body of military men that probably ever witnessed a like exhibition in this country. The reputation of the Texans had preceded them, and Captain Satterlee, of whom mention has been made herein, promised the officers of the regular army stationed at Washington and at all other points in that section of our common country, that they would see something extraordinary if they witnessed the Light Guard's drill. The result was that every one for hundreds of miles around who could get the leave of absence was present. Of course this fact was a source of great pride to the Light Guard, but it was not as great as the knowledge of the fact that their friends and neighbors in Houston, their admirers in Texas and their fellow citizens of the whole Southland had their eyes turned toward Philadelphia and were listening with strained ears for the verdict of the judges. What body of men sustained by such considerations, and honored to such a superlative degree by men who were alleged to be their superiors in the practice of the science that has been the devoted study of mankind since authentic history began its record, would not exert themselves to their utmost? And into more capable hands it would have been impossible to commit an exhibition of the prowess of the Southerner as a soldier. It could not have been in the path of their duty to follow Jackson to the cannon's mouth, ride behind the waving plume of Stuart as he encircled McClellan, or assist in executing the brilliant campaigns made by Lee, yet it was their privilege to show the people of the United States that they were of the stuff that soldiers are made; that the martial flame burned as brightly in the Sunny Southland that her youths have few lessons to learn in war's school. Not a mistake did they make; not a faux pas characterized their least movement. They marched onto the field conscious that they would be victors, and when they marched off it was amid the plaudits as well as the freely given acknowledgment of thousands of spectators that they were the conquerors beyond the remotest peril. Swift-winged lightning told the news in Houston, Texas, and the South, and the universal expression of joy was so great that the volume of noise it made rolled back almost to Philadelphia. Bonfires were lighted in every city where a patriotic military company had a home, and citizens everywhere expressed their pleasure.

A board of regular army officers were the judges, and they did sit in closest scrutiny. Through an inspection unexampled in its rigidness did the company pass, and as it they made a record that may be found in the adjutant's office in Washington today as an instance of the nearness to which perfection can be approached and which has never been rivalled in military annals. The score they made was 2899 out of a possible 300. Its excellence can be appreciated when it is remembered that a score of 250 out of 300 is considered good—even unusual. Besides the cash prize which they were supposed to have received, they captured a badge for their captain, and a beautiful flag which may be seen in their armory today.

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From Philadelphia they went to New York and gave exhibition drills before the Seventh regiment of New York and the Twenty-third of Brooklyn. They were the talk and wonder of all Northern military men. Colonel Clark of the Seventh New York declared their equal did not exist in all the world. In fact, so great did the enthusiasm become over them that several moneyed men offered them large sums for the privilege of exhibiting them in the various cities of the North and East as the best drilled body under Upton tactics on earth. Of course, they declined all such offers, and soon started home. On their return they met with an enthusiastic reception everywhere in the South, but none equaled the demonstration at home. As evidence of the high regard in which their victory at Philadelphia was held, it may be stated that they received various gifts and cash donations. Mr. D. M. O'Connor of Victoria sent them a draft for $1000 and a beautiful flag, that is still on exhibition in their armory in this city.

The company spent a quiet year at home, of course always keeping up their drill practice. In 1886 they attended an interstate drill at Galveston. A number of the famous companies that they had met so often were on hand to compete with them. It was at this encampment that the Belknap Rifles of San Antonio and the San Antonio Rifles first put in an appearance at an interstate drill. At this time the Light Guard were under the command of Captain F. A. Reichardt, and they kept up their old record of capturing the first prize. In fact, the statement that the Belknaps ever won first money in a contest in which the Light Guard participated is not according to the record.

No other contests occurred until 1889, when the State capitol at Austin was dedicated. In the meantime the Light Guard had organized what was called the Light Guard brass band. The managers at Austin offered a prize for the best band as well as the best drilled company, and the two Light Guard organizations captured the two prizes.

Later in that same year a State drill occurred in Houston, but as the idea seemed to be gaining that it was impossible to beat them the management determined to hang up a purse for them provided they beat by fifty points the best score made by the company winning the first prize in the regular contest. Against such a handicap they consented to enter and secured the prize with a margin of several points.

This seemed to convince all the companies that it was useless to compete against the Houston boys. As evidence of this fact, it may be stated that a drill was held in Galveston in 1891. A liberal purse was offered for the first prize, and every company in the United States was invited to participate in the effort to capture it except the Houston Light Guard. They were barred, and all companies notified to that effect. This was the sincerest compliment the company ever received, but it didn't do the drill much good. All the famous companies never lost faith in their ability to beat the Light Guard, and they were always willing to try. With them out of the contest there was no incentive for the foreign companies to participate, and very few of them were present on that occasion.

They then announced their withdrawal from future interstate drills, but their martial enthusiasm was never allowed to wane. During their career they won about $50,000 in prizes and flags and trophies innumerable. They then commenced to devote their attention to the erection of an armory, and that they succeeded as well in that as they did in their various contests is silently evidenced by the magnificent building on the corner of Fannin street and Texas avenue.

When the Spanish war broke out they went out under Captain George McCormick. They were assigned to the First Texas regiment, commanded by the lamented Mabry. They spent three or four months in Cuba and, returning home, were mustered out. Since that time they have had regular meetings and drills and are as active as they ever were. Captain A. C. Hutchinson is their present commander. They have been called to arms a few times by the governor to do militia duty. After the Galveston storm they were ordered to that city to do patrol duty. That period is regarded as the most arduous the company ever had. Their duties were trying in the extreme and the comforts they had were few indeed. It was, however, a labor of sad love and not one of the gallant men would have shirked if they could.

Taken altogether their military life since their return from Cuba has been routine in its character.

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There will probably never be any great interest exhibited in future interstate drills, as the tactics have been so materially changed as to rob evolutions of their beauty and spectacular effect. The board appointed by the war department to revise the tactics evolved a practical scheme, but it is not one to excite public interest or enthusiasm.

During their existence the Light Guard have had the pleasure to act as a guard of honor for two ex-presidents and two presidents. The first time was on the occasion of the visit of ex-President Davis of the Confederate States to this city in the early 70s. The second time was when General Grant was here, which was in the early 80s. The third time occurred when General Harrison passed through this city on his transcontinental tour. The fourth and last occasion was when the lamented President McKinley visited Houston in 1901. The fact is the company has played a very prominent part in the history of this State, as well as of this city, and while it is a local organization, it may be justly regarded as a State institution.

It would not be fair to close this recital without referring back to the year 1884, when an interstate drill was held in this city. It will be remembered that the Light Guard won the first prize at that contest. It was their first victory, and naturally they felt very proud of their success. They were always governed by a high sense of honor, and were always anxious to have and to hold the respect and esteem of their rivals as well as of their admirers and supporters. They knew they had won first place through fair and honorable competition, and that was sufficient for them. They had been at no particular expense in preparing for the contest, and therefore had no need of the money they had won to repay them for any outlay. The fact that they had been adjudged the best drilled company that had appeared in competition was, as said before, satisfaction sufficient for them and they held a meeting immediately after the decision of the judges had been announced and determined to distribute pro rata among the visiting companies the $5000 that had been awarded them, and it was done. So far as known, no other company in America ever did such a magnanimous act, and it served to assist in placing the company on the high plane it occupied, and still occupies, in the estimation of the public as well as the military world.

The writer hereof desires to return to Major Spencer Hutchins his thanks for assistance in furnishing the data from which the foregoing brief outline of the history of the Houston Light Guard is written. The major was one of the "old guard," as they are known, and was with his company in every contest in which they participated from 1881 until interstate drills became obsolete. He has occupied every position in the company from private to lieutenant, and has always stood well with his comrades.

Later the story of the Houston cavalry will be written and this will be supplemented by stories and anecdotes of those men who went to the South during the war between the States.

C. W. McNeil.

Wilbur F. Crawford Dead.

Cameron, Texas, March 29.—News was received here this morning of the death of Captain Wilbur F. Crawford, postmaster, who has been in Austin undergoing treatment for nervous prostration. Deceased has been a resident of Cameron many years. First in the capacity of a banker, then as land and loan agent and for the past two years postmaster.

Last month he suffered a complete nervous prostration, which was the culmination of an accident received many years ago. His funeral will be held in the Methodist Episcopal church Sabbath afternoon at 3 o'clock, Rev. James Kilgore, his pastor, officiating. Interment in Oak Hill cemetery.

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