

## Texas A&M University Department of History Faculty on the Institutional History of Lawrence Sullivan Ross

It has come to our attention that recent calls for removal of the Lawrence Sullivan Ross statue from Academic Plaza are being answered by the Chancellor's office with a document titled "Lawrence Sullivan Ross: Soldier, Statesman, Knightly Gentleman" that is outdated, incomplete, and unreliable. Elements of this partial history are likewise being uncritically repeated in various forums online and elsewhere. Let us be clear, the "real story of Sul Ross," as it was termed in one email, was not produced by the Department of History at Texas A&M University and does not meet the rigorous standards of our discipline (i.e., it is missing attribution, bibliographic citations, and an acknowledgement of varying interpretations, among other flaws).<sup>1</sup> Our commitment to the scholarly standards of our profession, as well as to academic and personal integrity, compel us to offer the following statement by way of clarifying, contextualizing, and enriching our collective understanding of Ross as an historical figure.

As historians in the Department of History at Texas A&M University, we find the "real story of Sul Ross" to be unreliable in three important ways.

1. The narrative that is being circulated does not sufficiently explain Ross's role in the displacement, dispossession, and denigration of Indigenous people in Texas. Instead, it relies on: a partial account of his time as a Texas Ranger without the full history of the Ranger force as one that terrorized Indigenous peoples as well as Mexican and African Americans, facile characterizations of Native groups as "friendly" or "hostile," and little consideration of his role in the massacre at Pease Creek and the expulsion of most Native American Texans from their ancestral homelands to Indian Territory.<sup>2</sup>
2. The narrative makes no mention of Ross's role within and on behalf of the Confederate States of America nor does it even use the term Civil War, referring instead to a "call to duty" and concern for states' rights. What might that duty and those rights be? The leading Texas secessionist, John Marshall, spelled it out in the *Austin State Gazette*, April 20, 1861: "It is essential to the honor and safety of every poor white man to keep the [N]egro in his present state of subordination and discipline." While the consequences of the Civil War are still unfolding in the present, it is a matter of consensus among professional historians that preservation of an agrarian economy, culture, and society based on human bondage and white supremacy was the primary catalyst for Confederate secession, whether or not a given individual was a slave owner (as was Ross's father and from which he directly benefitted).<sup>3</sup> In addition, Texan Confederates' proclivities for

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<sup>1</sup> We recommend consulting: the American Historical Association's ["Statement on the Standards of Professional Conduct."](#)

<sup>2</sup> We recommend consulting: Gary Clayton Anderson, *The Conquest of Texas: Ethnic Cleansing in the Promised Land, 1820-1875* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2005); Paul H. Carlson and Tom Crum, *Myth, Memory, and Massacre: The Pease River Capture of Cynthia Ann Parker* (Lubbock: Texas Tech University Press, 2012); William Carrigan and Bill Clive, *Forgotten Dead: Mob Violence against Mexicans in the United States, 1848-1928* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013); David LaVere, *The Texas Indians* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2004); Monica Muñoz Martínez, *The Injustice Never Leaves You: Anti-Mexican Violence in Texas* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2018).

<sup>3</sup> *Eighth Census of the United States 1860*; National Archives Washington DC, USA; Series Number: M653; Record Group: *Records of the Bureau of the Census*; RG29, 2.

violence extended to other ethnic groups such as Germans and Tejanos and also to white dissenters from “the cause.”<sup>4</sup>

3. The narrative pointedly disavows any participation in the Ku Klux Klan but does not explain that white supremacist violence characterized the state in the years after Reconstruction far beyond the functioning of any single organization. As a Texas Ranger in his early life and as the Texas governor who oversaw the Rangers later, Ross represented and carried out anti-Mexican, anti-Black, and anti-Indigenous beliefs and policies. These were not hidden attitudes, as one lyric of an official Rangers song attests: “all the Mexkins [sic] ought to be...in a narrow grave just six by three.”<sup>5</sup> Ross’s direct involvement in the so-called Jaybird-Woodpecker War in 1888-89 resulted in the disfranchisement and violent expulsion of Black Americans from Fort Bend County and ensured whites-only primaries and elections for decades to come.<sup>6</sup> In these and other actions, Ross was not alone. Anti-Black laws, poll taxes and voter intimidation, and violent attacks against people of color were the primary way that white southerners consolidated their power in the post-Reconstruction era. It is unequivocally true that Ross agreed with, supported, and defended these policies until his death, even as he carried out what might be considered isolated acts of charity towards some communities of color.<sup>7</sup>

There are many other important historical contexts and bodies of testimony that should be considered in any legitimate accounting of Lawrence Sullivan Ross’s life and legacies. Historians have a responsibility to consult myriad sources from multiple perspectives and all those voices cannot always be reconciled. Instead, we must inhabit the uncertainties and contradictions of the human condition and be ever-mindful of how choices made in the past affect our lives in the present. The “real story of Sul Ross” does none of this.

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<sup>4</sup> We recommend consulting: Dale Baum, *The Shattering of Texas Unionism: Politics in the Lone Star State during the Civil War Era* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1998); Walter Buenger, *Secession and the Union in Texas* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1984); Randolph B. Campbell, *An Empire for Slavery: The Peculiar Institution in Texas, 1821–1865* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1989); F.R. Lubbock, *Six Decades in Texas: Or, Memoirs of Francis Richard Lubbock, Governor of Texas in War Time, 1861-63. A Personal Experience in Business, War, and Politics* (Austin, B. C. Jones & co., printers, 1900); Sul Ross, “Life & Adventures,” [n.d.], Ross Family Papers, Baylor University Library; Andrew J. Torget, *Seeds of Empire: Cotton, Slavery, and the Transformation of the Texas Borderlands, 1800-1850* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015).

<sup>5</sup> David Montejano, *Anglos and Mexicans in the Making of Texas, 1836-1986* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1987), 102.

<sup>6</sup> Leslie Ann Lovett, “The Jaybird-Woodpecker War: Reconstruction and Redemption in Fort Bend County, Texas, 1869-1889,” (M.A. Thesis, Rice University, 1994), 78-79; Pauline Yelderman, “Jaybird-Woodpecker War,” Texas State Historical Association Online, <https://tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/wfj01>.

<sup>7</sup> We recommend consulting: Randolph B. Campbell, *Grass-Roots Reconstruction in Texas, 1865-1880* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1997); Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America’s Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877* (New York: HarperCollins, rev. ed. 2014); John Hope Franklin, *Reconstruction after the Civil War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 3<sup>rd</sup>. ed. 2012); John William Gorman, “The Crucible of Freedom: Reconstruction Violence in Texas, 1865-1868 (Ph.D. Dissertation, Texas A&M University, 2019); *Jumpin’ Jim Crow: Southern Politics from Civil War to Civil Rights*, ed. Jane Dailey, Glenda Gilmore, and Bryant Simon (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000); Montejano, *Anglos and Mexicans in the Making of Texas, 1836-1986*.

The discipline of history itself is rooted in vast inequities, in privileging some forms of knowledge over others. This has changed over time, largely as the result of work by determined individuals and communities whose very voices had been marginalized or ignored. As a profession, we still have far more work to do. But we are also laboring in a moment in which ill-informed opinions and comfortable fictions are trumpeted as examples of serious academic inquiry and against this trend, we protest.

We stand in opposition to the uncritical reverence of historical figures who represent racist, colonialist, and sexist attitudes and policies of the past. We advocate for the careful and unflinching study of our shared history. But we also advocate a compassionate and nuanced approach in the present. We value the Aggie traditions of **respect** for all members of our community—on campus and beyond, **integrity** in our work and our lives—as teachers, researchers, and mentors, and **excellence** in our approach to dealing with even the most troubling and traumatic histories our work uncovers.

We study history. We teach history. But we do not worship it. And we do not know how we will be judged by it in the future. But we do know that students, colleagues, and community members feel hurt, frustrated, humiliated, and silenced by the continued pride of place accorded the Ross statue and legacy by the Texas A&M University system.

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