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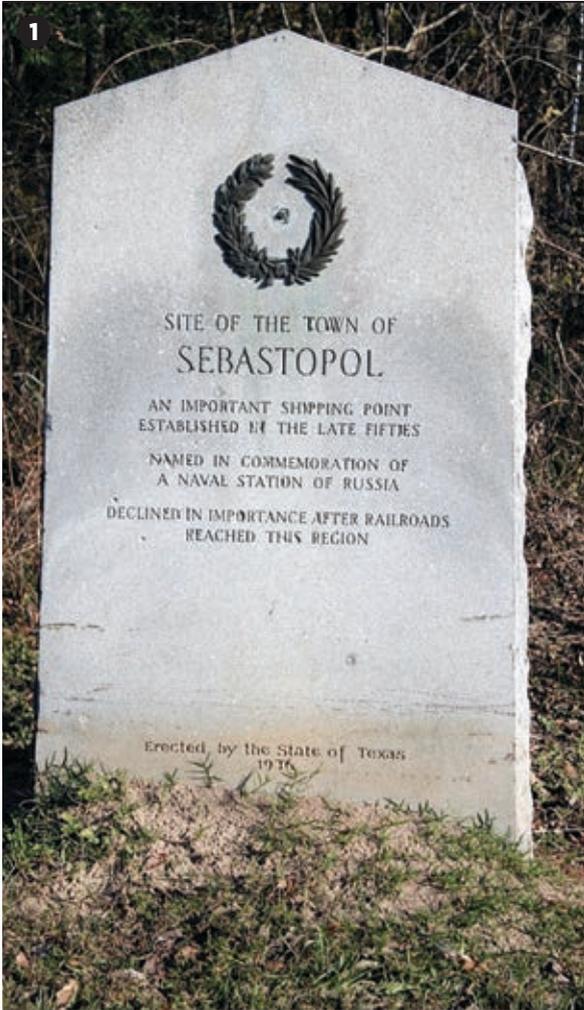
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Before Lake Livingston, the Trinity River Was a Commerce Superhighway

BY JEFF MILLER

WHEN SAMUEL SWARTWOUT FLED THE UNITED STATES FOR ENGLAND in 1838, after being charged with embezzling more than a million dollars from the U.S. government, he probably had no idea that one day a town would be named after him in Texas. And it wasn't just any town, it was one of the largest cargo ferry stops along the Trinity River.

Swartwout (pronounced swart-out) had deep ties to Texas before he fled. Serving under President Andrew Jackson as the collector of customs for the Port of New York, Swartwout was responsible for one of the largest sources of income for the United States at the time. As collector, he openly aided Texans in their struggle for independence from Mexico by sending money to Stephen F. Austin and provisions to Texas soldiers, allegedly at his own expense.

Even though his reputation was a bit tainted, it didn't matter to the settlers of the Trinity River borough when they named it after him. The developers of the area were certain that their river town would become the county seat of newly formed Polk County. After all, it was a prosperous trading center comprising 86 blocks that included several hotels, stores, eateries, stagecoach service and the ferry landing. It even had many physicians, lawyers and other professionals.

However, when county officials decided on the Polk County seat, they picked Springfield (which later became Livingston), where it remains today. And all that remains of Swartwout is a road sign and historical marker along FM 1988. The rest of the town lies at the bottom of Lake Livingston, near the Trinity River Dam.



1. Once a thriving port along the Trinity River, Sebastopol saw its population and river traffic dwindle once railways passed through town. Other than a few farms and a gas station, all that remains is a historical marker.

2. The town of Trinity, which took its name from the river, lies at the northernmost end of Lake Livingston. Bridges spanning the Trinity River, like the one shown here, prohibited large steamers from heading farther upriver.

3. Mexican General Antonio López de Santa Anna was held prisoner in Wallisville after his capture following the Battle of San Jacinto. Wallisville and areas south mark some of the widest sections of the Trinity River and helped the area become a major hub for steamboats and paddle-wheelers in the late 1800s.

4. While bulkheads and residences abound south of Lake Livingston, the area around Romayor, once a major ferry landing, remains pretty much as it was in the 1800s, with the exception of a few homes along the river route. Because of the lack of bulkheads, areas such as this are subject to flooding when Dallas receives abundant rain.

When the lake was conceived and built in the mid-20th century, it brought tourists, travelers, businesses and new residents to the area, which in the immediate years prior had been a sleepy lumber region.

But go back 100 years to the same area and you'll find bustling towns all along the Trinity, which originates just northwest of Dallas and meets the Gulf of Mexico near Anahuac, east of Houston.

The recorded history of the Trinity River dates back to the 16th century, when the Caddo Indians called it *Arkikosa*. In 1687, French explorer Rene Cavalier dubbed it River of the Canoes. That name didn't last long; just two years later, explorer Domingo de los Rios renamed it *Rio Trinidad*, which in English means Trinity River.

Several small creeks and streams in North Texas converge just 1 mile west of downtown Dallas to form the 423-mile Trinity, making it the longest river with its entire course in Texas. Believe it or not (for anyone who has taken a Jet Ski north of Lake Livingston), the Trinity is navigable all the way from Galveston Bay to Dallas.

That trip may take you through some very shallow water, but before decades of silt, bulkheads and construction along the river made it much shallower and narrower, boats used the river to transport goods to many of the large towns that

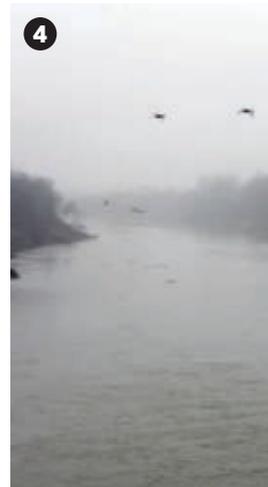
popped up along the way.

From 1836 through the mid-1840s, the first boats used on the river were called "packet boats," similar to those used in Europe for mail delivery in "packets." That changed in 1844, when steamboats began traversing the river route. It wasn't until 1868 that a vessel made the full trip from Galveston to Dallas loaded with cargo and passengers. The trip took a year and four days—just slightly more than what it seems to take on Interstate 45 nowadays.

As cargo going up and passengers coming down increased, many small towns began to pop up along the Trinity River. A large number of cotton fields and a massive timber industry helped these towns grow and flourish until the mid-20th century, when rail, air and road transportation made river commerce unprofitable.

And while many of these river landings, including Swartwout, no longer remain, there are quite a few with more than just a marker.

For example, the town of Trinidad in Henderson County used its position as both a rail crossing and a river crossing to great advantage. In the late 1800s, Trinidad had a general store, a saloon and a ferry crossing service. The 70-person town pretty much stayed that way until the 1920s, when Texas Power and Light opened a plant on the river, followed by the



Lone Star Producing Company plant that made chemical fertilizer. The town grew rapidly from those two operations, and buoyed by fishermen and recreational boaters, the population swelled to more than 2,000, which is where it stands today.

Further downriver is the town of Sebastopol, a farming community originally known as Bartholomew. Between the towns of Trinity and Onalaska, Sebastopol was an important Trinity River port in the period immediately after the Civil War. The town was settled by Russian merchants who renamed Sebastopol for the Russian port on the Black Sea. The Russians purchased cotton from local plantations and shipped it to Russia, first by barge down the Trinity and then by ship from Galveston.

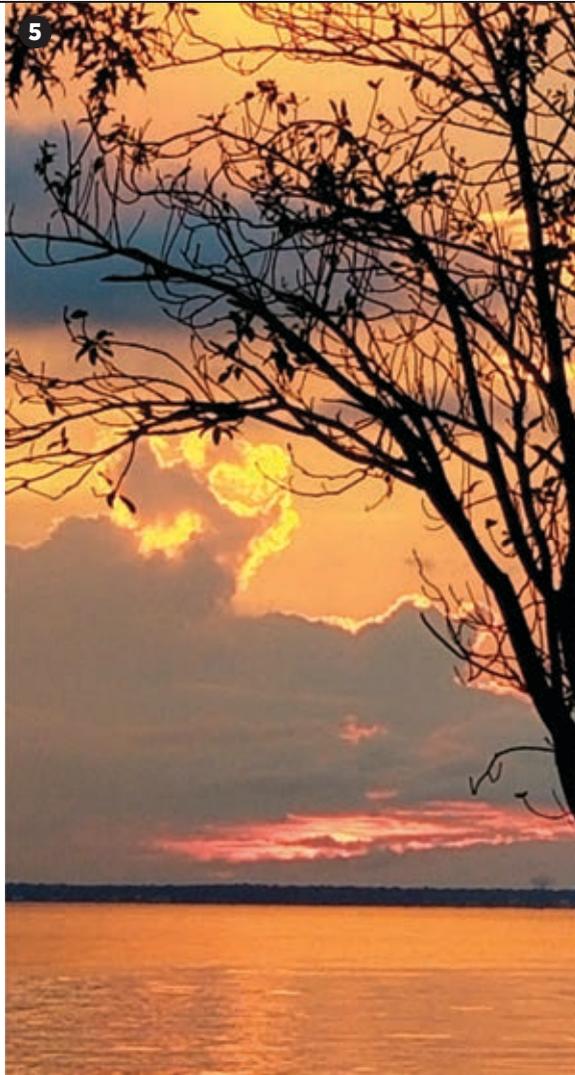
Sebastopol boasted a population of between 750 and 1,000 during its heyday as well as a turpentine distillery, post office, docks, warehouses and several stores. A yellow fever outbreak killed many of Sebastopol's residents in the late 1800s, and today's population stands at around 100. If you drive through what is left of the town, you'll find a historical marker and the keel of the Memphis Belle, the last vessel to make the trip upriver from Galveston.

Located in southern Polk County is Ace, probably the town

with the shortest name in Texas and one of the original steamboat landings on the Trinity River. The town began just four years after Texas gained statehood and immediately became a hotbed of lumber activity as numerous sawmills popped up every year. The commerce was short-lived though, as bigger cities downstream hosted better facilities. Ace was somewhat revitalized in the 1950s when oil was discovered in the town. Now, even though oil is still being pumped at very profitable levels, the population of Ace proper has dwindled to a few dozen farmers.

As we wind our way farther downstream, the next major "ghost" port is Romayor. Home to several sawmills, massive rice fields and shorter access to Galveston Bay, Romayor flourished in the late 1800s and early 1900s. But as happened with other Trinity River ports and landings, industrialization and other forms of transport made Romayor almost an afterthought. Today's population of fewer than 100 consists mostly of rice farmers.

Closer to the coast, we find Moss Bluff, located on Farm Road 563, just 45 miles southwest of Beaumont in southern Liberty County. Originally a 17th-century Spanish settlement called Los Horconsitos ("Little Pitchforks" in English), the



1. The Trinity River National Wildlife Refuge at Anahuac is home to millions of migratory birds, including these Canadian geese. The refuge is open to the public free of charge year-round.

2. Great blue herons can be found all along the Trinity River, from its origins in Dallas to the mouth of Galveston Bay. This one is searching for food at the Trinity River National Wildlife Refuge in Anahuac.

3. Swartwout, one of the busiest ferry landings along the Trinity River in the early 1800s, now rests at the bottom of Lake Livingston. All that remains is this historical marker and a church.

4. Some areas of the Trinity River look the same today as they did in the 1800s, when ferries hauled passengers and cargo through foggy, bird-infested terrain.

5. The river highway known as the Trinity became the feeder river for Lake Livingston in the early 1970s, effectively eliminating the unobstructed waterway from Dallas to Galveston.

town was renamed in the 1830s for early settler Nathaniel Moss. It was originally developed as a landing on the Trinity River, but after the community lost its bid to be the government seat of the Liberty District in 1831, the decline began.

Still, gristmills and sawmills were in operation as late as 1840. A semifamous brigade of Civil War soldiers, known as the Moss Bluff Rebels, volunteered to fight for the Confederacy. The group was led by former Moss Bluff cattle rancher William Berry Duncan. He eventually became commanding officer of Calvary Company F, which later became the 21st Texas Infantry. Virtually all of his fellow soldiers in the battalion were from Moss Bluff and the surrounding area.

After the Civil War, rice and cotton farming put a temporary halt to the town's decline, but what was once a bustling town of 400 people is now home to about five dozen, mostly oil folks associated with the Moss Bluff Dome, which produces large quantities of crude. Most of the crude is transported not down the Trinity but by pipelines to refineries farther down the coast.

Located on Interstate 10 on the east side of the Trinity River is the Chambers County town of Wallisville, named for original 1825 settler Elisha Henry Roberts Wallis. This town's

biggest claim to fame is that after Texas soldiers captured Mexican General Antonio López de Santa Anna, he was held prisoner at the Wallis family home in 1836 while on his way to Washington, D.C.

As the principal steamboat landing on the Trinity River, Wallisville was home to numerous sawmills and shipyards. At one point, it was one of the largest shipbuilding cities in Texas. A 1915 hurricane all but wiped the town's industries off the map, but a New Deal revitalization plan in the 1930s brought shipbuilding back to the area, using the Trinity as a launch point. The last shipbuilding enterprise came in the early 1940s, when Dunman Marine Services constructed the first steel boat to be built on the lower Trinity.

Just a bit south of Wallisville is Anahuac, one of the oldest settlements in Texas. There, the Trinity River converges with Trinity Bay and eventually the Gulf of Mexico. The area has become one of the premiere birding centers in America and is home to the nearby Trinity River National Wildlife Refuge.

Even though packet boats, paddle-wheelers and lumber trade on the Trinity are remnants of a bygone era, the river still provides enjoyment and natural resources to millions along its path from Dallas to Galveston Bay.