

Terrell County Memorial February, 2014  
Sanderson, Texas

# Museum News

## Alexander Watkins Terrell Godfather of Terrell County

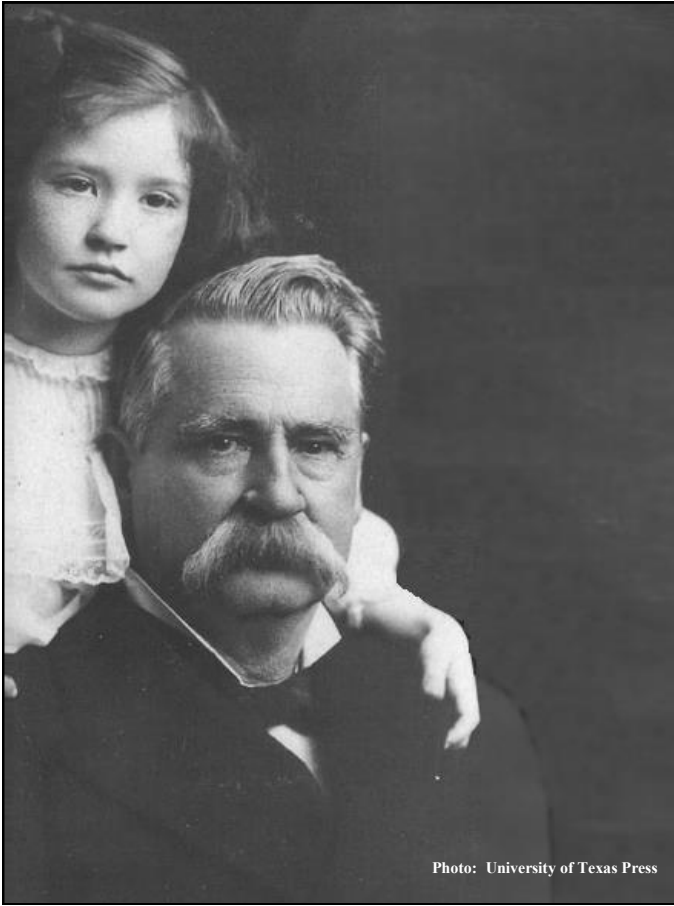


Photo: University of Texas Press

Alexander Watkins Terrell was the namesake and godfather, so to speak, of Terrell County, though he never resided here and probably never set foot on her soil.

Lawyer, legislator, general and commander of "Terrell's Texas Cavalry Regiment" in the Civil War, battalion commander with the forces of Emperor Maximilian and the French army in Mexico and minister plenipotentiary to the Ottoman Empire, a personal favorite of Sultan Abdulhamid II, Terrell was one of those larger-than-life characters that only Texas can produce.

He was a man with a large ego, yet in spite of his lengthy record of public service and heroic achievements, he felt the need to embellish his accomplishments with much exaggeration.

Terrell was born in Patrick County, Virginia on or about November 3, 1827. Born of Quaker parents, he moved with them in 1831 to Booneville, Cooper County, Missouri, where he grew to manhood.

From the beginning he was associated with greatness. His mother was related to the wife of the great explorer William Clark, who along with Meriwether Lewis and their redoubtable Indian guide Sacagawea tramped the northwestern wilderness in search of the Pacific Ocean.

Terrell graduated from the University of Missouri and then studied law at his hometown under the tutelage of Judge Peyton Hayden, respected jurist of western Missouri. He was admitted to the bar in 1849 and practiced in St. Joseph, Missouri until 1852, when he moved with his family to Austin, Texas. He built a grand reputation as a lawyer in Texas and was appointed a judge of the Texas Second



Judicial District in 1857.

Even with sterling credentials, public figures are often dogged by controversy, mostly built up by jealous adversaries. At various times he was accused of being a Unionist and having written a poem celebrating John Wilkes Booth, but the charges were baseless.

During his service as colonel of Terrell's Texas Cavalry Regiment, he was at once hailed as a hero in the Red River Campaign of 1864 and accused

of cowardice in the Battle of Pleasant Hill. To his credit, the last was unmerited, simply a case of not being able to get to his appointed place at the right time. Yet, that canard reared its ugly head time after time in the political arena.

A. W. Terrell was married a total of three times, losing all his wives to untimely death.

He married Ann Elizabeth Bouldin in 1849 and she bore him five children. She passed in 1860 and left him to raise his children alone.

His second marriage was to Sarah Douglass Mitchell in 1866, who bore him two more children. Of these children his daughter Bettie was a particular favorite. Sarah passed in 1871, leaving him a widower once again.

His final marriage was to Anne E. Holiday in 1883. She bore him no children, and passed in 1910, shortly before his own demise.

After his Civil War exploits, Terrell was so upset by the defeat of the South that he emigrated to Mexico where he

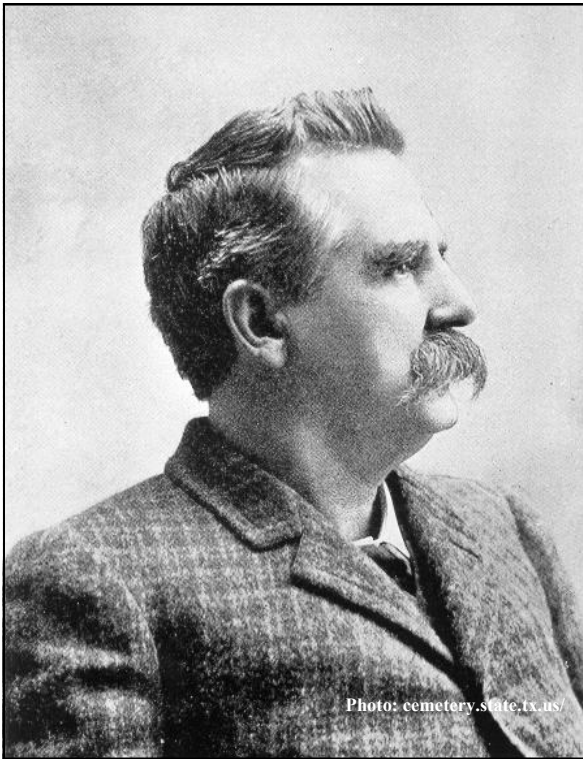


Photo: cemetery.state.tx.us

with landmark legislation, some of which survives to this day. He authored legislation requiring jurors to be able to read and write, created legislation that launched the Railroad Commission, sponsored the Terrell Election Law which called for candidates running for public office to be nominated by primaries rather than by local conventions and wrote legislation which allowed the resources from 3 million acres in the Panhandle to be used to construct the Capitol building. That acreage, by the way, was the beginning of the XIT Ranch.

In 1893, he was appointed by President Grover Cleveland as a diplomat to the country of Turkey, where he became a close friend and ally of the Sultan Abdulhamid II. That association gained him a black mark when the Sultan began active ethnic

cleansing of indigenous Armenian populations.

And in his last term in 1905, Terrell championed the cause of Sanderson and Dryden residents in their call for a separate county to be subdivided from Pecos County. For his support the infant county was named in his honor.

He led an active retirement after his days in the legislature, becoming the head of the Texas Historical Commission and a frequent contributor to its quarterly publication. He, along with Judge A. S. Walker, reported and annotated thirteen volumes of Texas Supreme Court decisions and alone reported on eleven more volumes.

When Terrell's second wife, Susan Douglass Mitchell, passed away, he hired a governess to take care of his young daughter, Bettie, and began to give her the attention of a doting father. At age nine, young Bettie began a sickly phase and Terrell often forsook his Senate duties to

joined the French Army under Emperor Maximilian and served briefly as a battalion commander. Not completely attuned with the French conquest of Mexico, he returned to Texas to a hero's welcome in 1866.

He reestablished his law practice in Houston, but soon became unhappy with Reconstructionist policies and Carpetbagger politics. Taking his leave from public life, he retreated to his plantation in Roberts County and took up the life of a gentleman farmer for the next four years. He began the study of agriculture and experimented with scientific farming techniques, but soon felt the call to public life.

In 1871 he returned to Austin and formed a partnership with Judge A. S. Walker. In 1876 he was elected to the Texas Senate and began a long term as a State Senator, leaving office in 1884.

He also served two terms in the State House of Representatives (1891-92 and 1904-05) where he distinguished himself

be at her bedside. When she passed from her illness in 1876, Terrell was totally grief-stricken.

At St. Mark's Episcopal Church in Austin a wonderful stained glass window was given in memory of Bettie Terrell and her governess, Matilda McKnight, by her grandmother, Mrs. Elizabeth H. Mitchell. The window depicts the Resurrection of Jesus Christ, an angel sitting on the vacant bier-stone, one arm pointing to the empty tomb and the other raised skyward, signifying to the early mourners that "He is not here, He is risen."

Though Terrell, himself, was somewhat unconvinced by the claims of Christianity, nevertheless, to quell his grief in the final moments of Bettie's life, he composed a bit of poetry:

*"The loved and lost have gone before  
And wait for me on that restful shore  
That borders the streams of time."*

Long years later, returning from a visit to family in Virginia, A. W. Terrell

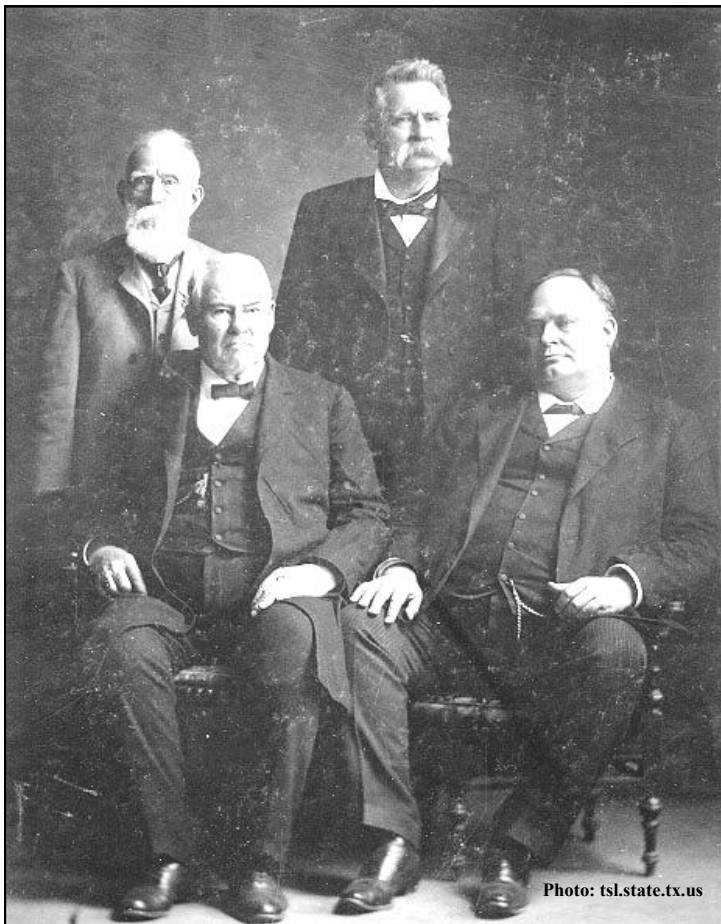


Photo: [tsl.state.tx.us](http://tsl.state.tx.us)

*Famous Texans, rear: Francis R. Lubbock, former governor, state treasurer; A.W. Terrell, former legislator, ambassador, University of Texas regent. Front: John H. Reagan, Railroad Commission chairman and Governor James Hogg, ca 1905.*

succumbed to the heat and died at Mineral Wells on September 9, 1912. He was 85 years of age.

Some thirty-six years after Bettie's death, the heroic and controversial Judge Alexander Watkins Terrell was at long last gathered to his loved ones "on that restful shore..."

#### References

- "Alexander Watkins Terrell Civil War Soldier, Texas Lawmaker, American Diplomat," Lewis L. Gould, U. of Texas Press, 2004.
- "Alexander Watkins Terrell: Citizen, Statesman," Charles Chamberlain, Ph.D. dissertation, University of Texas, 1957.
- "History of Texas: Fort Worth and the Texas Northwest Edition," Buckley B. Paddock, 4 vols., Chicago: Lewis, 1922.
- "Terrell's Texas Cavalry," John W. Spencer, Burnet, Texas: Eakin Press, 1982.
- "Alexander Watkins Terrell Papers," Dolph Briscoe Center for Am. History, U. of Texas at Austin. Irby C. Nichols, Jr.