

HISTORY OF KENNEY FORT

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Although faceless and sorely neglected, this granite monument marks the original site of Kenney Fort (also called Kenney's Fort). The missing bronze plate displayed this historic inscription:



SITE OF
KENNEY'S FORT
FIRST SETTLEMENT
IN
WILLIAMSON
COUNTY
ERECTED BY
SCHOOL CHILDREN
OF
WILLIAMSON
COUNTY

Picture taken of monument at site of Kenney Fort, July 2012

Today that monument remains mute and stands in a flower bed at the entrance to a neighborhood swimming pool. Those who pass by have no way of knowing the rich history it represents: the first settlement in Williamson County, Kenney Fort, built in 1838.

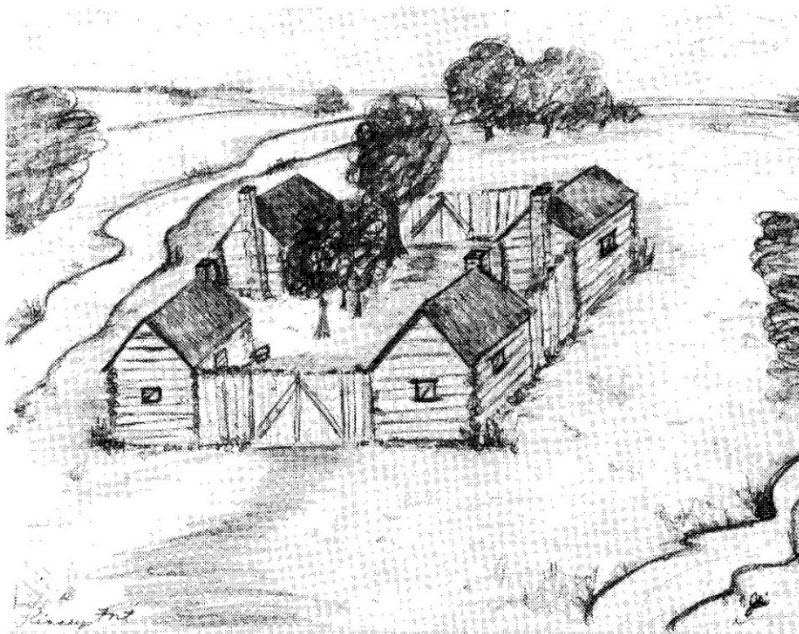
This is a summary of that history, based on two well-researched sources: *Land of Good Water*, by Clara Sterns Scarbrough (1973), and *Historical Round Rock, Texas*, by Jane Digesualdo and Karen Thompson (1985).

The claim, "First Settlement in Williamson County," requires some restraint however. Texas had just become a republic (1836), and settlers were just beginning to venture into central Texas. But almost a century before that, Spain had established missions along the San Gabriel River, beginning in 1748. And before the arrival of the Europeans, various native tribes had been living in central Texas for centuries: the Tonkawas, Lipan Apaches, Comanches, and Tawakonis. Ancestors of the Tonkawas are believed to have lived in this area as long as 10,000 years ago. So it is with some modesty that we can claim Kenney Fort as the location of the "first settlement" in Williamson County.

Nevertheless, Kenney Fort was the beginning of the arrival of pioneers who settled this land and developed it successfully despite hardships. We should also mention the Tumlinson Block House Fort, four miles south of Leander. That fortification was built by the Texas Rangers in 1836 as a

lookout for Indians. It was not a true settlement with families, and it was occupied for only two months before the Rangers and most Texans deserted their homes and retreated from the pursuing Mexican Army. Their flight to east Texas was known as the Runaway Scrape. Despite those disclaimers, the Block House was built before Kenney Fort.

Kenney Fort was not a military fort, and it lasted far longer than the two-month life of the Block House. Besides that, Kenney Fort was home for several families (fifteen people) as a refuge from native Americans and wild animals. Dr. Thomas Kenney was a native of Kentucky, where he practiced medicine. He and his wife, Polly, and their daughter, Mary Jane, came to Texas in 1833 as members of Stephen F. Austin's colony. The family settled in Bastrop where Dr. Kenney operated a mercantile business. During the Texas Revolution, he had been called to serve as a surgeon for the Texas Army. Following the victory at San Jacinto and the subsequent birth of two more daughters, Dr. Kenney moved his family west to the edge of the frontier. They chose a location on the northern fringe of Austin's colony, in what would one day become Williamson County. The spot was high on a bluff overlooking Brushy Creek, where it intersected with the Delaware's path, known as Double File Trail. The exact location was Brushy Cove, just west of where Dyer Branch flows from the south into Brushy Creek. Several years later the Missouri-Kansas & Texas (MK&T) railroad bridge was built across Brushy Creek about two hundred yards west of Kenney Fort.



Sketch of Kenney Fort as it appeared on the south side of Brushy Creek.

Two to four log cabins stood in the roughly one-half acre of cleared land. A picket stockade fence of upright logs eight to ten feet connected the houses, with gates at both ends. This enabled wagons to enter and leave without having to turn around. Down the hill from the fort was a spring which furnished fresh drinking water. In the mid-twentieth century, foundations of the cabins, remnants of cedar posts, and a portion of the flagpole remained. Before the end of the century nothing was left except a metal flagpole and a monument.

There remain some inconsistencies regarding the date of Kenney Fort's construction. A footnote in Scarbrough's *Land of Good Water*, states:

Both 1838 and 1839 are cited in various records, but overwhelming evidence supports 1838, including Smithwick, Jenkins, Wilbarger and official government papers. Makemson once cited 1839, but later changed it to 1838. Mrs. Blanch Stark Summers, great granddaughter of Dr. Kenney, also gave 1838. (p. 83)

Conclusive evidence might be the fact that the "Battle of Brushy" took place early in 1839. Three companies of volunteers engaged a band of Comanches encamped on the San Gabriel River on February 14, 1839. A few days later a large number of Comanches raided some settlements in retaliation. In the battle, the wife of Captain Robert Coleman. Her two little daughters were brought to Kenney's Fort where Mrs. Kenney cared for them. This would have been possible only if the fort had already been built in 1838.

Dr. Kenney and some helpers built the non-military fort in the summer of 1838. He then brought his family and other residents to take up residence. Upon their arrival in October of 1838, the Kenney family and other settlers noticed smoke north of the fort. The next morning Dr. Kenney and three other men set out to investigate. About four miles from the fort they were ambushed by Indians. Dr. Kenney was shot through the leg, the ball then passing into his horse. Two other men were injured, but all managed to survive.

As a young republic, Texas was eager to explore its territory and expand its economic base. Texas' President Mirabeau Buonaparte Lamar sponsored a fact-finding trip designed to establish a trade route between Mexico and Santa Fe. Some likened it to the Lewis and Clark Expedition; others called it a "wild-goose campaign." More than 300 personnel assembled at Kenney Fort, and in June of 1841, began their march. However, insufficient provisions, scarcity of water, Indian hostilities, and lost directions resulted in disaster and tragedy. When they finally arrived in Santa Fe, all the men were taken prisoners and forced to march the entire 2000 miles to Mexico City. The survivors were imprisoned for a short time before being released and sent home. Thus, the Santa Fe Expedition, which set out from Kenney Fort, ended as a total catastrophe.

1841 was not a good year for other reasons as well. In December, Mrs. "Polly" Kenney, who had been in failing health since leaving Bastrop, died, and was buried on a ridge east of the fort. The youngest daughter went to live with neighbors, Captain and Mrs. Nelson Merrell. The two other girls continued to live at the fort.

A year later the fort was the scene of the Archives War. In 1839, President Lamar had moved the capital from Houston to Waterloo, renamed Austin City. When Sam Houston was elected president in 1841, he ordered the government to be returned to the city of Houston, although a lack of accommodations forced him to change the location to Washington-on-the-Brazos (near Brenham). Houston ordered the Land Office papers (archives) to be removed from Austin and transferred to the new location. Residents of Austin refused, saying that the government had been moved to Austin by law. Houston ordered the records to be removed anyway. Armed soldiers loaded three ox-drawn wagons with archives and left for Kenney Fort on December 30, 1841, during a severe Texas blizzard. Dr. Kenney gave permission for the soldiers to enter the fort for protection. He even allowed them to use some fence rails to keep fires going during the night.

The next morning a company of men and home guard from Austin gathered at the fort, and at cannon point demanded the soldiers inside Kenney Fort to surrender and return the confiscated documents to Austin. They agreed, and thus the Archives War ended peacefully without a shot fired at Kenney Fort. The capital remained in Austin.



Thousands of American Bison (buffalo) continued to range central Texas, providing sustenance to the native Americans and lucrative hides to the Texas pioneers. In the autumn of 1843, several men went to harvest their corn crops near Kenney Fort, and on their return home were attacked by Lipan Apaches. Two of the men were killed.

The field south of Kenney Fort, which was located on far right at tree line.

Picture taken in 2012. Barely visible is the flag above the trees.

Later that winter Captain Nelson Merrell hired two men living at the fort to hunt for buffalo to fill an order for buffalo hides. They shot hundreds of buffalo and left them near the Salado Creek with plans to return in the spring to retrieve them. When they did return, along with Dr. Kenney, the Tawakonis took revenge on them, killing three men, including Dr. Kenney. Only Captain Merrell escaped.

After a few days, a delegation from Kenney Fort went in search for the missing men. They discovered their slain bodies near Salado. Since the ground was still frozen, the men lay a mound of stones on the bodies. The place became known as Bone Hollow.

The eldest daughter, Mary Jane later married John Lee. The couple lived at the fort from 1848-1852, when they sold 400 acres and the fort to the prominent Swedish immigrant, Swante Magnus (S.M.) Swenson. He gave the property to his sister, Anna Catherina, who had immigrated to Texas in 1847 and married William T. Dyer, one of the original "Old 300" colonists with Stephen F. Austin. They built a large two-story rock home on a hillside south of Kenney Fort. One of their six children, John Clement, died at the age of eleven in 1864, the second person buried at Palm Valley Lutheran Cemetery (known originally as Brushy Lutheran). Both parents died at Kenney Fort (William in 1903, and Anna in 1906) and were also buried at Palm Valley Cemetery. Their son, Swen Dyer, took over operation of the farm and also raised horses for many years. In fact, one of the later owners of the property turned the place into a Quarter Horse Ranch.

No longer do buffalo roam freely across central Texas. No longer do Comanches race their ponies nor fish the clear waters. Gone are the days when corn grew tall and prairie grasses waved in the breeze. Paved over with asphalt streets, Double File trail is forever hidden. And as a dream dies at the opening day, so have any traces of Kenney Fort, the "first settlement" in Williamson County. All that remains is a silent monument, hardly a tribute to the brave men and women whose strong determination and sacrifices made it possible for us to live and prosper here today.



Monument at the entrance to the neighborhood swimming pool in July 2020
Location is at the NE corner of Centennial Loop at Concord Brushy Creek, south of Highway 79.



Markers along Highway 79, looking south: Kenney Fort and Double File Trail.
Approximate Location of Kenney Fort: 2014 and 2019

