

Davey Crockett: A Biography with Masonic Footnotes

By,

W.B. Eric J. LeHew

District Education Officer, Virginia Masonic District 2

Presented, Friday September 1, 2023

Freedom Lodge No. 118

Lovettsville, VA

From his impressive reputation as a Bear hunter, to his terms in the U.S. Congress, to his heroic last stand at the Alamo, David “Davy” Crockett’s reputation as a hero and legend of the frontier is one that is deeply imprinted upon the American psyche. Often dubbed “King of the Wild Frontier,” he is perhaps the best known American folk hero of the early 19th Century. Hundreds of pages have been written, and countless movies and television programs have portrayed this larger-than-life character from the silver to the small screen. Since the 1950s Walt Disney show aired, Crockett’s persona has cemented itself in the zeitgeist of American culture, explicitly in his buckskin pants and shirt with a coon-skin cap perched on his head. While not all his legendary exploits are true, including “wrestling with a bear or riding a bolt of lightning” (although it made for good television to the Baby Boomer Generation!) there is some truth to his legend.

David Crockett (he detested “Davy” and preferred David his entire life) was born near the community of Limestone, in what is now Green County, Tennessee (then part of North Carolina) on August 17, 1786. David’s father was of limited financial means, and often in financial arrears with other local businessmen. The elder Crockett would hire out his son from a young age as a source of labor to others and a means of helping to support the family. After a flood took the family gristmill business in 1795, the Crockett’s father moved the family to middle Tennessee, where he built a tavern on a stagecoach route. At the age of 12, David’s father indentured him to Jacob Siler, to which the Crockett family was once again indebted. David helped tend to Siler’s cattle as a cowboy on a 400-mile trip to near Natural Bridge, Virginia. Returning to Tennessee, young Crockett would make further trips back East into Virginia, joining cattle drives to Front Royal and Christiansburg, VA. Due to his early formative years of being often at the service of others to pay off family debts and obligations, Crockett appears to have no real formal education,

save some tutoring from a neighbor. He stated in his autobiography that on day four of school “and had just learned my letters a little, when I had an unfortunate falling out with one of the scholars – a boy much larger and older than myself.”¹ Crockett eventually ambushed the bully after class and gave him a severe beating, and then began skipping school to avoid punishment. When his father tried to confront him, Crockett ran away and joined the cattle drives to Virginia previously mentioned. In 1802 he returned to his father’s tavern on foot “and been gone so long, and had grown so much, that the family did not at first know me” he said later.² After returning, Crockett found that his father was again indebted to a local man for \$36 (~\$736 in 2022). Working this debt off he eventually moved into the home of a local Quaker family near his father’s tavern. It was during this time that Crockett fell in love with his first wife Polly Finley, whom he married in 1806.³

David and Polly would go on to have 3 children, one of them, John Westley Crockett would follow his father into politics and would also be elected to Congress.⁴ Polly would die in 1815 after moving with her husband to Franklin County, on the Alabama/Tennessee border. David would remarry later that year, to Elizabeth Patton and have two more sons, and a daughter, and help to raise two stepchildren from Elizabeth’s first marriage.⁵ The large Crockett family was not uncommon in that period of time, as children often didn’t reach adulthood due to illness or accident. For David, all his children reached adulthood and did marry, some of them multiple times due to their own spouses’ death.

¹ Autobiography of David Crockett, Chapters 1 and 2

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Wikipedia, Davy Crockett

⁵ Autobiography of David Crockett Chapters 4 – 6

By 1813, Tennessee was on the leading edge of frontier hostilities with the Native American populations of the growing country. An unfortunate incident near Mobile Alabama in August 1813 would go onto start the Creek War and David left his family and enlisted as a scout with the local militia for a period of 90 days. He saw little action and was better suited to the roll of hunting wild game to feed his unit than killing Creek Indians. He would reenlist again for 90 days in Fall 1814 and serve under General Andrew Jackson in the last remnants of the War of 1812 as Jackson sought to oust British Forces from Spanish Florida. Crockett would return home in December 1814 and would just miss Jackson's pivotal military victory on January 8, 1815, at the Battle of New Orleans that secured the peace that ended the War of 1812 with the British.⁶

By 1817, Crockett and his family moved again, further west along the Tennessee/Alabama/Mississippi Border to the newly created Lawrence County where he was appointed a commissioner and responsible to establishing the county's new boundaries. He would be appointed a County Justice of the Peace, elected to Lieutenant Colonel of the Fifty-Seventh Regiment of Tennessee Militia, and in the coming years would open several businesses in the area. He found that the public duties of his offices took so much of his time away from family and his investments, he resigned as Justice of the Peace and from the Militia sometime around 1820.⁷ However, the call to public service would soon be heard again, and he would be elected to the Tennessee State Legislature in 1821, winning successive terms throughout 1827. He won his election due to his popularity of telling stories, and home-spun metaphors which appealed to the constituents of his district. Recall Crockett tried his hand at everything from

⁶ Winders, *Legend of the Wild Frontier*

⁷ Autobiography, Chapter 7.

farming to manufacturing wood barrels and gunpowder before being elected to the state legislature. But he found his greatest success as a professional hunter. He spent much of his life stalking black bears in the woods of Tennessee and selling their pelts, meat, and oil for profit.⁸ He even claimed to have bagged 105 of the animals in a seven-month period during the winter of 1825-26. Crockett's fondness for hunting dangerous game—and the tales he spun about it—later played a major part in making him a frontier hero. According to one oft-repeated yarn, he once killed a bear in pitch-black darkness by stabbing it in the heart with a butcher knife.⁹ In the legislature, an opposing legislator would refer to Crockett as “the gentleman from the cane” referring to the dense cane forests of western Tennessee where Crockett would hunt bears and racoons in the winter. This image of the rough, backwoods legislature caught the popular imagination during his lifetime, and continued after his death.

Of special note, during his first session in 1821 he fought for legislation to ease the tax burden on the poor. He felt that the impoverished settlers who dangled on the precipice of losing title to their lands due to the state's complicated system of grants was unfair. Crockett would spend his entire legislative career both state and national levels, fighting for the rights of the poor American farmer.¹⁰ It could be argued his upbringing, and his father's struggles lead to his crusade for the landed poor. Whatever the reason, multiple attempts in the Tennessee Legislature and the US Congress were thwarted despite Crockett's best efforts to change the law.

Announcing in 1825 his intention to run for the United States House of Representatives and loosing, Crockett would eventually secure a seat in the 1827-29 term. He would propose an amendment to H.R.27 that focused on settlers getting a fair deal for land titles, that was

⁸ Winders, *Legend of the Wild Frontier*

⁹ Ibid

¹⁰ Boylston and Allen *David Crockett in Congress*

originally sponsored by fellow Tennessee Congressman, James K. Polk (again his crusade for support to the landed poor). He would be reelected to three non-consecutive terms (having been defeated in a reelection bid in 1831 but winning in 1833) to the House of Representatives and served until 1835. Crockett over these years would proposed such bills as abolishment of the Military Academy at West Point (he felt public money should be going to benefit the sons of wealthy men), voiced opposition to the awarding of \$100,000 to the widow of Stephen Decatur, citing Congress didn't have the power to do that, and voted against Andrew Jackson's 1830 Indian Removal Act (what cost him his 1831 reelection bid).¹¹ However not a single bill he sponsored, co-sponsored passed. Interestingly, his original rise to political popularity in Tennessee politics was due to his close association and support of fellow Tennessee citizen turned General turned President, Andrew Jackson. His break with Jackson would be his political undoing as the anti-Jackson wave of political opponents would start to coalesce into the eventual Whig Party in the mid 1830s.

Also, during his last term in Congress, Crockett collaborated with another Kentucky Congressman to write his autobiography, titled A Narrative of the Life of David Crockett, Written by Himself. In it he explained his justification for voting against the Indian Removal Act: "I believed it was a wicked, unjust measure.... I voted against this Indian bill, and my conscience yet tells me that I gave a good honest vote, and one that I believe will not make me ashamed in the day of judgement."¹² His final reelection defeat in 1835 set his mind in motion to act upon what he had been considering since the winter the previous year; if Andrew Jackson's chosen successor, Martin van Buren was elected president, Crockett would move his family to

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Crockett Autobiography

Texas. He began working with friends to raise a company of militia units feeling that a revolution in that region was imminent and his thoughts became action once he lost his seat. Once his autobiography was published, and riding the wave of popularity in the country, Crockett would endeavor to use that to his advantage, and went on a book tour through the Eastern US. This choice to take the book tour may have impacted his reflection back home as they did coincide, and after his reelection defeat was announced, his book tour started to fizzle. Returning home to keep good on his promise to go to Texas. Local Tennessee newspapers report what possibly is the greatest thing he never said: "I told the people of my district that I would serve them as faithfully as I had done; but if not, they might all go to hell, and I would go to Texas."¹³ Whatever the reason, Crockett had made up his mind, and without question was taking up the mantle of Texas Independence.

During Crockett's tenure in Washington, he was initiated into Freemasonry, and became a Master Mason. We do not have Lodge Record, or Grand Lodge registration of this. We know not what jurisdiction he may have petitioned. The only proof of this exists only because he entrusted his Masonic Apron, which was made for him by Mrs. W. C. Massey while in office, to the Sheriff of Weakly County before he left for Texas. The Weakly Lodge of which Crockett is said to be a member (the assumption is that he transferred membership after returning to Tennessee) burned during the Civil War which destroyed all its contents and records. However, the Apron remains unharmed today having been inherited and preserved by the Sheriff's nephew and not part of the Lodge Record lost in the fire. Sketch images of the apron can be found online, but very little information concerning its history or actual photos could be easily found.

¹³ Wayback Machine Newspaper Clipping

Crockett keeping good on his word left for Texas with a company of men from Tennessee in November 1835.¹⁴ His daughter Matilda recalled the day her father left: “he was dressed in his hunting suit wearing a coonskin cap and carried a fine rifle...he seemed very confident the morning he went away that he would soon have us all join him in Texas.”¹⁵ Arriving in Texas after a two month journey, he immediately enlisted as a volunteer with the Texas Revolutionaries, swearing an oath of allegiance to the Republic of Texas in exchange for 4,600 acres of land.¹⁶ Crockett was sent to the Alamo Mission in San Antonio, arriving on February 8, 1836. The Mexican Army of approximately 2,000 soldiers, led by General Antonio Lopez de Santa Anna arrived February 23, surprising the approximately 200 defenders in the old Spanish Mission. The Mexican forces immediately started a siege, which lasted 13 days.¹⁷ Finally, in the pre-dawn hours of March 6, and lasting only about 90-minutes, all male defenders were killed by Santa Anna’s forces, and only a few females and children were left alive to tell the tale. Santa Anna ordered his men to take the bodies of the defenders to a nearby stand of trees where they were stacked together, and wood piled on top. That evening, a fire was lit and burned the bodies to ashes. The ashes remained undisturbed until a year later when they were reportedly buried in a local peach tree grove in a wooden coffin built by a local carpenter.¹⁸ Other sources say the defender’s ashes are buried in the local Catholic Church across the main plaza of San Antonio from the Alamo. Were Crockett’s remains among the reported mass grave in this grove of trees or is he buried in the Cathedral? We’ll probably never know. The only thing that is certain is that David Crockett died, March 6, 1836, at the age of 49 defending the

¹⁴ Winders, *Legend of the Wild Frontier*

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Tinkle The Siege of the Alamo

¹⁷ Note, 1836 was a leap year, so the 13 day siege from February 23-March 6, 1836.

¹⁸ Tinkle The Siege of the Alamo

Alamo.¹⁹ Accounts from survivors of the battle differ on the manner of Crockett's death with stories ranging from Crockett putting up a heroic last stand to the account that he surrendered along with several other men and was executed. To further confusion, historians have been able to back up these opposing theories with "voluminous evidence."

The popular mythology of Crockett's death in American culture is one of a heroic last stand, a tale that is backed up by some historical evidence. A former African-American slave named Ben, who had acted as cook for one of Santa Anna's officers, maintained that Crockett's body was found in the barracks of the Alamo surrounded by "no less than sixteen Mexican corpses," with Crockett's knife buried in one of them.²⁰ There is, however, historical evidence countering the popular myth, with stories of a Crockett surrender and execution by Santa Anna after the battle as the last of the defenders were rounded up.²¹ These stories are tracked to circulating as far back as just a few weeks after the battle. The legend of Crockett's surrender and execution gathered major support in 1955 after a memoir of a Mexican Officer who marched with Santa Anna was discovered and after being translated into English, was published in 1975. The firsthand account testifies that Crockett and a handful of men were the last ones to surrender and were executed in the courtyard of the Alamo mission.²² Historians agree that the paper, ink, and handwriting match the period of the mid-19th Century and believe that the memoir is authentic to the period, however the individual who wrote the account cannot be definitively traced back to Santa Anna's army.²³ The whirlwind of Crockett defenders find the "surrender and execution" legend blasphemous, and the English translator of the publication, who was also

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

the former librarian of the *Daughters of the Republic of Texas*, was often harassed by intimidating phone calls and anonymous letters.²⁴ Whatever happened to Crockett and the other defenders of the Alamo only added to his larger than life popularity and continued to grow his folk hero legend after his death.

Lastly a footnote on masonic influence in relation to the Texas War for Independence must be noted for a masonic publication. In the Fall 1835 there were many Masons in the foremost positions of authority in the Revolutionary forces, both military and political. The Texans' first shot was fired by Eli Mitchell on October 2, 1835, near Gonzales. He and his commander, Colonel John H. Moore, were both Masons. Masonic historian Dr. James D. Carter counts twenty-two known Masons among the fifty-nine signers of the Texas Declaration of Independence, signed at Washington-on-the Brazos on March 2, 1836. Among the 188 Texans who died at the Alamo, only a handful can be reliably identified as members of the fraternity, including Crockett, James "Jim" Bowie, and Col. William Travis (commander of the Alamo forces), and Santa Anna himself.²⁵ Today, there is a Davy Crockett Lodge No, 1225 AF&AM beholden under the Grand Lodge of Texas that meets regularly in San Antonio, and a bronze plaque is affixed to the Alamo listing the known defenders of that sacred Texas place who were Brothers of the Craft.

David "Davy" Crockett is without question one of the most inspiring folk heroes of the United States and holds an immovable place in the psyche of the period of Manifest Destiny and Westward Expansion. The mental vision of his coonskin cap walking in to the hallowed chambers of the US Capital Building is apocryphal, and his legend regardless of the truth is more

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ History of the Grand Lodge of Texas

circulated than the reality. He was a character of strong morals values, strong willed, equally determined in his convictions, loyal, and trustworthy, and most of all courageous (ne might note, all Masonic traits). He was a devoted family man to his wives and children, a champion and voice for the poor and impoverished, a loud voice of oppression in the Anti-Jackson wave of politics of the mid-19th Century, (despite the Masonic connections between Jackson and Crockett). Truly a more unique individual never came to the forefront of American popularity in the early formative years of this nation than Davey Crockett. And while we may never know the means of his death, or the truth behind of many of his legendary stories or myths, one thing is for certain: it is a rite of passage for every American boy (about the age of eight) to dream of dressing in buckskin leggings, and donning a coonskin cap, and venture into the wilds of their backyard with a stick (their imaginary firearm) and follow in the footsteps of Davy Crockett as they hunt that wild black bear in their (suburban) frontier.

Bibliography

Boylston, James R., and Allen J. Wiener. David Crockett in Congress. 2009.

Co-Freemasonry, Masonic Order of Universal. "Masonic Biographies| Davy Crockett."

Universal Co-Masonry, <https://www.universalfreemasonry.org/en/famous-freemasons/davy-crockett>. Accessed 29 Aug. 2023.

Crockett, Davy. A Narrative of the Life of David Crockett ... 1845.

"Davy Crockett Lodge 1225 AF & AM - History." Freemason Lodge in San Antonio, Texas –

Davy Crockett Lodge #1225 AF & AM - Davy Crockett Lodge 1225 AF & AM, <https://www.davycrockettlodge.com/history/>. Accessed 29 Aug. 2023.

Stiffler, Stuart A. "Davy Crockett: The Genesis of Heroic Myth." Tennessee Historical

Quarterly, vol. 16, no. 2, Tennessee Historical Society, pp. 134–40, doi:10.2307/42621334. Accessed 29 Aug. 2023.

"Texas Heritage Society - David Crockett Quote." Wayback Machine,

<https://web.archive.org/web/20131112173608/http://texasheritagesociety.org/David-Crockett-Quote.html>. Accessed 29 Aug. 2023.

Tinkle, Lon. 13 Days to Glory. 1985.

Winders, Bruce. Davy Crockett. The Rosen Publishing Group, Inc, 2002.