



TARRANT COUNTY TXGENWEB

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Civil War Veterans of Northeast Tarrant County

J. Ellison Saunders

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J. Ellison Saunders was a native of Tennessee who spent most of his life in Texas. Most of his immediate family also came here and remained in the Grapevine-Coppell area. A Confederate veteran and a successful merchant and inventor, he died in Austin and was brought back to Grapevine for burial.

Ellison Saunders was born in Claiborne County, Tennessee on November 19, 1831. He was the eldest son of Wiley Saunders and his first wife. Some researchers at Ancestry.com say her name was Polly Hawk. Wiley Saunders died in Claiborne County in 1861. Ellison's stepmother was Lucinda Wallas (1819-1891). All Ellison's half-siblings except one eventually settled in the Grapevine-Coppell area, along with Ellison's step-mother and step-grandmother, beside whom he lies buried.

Several of Ellison Saunders' relatives, including his half brother, John Sherman Saunders appear on our local veterans' monument. Three more of our Confederate veterans were married to his half-sisters....Calloway Hurst, George Cal Corbin and William Wayne Corbin. Two of the wives of our Union veterans were his half-sisters...Mrs. William E. Pearson and Mrs. John A. Berry.

Ellison Saunders appears in the 1850 census of Claiborne County's subdivision 7. He was eighteen years old and was working as a laborer. He was the oldest child in the family of his father, Wiley *Sanders*. The family farmed on land they owned which was worth one thousand dollars. Wiley Sanders was not a slave owner in 1850.

Ellison Saunders moved to Travis County, Texas in the fall of 1855 and settled near Austin. He was appointed postmaster of the post office at Webberville, Travis County, Texas on December 29, 1859 and took over the same job under Confederate authorization on July 12, 1861.

At the time the census was taken in 1860, E. Saunders was living at Webberville in Travis County, Texas and boarding with the family of Dr. J. B. Bacon, a wealthy physician. Ellison was working as a merchant, and owned sixteen thousand dollars worth of personal property. None of his wealth was in slaves.

Ellison Saunders joined the Confederate Army at Dallas, Texas on January 18, 1862 for a term of twelve months. He was mustered into the service at Dallas on the following March 15, and became a third lieutenant in Captain H. S. Morgan's Company of Darnell's Regiment of Texas Volunteers. The regiment subsequently became the 18th Texas Cavalry. Mr. Saunders presented himself for service riding a horse worth one hundred sixty dollars, with equipment worth forty dollars and with pistols worth fifty dollars.

On January 11, 1863 Ellison was captured with many other members of his regiment in Fort Hindman at Arkansas Post, Arkansas. On January 27, 1863 as prisoners they left St. Louis, Missouri to begin their trip further north. An interesting notation appears on the prisoner list: "The Arkansas Post prisoners were all transferred directly from the Boats in which they came up the river, to the Cars which took them East." On January 30, 1863 he was received at Camp Chase, Ohio. He was described as being five feet seven inches tall, with blue eyes, light hair, and a fair complexion. At some time in mid-April 1863 he was transported to Fort Delaware...the exact date is unreadable in the available microfilm. He was paroled from Fort Delaware on April 25. In some records from this time his name appears as J. Ellison Saunders. On April 29, 1863 he was forwarded to City Point, Virginia for exchange.

He was temporarily relieved of his command in a reorganization of the regiment which took place in or before June 1863, at which time he was a member of Co. B of the 18th Texas Cavalry. His name appears as a second lieutenant in Co. B of that regiment on May 5, 1864. Mr. Saunders' file in the National Archives contains several original pay vouchers which he signed. In every instance he signed his name "E. Saunders."

By the spring of 1868 Mr. Saunders and a partner named Washington were placing regular advertisements for their mercantile business in the Austin newspaper. About October of that year R. M. Castleman became a partner of Saunders and Thomas M. Washington and the business was styled Saunders, Washington and Co.

By the time the census was taken in 1870 Ellison had moved into the town of Austin in Travis County. He gave his occupation as "retired merchant" and said he owned twelve thousand dollars worth of real estate and four thousand dollars in personal property. He was a single man boarding with two store clerks, Lloyd Thomas and William C. Hawk. We have been unable to locate Mr. Saunders in the 1880 census records in Texas. He does not appear in the agricultural census of Texas in either 1870 or 1880. Descendants of one of his half-brothers near Grapevine remember that he once owned part of the Richard M. Gano property around Grapevine in the 1870's or 1880's.

Mr. Saunders had considerable success and recognition as an inventor. A notice appeared on page 233 of the Scientific American on April 12, 1884: *"A safety stop for elevators has been patented by Mr. Ellison Saunders, of Austin, Texas. A lever is pivoted to the bottom of the car, with a spring*

for throwing it into position transversely to the car bottom, so that the end of the lever can catch on horizontal bars on the sides of the elevator shaft, a rope on one end of the lever to the car cable keeping the spring taut and preventing it from throwing the lever unless the elevator cable breaks."

In 1894 the U. S. Government Printing Office published a lengthy report from the U. S. Department of Agriculture on....The Use of Metal Railroad Ties... A section on page 142 describes the "Saunders Tie," patented by Ellison Saunders of Austin. The article mentions that he held two patents related to this subject, numbers 450498 (filed August 17, 1890) and number 463456 (filed June 8, 1891). Both patent files are viewable online. A short article on the ties appeared in the Scientific American on May 2, 1891. Illustrations and fuller descriptions were printed in the same magazine on May 30, 1891 (p. 338) and April 16, 1892 (p. 248). A description of Saunders' metallic railroad tie also appeared in the May 1891 issue of The Canadian Patent Office Record on pages 246 and 247.

The Scientific American issue of August 8, 1896 contained an extensive front-page article about a large granite dam built across the Colorado River at Austin. The article contained numerous photographs and drawings about machinery connected with the dam's operation. On page 137 of that issue, it says: "*Mr. Ellison Saunders was President of the Board of Trade of Austin immediately prior to the inauguration of the movement that contemplated this great engineering feat, and it was largely through his untiring effort, assisted by a few other public-spirited citizens, that the enterprise assumed a substantial shape...*" Ironically, it was the failure of this dam about five years later which led to Mr. Saunders' death.

We have been unable to locate Mr. Saunders in the 1900 census records. There was one *Edward* Saunders living at 606 Rio Grande Street in Austin in that year, boarding with the family of Julian C. Pray. Mr. Saunders was listed as a sixty-three-year-old Tennessean, and a "capitalist." It seems likely this was Ellison Saunders, because a later note in the Grapevine Sun thanked Mr. Preay and Mr. Coleman of Austin and their families for the kindness shown to Mr. Saunders.

Ellison Saunders died June 7, 1901 at Austin, Travis County, Texas. A surprisingly-short notice of his death (considering his importance in the development of the City of Austin) appeared in the Austin Statesman on June 8: "*AN OLD CITIZEN GONE. Mr. E. Saunders Died About 12 O'clock Last Night. Mr. E. Saunders, one of the old and well-known citizens of Austin, died last night, after severe suffering for some time. His illness dates from the breaking of the dam, when he had a shoulder broken and paralysis supervened, from which he never recovered. About two weeks ago he grew rapidly worse and last night passed away. Mr. Saunders was 69 years old on the 21st day of last November, and has been a resident of this city for a long time. The remains will be shipped tonight to Grapevine, Tex., his old home, for burial.*"

On June 9, 1901 the following article appeared in the Fort Worth Morning Register. "*DIED IN AUSTIN. An aged Tarrant County Citizen Victim of the Dam at Austin. Information reached the city last night of the death in Austin Friday night of an old Tarrant county citizen, Mr. E. Saunders, but who for a long time had resided in Austin. The information is that he died from the effects of an injury received when the great dam broke, over a year ago, he being at the dam at the time. He had his shoulder blade dislocated, which, on account of his age, grew worse till this time, and finally*

resulted fatally. The remains were shipped to Grapevine, Tex., where the funeral will be held today. He was 69 years of age."

Finally, on June 22, 1901 a lengthy obituary for Mr. Saunders was printed in The Grapevine Sun. The microfilm is damaged and the print is quite faded, but most of it can be read: *"On June 8th news was received here of the death of Mr. Ellison Saunders, who lived at Austin, and that the body would be shipped here for burial. On the next day quite a company of many relatives and friends gathered at the depot to await the arrival of the body on the 11 o'clock train. It was accompanied by Mr. John Saunders, a brother of the deceased, and immediately went from the depot to the cemetery where an appropriate service from PSALMS 90:1 was held, after which the body was laid away for the final rest.*

Mr. Ellison Saunders was born Nov. 19, 1831 in Claiborne county, East Tennessee. He was the only child of the first marriage of his father. His mother died when he was quite young and afterwards his father remarried, there being twelve children from the second union, all but one living, most of them are citizens and friends living between Grapevine and Coppell.

Mr. Saunders came to Texas in the fall of 1855 and located at Austin, which place he has designated as his home since that time. He was for a long while connected with a wholesale grocery firm of New York and traveled over a large territory. He was a successful businessman in every line in which he embarked and acquired a good deal of real estate, most of which he used in such a way to make it beneficial to his family. He remained unmarried to his death, and was a thoughtful, loving brother to those of his father's name. He was a man of fine feelings and high ideals of character and manhood and wherever he went earned the respect and esteem of those with whom he came in contact. His life leaves us a beautiful lesson of what a poor boy can do in this world when honesty and integrity are his mottoes and those are made alive by indefatigable energy. The last year of his life was made long by the sad affliction of partial paralysis. He had a slight stroke soon after the breaking of the Austin dam and a second one a short time before his death, which immediately brought on that event.

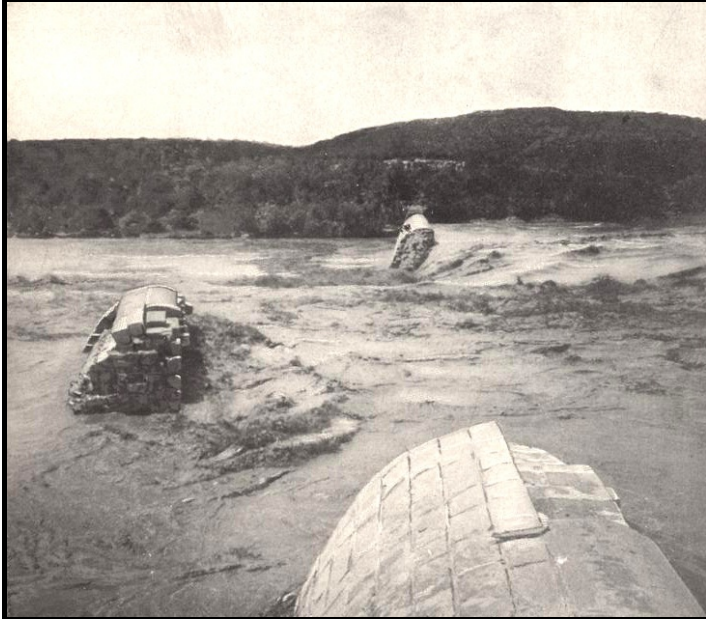
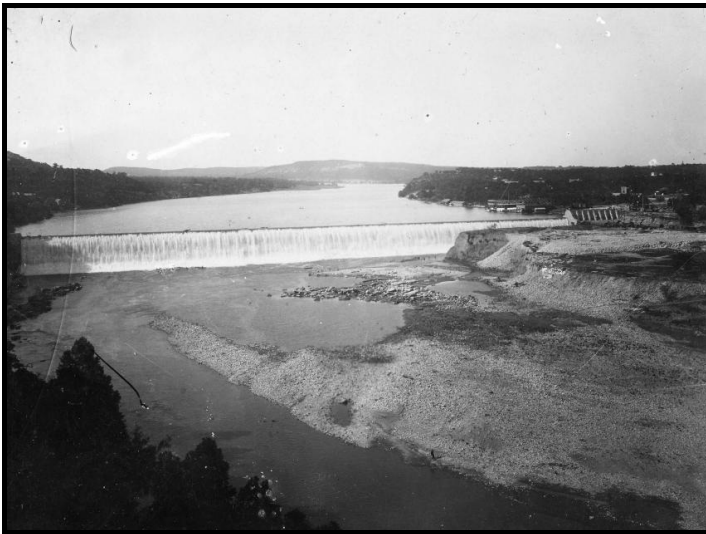
He had a host of friends and acquaintances in Austin who did everything in their power to make his last days as comfortable and pleasant as could be..."

The event referred to in the obituaries was the catastrophic failure of the McDonald Dam on the Colorado River at Austin at 11:20 a.m. on April 7, 1900. This event killed several dozen people, drained the Lake McDonald Reservoir, and left the City of Austin without electrical power for a number of months.

Torrential rains had fallen upstream in the Colorado River drainage. After the rains had stopped Austinites came out that bright Saturday morning to see their local version of Niagara. At 11:20 a.m. water was streaming over the top of the dam more than eleven feet deep. A large crowd, including Mr. Saunders, had gathered to watch. They heard a loud crack-"like a gunshot," several said-and watched in horror as a central section of the dam gave way and slid sixty feet downstream. Observers at three different points all agree in their testimony how it first opened and as though the mad current had simply pushed its way through the structure.

Within a few seconds two detached sections, each about two hundred fifty feet long, were shoved or pushed into the lower positions, about sixty feet from their former positions in the dam. There was not the slightest overturning. As soon as the sections were broken out, the partially pent-up waters rushed through the gap, those held back by the lower sections producing a strong current in the direction of the power house. This current struck the wall of the power house almost on a level with the floor of the pump room (about twelve feet below the crest of the dam), crushed in all of the windows on the west side, flooded all of the lower stories, and caught and drowned five employees and three small boys. Two of the employees miraculously escaped by climbing through a belt hole in the dynamo room. These workmen were pumping water from the lower portions of the power house.

Subsequent attempts to rebuild the dam were unsuccessful. The dam was finally replaced by the **Tom Miller Dam**, just upstream, in the 1940s.



Two photos of the Austin dam involved in Saunders' death, one taken about an hour after the dam broke.

