

## About

A Civil War camp for Union prisoners of war near Hempstead, Texas 1863 to 1864.

### Description

Established in 1862 as a camp of instruction for Confederate recruits, Camp Groce was abandoned due to its sickly location. In the summer of 1863, the camp was re-opened to hold Union prisoners of war captured in the battles of Galveston (January 1, 1863) and Sabine Pass (January 21, 1863). After the second battle of Sabine Pass (September 8, 1863), the prisoner population swelled to over 400 officers, soldiers, sailors, and US citizens. In December 1863, almost all of the prisoners were sent to Shreveport for exchange except for the officers who were confined at Camp Ford near Tyler, Texas.

In May 1864, the battle of Calcasieu Pass was fought in southwest Louisiana. About 150 Union officers, soldiers, and sailors were brought to the reopened Camp Groce. Great suffering occurred among these prisoners and many died. In August of 1864, about 500 additional Union prisoners were transferred from Camp Ford to Camp Groce. Not long after their arrival, a large escape attempt was made with the direct help of the guards who were Union loyalists. Almost all of the escapees were returned to Camp Groce just in time for a serious yellow fever epidemic to strike within a mile of the stockade. The entire prison population was evacuated south to Camp Gillespie, 1.5 miles east of Bellville, Texas, in present-day Austin County. The prisoners were held there on open ground for 10 days. The water was deemed insufficient so the prisoners were removed to Camp Felder, about 7 miles north of Chappell Hill, Texas in Washington County.

Camp Felder was a disaster. The prisoners were kept out in the open in a valley between two hills. It was the wettest winter in Texas history. The prisoners died at a rate 4-5 per day, and 6-7 when it rained. They were returned to Camp Groce on about November 1, 1864. There were about 650 prisoners alive when they left Camp Groce in September, but returned with only 430.

The surviving prisoners were paroled on December 5 and 19, 1864, and conveyed to Galveston Bay by rail. They were placed on Union ships under a flag of truce there and sent to New Orleans.

In April of 1865, thousands of Confederate troops were massed at Hempstead to await the arrival of Confederate President Jefferson Davis in-order to make the Last Stand of the Confederacy. Davis was captured, and the last remaining regular Confederate force west of the Mississippi River vanished.

In September of 1865, Maj. Gen. George Armstrong Custer arrived near Hempstead with 4 regiments of Union volunteer cavalry. Custer was accompanied by his wife, father and his 2-time congressional Medal of Honor recipient brother Thomas Ward Custer. George and Thomas were killed at the Battle of Little Big Horn 11 years later.

In 1866, the 1st Battalion, 17th United States Infantry Regiment, began occupation duty in Hempstead. In the Fall of 1867, a horrendous yellow fever epidemic swept the area, resulting in the deaths of 30 soldiers in the battalion and many Hempstead residents.

Today, there is little to commemorate the rich Civil War history of Camp Groce and Hempstead except for the Union Army P.O.W. Cemetery Park 3 miles west of Hempstead on the Austin Branch Road. In 1987, Waller County and the State of Texas officially recognized the site as one of the burial grounds of Union prisoners of war from Camp Groce who are buried there.

Submitted by

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