

David Levi Kokernot arrives in New Orleans with his father in 1817, takes to the sea, and moves to Texas

This extract from the life of David Levi Kokernot is a sample. Many pages as well as all citations are omitted. Contact the author if you are interested in the complete work.

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Many pages of preceding narrative omitted.

The Revenue Cutter Service

“The Caribbean pirates were a vicious lot. They progressed from robbing their victims to raping, torturing, and murdering them.” As old as the Barbary Coast, this piracy reached a peak between 1818 and 1825. The new nations of Latin America were willing to lend their flags to privateers who would raid Spanish shipping in the Caribbean. In time they expanded their efforts to include American shipping, even as far north as Georgia and Baltimore. Ships entering and leaving the Mississippi were especially vulnerable since their courses were predictable and pirates had endless hiding places among the swamps and coves near the Balize as well as the uninhabited offshore islands.

The Revenue Cutter Service was created by Alexander Hamilton in 1790 within the Treasury Department not to fight pirates but to collect customs revenue. Their ships were smaller, faster, and more lightly armed than warships, the better to pursue smugglers. These craft proved inadequate against the more heavily armed and villainous smugglers of the Caribbean, who were in fact most often privateers or pirates at the same time. So cutters were built bigger. At seventy-three feet, the *Ingham* was among the largest, and it was on her brand new decks that David received his commission and served in his first cruise down the coast to Barataria Bay that same autumn. Of that cruise David said only that they “captured

eight or ten sloops and schooners.” David’s duties as a warrant officer did

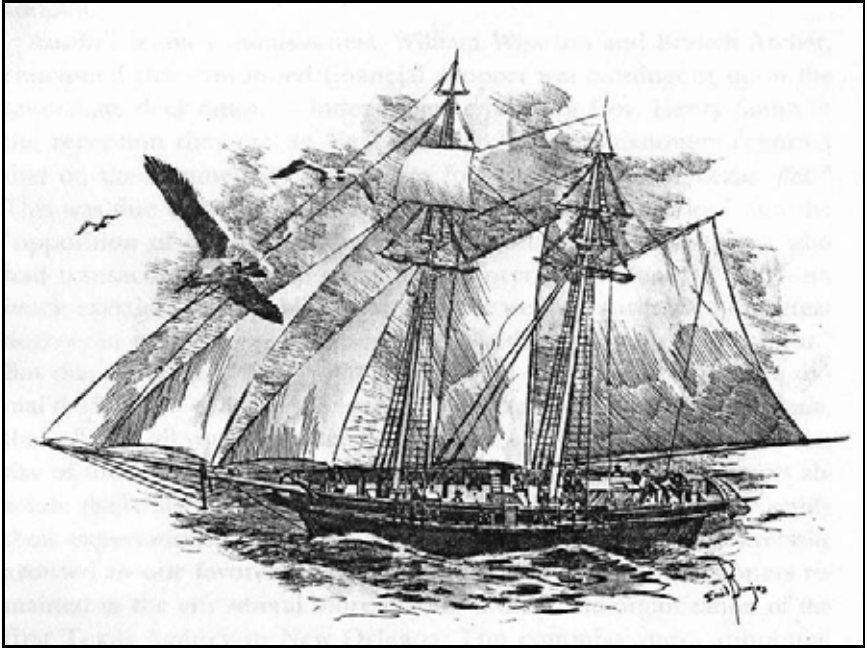


FIGURE 1. *The Revenue Cutter Ingham was sold to the Republic of Texas in 1836, renamed the Independence (pictured here), and commissioned into the Texas Navy.*

not include operation of the vessel but, as an agent of the Customs Collector of New Orleans, to assure import duties were not evaded. Typically a warrant officer would board incoming vessels and accompany them to port, perhaps the Balize, then rejoin the cutter.

By the following spring David Kokernot was back ashore. Perhaps absence had made his, and Caroline’s, hearts grow fonder for apparently they had reconciled. Their first child was conceived in February or March and no further action was ever taken in the divorce. Added to that, David received a new and much more exciting assignment—so he said—which he described in colorful detail in his *Reminiscences*. Many of these colorful details are contradicted by the public records of the day so one must use caution in accepting his tale, but there is no doubt that it did happen along the lines of what he told.

To “...find a good schooner of light draught and about 150 tons burden and to charter the same...” were his orders. Barataria was “alive with smugglers.” “I was sent thither.” It seems mysterious that a schooner would be chartered for this assignment rather than sending a cutter or

warship. Moreover besides the crew of ten, the schooner carried twenty civilian passengers, including women and children. It was common in that time for warships to disguise themselves as something less threatening and even to fly false flags in order to approach an enemy, but this seems an unlikely explanation for the civilians. Kokernot offers none, and he takes full responsibility for proceeding into an approaching storm despite advice from his old friends at the Balize.

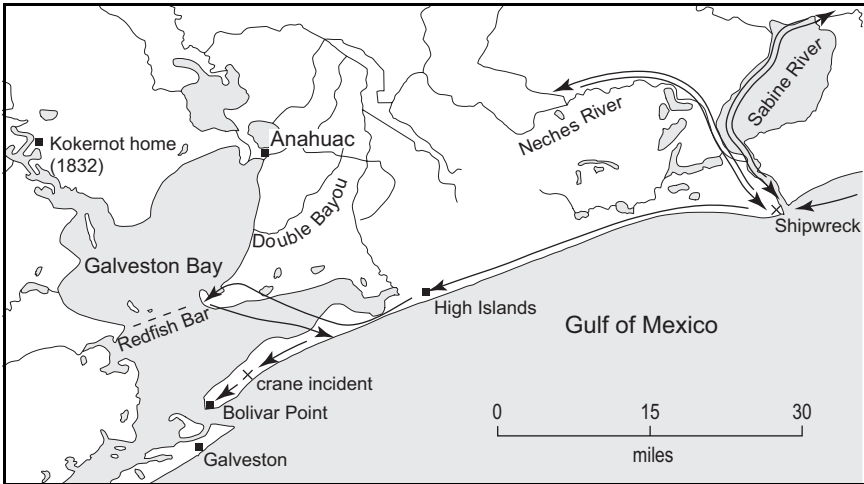


FIGURE 2. David Kokernot's shipwreck ordeal in 1831.

David's account begins with his departure on March 18, 1831, in the schooner *Julius Caesar*. He "dropped down to the mouth of the Mississippi" where, on the second day, his pilot friends from the Balize urged him not to set out, as a storm was brewing. "I could not see it" he said, "I set sail under a fine breeze, to the northwest, making a fine run down the coast the first day." At 7 pm on the twentieth—the third day after departing New Orleans—the storm hit "blowing a tremendous tornado." But before continuing David's tale, let's check it against known facts...

David actually left almost three months later on June 11, in the Atlantic hurricane season. The schooner *Ceaser*[†] had been purchased from Felix Boyer by William Henderson and Michael Thompson and registered only three days earlier. It was only 25 tons but indeed of light draught, drawing only three feet one inch. In both the registration and the departure notice in the *Bee* Michael Thompson was listed as the master and the

[†] Another schooner *Julius Caesar* was active in Texas and Louisiana waters in later years. Doubtless Kokernot had seen it, which could have contributed to his confusion a half century later. I've used the spelling of *Ceaser* that appears in the registration documents. Other spellings differ.

Bee noted that it carried cargo belonging to the master. And two days later when David said of the storm “I could not see it,” it was already well developed. The master of the towboat *Post Boy* arrived in New Orleans from the passes on the thirteenth and reported that he had left ships off-shore because of a “sea running so high it was impossible tow them in.” And the storm had been building, approaching from the east, for several days. Captain Batchlor, of the Brig *Virginia*, reported sighting a dismasted ship near the Tortugas as well as “a Spanger boom all inside the toffle bumed” in the water on the tenth. It probably didn’t require much experience to see that leaving the river and entering the Gulf on the third day, the fourteenth, was dicey. Curiously, within a few hours after leaving the river the *Ceaser* passed the entrance to Barataria Bay, David’s assigned destination, without pausing. Continuing David’s telling...

By the morning of the twenty-first, with the *Julius Caesar* damaged and shipping water after a night in the hurricane, David attempted to drive through the Sabine Pass by following two porpoises. Instead, he was wrecked in the breakers on the Texas side of the river[†] and only managed to get everyone safely ashore by assembling a makeshift raft from the mast and spars of the schooner.

Once ashore they found themselves in an environment typical of this part of the Gulf of Mexico—salt marsh, mosquitoes, snakes, and alligators, but few people. They did find an apparently abandoned dugout canoe, with which Kokernot and one companion navigated some thirty miles up the Sabine and twenty-five miles up the Neches Rivers, . They found not so much as a human footprint.

After two days rest Kokernot and three companions set out on the beach toward Galveston, sixty miles distant, while the rest of the party remained at the Sabine in a camp constructed of supplies and materials salvaged from the *Julius Caesar*. Two days walking brought the captain and his companions to High Islands where they found an abandoned hut of Burrel Franks, who had been a hunter for pirate Jean Lafitte.* Here they killed a pig, rested a day, then walked another day on the beach toward Galveston. At this point one of his companions, Mr. Redman, suggested they could travel inland by wading across the eastern arm of Galveston Bay to Redfish Bar, then cross the bay on the bar to the home of Mr. Edwards.

The eight mile crossing at Redfish Bar on foot looks like foolish desperation to someone today who’s seen ocean going cargo vessels pass it,

† The Sabine River then was the international boundary between Louisiana and Mexico and is today the state boundary.

* Lafitte had operated out of Galveston from 1818 to 1820 before he removed to Yucatan.

but this wasn't so then. The bar was an oyster reef with average depth in the channels of four to five feet—a major hazard to navigation in the days before dredging, but in 1831 conceivably passable on foot at low tide. In fact, the anonymous author of “A Visit to Texas” had rowed over the bar and visited Mr. Edwards at his home only four months earlier and reported that “at low tides there is but three to four feet.” After much “bogging” they did reach the east shore of Galveston Bay at Redfish Bar, weak and out of water. At least David and Mr. Gill were out of water. Their third companion, Mr. Morris, had conserved his water, which David offered to buy for \$500 in gold without success. Mr. Gill, who drank brackish water, soon died and was buried in the marsh, the only fatality of the expedition. The waters at the bar were evidently too deep to wade so the remaining three made their way back to the Gulf where they “gave up all hope, and laid down in the surf to die.” Mr. Morris—“not so exhausted as the rest of us”—then returned to High Islands and retrieved water to revive, indeed save, the others.

The next day David set out alone on the beach toward Galveston, exhausted and without food or water. “I thought of home, of my dear wife and mother, and that I must die alone on this barren shore.” The shore turned out to be not entirely barren, for he soon shot a crane, drank its blood, ate its meat raw, and was “revived and strengthened”. This strength carried him further down the coast to Bolivar Point where he encountered the current home of Burrel Franks. The adult Franks were gone but the eight year old daughter nursed David while the oldest son, Elijah, took food and water and fetched the remaining companions to the cabin. After a week they hailed a passing schooner which first carried them to Anahuac then retrieved the remaining victims at Sabine Pass to the same place.

Anahuac had only been established the previous October as a base for the Mexican Army, who used it to enforce collection of customs duties. That same anonymous visitor of four months earlier described it:

We found fifteen or twenty log houses and huts, and seven poor shops, with the building erected as barracks for the garrison. This was about one hundred and fifty feet long and twenty wide, with the Colonel's quarters at one end, and the guard house at the other.

The whole crew spent nearly three months at Anahuac at a critical time in Texas history. David met William Travis, James Morgan, and William Harden, who would all play roles in the subsequent revolution. James Spillman, the man who rescued him from Haiti in 1825 carried him and his crew back to New Orleans in July, 1831. David Kokernot wrote: “Now, my friends, at that time I was lost indeed; but, thanks be unto God, through Christ Jesus, now I am found.”†

David's return to New Orleans, with its excellent records, allows us to check on some of his facts once again. The newspaper noted their arrival in both the English and the French sections in the October 11, 1831, edition, but only the French account mentions the loss of the *Ceaser*:

Arrived yesterday: Schooner Martha, Spilman, in 72 hours from Anahuac (Bay of Galveston) with \$3000 in specie and passengers. The captain S. announces the loss of the Schooner Caesar near the mouth of the Sabine; the greater part of the cargo (consisting of dry goods) has been saved—the schooner had departed New Orleans for Galveston.

The *Martha* cleared customs on the tenth and James Spillman signed his name to this passenger list:

Baggage	Name of Passengers	Their Occupation
1 Trunk	M T Thompson	Mariner
1 Bag	George Horton	Mariner
1 Trunk	D L Kokernot	Merchant
1 Trunk	Charles O. Bedford	Merchant
1 Trunk	Moses Cohen	Mariner
	M Wood	Merchant
household furniture and tools	H Corvin, Wife & 3 children Stearge Passengers	Mechanic

M. T. Thompson is, of course, the co-owner and master of the *Ceaser*, and the one David calls “my mate.” Moses Cohen, only fifteen years old, was a friend, possibly even kin,[†] of David's mother. He had paid his passage from Amsterdam by working as cabin boy on the *Charles of Bath*, arriving in New Orleans with Betsy Kokernot's sister-in-law and her two young sons only two months before the *Ceaser's* departure. Of the other names mentioned by David (“Mr. R. Morris, wife and three children, John W. Brown, Redman and M. Gill, were among the passengers.”) none appears on this list. One likely explanation is David simply forgot their names. Another is that the others found a different way home despite David's claim that they travelled with him on the *Martha*.

[†] Raised in the Jewish faith, David Kokernot converted to Methodism later in life. (see *Gonzales Inquirer interview for more*)

[†] Betsy Kokernot often used the surname Cohn in the 1830s.

David's Memory Slips

Errors of detail are perfectly forgivable when writing a half century after the fact. Less forgivable are errors which enhance one's role in an historical event when a man believes they can't be checked. David was guilty of both.

Forgivable details include things like the name of the schooner and the dates—though it's a mystery why he'd quote his dates of departure, arrival at Anahuac, and return to New Orleans to the day yet be off by three months.

More serious is his claim to be master of the vessel as, during the storm he "ordered all hands to go below, save Mr. Thompson, my mate, and two men." Thompson was master, and David Kokernot may not have even been a seaman. In customs documents he had listed his occupation as "merchant" on his return to New Orleans, while Thompson and even the fifteen year old Moses Cohen were listed as "mariner."

Troubling also is his assertion that he was on a mission for the Revenue Cutter Service, which defies belief. He didn't even make a token effort to visit Barataria Bay on his first day in the Gulf, a day when he said the weather was "fine."

This all sounds remarkably like an ordinary mercantile run to Texas that just went sour in bad weather. Given that the cargo was dry goods belonging to Thompson and that the cargo was saved, one hypothesis appears: Thompson and his co-owner Henderson were investors in the Ceaser and its cargo. David was the merchant charged with disposing of the cargo in Texas—it was his family's business, after all. Thompson wrecked the vessel, maybe even with David's help, but the cargo was saved and sold at high profit in Anahuac, thus accounting for the "\$3000 in specie" they carried back. The investors lost their schooner, but David discovered Texas and the potential for marketing his specialty there.

In fact, on his return to New Orleans David immediately began preparations to move his family to Anahuac. And he started by acquiring another cargo of dry goods.
