

September 2011 – Did You Know?

Did you know that many Irish served in the Confederate Army during the Civil War, many with distinction?

Given that Irish immigrants fled oppression (and hunger), that might seem surprising, as one would expect them to sympathize with the condition of the slaves. Historian Philip Tucker points out that, by and large, the Irish were neither slave owners nor pro-slavery, but a variety of other concerns influenced them. Among them, the anti-Irish and anti-Catholic bigotry and violence of the Know-Nothings was more prevalent in the North. And the Irish immigrants in the South tended to be a bit more welcomed, and they wanted to protect their new homes.

The escaped Fenian rebel prisoner John Mitchel sided with the Confederacy, ending up in the cell adjacent to Jefferson Davis.

One famous soldier was Richard W. “Dick” Dowling. Born near Tuam, County Galway, in 1838, the second of eight children, he came to New Orleans in 1846. Orphaned in a yellow fever epidemic in 1853, Dowling settled down in Houston, where he established a successful chain of saloons. His most successful saloon was known as “The Bank,” which became Houston’s most popular social gathering place in the 1860s, reknowned for its hospitality.

Dowling was also involved in setting up Houston's first gaslight company, and was first to have it installed in his home and "The Bank". A founding member of Houston's Hook and Ladder Company Number One fire department, he was also involved in running the city's first streetcar company.

At the outbreak of the Civil War Dowling enlisted in a Texas unit composed primarily of Irish dockworkers and known as the Jefferson Davis Guards. In 1863, Lieutenant Dowling, along with a company of 44 mostly Irish men, known as the Davis guards, was assigned to an earthen artillery post on the Sabine River named Fort Griffin. Known for his skilled artillery work, Dowling spent his time at the remote outpost instructing his men in artillery targeting drills across the Sabine River's two channels, which the fort guarded.

On September 8, 1863 a Union navy flotilla of 5,000 men attempted to enter the channel. Dowling's artillery drills and strategies paid off as his small group forced the flotilla's retreat, capturing 350 prisoners and a large quantity of supplies, postponing a Union invasion of Texas.

The Confederate government offered its gratitude and admiration to Dowling and his unit while the ladies of Houston presented the unit with medals.

Dowling's promising future was cut short by a yellow fever epidemic and he died on September 23, 1867.

In 1905 the city of Houston commissioned a statue of Lt. Dowling, and it was erected at city hall, later moved to Sam Houston Park, and eventually relocated to Hermann Park. In 1998, the town of Tuam, also placed a bronze memorial plaque of Dowling on its Town Hall facade bearing his image and explaining his feats.