



**John Henninger Reagan
October 8, 1818-March 6, 1905**

**Davis-Reagan Chapter 2292 UDC
Reagan Memorial Ceremony
October 10, 2009**

**Address By Charles Marc Robinson, Commander
John H. Reagan Camp 2156, Sons of Confederate Veterans**

I would like to begin by thanking the Davis-Reagan Chapter 2292 for allowing me this opportunity to honor a very special Texas son, John H. Reagan. He was, to say at the least, a great man. Mr. Reagan was not born in Texas, but neither were most of the citizens who settled and founded the great Republic of Texas in the early 1800's. He came to Texas from (sa-veer-vul) Sevierville, Sevier County, Tennessee in 1839. He did not come from the aristocratic slave-holding class of the Old South, but instead, and in comparison, would have been considered raised in poverty. His economic situation was probably the deciding factor that brought the young Reagan to Texas to seek larger opportunities. He was born on October 8, 1818, the oldest son of Timothy and Elizabeth Reagan, who were farmers. All four branches of his immediate family were in America prior to the revolutionary war. His great-grandfather Timothy Reagan, was a soldier in the revolution, and was seriously wounded at the battle of Brandywine. His early education was limited for one, because of the rural area in which he was raised and two, because his father got into financial difficulties and was unable to give his children the education he had received. John H. Reagan did at various times briefly attend some formal academies. To do this, he would work and save enough money to attend for one or two sessions at a time, and then return to work, to raise more money for tuition.

When he came to Texas in May 1839, he originally settled in Nacogdoches. He joined the local militia during the Cherokee War. He participated in the battle on July 15, 1839 where the Indian leader Chief Bowles was killed in what is now Van Zandt County. His early career path in Texas was first working as a frontier scout, then surveyor, justice of peace, and captain of a militia unit in Nacogdoches. Mr. Reagan then began to study law and received a temporary law license in 1846. With this license, he opened a law practice in the old settlement of Buffalo near the Trinity River in what is now Henderson County, a county that he later named when he submitted the petition to the state of Texas for it to be formed. He actually submitted petitions to the state to form three new counties and the state accepted the names he submitted with these petitions. Those counties were Kaufman, Van Zandt and Henderson Counties named after the Honorable David S. Kaufman, the Honorable Isaac Van Zandt, and the General J. Pinckney Henderson, each of whom were distinguished for his public service to the Republic and State and were friends of John H. Reagan.

Mr. Reagan cultivated a small farm in Kaufman County from 1844-1851. He was elected probate judge and Lt. Colonel of the battalion of militia in newly formed Henderson County. In 1847, he was elected as a State Representative from the Nacogdoches district which included counties from Angelina all the way to the northern portion of Dallas County and Hunt counties. He lost reelection to the State House. In 1850, Judge Reagan was elected district judge for the counties of Houston, Anderson, Henderson, Van Zandt, Navarro, Ellis, Kaufman, Tarrant, and Dallas for a term of six years. In the summer of 1851 Judge Reagan moved to Palestine, Anderson County, Texas. At that time it was the largest city in the judicial district with the ablest lawyers according to Judge Reagan. In 1860, he bought a farm on land west of town which had originally been the site of Fort Houston, a post for the Republic of Texas. He did not live on the property until after the War Between the States in what was at that time a one-story Greek revival cottage. He named his home, appropriately, Fort Houston. In 1880 it was enlarged to a two-story stately and beautiful home. Shortly after being elected for a second 6 year term as district judge in 1856, he was nominated to a seat in

the U.S. House in which he was later elected. He had originally declined the nomination on the basis of just being re-elected to his judicial seat and also because he did not want, as he put it, to go into politics. Judge Reagan was subsequently convinced that he was greatly needed in this office and must accept the nomination. He took his seat in Congress of the United States of America on December 7, 1857.

John H. Reagan was a man that didn't mind taking a stand on what he believed to be right, no matter what the political outcome. Toward the end of his first term in the U.S. Congress, his views were being challenged on the issue of extreme Southern Rights men being in favor of filibustering Congress to acquire additional territory from Mexico, Cuba, and Central America, and for the reopening of the African slave-trade, and for the creation of additional slave States, to restore the balance of power between the North and the South. Congressman Reagan made a brief statement of opposition to filibustering and the reopening of the African slave-trade. This statement caused very bitter denunciation of him by the leading newspapers of the State, such as the Galveston News, the Houston Telegraph, the State Gazette of Austin, and the Marshall Republican and by nearly all the newspapers of the State and by nearly all the active politicians. In Judge Reagan's autobiography, published in 1906 and titled, *Memoirs with Special Reference to Secession and the Civil War*, he stated, "the personal attacks were so bad that I would burn the newspapers so my wife couldn't see what they were writing about me." He had no plans to run again for Congressional office in 1859, but his wife, after finally reading some of the personal attacks of him by the newspapers, encouraged him to run for re-election. During the canvass for his re-election, he gave to the public a circular letter illustrating his position. In his *Memoirs*, Mr. Reagan stated the following concerning the outcome of this election, "the result was that I defeated him by one of the largest majorities that any candidate for Congress ever got in the State". In honor of Mr. Reagan, and to get a better feel for whom this great man was, I hope you don't mind that I will be reading other various excerpts from his *Memoirs* during this address. At this time I would like to

read a portion of the letter that Mr. Reagan circulated to the public during this same 1859 re-election campaign. He states:

“These doctrines of filibustering and the reopening of the African slave-trade are chosen as those best calculated to secure the execution of their designs, because they appeal directly to the bad passions most easily awakened, and most difficult to reason with, those by which the people are encouraged to believe they are to be enriched suddenly and without patient toil, which has heretofore been regarded as necessary to secure wealth. These doctrines are not, and are not intended to be Democratic: but they are, and intended to be purely sectional and revolutionary. And I appeal to the Democracy of Texas, in the name of the Constitution and the Union, in the name of the rights of the States and the liberties of the people in the name of law and order, in the name of good government and sound morals, and for the happiness of our people and perpetuation of our institutions to sustain the old, the pure, the time-honored doctrines of our party; and put down these sectional and revolutionary doctrines. I know those who favor these doctrines will apply to me their cant expressions of submissionist! Submission to what? To be happy in a good government and obedient to just laws, and observant of sound morals? Certainly to these I submit. But I shall be called a Union saver, and charged with yielding to Northern aggression and surrendering the rights of the South. But no act, no vote, no speech of my life will warrant this. I have seen and understood the baleful effects of the sectional and revolutionary doctrines of the Abolitionists of the North, and have resisted and denounced them whenever and wherever I could do so. And I have often declared, and now repeat the declaration, that if they obtain the power to do so, and so attempt to abridge the constitutional rights of the States, or deprive the people either in the States or the Territories of their constitutional rights, I would regard it as an act of revolution, and appealing to the first great law of nature, the law of self-preservation, I would urge the States to fall back on their sovereignty, and resist the power to the by every means necessary to secure their rights. The Abolitionists are a sectional, a revolutionary and fanatical party who have no respect for the Constitution and laws of our country or for the rights

of their fellow-men. Our Southern agitators are alike sectional and revolutionary, and are now beginning in their meetings and speeches to show the same disregard for the Constitution and laws, and the same disposition to violate the rights of others. Both claim rights superior to the Constitution and laws of the land and claim the right to invade other people and despoil them of their property at whatever expense of human life and suffering. I denounce and defy them both, and appeal to the people to arrest the lawless career of each of them and restore our country to its former security. We expect Northern and Northwestern Democrats to resist the Northern sectionalism at whatever cost to themselves. They respond like pure patriots to our expectation, and often fight the most hopeless battles for the Constitution and the Union. We admire their self-sacrificing patriotism, and glory in their illustration of the pure principles of Democracy, and in that sublime grandeur of faithful integrity and moral courage which enables them to fight a hopeless battle bravely and meet defeat and proscription without a murmur, for the sake of maintaining such a government and such institutions as ours. And now that the sectional storm lowers here; now that sectionalism requires its victims here, who will go with me to the sacrificial altar if need be? Who will prove with me that the Democrats in the South are as ready to make the sacrifices which we expect the Democrats in the North to make? I know not what others may do, I only speak for myself; I will maintain the Constitution and laws of my country. I will maintain the moral law and the principles of justice. I will maintain the rights of the States and the liberties of the people. I will maintain the principles of the Democratic party in the construction of the Constitution, the powers of Congress, and the reserved rights of the States. I will resist sectionalism and revolution and fraud and force and wrong alike faithfully, whether they come from the North or from the South.”

Mr. Reagan continues in his Memoirs by stating:

“I remained thus devoted to the Union until the Republican party obtained the control of the government and answered our appeals for the protection afforded by the Constitution, by saying they were in the majority and that we had to submit; thus proposing to substitute the will of a popular majority of the people of

the Union for the Constitution of the United States, with its limitations on the powers of the Federal Government. I loved the American Union with a passionate devotion, and witnessed with an aching heart the unjust and unconstitutional crusade which led to disunion and war.”

Congressman Reagan was a member of the Texas Secession Convention of 1861 and was appointed a delegate to the Convention of Southern States in Montgomery Alabama. At this convention, he accepted the appointment as Postmaster General of the Confederate States of America by Jefferson Davis, the President of the Confederacy. It is worth mentioning that the Confederate Postal Service was the only national postal service to have actually made a profit. Mr. Reagan became a trusted friend and confidant of President Davis and remained in this position throughout the war and held the President in high regards the rest of his life. Judge Reagan, in writing the last few remarks in his Memoirs, lists many names of distinguished men he was personally acquainted with during his lifetime. These leaders included several U.S. presidents, Republic of Texas presidents, and state and federal military leaders. Mr. Reagan also stated the following concerning his acquaintance to President Davis:

“I enjoyed the personal friendship, as well as close official relations, with Jefferson Davis, the President of the Confederate States, and the association and friendship of the distinguished men who were members of his Cabinet, and of many of the men who distinguished themselves in the legislative, military, and the naval service of the Confederacy.

It has been my fortune to know many of the distinguished citizens of the United States during the past sixty years, and to have formed opinions as to their respective characters and abilities. There may have been among them some equal to or even superior to President Davis in some one department of study or branch of knowledge; but taking into view the combined elements of character and ability I regard him as the ablest man I have known. There is a maxim that distinguished men diminish in greatness as we get closer to them. This view did not apply in his

case. In all my association with him I found him thoughtful, prudent, and wise. I never heard him use a thoughtless, vain, or idle expression.

I only mention these associations to indicate the opportunities I have had for becoming familiar with matters of public and historical importance which have occurred within my experience.

If this great Republic could be administered on the principles upon which it was founded by the fathers, it might continue to be an asylum for the most prosperous, the most enlightened, and for the freest, the happiest people on earth."

During the final days of war, Mr. Reagan was the last of the original cabinet appointees that accompanied President Davis as the Confederate Government was fleeing south from Richmond. Mr. Reagan wrote in his Memoirs that they were headed west of the Mississippi. Some historians speculate that they were headed to Texas, possibly Palestine, to set up the Confederate Government here and continue the fight for Southern Independence. President Davis appointed Mr. Reagan Secretary of the Treasury shortly before they were captured in Georgia in May 1865. Upon his capture, he was imprisoned at Fort Warren in Boston Harbor for a few months. On May 28th, while in solitary confinement, he wrote a lengthy letter to President Johnson, asking that the Government be understanding and lenient on the eleven Southern States and those individuals who served the Confederacy including those that were still in federal prison. Judge Reagan stated in his Memoirs, *"To be able to understand why such a letter as this one to the President, and the one to Secretary of State Seward were written, it would be necessary for the reader to call to mind the extraordinary condition of the country at that time; and especially the condition of the Southern States, and their people. The people of eleven great Southern States, and the greater part of the people of four others having the heel of oppression on their necks, it became the sacred duty of all those who could speak to do whatever they could do to ameliorate (make better) those conditions, and to influence the abatement of the passions of war, and the adoption of the policies of peace. And on that view of the subject I acted in my Fort Warren letter, to the people of Texas, which follows this. It can now be seen*

whether the course I adopted, in the hour of painful trial, was wise and patriotic or not."

On August 11, 1865, from prison in Boston, he also wrote the "Fort Warren Letter." He wrote this letter to encourage the people of Texas to recognize the war's outcome, emancipation and suffrage of their former slaves and the terms of the federal government. He hoped Texas would avoid conflict and retribution by the occupying Federal forces. The Fort Warren letter made Mr. Reagan extremely unpopular for years in Texas. He regained his popularity when his premonitions were proven right and Texas suffered the ruthlessness and indignities of reconstruction. The courage he demonstrated in sacrificing his personal popularity, for the people of Texas, acquired him the honored nick name "The Old Roman."

Mr. Reagan began rebuilding his farm and his life after returning to Palestine and his home at Fort Houston. He made his living farming for two years as no one had money to pay attorney fees and because of his Fort Warren letter, he was too unpopular at that time to engage in a canvass for public office.

During the summer of 1866, Mr. Reagan was offered the appointment to the Governorship of Texas. From his Memoirs, Mr. Reagan again writes, *"General Griffin, then in command of what was called the Department of Texas, with headquarters at Galveston, sent one of his staff officers to inquire whether I would accept the appointment as Governor of Texas. The officer found me plowing. I asked what I had done to cause General Griffin to suppose I could accept such a position. He said, "General Griffin thinks you are a conservative man, and that you may aid in the restoration and preservation of good order in the State." I told him to take my compliments to General Griffin, with my thanks for the proposed honor, but that I could never be Governor of Texas except as the choice of the people of the State."*

As mentioned before, Mr. Reagan regained his popularity and in 1872 he was elected to the State Constitutional Convention. He served as U.S. Representative to Congress for the 1st District from 1874 to 1887. In 1887, he was elected US

Senator. In 1891, Governor Hogg asked him to head up the newly formed Railroad Commission of Texas. Senator Reagan resigned his U.S. Senate Seat, and accepted this new post as he was appointed the Chairman of the Railroad Commission of Texas. This was a position he held until he retired in 1901. He was also one of the founders of the Texas State Historical Association and served as their first President. Before Judge Reagan passed away at Fort Houston from pneumonia on March 6, 1905 he had completed his "MEMOIRS". The entire Texas Legislature turned out to remember John H. Reagan and attend his funeral.

At the very beginning of John H. Reagan's book, titled, *Memoirs, With Special Reference to Secession and the Civil War*, he dedicated his work to three groups of men and women. That page reads: *"This volume is dedicated with reverential respect TO THE PATRIOTS, who in the council and on the field, pledged life and fortune to the Cause of the Confederate States of America; TO THE DAUGHTERS OF THE CONFEDERACY, who endowed with the self-sacrificing virtues of their noble mothers, are doing so much for the preservation and perpetuation of the true history of the causes and conduct of the War Between the States; and TO THE SONS OF CONFEDERATE VETERANS, upon who devolves the great duty of vindicating their fathers against the calumny of rebellion and treason, and upon whose wisdom and patriotism largely rests the hope of this great Republic."*

If you look closely at the portrait of Judge Reagan that hangs today on the wall in the Reagan Room at the Museum for East Texas Culture here in Palestine, you will see in the background behind Judge Reagan hanging on the wall of his home, two portraits, one of General Robert E. Lee and the other of General Thomas "Stonewall" Jackson. Judge Reagan obviously held these great God fearing Confederate military leaders in high esteem as many Americans still do today.

George P. Garrison who was a renowned history professor at the University of Texas, wrote the introduction for Judge Reagan's *Memoirs* many years ago. He wrote about the greatness of Judge Reagan when he stated, *"Suffice it to say that his environment was such as strongly to develop his native instinct of rugged self-dependence, and this became one of his most prominent characteristics. He was*

always ready to take upon himself the burdens of others, but he sought no help in carrying his own. None ever accepted such responsibilities as fell to him with greater bravery and determination, or bore them in manlier fashion. It was no vain show of loyalty, but consistent obedience to the dictates of his heart and conscience that led him to ask, when he was captured along with President Davis, that he might share the fortunes of his fallen chief. How little of demagoguery or selfish ambition was in him is shown by his Fort Warren letter, whose distasteful advice to the people of Texas seemed at the time to have broken completely the hold of its writer upon them, and by his refusal to accept the governorship of the State by appointment of the Federal authorities during the period of Reconstruction. Judge Reagan died without an apology for his record, and in complete willingness to be judged thereby. The impartial verdict of history may find in it mistakes, but no cowardice or conscious wrong. May his type of pure, robust, and strenuous manhood never fail among those for whom his work was done."

I would like to close by making one last remark, and that is, our country today is in dire need of more strong, honest, and courageous leaders like Judge Reagan.

Thank you for being here today and may God bless the memory of John H. Reagan.

Sources:

Memoirs, With Special Reference to Secession and the Civil War, by John H. Reagan, published 1906

"The Old Roman," Article by Forrest E. Bradberry, Jr., www.reaganscvcamp.org

Historical Markers, Monuments, and Much More in Anderson County, Texas, by Bonnie Woolverton