

Ben Thompson Graveside speech by Anne Beck

As I look into the audience today I am so proud to say that I am the great granddaughter of Ben Thompson. I thank each and every one of you for attending this honorary graveside ceremony. On behalf of myself, my family, the Ben Thompson Preservation Foundation and the legacy of Ben Thompson, I extend a very special thank you to Lisa Lach and Denise Harlan along with H.W. Irby, your Master of Ceremonies. These talented and energetic individuals planned this event. And, Land Commissioner Jerry Patterson, we offer you our thanks for attending this ceremony and applaud you and your staff for your interest in preserving Texas history.

I want to welcome my husband Marvin Beck, who is well on the road to recovery after a recent medical scare. Marvin is the first person who urged me to talk about Ben Thompson, and he actually began to research Ben's history before I did! We have three daughters, and two are with us. DeAndra is a Director for the Ben Thompson Preservation Foundation, and Sondra Black is here with her husband Richard and my grandson Dylan. We have five other grandchildren who were unable to attend. Also here today is the Davis family who descended from Ben Thompson's sister Mary Jane Thompson Gill, I hope you will meet all of the Thompson family at the history conference following the ceremony.

As you are gathered here around Ben's burial site, there are two things I wish to point out about Ben's tombstone and the gravesite itself. Oddly, the birth date on the tombstone is incorrect. You will find the correct date (November 2, 1843) on the bronze plaque we have mounted on the grave. Secondly, Ben's father-in-law Martin Moore purchased this burial plot. We have learned from our research that there are five people buried with Ben. I am sure at one time there were tombstones for them before the cemetery was vandalized numerous times over the years. Now we turn to an earlier day, and an earlier time. When news of the Civil War reached Texas, Ben signed up on June 12, 1861 in San Antonio, serving under Colonel John R. Baylor as a Private in the 2nd Regiment Texas Cavalry at age 17. The commander of the regiment was Colonel John S. Ford, more commonly known as RIP Ford.

The first battle Ben fought was the Battle of Galveston Bay. The battle took place January 1 to January 2, 1863. Ben's regiment overtook the Union's SS Harriet Lane before turning it over to the Confederacy. I have read a couple of newspaper accounts that said the ship had whiskey on board, and the boys drank all of the bottles before handing over command of the ship. Ben was wounded in this battle and was sent to recover at a hospital in Louisiana.

By April 1863 there was another battle brewing. Upon hearing his regiment had already started to move towards La Fourche Crossing, Ben deserted his hospital bed, took a pair of crutches and walked to the town of St. Barnard to meet up with his regiment. He was ordered back to sick leave but refused. Ben said that one moment he was among the living the next among the dead. Ben returned home and married Catherine Louise Moore and raised a family in Austin

After the Civil War, Ben became a gambler before being elected as Austin City's Marshal in 1880. My great-grandfather Ben Thompson was a part of Austin's history. If you take a walk today in this beautiful city you will be re-tracing his steps and seeing some of the historic building he visited that are still standing today. When he was killed in 1884, along with King Fisher at the Vaudeville Theatre in San Antonio, the citizens of Austin met his train and observed his coffin being guarded by the Knights of Pythias. His coffin was hitched to a hearse carriage, but throngs of people surged forward to pull the coffin by hand down the entire length of Congress Avenue. Members of the African American brass band, who admired Ben for his progressive ways, marched and played during this procession. Ben's funeral was lavish, with carriages lined up in a long row. Thousands of people that came to give a last farewell to a man they considered Austin's own in this very cemetery at this very spot 129 years ago. Time and events have diminished recollections of his accomplishments, his heroism, his generosity – and yes, his faults. I am hopeful that today's events will chart a new course and will inspire a new generation to research the life and times of Ben Thompson. It is an honor to be among all of you today, to be a part of celebrating Ben Thompson's legacy and contribution to history, and to recognize his service in the Civil War.