

Bagdad, Tamaulipais History, an unedited Wikipedia version by History Lady

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Bagdad, [Tamaulipas](#), [Mexico](#), was a major player in the [American Civil War](#).

Established in 1848 on the south bank of the mouth of the [Río Grande](#), it is now invisible, covered by the shifting sands of time. Few realize it even existed, nor its vital importance to the Confederacy in its struggle against the North. One of the first appearances of Bagdad was on a map entitled "Map of the Country Adjacent to the Left Bank of the Rio Grande Below Matamoros, 1847."

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Civil War

The Civil War began in 1861 when the Southern states seceded from the Union. With [Abraham Lincoln](#)'s proclamation that he would hold [Jefferson Davis](#)' privateers "amenable to the laws of the United States for the prevention and punishment of piracy," the War commenced. Mexico was the only foreign country to share a border with the Confederacy. Being neutral, Mexico could not be cut off by Lincoln's Federal blockade. The US Supreme Court, in the Prize cases, had declared Lincoln's blockades legal. However, this legality did not extend to the Rio Grande, as this river was considered international water by the [Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo](#) signed in 1848 between the United States and Mexico.

Article VII of the Treaty read, "The river Gila, and the part of the Rio Bravo del Norte laying below the southern boundary of New Mexico, being, agreeably to the fifth article, divided in the middle between the two republics, the navigation of the Gila and of the Bravo below said boundary shall be free and common to the vessels and citizens of both countries; and neither shall, without the consent of the other, construct any work that may impede or interrupt, in whole or in part, the exercise of this right; not even for the purpose of favoring new methods of navigation."

Importance of cotton to the Southern cause

Cotton was the "white gold" that would sustain the Confederacy during the Civil War, and cotton was literally "King" in south Texas. [Richard King](#), owner of the famed King Ranch, along with several partners, was a major player in the cotton trade during this time period. The arid brush country was soon a bustle of activity as cotton carts from all parts of Texas, as well as neighboring states, labored on the rutted, dusty roads to transport the cotton first to [Brownsville, Texas](#), and then to [Matamoros, Tamaulipas](#). From there it was transported by cart to Bagdad, where it was placed on ships bound for various ports around the world.

Frontier boomtown

So great was the trade that Bagdad's population soon reached 15,000 inhabitants. From a miserable shanty town, Bagdad exploded into a frontier boom town, complete with saloons, gambling houses, and brothels. The Brownsville *Ranchero* described Bagdad as a town in which "...fandangos were held every night and women as beautiful as houris exhibit their charms, without the least reserve." The *New York Herald* described Bagdad as "an excrescence of the war. Here congregated . . . blockade runners, desperadoes, the vile of both sexes; adventurers . . . numberless grogeries and houses of worse fame. [Where the] decencies of civilized life were forgotten, and vice in its worst form held high carnival . . . while in the low, dirty looking buildings . . . were amassed millions [in] gold and silver." A blockade runner once described Bagdad

as a place where everyone was trying to grab what he could by using whatever scheme possible to make money out of crisis.

There was immense pressure to keep the cotton moving. Ship masts stretched across the water as far as the eye could see. All of these were waiting for cotton. The cotton was slowed down on its journey when it reached Bagdad, as it could take up to three months to load one schooner. This process was hindered by the shortage of small steamboats, lighters [wide barges] and carts to move the bales downriver.

The role of camels

To speed up this process, the Confederacy decided to utilize camels, first brought to Texas at the recommendation of secretary of war, Jefferson Davis, in 1857. Each carried two bales of cotton to Matamoros where it was then unloaded and shipped on to Bagdad. The camel caravans would return to Camp Verde carrying six hundred pounds of salt from El Sal del Rey and Sal Vieja. The camels could carry twice the load of that of a mule. However, Brownsville citizens soon complained when some camels created havoc. The Brownsville Commission immediately enacted an ordinance prohibiting anyone from walking camels in the streets.

Mexican power struggles over the area

Prior to the American Civil War, Bagdad was but a recreational destination for the residents of Matamoros. When the Mexican-American War broke out, Matamoros was split into two cities. Those residents with loyalties to the United States moved north of the Rio Bravo - known in the United States as the Rio Grande - and created Brownsville. However, Bagdad continued on as a destination for recreation for the people of both cities.

Ships occasionally dropped anchor off the coast of Bagdad, and there was stagecoach service from Bagdad to Matamoros. However, Bagdad was a very poor port. The

coastal shelf to this day is some hundred meters distant of the beach, and ships dared not come close. The transfer of passengers and cargo required the use of small flat-bottom boats that could manage the shallows.

Had it not been for the American Civil War, Bagdad would not have developed into a significant port. But once it became the chief means of transporting cotton from the Confederate States - and this became even more critical after the fall of Vicksburg - governing authorities in Mexico took great interest in the trade.

Mexico at this time was also in political turmoil. [Benito Juarez](#), the leader of the popular rebellion against the [French intervention in Mexico](#), wanted control of Bagdad in order to obtain much needed revenue, and possibly weapons. The revenue was to come from duties imposed on the cotton trade, as well as any other goods coming through the port.

[Maximilian of Habsburg](#), the so-called "Emperor of Mexico," also came to understand the strategic usefulness of Bagdad. Austrian troops were sent to Bagdad. In the northern state of Tamaulipas, where Bagdad was located, there were also regional chieftains with ambitions of their own.

There were several battles involving these factions for control of Bagdad, and possession of the city shifted from one to the other. On at least one occasion, the fighting came so near the city that there was a panic and most of the residents evacuated for a short period.

Union sympathizers and the refugee problem

When Texas aligned itself with the Confederacy, Union loyalists were persecuted. Many German-American residents of the Hill Country, in particular, and other Union loyalists found it necessary to flee for their lives. Many of these Union loyalists made harrowing journeys through territory strange to them in the South Texas country. Matamoros was their destination, but their hope was to eventually make their way by sea, through Bagdad, back to the Northern States.

Texan Confederate residents of Brownsville were aware that Union loyalists were hiding in Matamoros. These refugees were chased and were not safe in Matamoros. Texan Confederates were free to roam Matamoros, a city where they enjoyed long-established and friendly relations with many of the locals, and they actively hunted Union loyalists.

This situation greatly concerned the U.S. Consulate in Matamoros, and he sent dispatches on behalf of the refugees, via ship, to Washington. There were numerous pleas imploring Washington to send a military naval vessel to Bagdad to provide safe passage. The consulate gave assurances that were this to occur these men would make loyal soldiers in the service of the Union.

The Naval Blockade of Southern ports took priority, however, and response was slow. A U.S. naval ship did eventually make its way to just north of Bagdad and a party of long-suffering German-American refugees were at last rescued.

The Consulate also complained bitterly in his dispatches about the cotton trade and implored Washington to find some way to stop it. But as Mexico was a neutral party, there was little Washington could do.

Bagdad's demise

The importance of this frontier boom town to the Confederacy cause must not be underestimated. The Confederacy depended upon this town and its trade in order to survive. As the Confederacy cause died, so died Bagdad. The town itself was officially declared non-existent in 1880. The surrounding area sustained several hurricanes during the late 1860s through the 1880s. The 1889 hurricane closed the port of Bagdad forever to merchant ships. Due to the danger of the sandbar, only very small boats ventured to put in there. Bagdad, like a flower, had bloomed and blossomed, but was forever dead on the vine.

Today all that remains is a beautiful, isolated beach where many go "to get away from it all." Few of those visitors realize what a bustling port once lay under their feet.

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External Links

- [Matamoros: The Gateway to Mexico](#) (Spanish)