December 5, 1906

Next in order being talk by Mrs. S. W. Sholars, "The Heroic Defense of Sabine Pass." On motion Mrs. Sholars was honored with a rising vote of thanks for this excellent paper:

To secure a true picture, a good perspective must be gained proper distance, and no obstructions to the view. As this is a fact in art, so it is in history. In the din of battle, amid the smoke and roar of cannon, who can give an unbiased recital of the action? It is only when the distance of years has allowed the smoke clouds of ignorance and prejudice time to clear away, that any impartial statement of facts can be written for posterity. A statement that will bear the search light of truth turned upon it, and truth after all is what we want, whether it be for, or against us.

Almost at my door, a little way down Sabine river, out through the lake to what is known as Sabine Pass, there is still to be seen a slight embankment in the sand, which is all that marks the spot, that was once Fort Grigsby. A spot whereon was enacted a struggle as brave and heroic as ever emblazoned the page of history—an act whose daring has no parallel. Yet this spot sacred to those who love the South, is unmarked in any way; nothing to tell how, only forty-three years ago, a few brave men made a stand against the enemies fleet, numbering twenty-six vessels and 15,000 troops and routed them too! A few years more of wind and rain, the trampling of cattle, and all traces of the fort of Sabine Pass fame will be totally obliterated.

A monument erected in Houston a few years ago by Dick Dowling Camp [35] and the Hibernian Society to the hero who directed this brilliant defense, is the only one to commemorate the deed. But what shaft is tall enough, or granite pile broad enough to trumpet to the youth of the South and of Texas particularly, the gallant daring and cool courage of this son of Erin. Only history truthfully and fearlessly written, then thoroughly and fearlessly taught, will bring about the desired result. Let the story be told and retold until every boy and girl of the public schools when they scan the map of Texas coast will see standing before them the picture of a young Irishman—with a sword by his side—a silver medal upon his breast and a shamrock green badge in his cap—the picture of Lieut. Dick Dowling.

Gen. J. B. McGruder defeated the Federal forces under Gen. Franklin at Galveston on the 1st of January, 1863. He was so encouraged by this victory that he determined to fortify every point on the Texas coast, and thus prevent an invasion of the State. In August of that year a fort was built immediately on the Pass, just a mile below the town of Sabine, and consisted of a simple earthwork—just large enough to mount six guns. These guns were old United States guns that had been condemned, and were only available at short range, a mile and a half at the most.

On August 20, 1863, Capt. F. A. Odlum, in command of the Davis Guards, a gallant company of young Irishmen, was ordered to take up quarters near the fort, where the men were soon busy placing the guns. These consisted of two 32-pounders, two 24-pounders and two 24-pound mountain howitzers. Under cover of night September 26th, these were put in place. The garrison consisted of the Davis Guards,
Lieut. N. A. Smith of the engineering corps, and Dr. J. H. Bailey, surgeon of Dailey's regiment, who had been post surgeon. Lieut. R. W. Dowling was in charge of the Davis Guards at the fort, as Capt. Odlum was in command of the town of Sabine, where he could be in constant communication with the military headquarters at Houston. Exclusive of Lieut. Dowling there were, all told, forty-one men at the fort.

On the morning of September 7th, about 10 o'clock, five Federal gunboats and five transports were sighted from the southward, and from that time until sun-down the number kept increasing until the greater part of Gen. Franklin's fleet of twenty-six ships were in sight. At daylight of September 8th, several of the vessels came over the bar, and as the Davis Guards were cooking breakfast the first shot from the "Clifton," which had approached close enough, fell in their midst. After firing about twenty shots the "Clifton's" example was followed by several of the vessels, but none took effect. At 10 o'clock in the morning the entire fleet, with the exception of three ships, were in the Pass engaged in shelling the fort. This bombardment continued until about 3 p.m., at which time some of the vessels had approached close to the fort from which, up to this time, not a shot had been fired. While matters were thus at the fort, up in the town of Sabine, one mile distant, Capt. Odlum had been busy. By the time he had communicated with Gen. McGruder, and received from him the orders to "spike his guns, blow up the fort and retreat to Taylor's Bayou," he had made good the time by using strategy.

Early in the day Capt. Odlum began to have all the animals that could be ridden, horses, mules and ponies, gathered up, and mounted them with cowboys and negroes, and gave them a circuit to ride all day. In going out of the town north the buildings would hide the riders from view of the fleet until they reached the cover of a strip of timber when the cavalcade would cross to the west into the main road coming into Sabine Pass from Beaumont and westward. This main road was in sight of the fleet, and with their glasses they could see the battalion coming into town every little while on a gallop, having the appearance of troops continually arriving. This running of the mounted men was kept up all day, and it appears that the enemy did not notice that it was the same body of men.

Now, when Gen. McGruder's orders were delivered to Lieut. Dowling at the fort, he addressed the Davis Guards and asked them "if they wanted to spike the guns and blow up the fort." With a loud cry of indignation they shouted: "No! We prefer to fight while there is a detachment left to man the guns!" Just at this time the Federal gunboats opened fire all at once. The "Sachem," closely followed by the "Granite State," was now about a mile distant, and it was upon these two vessels that the fort opened fire. At the second round a ball from one of the fort's guns entered the steam chest of the Sachem, causing an explosion, badly scalding a number of the men and creating such consternation that nearly all jumped overboard, many dying as they struck the water, others swimming to the Louisiana shore, and being afterwards picked up by their transports.

The Sachem being thus rendered harmless, the Granite State was a target for the guns of the fort. The first volley disabled her so that she hauled down her colors and swung across the channel.
Meantime the Clifton, carrying eighteen guns, and proudly bearing the commodore’s flag, drew near the fort. She was so close and so low in the water that it was necessary to cut away some of the breastwork in order to bring the guns to bear upon her. While this necessitated great exposure of our men, and was effected at a great risk, not a life was lost.

In an incredibly short time this hail of shot and shell upon the vessel convinced the officers that there must be a powerful garrison, backed by a large reinforcement in the town, so they hoisted the white flag, while all the other vessels that were not disabled hastily left the scene of action.

As soon as the white flag was run up Lieut. Dowling mounted the breastworks, followed by four men and commanded that a boat be sent to convey him on board. This was done, and as he stepped on deck the Federal officers advanced and offered to surrender their swords, which Dowling refused to accept. The dead and wounded numbered 50, and 150 prisoners were conveyed on shore.

The Sachem, too, surrendered, and the Granite State floated out to sea. One of the transports went to pieces soon after crossing the bar, showing that she, too, had been disabled. The balance of the fleet disappeared rapidly Gen. Franklin being convinced that Sabine Pass was impregnable. It was hard to convince the prisoners that their captors numbered forty men. One of the mountain Howitzers was lost in the recoil, in the first or second discharge, but on our side not a drop of blood was spilled. One man received a slight scratch upon his arm. The firing on the fort did not exceed forty minutes, but in that time the thumb stalls were burned off two of the gunners and their flesh seared to the bone, so rapid and continuous was the firing. It was 3 p.m. next day before the larger guns cooled sufficiently to allow the hand to be placed upon them. When Gen. McGruder, hearing the news, hurried from Houston to honor and congratulate the men who had so gallantly saved the State from invasion, he entered the fort with uncovered head, and words failed him in the face of the glorious achievement.

Now, there is a touch of color I wish to add to this picture. It has been said that woman plays a part in every crisis of life. The woman at Sabine Pass has no place in history, but so long as one of those forty-one Irishmen who fought that good fight shall live, so long will this woman, Kate Gorman, be remembered.

During the hours of the morning preceding the battle, in the town of Sabine, she had busied herself and others in cooking meats, bread, boiling coffee and sending relays to the fort. Buckets of foaming home brewed beer found their way to the hot, thirsty Irishmen to freshen and strengthen them for the fray. No sooner was the fight over than she sprang into a cart, taking all the food she could gather together, and drove off to the fort to attend to those who might need her care. On seeing her approach, the men rushed to meet her, and one of them took her in his arms, lifted her out of the cart and ran with her to the flag staff, whose colors had been torn away. There he placed her, and the eager, triumphant, powder-stained men gathered around her. She, leaning against the flag staff, with tears coursing down her cheeks and eyes sparkling, (for she, too, was Irish), stretched out her arms and said: "Boys, I wish my arms had been made of rubber, so that I could hug you all at once."

—Proceedings of the Eleventh Annual Convention of the Texas Division, United Daughters of the Confederacy, Held in Bryan, December 4, 5, 6, 7, 1906, pp. 34-36.