

First Generation

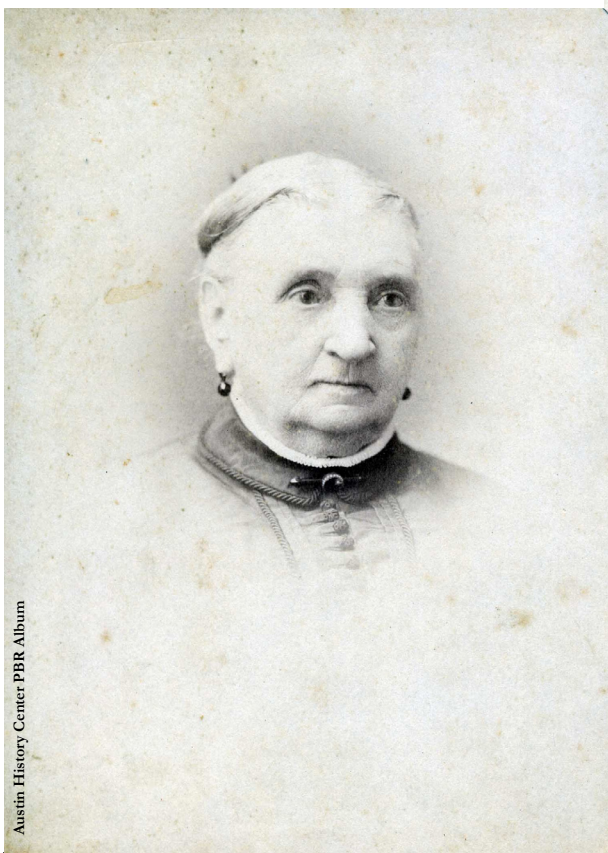
John Hermy Robinson Sr. 1815-1897

John Hermy Robinson was born on 25 Aug 1815^{1 2} in London, England.^{3 4} Robinson was a “younger son”⁵ and had a sister.^{6 7} His grandson, William Herme Robinson, wrote the following in a letter to a cousin, Nettie Bissell Swancoat Young on 8 Jul 1953:

John Hermy Robinson...baptized in a London church, middle name 'Hermy' being for his godfather. Of a bright analytical mind and strong personality, his father wanted him to be a barrister (as lawyers are called in England) but he had a love for the sea – and finally with the consent of his family, but not with their approval, he obtained a commission as a ship's captain – in command of a merchant ship – I don't



Austin History Center PBR Album



Austin History Center PBR Album

John H. Robinson, Sr.
Elizabeth Sheridan Robinson

know how he obtained such an important post with such responsibility so very young.⁸

Elizabeth Sheridan, born in County Cavan, Ireland, 17 May 1817 – Her father moved to New Orleans, Louisiana and opened a small wholesale dry goods and implement house there – Grandfather Robinson's ship brought merchandise from England to the Sheridan Wholesale House, and so became friends and met the daughter Elizabeth – Yellow Fever took all the family for victims, leaving only Elizabeth. She entered a New Orleans convent, which in those early days didn't carry students as high as now of course – But did teach them to be refined ladies with social graces. On his final ocean trip to New Orleans, John H. Robinson and Elizabeth Sheridan were married in New Orleans on 10 Jul 1836⁹ – he being 21 and she being 19. He proposed

they return to England but she voted to remain in America.¹⁰

William says his grandfather's middle name is “Hermy.” In all of the documents found, including John H. Robinson's own Cash Ledger, his name is always written John H. or J. H. Robinson. The Austin History Center often uses “Henry” as a middle name, but Hermy is most likely the correct middle name, particularly given the middle name of William Herme Robinson.

First Generation

Family members have recorded various versions of the immigration and marriage of the couple but the stories are basically consistent with only a few embellishments. According to a descendent, Charles Aubrey Smith, John H. was a sea captain commanding a merchant vessel that plied between Liverpool and New Orleans.¹¹ Robinson ended up in New Orleans and it was here that he met Elizabeth, the daughter of a merchant with whom Robinson did business. Elizabeth came to the United States in 1822.¹² After the marriage, Captain Robinson proposed that they return to England but his young wife preferred to remain in the USA.¹³ Oscar Robinson, a grandson, in an interview in 1959 related his version of Robinson's arrival in the United States. "The boat in which he was coming to America was wrecked on the Virginia coast. Mr. Robinson Sr. drifted down the coast to New Orleans."^{14 15}

The obituary of John H. Sr.'s son, Alonzo, provides yet another slightly different version of the courtship and marriage of John H. Robinson and Elizabeth Sheridan. The obituary repeats the idea of John H. as a sea captain, but it also gives additional information. "One of the merchants with whom Capt. Robinson did business in New Orleans was an Irishman by the name of Sheridan, who had a young daughter, Elizabeth.¹⁶ She was born in County Cavan, Ireland in 1817. Capt. Robinson was attracted to Elizabeth Sheridan and on one of his voyages to New Orleans, he learned that she had been left an orphan during a yellow fever epidemic. The sea captain found Miss Sheridan in a convent, took her out, and married her."¹⁷ All of these accounts are very similar but William Herme's is probably the most accurate. He was the eldest grandson and was careful to accurately pass down the family story.

Elizabeth and John H. began their married life in New Orleans and John H. began looking for a career since he had given up the sea. He became a partner in a small New Orleans baking enterprise.¹⁸ His partner in the business was Thomas William House,¹⁹ father of Col. E.M. House, a Texan of some importance during President Wilson's administration.²⁰ Grandson, Oscar Robinson, recalled that neither Robinson nor House had much money, but Mr. House was a baker by profession and together the two young men started a small business. Mr. House would bake the cakes and pies and Mr. Robinson would take them around. In later days Mrs. Laura Sheeks and Mrs. E.M. House were teased about the humble beginnings of their father and father-in-law.²¹

Background information about Thomas William House backs up Oscar Robinson. House immigrated to New York in 1835 at the age of twenty-one and worked as a pastry cook. The owner of the famous St. Charles Hotel in New Orleans liked his work so well that he offered House a job. House moved to Texas in 1836 to fight in the revolution against Mexico. House settled in Houston and by 1838 had set up the firm of House and Loveridge, bakers and confectioners.²² The two must have crossed paths in New Orleans in the late 1835 or early 1836. It is interesting that years later, Mr. House was in business in Houston in 1875 with Paul Bremond, two capitalists who chartered the Houston East & West Texas Narrow Gauge Railroad. Three of Paul Bremond's nieces and nephews married three of Robinson's offspring in Austin, Texas.

In addition to the bakery business, Elizabeth and John H. began a family and the couple's first child, William Thomas Robinson (perhaps named for Thomas William House), was born in New Orleans on 16 Jun 1837.²³ The family did not stay in New Orleans long and their second child, John H. Robinson Jr., was born on 16 Jul 1839 in Little Rock, Arkansas.²⁴ Why the family moved to Arkansas is a question not answered, but history provides insights. John H. had not made a great success in New Orleans. His bakery business was small and his partner, House, had moved to Texas. New Orleans continued to have periodic Yellow Fever epidemics and the death of Elizabeth's father probably played heavily on her heart. She and John H. were certainly concerned for the welfare of their young family. Arkansas became a state in 1836 and Little Rock was designated the state's capital. Little Rock was an ideal place for a town, located in the center of the territory, its river (the Arkansas) was navigable by steamships traveling from New Orleans. The bluffs along the banks offered protection from flooding and Little Rock was a stop on the Southwest Trail from Louisiana and Texas. Cotton was the major crop and southbound steamboats loaded with cotton bales passed northbound boats carrying clothing,

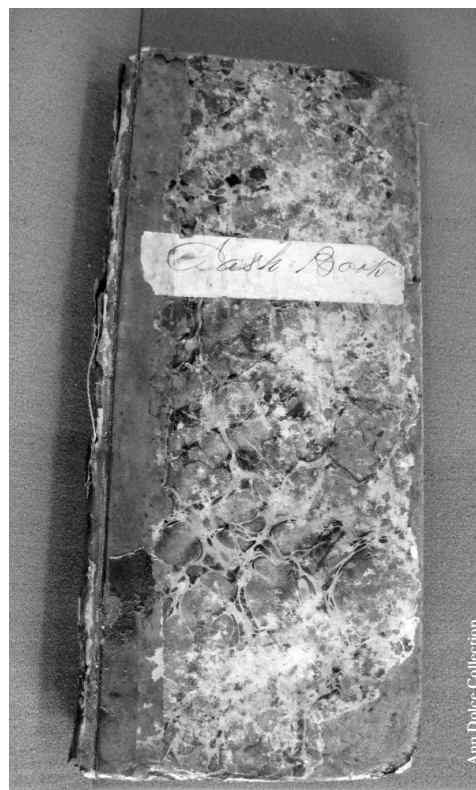
tools, and molasses from New Orleans. The town offered economic potential to the Robinsons and a haven from the yellow fever so rampant in New Orleans.

John Robinson	2	"	"	"	1	1							"	"	"	"	1
Elizabeth Robinson													"	"	"	"	1

1840 Census; Little Rock, AR

The move was made and the 1840 census in Little Rock, Pulaski County, Arkansas lists the Robinsons as a family of five: two adult males, one adult female and two male children. The two male children were William Thomas Robinson and John H. Robinson Jr. Two of the adults were John H. and Elizabeth. The additional male adult, between 30 and 40, is not identified since the census form only recorded the name of the head of the household.

The most concrete information about John H. Robinson and his days in Arkansas is found in a cash ledger he kept that was donated to the Austin History Center by his granddaughter, Ethel Robinson Brown. The book dates from 1841 and contains not only records of his business transactions but also an annual salute to the old year passed and to the new-year beginning.²⁵ On 1 Aug 1841, the earliest entry in the cash ledger, John had \$286.50 in cash plus \$50 in "Sales for Silver."²⁶ On 10 Mar 1843 John H. signed a lease with W. Trimble for a store on Lot 1 Block 1 in Little Rock.²⁷ Robinson then entered the general mercantile business in Little Rock and opened his store on Main Street. He purchased his supplies through New Orleans, bringing goods up the Mississippi River by steamer.²⁸ ²⁹ Business was good and by the end of 1846 he had a total of \$1,720.30 on hand. At the end of 1846 he wrote, "Another year is past and with it much of good and bad, yet thank God I have much to be thankful for, to wit Content, Health, Happyness and Plenty."³⁰ In 1847 he listed his expenses:



Cash Ledger

To 1 negro woman	100.00
To 1 negro child	200.00
To 1 Dunn pony	12.00
To weight scales measures	18.00
To delph ware	105.86
To amt of rent paid in advance	188.25
To groceries hardware and sundries	848.44
To dry goods and sundries	757.38
To books and shoes	103.00

	1814.08

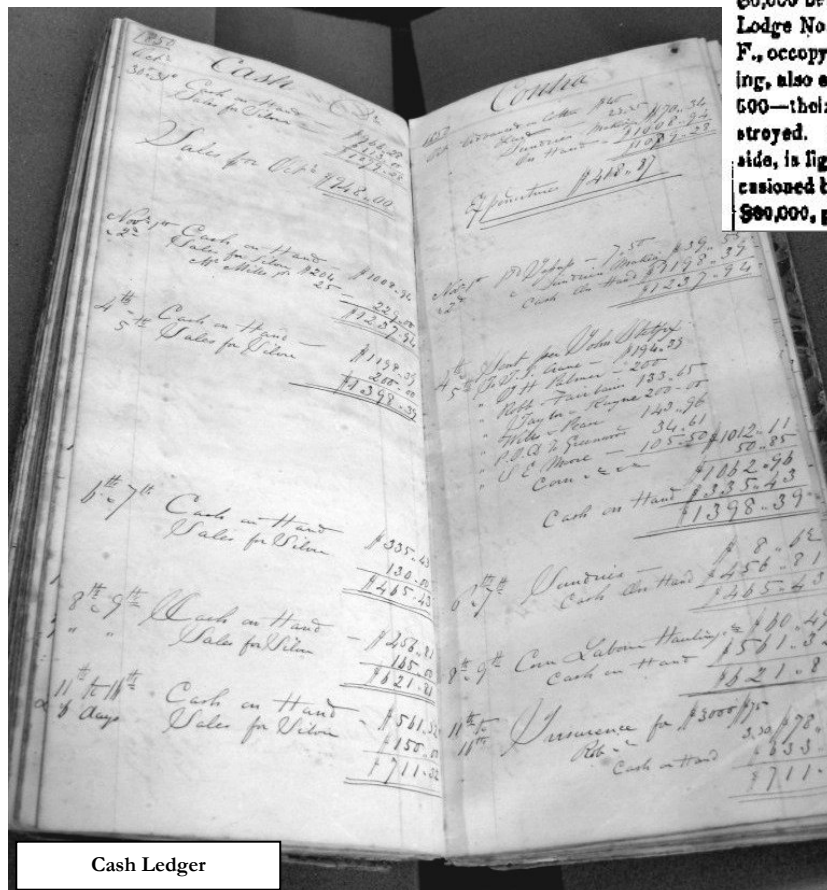
Robinson then saluted farewell to 1847: "Farewell to me and mine. Thou has shown many bright & sunny days again. Fare thee well." To the newly arrived 1848, "I will not say welcome to thee till I know if you are worthy of the welcome. Thou comest among us in an angry mood."³¹

First Generation

In 1847 a new name and signature appeared in John H.'s ledger book: William John Stelfox. The signature was unique in that it is the only signature other than John's and Elizabeth's that appears in the book. Mr. Stelfox figures prominently in the life and career of John H. Robinson. He was an Englishman from Manchester, England about the same age as Robinson; he was a merchant who also did business on Main Street in Little Rock³²; he and Robinson owned property together in Arkansas; and the two eventually came to Texas together in the mid 1850s.

In Little Rock Robinson worked hard and expanded his interests. On 9 Feb 1849 Robinson purchased Lot 6 in Block 5 in Little Rock from Charles Theiss and his wife³³ and on 27 Nov of 1849 he purchased Lot 5 in Block 5.³⁴ In addition to real estate, he also owned slaves. In 1847 he owned one female slave and one child³⁵ and in 1850 he owned one 60 year old female Negro slave.³⁶ He bought and sold slaves and added their monetary value to his net worth. By the time he left Arkansas he owned 5 adults and 3 children and slavery was definitely part of his business operations as he always added their worth when figuring his assets.³⁷

At the end of 1849 John said farewell to the old year: "We are indebted for a Home, land, means to help our friends



Cash Ledger

GREAT CONFLAGRATION.
Our city, on Friday morning, Feb. 10, 1853, was visited by a most disastrous conflagration, the fire originating, as is generally supposed, in or near the post office. The fire was discovered about 3 o'clock, and continued to rage until the buildings owned by the post office, Messrs. Thompson & Fitzgerald, as an auction and commission house; H. Griffiths, as a gunsmith shop; Wm. Gill and James Kinneer, as boot and shoe stores, and John H. Robinson and Geo. A. Worthen, Esqs., as merchants, were entirely consumed. The buildings were owned by S. S. Sanger, of Fort Smith; N. H. Badgett, of this county; and James Kinneer, of this city, and were not, as we are aware, insured to any great extent. Several buildings on the opposite side of the street, were also seriously injured by the fire. They were, however, by the timely aid of the fire-engine, rescued from the devouring flames—thus preventing a great loss of property. The Masonic Hall was also slightly injured by the fire from the opposite street.
H. Griffiths's loss will perhaps amount to \$700; Thompson & Fitzgerald's, including several small consignments, \$2,000; Wm. F. Pope, P. M., \$500; Wm. Gill, \$300; James Kinneer, \$1,500; Geo. A. Worthen, \$500; N. H. Badgett, \$3,000; John H. Robinson, \$12,000, \$6,000 being covered by insurance. Far West Lodge No. 1; and Encampment No. 2, I. O. O. F., occupying the third story of Sanger's building, also sustained losses to the amount of \$1,500—their entire fixtures and regalia being destroyed. Jacob Reider's loss, on the opposite side, is light. The entire amount of loss occasioned by the conflagration, will amount to \$60,000, perhaps \$35,000.

Arkansas Whig 10 Feb 1853

and last though not least, for a daughter [Lillie]. Though thou art about to leave us, we will not forget thee for joy thou has given us much, of sorrow none." To the new year he wrote: "We do not expect too much of thee as thy predecessor has done, but we feel and know that we are ready to avail ourselves of all the good you offer and hope we will bear all mishaps with patience, humility. To the year 1850 we say welcome." The welcome was not long

lasting.

1850 brought violence and illness and the death of Mrs. Stelfox.³⁸ Of 1850 Robinson wrote:

At your approach we welcomed you, and extended our hand in greeting, we then told you we would try to bear all mishaps with humility, we trust we have done so, for you had scarcely got over your suckling days when you deprived us of a valuable friend & servant making us feel that death had been in our midst. You had not more than reached your manhood ere you witness'd our loss by robbery. Not content with this, ere your summer was over my son had to then [be] mangled by a furious dog – given pain and trouble to his mother, and then after you had sunk into the red & yellow leaf, you learnt me that in the midst of life we are in death, and while at one moment we may be full of strength gaiety & manly pride, she next may see us a senseless clod upon our Mother Earth. None so helpless as she stand invalid... In this event you have put a mark upon me that your successors will not be able to eradicate. And then on this the last night of thy existence, like a fallen enemy shot down thou are not conquered and in this thy last struggles you throw your darts among us and strike our darling Lilly. 'Tis you have lived so you die 1850. Go and I trust you will take all ill with you for the good you have done, thanks. As to the evil, let it die with you.

1852 was an excellent year for Robinson and his annual reflection at the end of 1852 noted the birth of his son, Alonzo.

Died last night (much regretted) exactly at midnight old 1852 – aged 365 days – some of them cold and stormy, some cloudy, but many bright and merry. In his onward march to puberty he takes with him some of the bravest and wisest – England mourns her Wellington, France her old generals, Spain her Castanos, her champion in the Peninsular contest and America her Clay and Webster. For ourselves we have much to be thankful for and we bless and praise God for an increase of means credit and happyness and the old year did not leave us without even giving us something more than there. He on the 19th day of his 9th month gave us another son to cherish, our Alonzo whom in future times we hope will be a comfort to his parents and an honor to himself - the portrait of my loved and venerable mother, accompany'd by the likeness of my sister. Old 1852 has added to my stock of valuables. 1852 some of thy predecessors done well but you exceedest them all. Farewell 1852.

1853, on the other hand, was a disaster. On 4 Feb 1853 Little Rock was “visited by a most disastrous conflagration.”³⁹ The fire destroyed three blocks including the store of John H. Robinson. The store and merchandise were entirely consumed and his loss was estimated to be \$12,000 of which \$6000 was covered by insurance.⁴⁰ Immediately after the fire, Robinson begged his customers to pay their debts and placed an ad that he was “not broke, but bent a little.”⁴¹ He moved his store temporarily to Markham Street; he also sold a horse and genteel carryall to raise money.⁴²

During the period following the fire Robinson made no regular daily entries in his cash ledger. He noted that he used considerable private funds and insurance money to replace the capital lost by the fire. Robinson referred to “Mrs. Robinson’s private means” as the source of the added capital. He listed the following tallies:

<i>Funds from Mrs. Robinson</i>	<i>2000.00</i>
<i>Profit</i>	<i>406.73</i>
<i>Insurance</i>	<i>3000.00</i>

He reflected at end of 1853 on the fire:

On this night just one hour and a half from this present time you leave us but how to part with you we scarcely know whether to address you as friend or foe, we know not. On the fourth day of your second month you caused us to be suddenly wakened by that dreaded cry of “Fire! Fire!! Fire!!!” and we found our store and the labour of many years likely to be swept away in a few minutes. True you gave us time to save a remnant from the wreck. All of your summer months see us afflicted by the dreaded disease of Vertigo – Heaven in kindness you might have laid on the rod – to bring us nearer to our God, as you day by day fetched us nearer to our grave. So then as we extended our hand to you in your infancy we will give you our arm in this your old age.

First Generation

The fire obviously had a major impact on the Robinson family, both financially and emotionally. Whether it was the fire or Robinson's sense of adventure and the pursuit of a financial dream, the family soon began planning another move. This time it was to Texas. In 1850 Austin, Texas was officially named the capital of Texas and began a period of accelerated growth. The population reached 3,000 by 1855 and in 1853 Sam Houston complimented Austin on her location, beautiful scenery, progress in population and wealth, and bright prospects for the future.⁴³ Both Robinson and his friend John Stelfox became interested in life and business in Texas. The two friends made an exploratory trip to Texas and both families eventually moved to Texas.

Dates vary as to the actual move but recollections by grandson Oscar Robinson and writings in Robinson's Cash Ledger shed light on the date of this preliminary trip:

*Mr. John H. Robinson and Mr. John Stelfox came to Austin together [from Little Rock, Arkansas]. They came first before they moved. Mr. Stelfox rode a mule and carried an umbrella. Mr. Stelfox had a store where Yaring's is. They probably came in 1851.*⁴⁴

On New Years Eve 1853, the following notation was made in the ledger on New Years Eve 1853:

From 8 o'clock pm 1853

Till 1 o'clock am 1854

Was opened by Mrs. Robinson

In watching the Mrs. Stelfox

The handwriting saluting the old and new years appears to be different though the language style is similar to Robinson's previous writings. The note seems to indicate that this was written by Mrs. Robinson when Mr. Robinson and Mr. Stelfox were on their initial trip to Texas, not in 1851 as thought

WANTED

A Lad to attend to a horse, and make himself generally useful in a store and private dwelling. Enquire of
Dec. 15, 1853. J. H. ROBINSON.

Arkansas Whig 15 Dec 1853

by Oscar Robinson but in late 1853 or early 1854. An additional piece of evidence is found in an advertisement that Robinson placed in the Arkansas Whig 15 Dec 1853 looking for a boy to help in the store and at

THE RAILROAD

WILL make property improve, and any person desirous of getting a convenient home, with a certainty of its increasing in value, has only to apply to the undersigned, who will sell **VERY CHEAP** and give immediate possession of his homestead, situated on Malnet, Little Rock. You that want **BA** again come on.
JOHN H. ROBINSON.
Little Rock, Feb. 8, '55.

Arkansas Whig 24 May 1855

his home. This is the only time Robinson advertised for an employee; this young man most likely was needed to help in Robinson's absence. John and Elizabeth began to plan their travel to Texas with their seven children: William Thomas, John H. Jr., Mary Amelia, Alfred Henry, and Elizabeth, Lillian, and Alonzo. Alonzo was the last of the siblings born in Arkansas⁴⁵ and the rest of the children, Austin, Laura Ada, and Eugene were born in Texas. It should be noted here that Arkansas did not keep birth records until 1914.⁴⁶ Since the actual birth records of these children have not been located either in church records or in civil records, tombstone dates, census records, newspaper obituaries and family bibles have been used to determine the birth locations and years.

While planning his move to Texas, Robinson continued his mercantile business in Little Rock and continued to invest in Arkansas real estate. He purchased 80 acres of public land in Little Rock and registered it with the

NEW IMPORTATIONS.
OF FRESH GOODS AT
J. H. ROBINSON'S
CHEAP STORE!
CONGRESS AVENUE, AUSTIN.
Low Prices! Fall and Winter
STOCK.
J. H. R. has just received and opened a large and superior stock of Fall and Winter Goods, direct from New York, consisting of **STAPLE AND FANCY GOODS,** both Foreign and Domestic. Family Groceries, etc., which he offers **CHEAP.**

Southern Intelligencer 8 Feb 1860

General Land Office of the United States. In Feb 1855 he advertised in the Arkansas Whig that his house was for sale. His last advertisement appeared 24 May 1855.⁴⁷ His last entry in his cash ledger before leaving for Texas was dated 1855. Robinson still had property in Arkansas after he moved to Texas that he eventually sold. He sold Lot 6 Block 5 in downtown Little Rock to Marcus Dotter in November of 1855⁴⁸ and on 7 Sep 1857 he sold Lot 5 Block 5 to the same Marcus Dotter.⁴⁹ An additional piece of property was sold by the Sheriff to John W. Purdow on 18 Aug 1859.⁵⁰

Upon leaving Arkansas, John carefully detailed his net worth and assets:

1855	
Negro woman Kitty	50.00
Negro man Dick	800.00
Negro woman Jincy and her 3 children	1200.00
Negro Sophia	700.00
Negro Anthony	500.00
One town lot	400.00
10 Acres land	170.00
Mineral Land	250.00
Princeton Lots	50.00
One Brick store	1800.00

There is also shown the Amount of \$12,952.88 as been made in 11 years.

I have now quit to go Texasward

May I do as well

Little Rock is done

Nobly

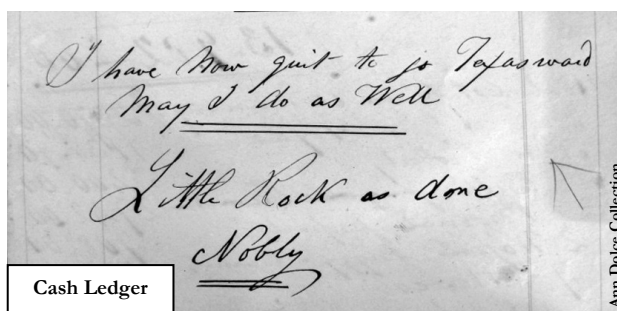
And again an entry dated 1 Oct 1856:

To my total worth upon leaving the state of Arkansas	13584.00
Real Estate in Arkansas	2370.00
Real Estate in Texas	1135.90
Negro property	3400.00
Bills receivable	2742.00
Personal property	708.00
2 wagons, buggy, and hasp	327.00
7 horses	450.00
Cash	230.00 ⁵¹

Robinson and his family traveled to Texas in covered wagons and settled initially in

NOTICE.
DISSOLUTION OF PARTNERSHIP.
THE Firm heretofore existing between the undersigned is this day dissolved by limitation. The unsettled business of the House will be attended to by either of the firm
JOHN H. ROBINSON,
JOHN STELFOX
GOLD DUST,
 Or the Coin is required by the undersigned from all who are owing the old Firm. We want to close our business as soon as possible, and this cannot be done till our debtors pay. You will always find either one of us ready to receive and give receipts
JOHN H. ROBINSON,
JOHN STELFOX
 Austin, June 4th 1859.—v10-n44 5m

State Gazette 17 Sep 1859



Travis County in Fiskville, north of Austin.⁵² Fiskville was the last stage stop before Austin coming from Georgetown.⁵³ In Oct 1856 Robinson purchased property from James D. Easton: 177 acres on Gilleland's Creek about 14 miles north of Austin near what today is Manor, Texas and 120 acres on the headwaters of Walnut Creek,

First Generation

12 miles north of Austin. After a brief stay in the Fiskville area, the family moved to Austin.⁵⁴

In Austin, John H. Robinson purchased lot 2 block 55 at 504 Congress Avenue. He bought this lot and 230 acres on Little Walnut Creek from an Austin lawyer, Josiah Fisk on 22 Dec 1855. On 18 Jan 1856, Robinson and his friend John Stelfox purchased lot 3, block 55 at 502 Congress Avenue from James R. Pace⁵⁵ who was also an Austin lawyer.⁵⁶ The two Englishmen began a business at this location called “Robinson and Stelfox.” Their “stand” was on lots 2 and 3 in block 55 on the west side of Congress Avenue between Pine and Pecan (5th and 6th streets).⁵⁷ The firm of Glasscock & Millican built two buildings on the property using 20-inch thick stone load bearing walls. Robinson later added a brick front. The two buildings shared a wall which extended from the Avenue west toward the back alley. On the Avenue the stone fronts of the two buildings were plaster, designed in a simple boxy straightforward fashion. The buildings did not extend as far back as the alley. The Stelfox and Robinson business in Austin closed in June of 1859, with each man operating an independent business after 1859 but they maintained a close friendship. On 14 Nov 1892 in a letter to Stelfox’s daughter, Harriet Stelfox Browder, Robinson wrote:

*You will bear in mind that for one half a century your father and myself have been more than many brothers in all our business pursuits, in all our close connections, in our long time friendship, in our experience as partners. No angry word, no unkind thought was ever spoken or engendered. He is what a writer calls the Noblist Work of God – an Honest Man.*⁵⁸

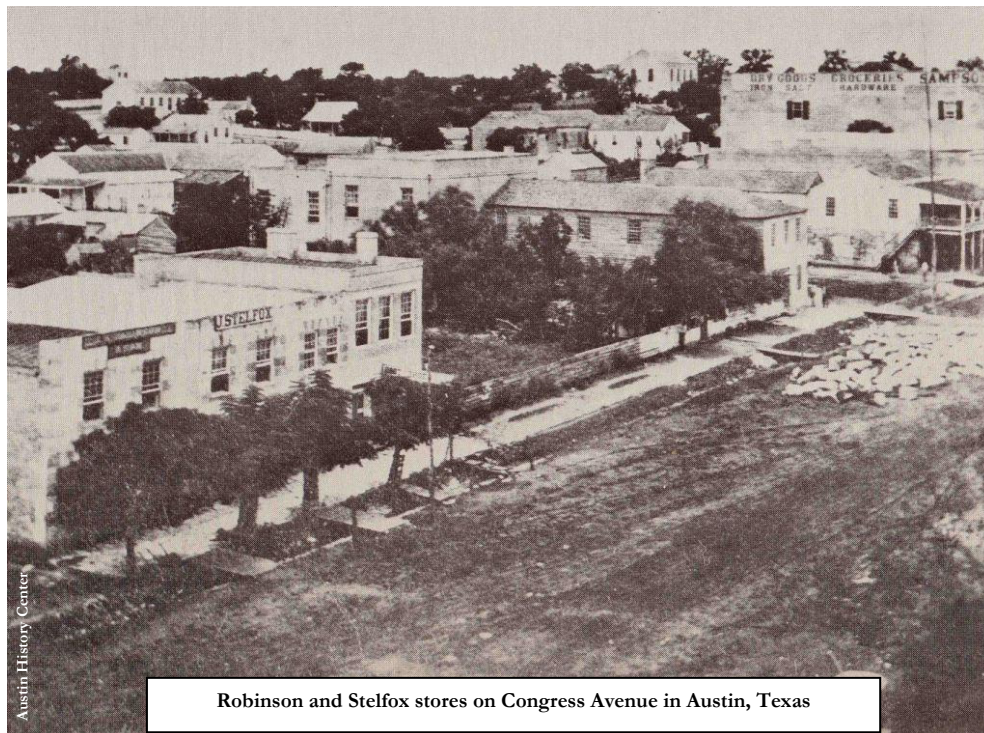
According to their agreement, the party that “offered and bid most” should have the choice of the two stores. Robinson had the first choice and became entitled to the south store on Lot 2. Robinson changed the name of his store following the closing of Robinson and Stelfox to “Robinson and Son”

with his son,
John H.

Robinson Jr..⁵⁹

⁶⁰ In addition to the store, Robinson operated a lumberyard on lot 1 of Block 55, on the northwest corner of Congress and Pine (5th) Street.

Another name that plays a significant role in the life of John H. Robinson Sr. and his succeeding generations is

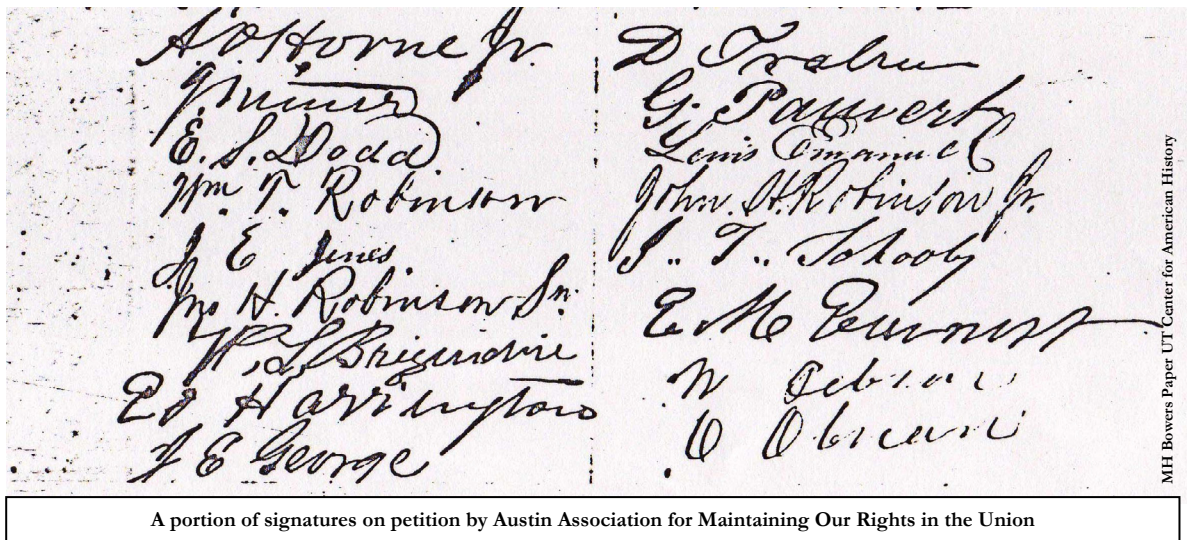


Robinson and Stelfox stores on Congress Avenue in Austin, Texas

John Bremond. John Bremond, Sr. came to Austin in 1846, almost ten years before Robinson, and he too opened a general store on Congress Avenue. Robinson and Bremond’s son, Eugene, were business partners for a brief period. Robinson and Bremond became good friends and so did their families. They became such good friends that three of the young Bremonds married three of the young Robinsons. In Austin history, the names Bremond and Robinson are uniquely intertwined.

Financial progress came slowly but surely for the businessmen of Austin in the years leading up to the Civil War. During most of the 1850s Robinson's son, William Thomas, had been attending school in Cincinnati, Ohio.⁶¹ It was about the time of the dissolution of Robinson and Stelfox store that William returned to Austin. A copy of Robinson's ledger showed a net worth of about \$50,000 prior to the Civil War. Due to post Civil War problems and the necessity of taking care of a large family of seven or eight children, his fortune was soon dissipated.⁶²

In 1860, slavery was an integral part of the life of Austin. Of the town's 3,500 inhabitants, about 1,000 were slaves. "More than a third of Austin's Anglo families owned slaves. Among the town's prosperous lawyers, merchants, doctors, ministers, and high government officials, slave-owning was the rule rather than the exception."⁶³ As the crisis dividing the North and the South over the issue of slavery came to a climax following the election of Abraham Lincoln, many Austinites did not join the secessionists. These were not people who had supported Lincoln since not a single Texan voted for



Lincoln in the election of 1860. The sentiments of those who hesitated in supporting secession were not with the Northern states but were with the Union. "Their spiritual father was Sam Houston, governor of Texas on the eve of secession and the sturdiest Unionist of them all."⁶⁴ Just as Austin's secessionists organized parades and speeches, so did Austin's Unionists. They formed the Austin Association for Maintaining Our Rights in the Union and circulated a petition protesting the state secession convention of January 1861. The protest read:

Travis County, January 1861

Mesers. John A. Green, H. N. Burditt and George M. Flournoy:

*GENTLEMEN: We the undersigned, the citizens and legal voters of Travis, most respectfully protest against your taking any part, as the representatives of said county, in the revolutionary convention, proposed to be held at the city of Austin, on the 26th day of January, 1861, as it must be evident to you that a majority of the voters of the country are opposed to said convention.*⁶⁵

John H. Robinson Sr. and his sons William T. and John H. Jr. were among the signers of the petition that included former Governor Elisha M. Pease, Eugene Bremond, Jos Martin, August B. Palm, James H. Raymond, Judge George W. Pashal, George Hancock, Julius Schutze, Jean Schneider, John Stelfox, and John M. Swisher.^{66 67 68}

Austin and Travis County rejected secession by 704 to 450 votes, but the state favored secession by more than a three-to-one majority.⁶⁹ "Hundreds who voted against secession were now ready to help the Confederacy, while other Unionists remained unconvinced and became aliens in a Confederate capital."

First Generation

On 27 Apr 1861 the State Gazette published the following letter by John H. Robinson written to the paper's editor, Major John Marshall:

Austin April 18, 1861

Sir— Knowing a wrong impression is abroad in our State, as regards the feelings of the citizens of Travis county, and believing you would render your aid to remove same, I have troubled you with my own observations, obtained through a business intercourse with many of our people. Many, very many, citizens of our city and county believed Southern rights could be secured by a cooperation with the slave holding States, and, so believing, voted against secession, I among the number. Yet, I hold myself second to none in Southern patriotism. As soon as the people had spoken, we, as good Democrats, believing the people should rule, rendered a willing acquiescence to their verdict, and hold ourselves ready, with might and means, to help the Southern Confederacy.

I hold an office in the city in which there is neither profit or praise. [Robinson was an alderman] Yet, though called a Union man, I promptly repaired to the Mayor's office to register my oath, the laws of Texas and Constitution of the Southern Confederacy to support. Hundreds are like unto me, who voted as I did, with an earnest conviction that the remedy was inside separate secession. True, there are men among us with northern sentiments, presuming upon our vote. Who dare to class us as aiders and abettors of Abe Lincoln and his Black Republican crowd? Let their most prominent leader come among the citizens of Travis county, and try to enlist from the so-called Union men a corporal's guard to oppose secession and they would fail, wretchedly fail.

J. H. Robinson, merchant

In September [1861] the Soldiers' Aid Society was formed in Austin to obtain winter clothing and equipment for the Travis County soldiers in Kentucky and Virginia⁷⁰ By October of 1861, John H. Robinson was chairman of the Soldiers' Aid Society.⁷¹ It is believed that this chairman was John H. Robinson Sr. The senior Robinson was an alderman at the time and it would have been natural for him to head such an effort. Also, his reflections about the war in his cash ledger at the end of 1861 indicate a familiarity with the wartime situation far beyond the borders of Austin and the state of Texas.

"Robinson took the contributions at an office on Congress Avenue, and he personally planned to deliver them to the soldiers. In a report to the people at a meeting in the House of Representatives on October 5, Robinson reported that \$420 in cash had been received, plus 1 buffalo robe, 75 bandage lints, 26 handkerchiefs, 22 pairs shoes, 9 pairs boots, 103 shirts, 125 undershirts, 35 vests, 125 drawers, 350 socks, 98 comforters, 203 blankets, 194 coats, and 208 pairs pants for a total value of about \$4,400 from Travis County and \$1,500 from Hays County. Receipts had been issued for only \$1,931 value. When Robinson started out with the supplies, their value totaled about \$8,000. He started with four large wagons on Monday, Oct 14, heading for Virginia by the "most accessible route. Robinson passed through Crockett on October 24 and Nacogdoches about October 30. On November 25 Robinson reached Bowling Green, Kentucky, and left some of the supplies with Terry's Rangers. After leaving Bowling Green, Robinson contracted measles but managed to complete the trip to Richmond. He left the supplies with a Texas representative in Richmond, visited the Texas sick in the Richmond hospitals, and then returned to Texas."^{72 73} A letter written 5 Dec 1861 by J. W. Rabb, a member of Terry's Texas Rangers, gives insight into the times:

We Rangers have been going all the time, eager to get into a fight, going through wet and cold, marching day & night. About this time, our Regiment got the Measles & neumonia in camp which thinned the companys down so that each company could not send more than fifty or sixty on a scout. But we kept going what we could go to look for the Yankees. When we could get back to camps, we could enquire who had died, and they would tell us of this one and this one. Most always some had died, either in the Hospitle or in camps. I have never seen a tear or heard a sigh over a solgers grave, and all the funeral they have is the firing of twenty four guns over there graves. When the mess that I am in was organized, it consisted of twelve men. One of them is dead (Ed Eane). Seven of the balance are sick.⁷⁴

At the end of 1861 Robinson wrote in his ledger:

"Thy predecessor 1861 introduced bloody civil war in the fair land of these once United States, setting brother against brother, father against son, and son against father and then the descendent of a bloody siege has carried out the work he began in the long days and nights thou has given us. No gleam of peace was there, no bright hope for the future, all dark, gloomy, bloody,, saturating God's fair earth with the blood of his creatures, witnessing cities sacked, homes destroyed, farms laid waste. The Father, Son, or Brother of the day was food for carrion on the tomorrow in millions stormed abroad armed for the fray, and when they met they met as never men met before, carrying the improved implements of modern warfare. They murdered by thousands and tens of thousands hopes of fathers, tears of mothers and the heart broken sighs of wives, where all in vain the Deamon war was unchained and the angel of mercy hid his face and turned the walks of cruel man bereaved fathers, sadly stricken mothers, widows and orphans with hearts lacerated and torn. In after days we'll look back with horror and then think of your cruel face and tremble at the mention of thy name.

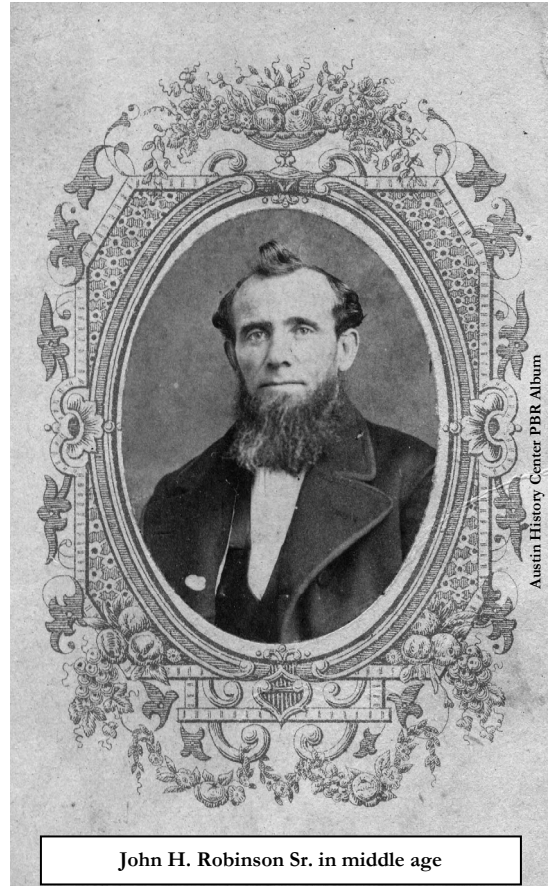
*Although the curses of 1000 and tens of 1000 go forth against thee, yet for ourselves individually we should not deride thee. Our home has not been trodden by foot of the enemy. Our children have not cried in vain for bread and although the circumstances of war has taken from us three of our well beloved sons, they yet are spared in life to us. Fond hope consoles us with ... uncertain they will again be ours. We pray the Almighty"*⁷⁵

After the end of the Civil War, in April of 1865, Robinson reflected on the war:

The year and month that virtually ended civil war and destroyed a reign of terror and despotism the South had endured for four years. Unequal taxation, private property appropriated to public use without compensation, general and illegal suppressments, universal conscription were only a part of the ills we had to endure. A corrupt President and total deprivation of the freedom of speech with ruffians and outlawed bullies for provost marshals and their assistants – advocating and exercising mob law, burning houses, driving women and children out – hanging shooting and drowning husbands and fathers in the presence of their wives and children only for being suspected of entertaining a loyalty to a government they had always loved. These and many, many other acts were only a part of the drama in which we have been forced to take a part. Thank God it is now over and we have the consolation of knowing that none of the glory dead can say to one of us thou didst it."

Losses by war

		Gold
<i>Farm valued</i>	3500	
<i>Sold for</i>	2500	1000
<i>13 slaves</i>		5000
<i>Bills receivable</i>		1000
	TOTAL	7000
<i>Northern debts confiscated & paid to the Confederacy afterwards had to be to Northern creditors</i>		3000
TOTAL		13,000
1867 Total Resources		26,169

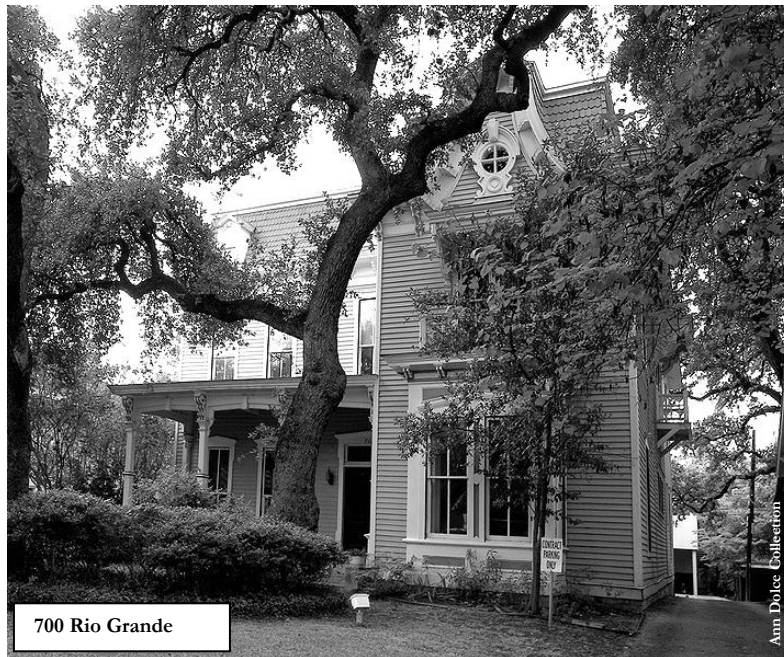


John H. Robinson Sr. in middle age

First Generation

The years after the war were spent in rebuilding the Robinson and Son grocery business and investing in cattle, ranch lands and urban real estate. His cattle brand was JHR and his horse brand was 3E.⁷⁶ The eldest son, William, left Austin and settled in Waco, opening his own dry goods business in 1867.⁷⁷ John H. Robinson Jr. went into business with John Bremond Jr., leaving Alfred Henry Sr. to become the “Son” in the firm. The partnership was most successful and by 1874, John H. Robinson’s total worth was back to \$51,717.59.⁷⁸ Following Alfred’s death in 1885, Alonzo bought the store and ran it, continuing the family business.

John and Elizabeth lived at 700 Rio Grande Street in a house built for Elizabeth and John in 1876.⁷⁹ Robinson purchased the land on 1 Feb 1859 from Hugh Hamilton Haynie and his wife Mary Louise Bremond Haynie.⁸⁰ The property was the homestead of the Haynie family and contained a brick dwelling. By 1872 Robinson had demolished the brick dwelling in order to construct a new residence, described in the Austin Daily Statesman of 1 Jul 1876, as a frame house with octagon and bay windows.⁸¹ The cost of the house was estimated to be \$5000 or \$6000.⁸² The Robinsons’ choice of the fashionable Second Empire style is of considerable interest. At the time, Austin was a remote city emerging from the Reconstruction era, and the choice of the then-fashionable Second Empire style was an indication of prosperity for both the Robinson family and Austin. Following the deaths of John H.



and Elizabeth Robinson, the property was purchased by their son Eugene. The house remains today, and is one of the few intact Second Empire residential examples left in Texas.⁸³ It is in close proximity to the houses built by the Bremond family, just three blocks east.

The Robinson family was a sizable one; the couple had ten children (**William T. Robinson** born 1837; **John H. Robinson Jr.** born 16 Jul 1839; **Mary Amelia Robinson** born 14 Aug 1842; **Alfred Henry Robinson** born 23 Aug 1844; **Elizabeth “Lizzie” Robinson** born Apr 1847; **Lillian “Lillie” Robinson**, born 1849; **Alonzo “Lonnie” Robinson** born 19

Sep 1852; **Austin M. Robinson** born 5 Apr 1856; **Laura Ada Robinson** born 1859; and **Eugene Bremond Robinson** born 28 Apr 1862). In 1870, just two years before the new house was completed, the four youngest children were living at home.⁸⁴

Robinson was a many-faceted man. He was deeply involved in the Austin community in addition to being a businessman and family man. He served as an alderman in 1860-1862, 1867, 1871-1872, 1873, 1874-1877. He was known for his honesty and integrity and was a genial companion full of good humor and positive outlook.⁸⁵ Grandson William Herme Robinson wrote, “Grandfather was something of a student & his favorites were Shakespeare and Robert Burns – and he could quote from them easily – his memory was very – very fine. Grandfather told me he had a naturally high temper, and always had to watch it. I don’t think any of his ten children inherited that, but were more of the placid disposition of our lovely grandmother.”⁸⁶ Above all, he was a spiritual man, generous and loving to his family, and in turn loved by them. His writings in his cash ledger and in his letters to family members show a spirituality that deepens over the years; his poetic literary mind, and a life that though battered by the unexpected, looked to the future with great anticipation and faith.

Many times Robinson's faith was tested. The family was often touched by personal tragedy. In 1867 daughter Lillie died and John wrote the following letter to his son, Alonzo:

Austin, April 20, 1867

Dear Son Lonny,

Your last favor duly received and plainly could we see, on its pages the hearts anguish that possessed you when you wrote. The tear drop was plainly visible on many a line and fain should we weep, for a brighter and purer being that has soared to Realms above - few could have excelled her that but as yesterday left us, for that Heavenly Sphere where sorrow never comes. My dear son tis our proud privilege to know that now we have one in Heaven who is allowed to approach the throne of grace and offer her supplication and petitions in our behalf. Oh: my son let her death be the birth of our salvation and daily we will ask divine help to keep us in the path that leads to the home where our dear Lillie dwells. ...

In addition to the untimely death of Lillie Robinson, several other members of the family preceded John and Elizabeth in death. Their son Alfred Henry died in 1885 at the age of 41 leaving a wife and seven children; their grandson John Alfred died at the age of 21 in 1891 following a bout of pneumonia; their son-in-law James Sheeks committed suicide in 1894 at the age of 39; and another grandson, Greek Sheeks, died very suddenly and unexpectedly in 1894 at the age of 12. John's writings give an inside look at his personal tragedies.

In 1889, Robinson wrote in his ledger:

Oct 1889

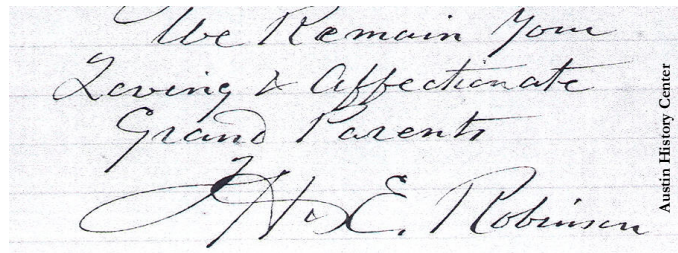
Tis now over 43 years since the first entry was made in this book and the writer not in his 75th year finally realized the truth of the following quotation. "I now realize that I have reached that point in life when nature begins to take away one by one all the things one by one thee had given. Youth, Health, Strength, the Quick Eye to see, the ear to hear, the mind to think, the heart to feel, and last but not least the love of others. For not only do youth, health, and strength go but the eye grows dim, and the ear dulls. While memory fails and the heart hardens in age and even love at last leaves us, unregarded, age comes through. Let any one who doubts this compare the tears a mother sheds for her little child she has known only a few days with the tears of the upgrown son who mourns a mother bound to him by fore score years. Truly life is like Penelope's Web - all the golden threads woven with it in the day of youth are one by one unraveled in the night of age."

In September of 1890 John wrote to his grandson, John Alfred Robinson, and reflected on the life of John Alfred's father, Alfred Henry Robinson:

Dear Grandson,

Your highly prized letter of the 28th to hand, be assured it will ever be kept by me, to mark that time that with strength of mind and good resolves, you with such commendable resolution pen'd the rule and line, that the future of your life was to be guided by.

No young man ever had a nobler or better father than you had. One whose example, tis well to follow. A son while in life, never caused his parents a regret, a pang or a tear. A true loving and devoted husband and father, without ostentation good and charitable. Yes one whom to know, was to love and respect, none named him but to praise him, in life esteemed by all, in death mourned and regretted.



*We Remain Your
Loving & Affectionate
Grand Parents
JH & E Robinson*

Austin History Center

In the wisdom of God, in the very midst of his prime, manhood and usefulness, was taken from us, leaving behind him a legacy of all that was commendable, but to you his oldest son, he not only left an example, but duties to perform, first to comfort and be a source of pride and joy to your mother, and now I pray to God to enable you to commit no act, but you would be willing for her to know and see. Second, not only to be a brother to your sisters but also a counselor and a guide, few young men at your age are call'd on to assume the latter responsibility, but by the tenor of yours I feel assured you will cheerfully and willingly assume the task, a task that to yourself will afford profit and pleasure.

You refer to my long life, yes years beyond the threescore and ten, an age that only six out of thousand reaches, would I could say all those years was without spot or blemish, would that I could. A writer pure and immaculate said there is none perfect no not one if on earth there ever was an exception, that exception was your father. In Writing to my loved ones, I pen what my mind dictates and what I wrote to your sister Bessie, I have forgot. But if in it, there was a word, expression or thought sent, that caused you to determine to quit all foibles, and begin that better path that leadeth to peace, health, content, and happiness, then indeed the letter was not writ in vain.

My dear boy be fully assured that the good and the bad have their results in this world. The first leadeth to honor among men and giveth goodly hopes of a happy future, the last leadeth to dishonor and misery, for truly he that sins suffereth and while we may so hide our misdeeds that men may not condemn us that inward monitor brings us face to face with all faults. I will now conclude (this my 31st letter since leaving home writing to different members of the family) praying that God will keep you from all the snares that beset the path of youth, and give you firmness and strength to pursue the good and better path.

We remain your loving and affectionate grand parents

JH & E Robinson

In May 1894 three years before his own death and following the deaths of James and Greek Sheeks, Robinson wrote in his ledger:

May 1894

In all likely this will be my last writing in this the old book, now near one half century old. Truly I fully recognize the truth of Psalmist word who wrote the "Days of man are three score and ten and though he liveth to four score years yet his days are all vanity and vexation of spirit."

Yes, Oh! How much sadness and sorrow would have been spared us had we ended our times at three score and 10 years.

It now only in the 5th month of the year our hearts have ached and our heads bowed down with sorrow. On April 3rd James Sheeks our loved and respected son-in-law departed hence to that bourne from which no traveler returns leaving a disconsolate widow and fatherless child – bright of intellect, strong physically, and gave bright promise of a brilliant future, his mother's pride, her hope, her comfort. On the morning of the 22nd of the month got up well, bright and cheerful and commenced his days amusements and before the close and long before sunset he passed away bringing a mother's heart and brain to near madness.

Oh!! God why is this? We are mortals and cannot comprehend immortality but is our weakness with our senses to..... we cry "Oh, God! Why is this?"

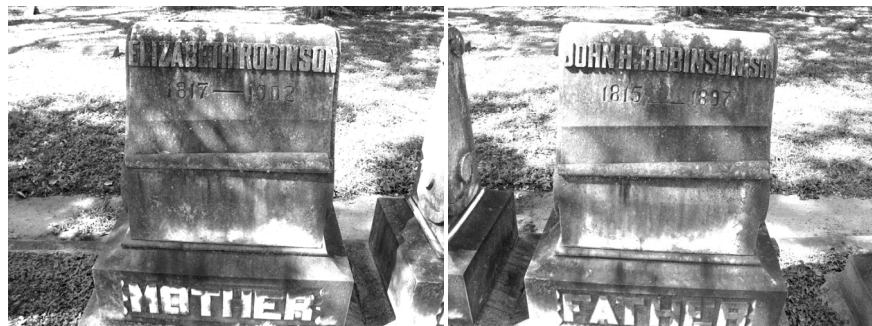
The historic legacy and image of Elizabeth Sheridan Robinson is not as detailed as that of John. No letters or writings of Elizabeth have been found other than her note in the Cash Ledger. She did have financial assets that John H. used following the fire of 1853 in Arkansas; she birthed and raised ten children; and was a loving mother and a lifelong companion and supporter of John H. Robinson. Her obituary reflects that this Irish Texan was "one of Austin's best beloved citizens." Elizabeth is remembered in a letter to Alonzo Robinson from his sister-in-law Kate:

It seems indeed strange to

think of never seeing the sweet old lady sitting in her pleasant room greeting every one that comes in with that patient peaceful smile. It was like a benediction to be in her presence, and her children have sustained a great loss; but just think how weary and exhausted she would be after one of those shaking spells, and now she has no more of that but is enjoying rest from her long and useful pilgrimage.

Lonnie, we must all try to emulate her example, so that when we die we may be as sure of heaven as she was. I don't think I ever saw children more devoted to a parent than her children were, and she seemed so happy in their love and enjoyed their frequent visits.

John H. died 5 Mar 1897 of apoplexy⁸⁷ at his home 700 Rio Grande Street and was buried 6 Mar 1897 in Oakwood Cemetery, Austin, Texas. Elizabeth died in 1902 in Austin and on 12 Aug 1902 was also buried in Oakwood Cemetery.⁸⁸



Oakwood Cemetery, Austin, Texas

MR. JOHN H. ROBINSON.

An Old and Prominent Citizen of Austin Quietly Passes Away.

Mr. John H. Robinson quietly passed away early yesterday morning at his home, 700 Rio Grande street. He was 81 years of age and for several years has been very feeble, rarely coming down town.

Mr. Robinson was an Englishman by birth, coming to America along in the forties, landing in New Orleans, where he lived several years and where he married. He moved from New Orleans to Little Rock, where he engaged in the dry goods and grocery business.

In 1854 he came to Austin, and entering into the dry goods and grocery business, continued in it up to a few years ago, when he retired. As a business man no man stood higher in this community, and his integrity and honest business methods were proverbial all over the territory embraced in the counties surrounding Travis as well as here at home. He enjoyed the confidence of all with whom he had dealings. He was a well informed man and a most genial companion. In the good old stage days if Mr. Robinson happened to be a passenger he kept everybody in a good humor and made them forget, in a large measure, the weariness of the trip. He was a most generous and loving husband and a kind father, and no man ever had a more devoted family.

He had a very wide circle of friends who will sincerely mourn his death. Five sons, William, Lonnie, John, Austin and Eugene, and two daughters, Mrs. James Sheeks and Mrs. Swancoat, survive him.

He will be buried this afternoon at 5 o'clock from the family residence, 700 Rio Grande street. Friends of the family are respectfully invited to attend.

