

Texas Historical Commission Staff (CJB), 9/23/96; revised 1/28/97; (WCT) 2/24/97;  
3/27/97

Official Texas Historical Marker Grave Marker  
Jefferson County (Job # 00497)

Location: Sabine Pass Cemetery, Cemetery Road, 1 mile W of Sabine Pass off SH 87

**KATE DORMAN\***  
(1828-1897)\*\*\*

GEORGIA NATIVE KATE DORMAN AND  
HER HUSBAND ARTHUR MCGILL OWNED  
THE CATFISH HOTEL AT SABINE PASS  
AS EARLY AS 1847. MCGILL DIED IN AN  
ACCIDENT IN 1858, AND IN 1859 KATE  
MARRIED JOHN DORMAN. IN 1862 THE  
CATFISH HOTEL BECAME A TEMPORARY  
HOSPITAL, AND KATE NURSED VICTIMS  
OF A YELLOW FEVER EPIDEMIC. A  
STRONG SUPPORTER OF THE CONFED-  
ERACY, KATE DORMAN ASSISTED LT.  
DICK DOWLING'S TROOPS THE DAY  
OF THE BATTLE OF SABINE PASS IN  
SEPTEMBER 1863.\*\*

RECORDED - 1997\*\*\*

\*1/2 inch lettering

\*\*3/8 inch lettering

\*\*\*1/4 inch lettering



# SCRAPPY KATE DORMAN WAS CONFEDERATE HEROINE OF SABINE PASS

27289

By W. T. Block

Around Labor Day of each year, as Sabine Pass prepares to celebrate its Confederate holiday, Jefferson County citizens hear much about the 47 Irish defenders of the seaport city. Scrappy Kate Dorman is by no means as well-known as Lt. Dick Dowling, but to those Federal troops who had occasion to meet her, she left an indelible imprint on their memories.

Until recently, a plaque in Sabine Pass State Park paid some tribute to the Irish heroine, but it was removed while construction work was in progress and was never remounted. In its issue of Dec., 1973, "Civil War Times Illustrated" published a photograph and a brief note about the diminutive, 4-foot, 10-inch Kate; so did "Blue & Gray Magazine" in its issue of September, 1986.<sup>1</sup>

Of volatile temperament as well as small, Catherine Magill Dorman compensated for her lack of stature with sheer guts, determination, and an acidic tongue. Little is known of her life outside of the Civil War years. She was born in Georgia in 1828; later she met and married Arthur Magill at an early age and by 1846 was living at Sabine Pass. A tiny tombstone there indicates that a 5-year-old daughter died there in 1848.<sup>2</sup>

About 1852, the young couple built the Catfish Hotel, which became Jefferson County's best-known antebellum inn, about 300 yards north of Fort Griffin. During the battle of Sept. 8, 1863, a number of Union shells exploded nearby. The 1860 census records that the two-story hostelry housed 24 permanent guests, including five merchants, as well as the itinerant seamen who lodged there and enjoyed the inn's excellent cuisine. It was a seaport landmark second only to the Sabine lighthouse. The hotel had its own wharf where steamer crews docked while eating there. One historian once recorded that he had watched Ben Granger, an early day Sabine sawmiller, stand on the hotel wharf and with a double throw of a cast net, land 176 pan-sized fish.

That historian, Beaumont attorney T. J. Russell, recorded in his PIONEER REMINISCENCES OF JEFFERSON COUNTY that in antebellum Sabine Pass:

".....Arthur McGill was there and was owner and caterer of the Catfish Hotel situated on the edge of the Pass, at the north end of the wharves. It was quite a noted place. It was at that wharf that the writer saw Ben Granger make two throws of his cast net and catch 176 mullet of good-eating size. McGill died about the beginning of the war. His widow remained there and afterward married Capt. John Dorman. McGill left two daughters, the older of whom married Dr. P. Jordan, well-known in later days in Beaumont. The younger daughter married Major F. C. McReynolds, who lived at the Pass many years – now of Beaumont."<sup>3</sup>

One incident involving Kate Magill resulted in the first survey of the west Jefferson County line. One day, a German immigrant-resident of Sabine, known

locally as "Dutch Margaret," entered the hotel dining room and without known provocation, "proceeded to villify in blackguard language" the innkeeper while she was serving meals. Although Kate thoroughly tongue-lashed the intruder to her own satisfaction, three friends, without the innkeeper's knowledge, carried the quarrel somewhat farther, met "Dutch Margaret" on the street, and caned her with a parasol.

A lawsuit resulted, with the plaintiff claiming she had suffered a miscarriage. Later, H. C. Pedigo, the plaintiff's attorney, questioned the legality of a juror as a bonafide county resident. Since Will J. Collins lived on what was thought to be the county line, the commissioners' court agreed to survey it, and in the meantime the suit was postponed. The suit was subsequently quashed, and three months later, "Dutch Margaret" gave birth to a son.<sup>4</sup>

Both of Kate's husbands were steamboatmen by trade. Arthur Magill was the chief engineer aboard the "T. J. Smith," a Neches River mail packet built in 1857 at Bevilport, Jasper County, and owned by Capt. Henry Clay Smith of Orange. In 1858, while riding the 100-foot steamer to Sabine, Henry R. Green, a Beaumont correspondent of Galveston "News," wrote that the "Smith" ran "like lightning with a thunderbolt after it."<sup>5</sup> Green also wrote that "Magill is scientific in his line, very careful, and experienced." Nevertheless, the engineer was killed on Nov. 2, 1859, when the vessel's boiler exploded. The "T. J. Smith" was later repaired and in 1862 was confiscated by the Confederate States government when its owner, H. C. Smith, defected to the Federal forces.<sup>6</sup>

Probate records reveal that Kate Magill soon sued Capt. Smith to collect her dead husband's wages. This was her first encounter in court with the man she would grow to loathe.

In 1860 the young widow, mother of two young daughters, married a widowed friend of her deceased husband, Capt. John Dorman, who was master of the Neches River cotton steamer "Doctor Massie."

Tragedy struck Sabine Pass in July, 1862, when Jefferson County's worst epidemic, the dreaded "yellow jack" {yellow fever}, was imported aboard a blockade-runner. In a four-month period, the disease killed 100 residents at Sabine and Beaumont and afflicted at least 200 more. The luckier ones, about 90% of Sabine's inhabitants, fled at the first outbreak, some carrying the disease with them. Only about 30 men of two military companies (40 or more soldier cases were fatal) escaped the malady, and their "principal business was to bury the dead."<sup>7</sup>

When the hotel tenants and the town's populace fled, Kate turned the Catfish Hotel into a temporary hospital, for there was then no Confederate medical facility in the city. Mrs. Dorman and two friends, Sarah Vosburg and Sarah Ann King, were among the Sabine women who remained to nurse the victims, and all three were fortunate to escape death.<sup>8</sup>

In Sept., 1862, while the pestilence still raged, a Union squadron invaded the Pass. Fort Sabine, with only 16 defenders fit for duty, was evacuated. The invaders

destroyed the fort and its barracks, but generally avoided the town because of the epidemic. However, they frequently encountered the Confederate cavalry, who kept the range cattle driven inland to prevent their use by the Bluejackets as a food supply.<sup>9</sup>

The Federals armed a captured steamer, the "Dan," harassing all points along Lake Sabine with it, and the little sidewheeler soon became the special target of the Rebel horsemen, who ultimately burned the vessel during a fog. On Oct. 15, 1862, fifty of the "Dan's" crew came ashore with a boat howitzer and marched twice through Sabine Pass en route to and from the Confederate cavalry barracks, 5 miles west of the town, where they burned 14 barracks and stables.<sup>10</sup> En route, the Federal patrol took Capt. Dorman's horse and cart to mount the howitzer on, an event recorded in great detail in the Houston "Tri-Weekly Telegraph" of Nov. 5, as follows:<sup>11</sup>

"Mrs. Dorman, who witnessed the act, became perfectly enraged, and being one of the bravest women in the Confederacy, gave them just such a tongue-lashing as only a brave woman would dare do. She shook her fist at them, and told them she hoped our boys would kill the last one of them before they got back, and if she had 25 men, she could take them and their cannon with them."

"After the enemy retired to their gunboat, they gave Dorman his horse and cart again, and told him if he did not keep his damned wife's mouth shut, they would hang him . . ."Mr. and Mrs. Dorman have a large hotel in the place, and the Yanks declare if she does not apologize to them, they will burn it. She declares that she will see them in the lower regions first, and they may burn it if they choose."<sup>12</sup>

Apparently, the Federals had no real desire to carry out their threat, or to encounter the innkeeper again. When the "Dan" sent another patrol ashore seven days later, they burned one-fourth of the town, including all the sawmill industry and some fine residences, but they left the Catfish Hotel alone.<sup>13</sup>

On Sept. 8, 1863, the war returned to Sabine Pass in full measure. Unknown to Kate at the time, her old adversary, Capt. Clay Smith was the Confederate defector to the North who piloted the ill-fated U. S. S. "Sachem" up the Louisiana channel. The gunboat was one of two which soon bowed to the gunners of Fort Griffin, and ironically, Capt. Smith was the only one aboard who escaped.<sup>14</sup>

Oblivious to the Federal shells bursting around them, Kate and her friend, Sarah Vosburg, labored over a hot stove in the Catfish Hotel, cooking meat, doughnuts, and hot coffee. In the heat of the battle, Kate Dorman went outside, hitched up the same horse and cart, and carried a hot meal to the grimy gunners in the fort.

One book, A HISTORY OF JEFFERSON COUNTY, TEXAS, records that: ".....at the height of the bombardment, two of Sabine's heroines, the innkeeper Kate Dorman and Sarah Vosburg, arrived at the fort in a buggy and unloaded meat, doughnuts, coffee, and a gallon of whiskey for the Confederate defenders."<sup>15</sup>

In his published memoirs of 1899, Lt. Joe Chasteen of Sabine Pass confirmed the story so often told of the Confederate heroines:

".....Mrs. Kate Dorman got in her buggy and Mrs. Sarah Vosburg accompanied her, and they carried food to the fort. By the time the fight was over, the soldiers met these ladies with the refreshments...."16

In 1902, Andrew Veatch, the editor of a Hemphill newspaper, was visiting in Sabine Pass when he was asked to write a story about the the Sabine Pass battle. He interviewed Mrs. Millie Murray, who roomed at the Catfish Hotel throughout the Civil War and whose future husband, Dr. James Murray, treated the scalded Federal victims of that battle. Mrs. Murray recalled that she had:

".....witnessed the devotion of the loving Mrs. Dorman in sending the best dinner that was ever prepared in her hotel down to the fort to cheer the boys as they began answering the challenge of the foe..."17

Kate and John Dorman resided at Sabine Pass for the remainder of their lives. Capt. Dorman died there in July, 1886, only three months before a hurricane destroyed the entire city on Oct. 12, 1886. His indomitable widow survived the hurricane and, five years later, she died in her adopted community where she had withstood pestilence, war, and storm.<sup>18</sup>(1891)

In Feb., 1900, two of the three aged and infirm surviving veterans of the Battle of Sabine Pass, Michael Carr and P. C. O'Hara, residents of the Confederate Soldiers Home in Austin, were given train tickets to spend a two-week vacation re-visiting the remains of old Fort Griffin at Sabine Pass (most of the veterans of that battle had died during the Houston and Galveston yellow fever epidemics of 1867). The soldiers' first request was — "Where's Kate? We want to see Kate!" But Kate was gone, having passed on to her reward nine years earlier.

Perhaps Mrs. Margaret L. Watson paid the most laudatory tribute to the Confederate heroine in an article she published in the Confederate Veterans Column of the Galveston DAILY NEWS. Mrs. Watson, who had utilized the column to raise funds for the veterans' train tickets, probably knew Kate Dorman as well as anyone, for she had lived in the Catfish Hotel throughout the Civil War years while her husband, Sergeant Sam Watson, was a cannoneer in Co. B, Spaight's Battalion, aboard the cottonclad gunboat "Uncle Ben" during the battle. Mrs. Watson had arranged for Major Felix McReynolds, the latter's daughter-in-law, Mrs. Arthur McReynolds, and Lt. Joseph Chasteen to meet O'Hara and Carr and escort them to the battleground. Mrs. Watson recorded a part of that meeting as follows:

".....These people mentioned were of peculiar interest and love to these men, as the family of Major McReynolds represents the grandchildren of Mrs. Kate Dorman, whose name will go down in history entwined with that of the Davis Guards. Though she now sleeps in the cemetery at the Pass, she lives forever in the hearts of these survivors. During the days of the trials and privations of the Civil War, Mrs. Kate Dorman stood strong and brave under every difficulty. She was the friend of the private soldiers as well as the officers; she nursed them when sick, gave the best she had to feed them. She was always on hand in the hour of

peril to express faith in their success, to give an enthusiastic welcome in the hour of victory...."<sup>19</sup>

One of Kate Dorman's daughters married Dr. Powhattan Jordan, a former Confederate surgeon and a pioneer Beaumont physician. Laura Magill, the younger daughter, married Major Felix McReynolds, one of the county's ablest Confederate defenders, the executive officer of Griffin's Battalion and the commandant of Fort Manhasset at Sabine Pass.<sup>20</sup>

On May 6, 1864, the date that McReynolds led the Sabine garrison of seven infantry companies to victory at the Battle of Calcasieu Pass, La., a fellow Beaumont, Capt. Joseph Brickhouse, described the major as one "of the bravest officers who ever drew sword," who rallied "his men in such terms as no one who heard could ever forget." Both McReynolds and his wife are buried in the Magnolia Cemetery in Beaumont.<sup>21</sup>

As of 1974, the thin marble tombstones of Capt. and Mrs. Dorman lay cracked and fallen in Sabine Pass Cemetery. The writer and two of his sons hauled sand, gravel and cement from Nederland and remounted the stones horizontally in a six-foot by ten-foot concrete slab that will withstand the future's ravages of time and flood.

Until the death of Mrs. Miriam McReynolds Taylor at Beaumont about 1978, friends could understand the widow's pride whenever she scanned two dimmed and yellowed photographs of a century ago. Her brave grandfather and scrappy great grandmother certainly left their marks on the Civil War history of the seaport community of Sabine Pass. {Reprinted from Beaumont ENTERPRISE, Aug. 13, 1974}

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#### Footnotes

1

J. F. McCormack, "Sabine Pass," CIVIL WAR TIMES ILLUSTRATED (Dec. 1973), p. 36; E. Jones, "Battle of Sabine Pass," BLUE & GRAY MAGAZINE (Sept., 1986), p. 15.

2

Dorman and McGill gravestones, as listed in "Sabine Pass Cemetery," YELLOWED PAGES (May, 1971), 72-76.

3

U. S. Census, Jefferson County, Texas, 1860, Res. 335; T. J. Russell, "Pioneer Reminiscences of Jefferson County (Beaumont: 1966), p. 37, reprinted from Beaumont JOURNAL, March 04, 1906.

4

IBID., p. 87, reprinted from Beaumont JOURNAL, March 31, 1907.

5

"Letter from Hal," Galveston WEEKLY NEWS, Sept. 12, 1858, as reprinted in "Extracts from The Writings of Henry R. Green," TEXAS GULF HISTORICAL AND BIOGRAPHICAL RECORD, X (Nov., 1975), p. 67.

6

File 110, Estate of Arthur McGill, Probate Records, Jefferson County Archives.

7

MSE, "Diary of First Sergeant H. N. Connor, 1861-1865," Unpublished, p. 2, hereinafter cited as "Connor," copy owned by W. T. Block; K. D. Keith, "Memoirs of Capt. K. D. Keith," TEXAS GULF HISTORICAL AND BIOGRAPHICAL RECORD, X (Nov., 1974), 57-58; K. D. Keith, "Military Operations, Sabine Pass," in BURKE'S TEXAS ALMANAC AND IMMIGRANT'S GUIDE FOR 1883.

8

Dr. George Holland, "Epidemic at Sabine Pass," Houston TELEGRAPH, Sept. 10, 1862; Keith, "Memoirs," pp. 57-58; Confederate Veterans Column, Galveston DAILY NEWS, March 11, 1900.

9

Letters of Col. A. W. Spaight, OFFICIAL RECORDS-ARMIES, Ser. 1, Vol. XV, 143-147.

10

Connor diary, p. 5-a.

11

"Night Attack at Sabine Pass," Houston TELEGRAPH, Nov. 5, 1862.

12

IBID., Letter, J. H. to E. H. Cushing, Nov. 5, 1862.

13

Connor, p. 4.

14

"Memoirs of Lt. Joseph Chasteen," Confederate Veterans Column, Galveston DAILY NEWS, Sept. 3, 1899.

15

W. T. Block, A HISTORY OF JEFFERSON COUNTY, TEXAS, FROM WILDERNESS TO RECONSTRUCTION (Nederland: 1976), p. 114.

16

Chasteen Memoirs, Galveston DAILY NEWS, Sept. 3, 1899.

17

Andrew Veatch, "The Story of Fort Dowling," Sabine Pass (Tx.) NEWS, April 12, 1902. (Note: Locally, Fort Griffin was called 'Fort Dowling' around 1900.) A copy of this newspaper is also owned by the writer.

18

U. S. Manuscript Censuses, Jefferson County, Texas, 1870, res. 16; 1880, res. 30.

19

Margaret L. Watson, "Battle of Sabine Pass," Confederate Veterans Column, Galveston DAILY NEWS, March 11, 1900.

20

Beaumont JOURNAL, March 4, 1906.

21

J. A. Brickhouse, "The Battle of Calcasieu Pass, La.," Beaumont ENTERPRISE, May 9, 1909.



R. Y. KING, SUPERINTENDENT.

Confederate Home.

State of Texas.

Austin, March 26<sup>th</sup> 1903

Mr G. D. Bryan  
Houston

Dear Sir

Your favor of yesterday received to day. Terence Mulhern and Pat Sullivan were in the Fort at Sabine Pass, all the morning of September 8<sup>th</sup> 1863 during the terrific bombardment of the Fort. Mrs Kate Dorman who lived in Sabine Pass with Dowling and his Men their dinner on that day, saw the fleet of gun boats with crew about noon, Dowling his officers and Men then ate the dinner sent them by Mrs Dorman. Dowling then sent Sullivan and Mulhern with the dinner dishes to Mrs Dorman. He did not wish to take the chance of losing them. In the afternoon, when Dowling and the fleet were engaged in battle, Sullivan and Mulhern did not reach the Fort until the fleet had surrendered. They said it was impossible to reach the Fort during the fight on account of the pain of shot and shell that literally raked the earth from Fort to town. I hope you will conclude to place their names on the Monument. Dr. Bailey must be right about John Remsey, as he and two other members of the Company were in the hospital sick. Dr Bailey

March 28<sup>th</sup> 1903



R. Y. KING, SUPERINTENDENT.

Confederate Home.

State of Texas.

Austin, \_\_\_\_\_ 190—

being post Surgeon and a brave and truthful Man must be believed. Dr. Bailey was and is loved and honored by Every Member of Our Company.

There were three Sullivans in the Membership: Thomas, Michael, and Patrick all of whom deserve to ~~be~~ have their Names inscribed on the Monument Tom and Mike were in Every fight in which the Company was Engaged.

I will not say as a certainty that John Hennessy was not in the Engagement of September 8<sup>th</sup> - yet Dr. Bailey knows - but Jett, Richard O'Hara, and William Hardin were not at the Pass on September 8<sup>th</sup>.

The Company's Name is Davis Guard, not Gaurds. It was named in Honor of President Davis, He being an honorary Member.

Hardin has the only photo of Me in Texas. I will write Him this Evening to forward both His and My photo to you at once. You received a Letter from Me to day in it - I told you that Mrs Watson has a complete roster of the original D. G. Company I have to day drawn from my Memory a complete roster. if it should be wanted at any time write for it.

Yours Truly R. C. O'Hara

Will Dr. Bailey come to the  
1. Line of Davis Monument

arrange with I am writing



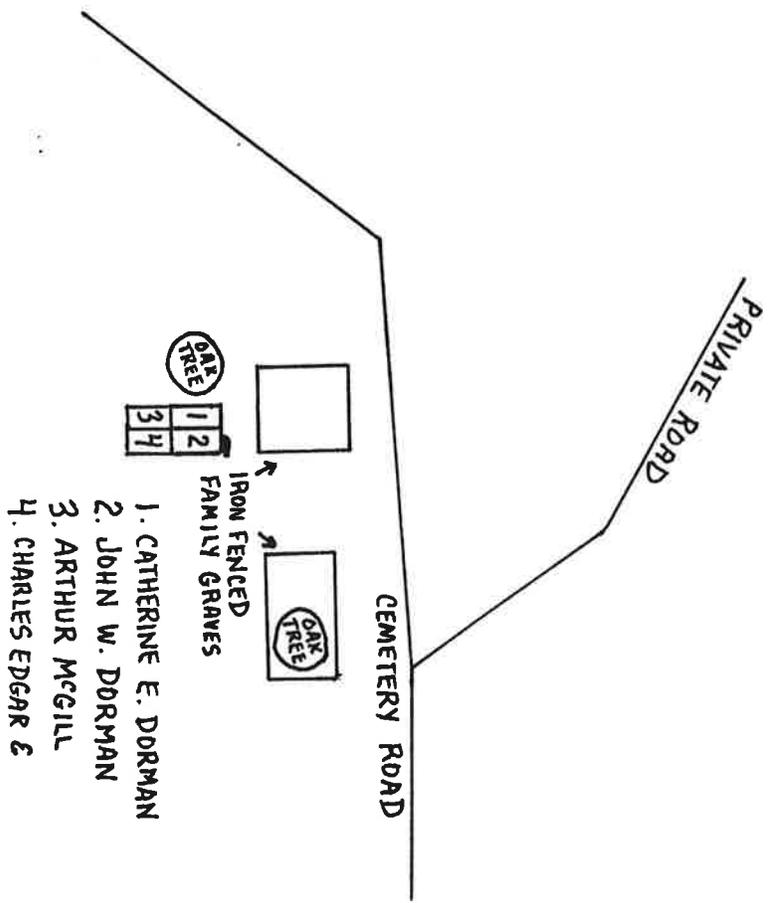
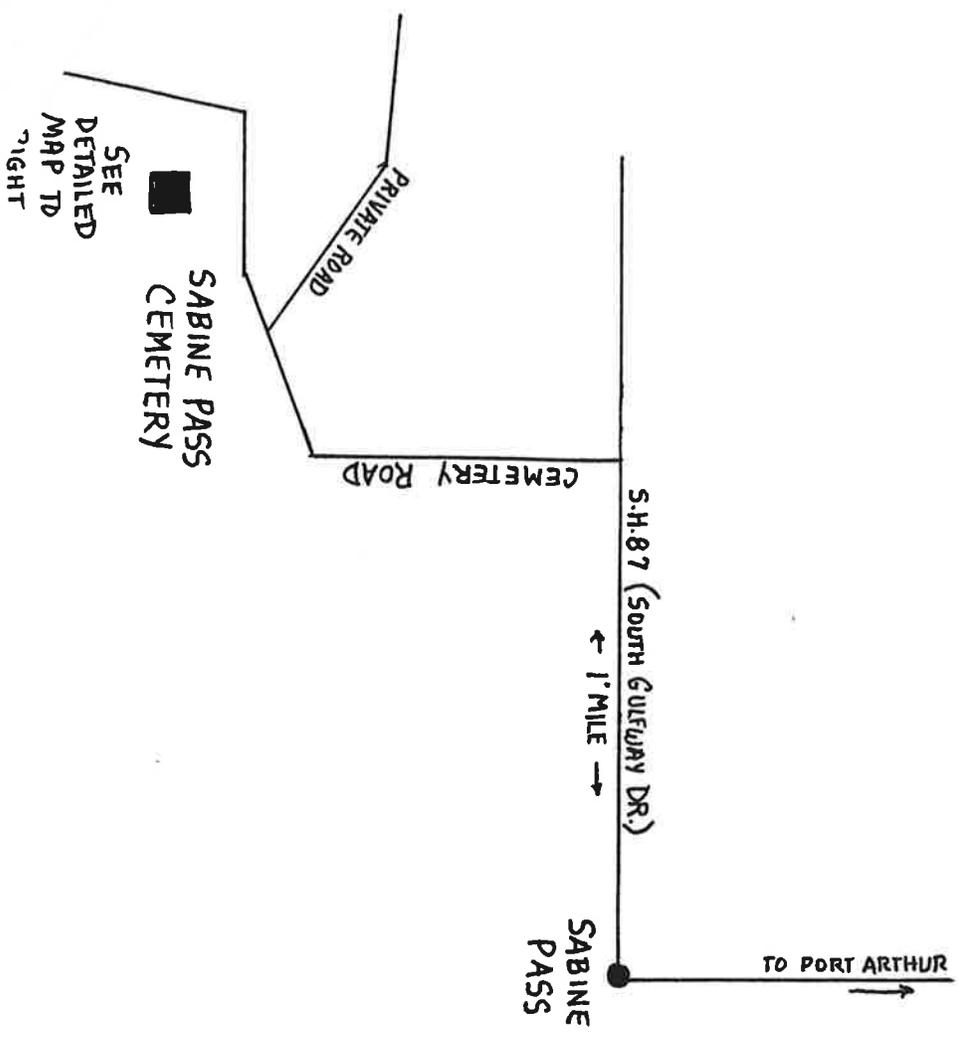
*Anderson's*

55 MAIN STREET,

HOUSTON, TEXAS.

PROPOSED SITE OF STATE  
 HISTORICAL GRAVEMARKER  
 CATHERINE (KATE) E. DORMAN  
 AT SABINE PASS CEMETERY  
 SABINE PASS, TEXAS

DRAWN BY JEFFERSON COUNTY HISTORICAL  
 COMMISSION MEMBER  
 RODNEY B. LEE  
 7.26-96



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