The Battle of the Alamo

Antonio López de Santa Anna

Few historical events are more surrounded with legend than the battle of the Alamo, where a couple of hundred Texas volunteers sought to defend an abandoned missions against between two thousand and five thousand Mexican soldiers. Texan bravery and sense of duty in the face of certain defeat has become a popular symbol of heroism.

Most Texans are unaware that Tejanos played a pivotal role in this battle for Texas independence. Gregorio Esparza, Antonio Fuentes, Toribio Losoya, Guadalupe Rodriguez, Juan Seguin, and other Tejanos joined Colonel William B. Travis, who is said to have drawn a line in the dirt with his sword and asked those willing to stay and fight to cross the line. They fought alongside the bedridden Jim Bowie, who later died of a bayonet wound, but not before leaving his famous knife in an attacker's body. And they stood alongside of David Crockett, the fifty-year-old Indian scout and politician, who was either shot and killed or captured and executed.

For twelve days, Mexican forces laid siege to the Alamo. At 5 a.m., March 6, 1836, Mexican troops scaled the mission's walls. By 8 a.m., when the fighting was over, 183 defenders lay dead.

Two weeks after the defeat at the Alamo, a contingent of Texans surrendered to Mexican forces near Goliad with the understanding that they would be treated as prisoners of war. Instead, Santa Anna ordered more than 350 Texans shot.

These defeats had an unexpected side effect. They gave Houston time to raise and train an army. Volunteers from the southern United States flocked to his banner. On April 21, his army surprised and defeated Santa Anna's army as it camped on the San Jacinto River, east of present-day Houston. The next day Houston captured Santa Anna himself and forced him to sign a treaty granting Texas its independence, a treaty that was never ratified by the Mexican government because it was acquired under duress. In 1837, Santa Anna presented his perspective on the battle of the Alamo.

The enemy fortified itself in the Alamo, overlooking the city. A siege of a few days would have caused its surrender, but it was not fit that the entire army should be detained before an irregular fortification hardly worthy of the name. Neither could its capture be dispensed with, for bad as it was, it was well equipped with artillery, had a double wall, and defenders who, it must be admitted, were very courageous.... An assault would infuse our soldiers with that enthusiasm of the first
triumph that would make them superior in the future to those of the enemy. Before undertaking the assault and after the reply given to Travis who commanded the enemy fortification, I still wanted to try a generous measure, characteristic of Mexican kindness, and I offered life to the defendants who would surrender their arms and retire under oath not to take them up again against Mexico.

On the night of the fifth of March, four columns having been made ready for the assault under the command of their respective officers, they moved forward in the best order and with the greatest silence, but the imprudent huzzas of one of them awakened the sleeping vigilance of the defenders of the fort and their artillery fire caused such disorder among our columns that it was necessary to make use of the reserves. The Alamo was taken, this victory that was so much and so justly celebrated at the time, costing us seventy dead and about three hundred wounded, a loss that was also later judged to be avoidable and charged, after the disaster of San Jacinto, to my incompetence and precipitation. I do not know of a way in which any fortification, defended by artillery, can be carried by assault without the personal losses of the attacking party being greater than those of the enemy, against whose walls and fortifications the brave assailants can present only their bare breasts. It is easy enough, from a desk in a peaceful office, to pile up charges against a general out on the field but this cannot prove anything more than the praiseworthy desire of making war less disastrous. But its nature being such, a general has no power over its immutable laws. Let us weep at the tomb of the brave Mexicans who died at the Alamo defending the honor and the rights of their country. They won lasting claim to fame and the country can never forget their heroic names.


1928
1993
The Texas Revolution

Manuel Mier y Terán

As the population in Texas from the United States swelled, Mexican authorities grew increasing nervous. In 1827, the Mexican government sent General Manuel de Mier y Terán to investigate the situation. He warned that unless the Mexican government took timely measures, settlers were certain to rebel. Differences in language and culture, Terán believed, had produced bitter enmity between the colonists and native Mexicans. The colonists refused to learn the Spanish language, maintained their own separate schools, and conducted most of their trade with the United States.

To reassert its authority over Texas, the Mexican government reaffirmed its constitutional prohibition of slavery, established a chain of military posts, levied customs duties, restricted trade with the United States, and decreed an end to further immigration from the United States. These actions might have provoked a revolt in Texas, but in 1832, General Antonio López de Santa Anna became Mexico’s president. Many colonists hoped that he would make Texas a self-governing state within the Mexican republic. Once in power, however, Santa Anna proved far less adaptable than many had hoped. In 1834, he overthrew Mexico’s constitutional government and made himself dictator.

In November 1835, Anglo-American colonists adopted a constitution and organized a temporary government but voted overwhelmingly against independence. A majority of settlers hoped to attract the support of Mexican liberals in a joint effort to depose Santa Anna and restore power to the state governments, including a separate state of Texas.

While holding out the possibility of compromise, the Texans prepared for war. The provisional government elected Sam Houston, a former Tennessee governor, to lead whatever forces he could muster. Then in early 1836, a band of three hundred to five hundred Texans captured Mexico’s military headquarters in San Antonio. The Texas revolution was under way.

Soon the ominous news reached Texas that Santa Anna himself was marching north with seven thousand soldiers to crush the revolt. In actuality, Santa Anna’s army was not particularly impressive; it was filled with raw recruits and included many Maya Indians who spoke and understood little Spanish. When Houston learned that Santa Anna’s initial goal was to recapture San Antonio, he ordered the city abandoned. But Texas rebels decided to defend the town and made their
stand at an abandoned mission, the Alamo.

In this selection, Mier y Terán reports on the situation in Texas eight years before the Revolution.

...As one covers the distance from Béjar to this town, he will note that Mexican influence is proportionately diminished until on arriving in this place he will see that it is almost nothing. And indeed, whence could such influence come? Hardly from superior numbers in population, since the ratio of Mexicans to foreigners is one to ten; certainly not from the superior character of the Mexican population, for exactly the opposite is true, the Mexicans of this town comprising what in all countries is called the lowest class—the very poor and very ignorant. The naturalized North Americans in the town maintain an English school, and send their children north for further education; the poor Mexicans not only do not have sufficient means to establish schools, but they are not of the type that take any thought for the improvement of its public institutions or the betterment of its degraded condition. Neither are there civil authorities or magistrates; one insignificant little man—not to say more—who is called an alcalde, and an ayuntamiento that does not convene once in a lifetime is the most that we have here at this important point on our frontier; yet, wherever I have looked, in the short time that I have been here, I have witnessed grave occurrences, both political and judicial. It would cause you the same chagrin that it has caused me to see the opinion that is held of our nation by these foreign colonists, since, with the exception of some few who have journeyed to our capital, they know no other Mexicans than the inhabitants about here, and excepting the authorities necessary to any form of society, the said inhabitants are the most ignorant of Negroes and Indians, among whom I pass for a man of culture. Thus, I tell myself that it could not be otherwise than that from such a state of affairs should arise an antagonism between the Mexicans and foreigners, which is not the least of the smoldering fires which I have discovered. Therefore, I am warning you to take timely measures. Texas could throw the whole nation into revolution.

The colonists murmur against the political disorganization of the frontier, and the Mexicans complain of the superiority and better education of the colonists; the colonists find it unendurable that they must go three hundred leagues to lodge a complaint against the petty pickpocketing that they suffer from a venal and ignorant alcalde, and the Mexicans with no knowledge of the laws of their own country nor those regulating colonization, set themselves against the foreigners, deliberately setting nets to deprive them of the right of franchise and to exclude them from the ayuntamiento. Meanwhile, the incoming stream of new settlers is unceasing; the first news of these comes by discovering them on land.
already under cultivation, where they have been located for many months; the old inhabitants set up a claim to the property, basing their titles of doubtful priority, and for which there are no records, on a law of the Spanish government; and thus arises a lawsuit in which the alcalde has a chance to come out with some money. In this state of affairs, the town where there are no magistrates is the one in which lawsuits abound, and it is at once evident that in Nacogdoches and its vicinity, being most distant from the seat of the general government, the primitive order of things should take its course, which is to say that this section is being settled up without the consent of anybody....

In spite of the enmity that usually exists between the Mexicans and the foreigners, there is a most evident uniformity of opinion on one point, namely the separation of Texas from Coahuila and its organization into a territory of the federal government. This idea, which was conceived by some of the colonists who are above the average, has become general among the people and does not fail to cause considerable discussion. In explaining the reasons assigned by them for this demand, I shall do no more than relate what I have heard with no addition of my own conclusions, and I frankly state that I have been commissioned by some of the colonists to explain to you their motives, notwithstanding the fact that I should have done so anyway in the fulfillment of my duty.

They claim that Texas in its present condition of a colony is an expense, since it is not a sufficiently prosperous section to contribute to the revenues of the state administration; and since it is such a charge it ought not to be imposed upon a state as poor as Coahuila, which has not the means of defraying the expenses of the corps of political and judicial officers necessary for the maintenance of peace and order. Furthermore, it is impracticable that recourse in all matters should be had to a state capital so distant and separated from this section by deserts infected by hostile savages. Again, their interests are very different from those of the other sections, and because of this they should be governed by a separate territorial government, having learned by experience that the mixing of their affairs with those of Coahuila brings about friction. The native inhabitants of Texas add to the above other reasons which indicate an aversion for the inhabitants of Coahuila; also the authority of the comandante and the collection of taxes is disputed....

The whole population here is a mixture of strange and incoherent parts without parallel in our federation: numerous tribes of Indians, now at peace, but armed and at any moment ready for war, whose steps toward civilization should be taken under the close supervision of a strong and
intelligent government; colonists of another people, more progressive and better informed than the Mexican inhabitants, but also more shrewd and unruly; among these foreigners are fugitives from justice, honest laborers, vagabonds and criminals, but honorable and dishonorable alike travel with their political constitution in their pockets, demanding the privileges, authority and officers which such a constitution guarantees.

Anglo-Mexican Relations in Texas

A Member of the Tejano Elite

In this selection, a member of the Tejano elite favors Anglo-American immigration into Texas.

What shall we say of the law of April 6, 1830? It absolutely prohibits immigrants from North American coming into Texas, but there are not enough troops to enforce it; so the result is that desirable immigrants are kept out because they will not violate the law, while the undesirable, having nothing to lose, come in freely. The industrious, honest North American settlers have made great improvements in the past seven or eight years. They have raised cotton and cane and erected gins and sawmills. Their industry has made them comfortable and independent, while the Mexican settlements, depending on the pay of the soldiers among them for money, have lagged far behind. Among the Mexican settlements even the miserable manufacture of blankets, hats and shoes has never been established, and we must buy them either from foreigners or from the interior, 200 or 300 leagues distant. We have had a loom in Bexar for two years, but the inhabitants of Goliad and Nacogdoches know nothing of this ingenious machine, nor even how to make a sombrero.

The advantages of liberal North American immigration are innumerable: (1) The colonists would afford a source of supply for the native inhabitants. (2) They would protect the interior from Indian invasions. (3) They would develop roads and commerce to New Orleans and New Mexico. (4) Moreover, the ideas of government held by North Americans are in general better adapted to those of the Mexicans than are the ideas of European immigrants.

The Texas Revolution: A Conflict of Cultures?

José María Sánchez

During the Texas Revolution, Tejanos faced a test of conflicting loyalties: whether to fight for independence with Texas Anglos, or to side with General Antonio López de Santa Anna. Gregorio Esparza, a Tejano, was one of 183 Texans who died defending the Alamo. His brother Francisco was in the victorious Mexican army. Families, like the Esparzas, were split by the fight for Texas independence.

Was the Texas Revolution essentially a conflict of cultures? The answer is ambiguous. Anglo-Texans provided most of the leadership for the revolution. Some Anglo-Texans, including Stephen Austin, made statements that suggest deep ethnic hostility. In 1836, Austin wrote that the conflict in Texas pitted "a mongrel Spanish-Indian and Negro race, against civilization and the Anglo-American race." But a significant number of Tejanos took an active role in the Texas Revolution. The Texans who captured San Antonio in 1835 included 160 Tejanos and seven Tejanos died defending the Alamo. Many elite Tejanos, who regarded slave-grown cotton as the key to the region’s prosperity, opposed Mexico's 1829 decree prohibiting slavery. They also favored repeal of an 1830 law forbidding further immigration from the United States, and wanted improvements in the court system, lower tariffs, and separation from Coahuila.

Among the rebel Tejanos was Juan Seguin. Seguin, the son of a wealthy rancher, recruited a company of Tejano volunteers which helped defend the Alamo. During the siege of the former mission, Seguin and some of his men went to look for reinforcements. Later he did essential service harassing and delaying Santa Anna's army, which gave Sam Houston time to gather reinforcements from the southern United States. He served as mayor of San Antonio until 1842, when Anglos accused him of supporting a Mexican invasion of Texas. He was forced to flee to Mexico, having become "a foreigner in my native land."

Another rebel was Tejano Gregorio Esparza, who died defending the Alamo. His brother Francisco was in the victorious Mexican army. Families, like the Esparzas, were split by the fight for Texas independence.

After Texas secured its independence in 1836, and especially after two failed Mexican invasions of Texas in 1842, anti-Mexican sentiment soared. Anglo-Texans threatened to banish or imprison all Tejanos unless Mexico accepted the Rio Grande River as the southern border of Texas.

This selection examines the attitudes of the Tejanos and
Anglo-Texans, *eight years prior to the Revolution* It is excerpted from a journal kept by José María Sánchez, who served on a Mexican government directorate commissioned in 1827 to survey the boundary between Texas and Louisiana.

The Americans from the north have taken possession of practically all the eastern part of Texas, in most cases without the permission of the authorities. They immigrate constantly, finding no one to prevent them, and take possession of the sitio [site] that best suits them without either asking leave or going through any formality other than that of building their homes. Thus the majority of inhabitants in the Department are North Americans, the Mexican population being reduced to only Béjar, Nacogdoches, and La Bahía del Espíritu Santo, wretched settlements that between them do not number three thousand inhabitants, and the new village of Gudalupe Victoria that has scarcely more than seventy settlers. The government of the state, with its seat at Saltillo, that should watch over the preservation of its most precious and interesting departments, taking measures to prevent its being stolen by foreign hands, is the one that knows the least not only about the actual conditions, but even about its territory.... Repeated and urgent appeals have been made to the Supreme Government of the federation regarding the imminent danger in which this interesting Department is becoming the prize of the ambitious North Americans, but never has it taken any measures that may be called conclusive....

The Americans from the North, at least the great part of those I have seen, eat only salted meat, bread made by themselves out of corn meal, coffee, and homemade cheese. To these the greater part...add strong liquor, for they are in general, in my opinion, lazy people of vicious character. Some of them cultivate their small farms by planting corn; but this task they usually entrust to their Negro slaves, whom they treat with considerable harshness.