

The Siege & Battle of the Alamo

It is often difficult for visitors who come to the Alamo to imagine that a historic battle took place here. The buildings and streets hide one of the nation's most important battlefields. I'd like to take you back to that time when the Alamo was a Texian fort deep in Mexican Texas. Hopefully when I've finished you will have a better understanding of why so many people have a feeling of reverence for the Alamo and the men who died here.

Texas was in revolt 1836. Within months of General Antonio López de Santa Anna's becoming president in 1833, he instructed the Mexican Congress to throw out the Federal Constitution and established a Centralist government with himself as its leader. While Santa Anna proclaimed himself the "Napoleon of the West," his opponents had other names for him like tyrant, despot, and dictator.

Most Anglo-Texans, or Texians as they were called, had tried to support the Mexican government after coming to Texas. Accepting Mexican citizenship and the Roman Catholic religion seemed small concessions for the chance to purchase land for 12 cents an acre. For the Mexican government, the plan to colonize Texas with Americans actually proved too successful when an 1829 census revealed that Texians outnumbered Tejanos, or Mexican-Texans, nearly ten to one.

Distrust grew on both sides. Many Texians believed themselves underrepresented in Mexico City and asked for separate statehood from Coahuila. Mexican officials saw this as a prelude to independence and began to crack down on Texas, strengthening military garrisons at key towns. Several Mexican states, with governors who believed in federalism, rose up in revolt. In the spring of 1835, Santa Anna led his centralist army to Zacatecas where he defeated the rebels there and allowed his troops to plunder the capital. He next turned his attention toward Texas.

Texians were divided over what course of action to pursue. Some wanted to restore the Federal Constitution of 1824. Others, however, favored independence. When a small group of Texians led by William B. Travis captured the centralist garrison at Anahuac in July of 1835, Santa Anna ordered their arrest. He also sent reinforcements to Texas, including an army under his brother-in-law, General Martín Perfecto de Cos.

Events soon reached the point of no return. The opening shots of the Texas Revolution were fired on October 2, 1835, near the town of Gonzales. Mexican soldiers had been sent there to seize a small cannon given to the colonists by the government. The colonists refused to give it up and, flying a homemade flag with the words "Come and Take It," fired on the soldiers. Within days another group of colonists captured the centralist garrison at Goliad. Soon, an army of volunteers marched on San Antonio, held by General Cos' men. Many colonists joined this gathering of volunteers outside San Antonio. Throughout the rest of October and November a standoff existed between the Texians and Cos.

But reinforcements had already started to arrive from the United States in the form of uniformed companies of volunteers like the New Orleans Greys. Together with the colonists who stayed, they attacked Cos' entrenched army of nearly 600 men, even though outnumbered two to one. House-to-house fighting continued for several days as the Texians drove Cos' men from their fortified positions. The arrival of 600 more government troops failed to turn the tide of the battle. Finally, on December 10, the Mexican general agreed to surrender. The victory cost the Texians about 30 killed and wounded in comparison to about 150 casualties for the government troops.

The Texians occupied San Antonio following Cos' retreat, including the former mission known as the Alamo. Shortly after the start of the new year, the Texian commander of the post, Colonel James C. Neill, informed the Provisional Government of Texas that most of the colonists and volunteers had either gone home or left for other campaigns and that only 104 men remained. Neill estimated at least 300 were needed just to place the site in a defensible condition. Sam Houston, the commander of the Texian Army, sent James Bowie, a respected Texian leader and a resident of San Antonio, to investigate the situation. Bowie reported to Governor Henry Smith that centralist troops were on their way back to Texas and requested reinforcements right away. Wrote Bowie, "Colonel Neill and myself have come to the solemn resolution that we would rather die in these ditches than give up this post to the enemy." Governor Smith ordered newly commissioned Lieutenant Colonel William B. Travis to assist Neill. On February 2, Travis entered the walls of the Alamo at the head of a 30-man detachment. The addition of Bowie's and Travis' men raised the garrison to at least 150. On February 14, Colonel Neill left the Alamo on a leave of absence to visit his family, leaving Travis and Bowie to share command of the fort.

The stage was set for the historic Battle of the Alamo. Santa Anna was already on his way to Texas at the head of a large army and on February 23, he arrived in San Antonio. The Texians fell back to the Alamo. Santa Anna demanded the rebels surrender immediately and ordered a red flag - signifying that no prisoners would be taken - flown from the bell tower at San Fernando. Travis responded by firing a cannon in defiance. Both sides settled down for a siege.

Mexican cannons bombarded the Alamo for the next two weeks. Travis assumed overall command on the second day of the siege after sickness confined Bowie to his bed. Travis sent couriers to Governor Smith and the Provisional Government asking for reinforcements and supplies. But help was slow in coming. Colonel James W. Fannin, the Texian commander at Goliad, attempted to aid the Alamo but a column of government troops was approaching his own area. Early on the morning of March 1, however, thirty-two men from Gonzales slipped through the Mexican lines, bringing the number of defenders to around 200. The arrival of government reinforcements brought Santa Anna's force to nearly 3000.

The siege ended on March 6, 1836. Santa Anna ordered the assault to take place before daybreak when the garrison, worn down by twelve days of cannon fire, would most likely be resting. The main attack came from the north and was driven back twice before Santa Anna's troops forced their way over the wall. To the south, another battalion climbed over the walls of the southwest bastion. With the compound filling with soldiers, the defenders fell back to the Long Barrack from where they continued to resist. Troops in the compound, however, turned the Texians' own artillery on the Long Barrack and church. With the doors of the buildings blown open, Santa Anna's troops rushed in, bayoneting everyone they found still alive. Shortly after sunrise it was all over, but at a cost of nearly 600 Mexican dead and wounded. One officer was reportedly overheard saying, "Another such victory will ruin us."

At least 14 women and children found in the compound were spared by Santa Anna's troops. The soldiers also found Joe, a slave belonging to Travis, in one of the rooms. Susanna Dickinson was released and sent to Gonzales to warn other Texians to lay down their weapons or faced the same fate that had befallen the Alamo garrison. The Alamo's fall, combined with the execution more than 300 of Fannin's command at Goliad on Palm Sunday, convinced many Texians that it would be as Travis had written, a war in which the outcome could only be "Victory or Death."

In the weeks following the battle, Sam Houston led the Texians towards the Louisiana border, falling back before the advancing armies of Santa Anna. Then he halted and turned to face his enemy. On the afternoon of April 21, Houston attacked Santa Anna's camp on the bank of the San Jacinto River. The fighting was brutal as the Texians crying "Remember the Alamo," "Remember Goliad," struck down soldier after soldier. Mexican losses were staggering as Texians sought revenge: nearly 630 of Santa Anna's troops were killed compared to only 9 Texian dead. The next day the victory was made complete when Santa Anna was captured and brought to Houston. The Texian victory at San Jacinto gave real meaning to the Declaration of Independence that delegates at Washington-on-the-Brazos had signed on March 2. For the next ten years Texas would be an independent nation, the Republic of Texas. The Alamo had been an important part of that struggle.

Much of the interest in the battle focuses on the men of the Alamo, who although greatly outnumbered, refused to give up their fight. You will see the names of 189 defenders listed here at various places on the Alamo grounds. Most of you are familiar with William B. Travis, James Bowie and the famous frontiersman and former Congressman David Crockett. Some of the defenders like Captain Almeron Dickinson had lived in Texas for several years, either as farmers, craftsmen, or businessmen. Others, like Lieutenant James Butler Bonham, had journeyed to Texas after the revolution erupted, coming to join the ranks of the Texian Army. Still some were like Gregorio Esparza, Tejanos who were opposed to Santa Anna. Seven were doctors. Six were lawyers. Many were veterans of the skirmish at Gonzales and battle for San Antonio. All died on the morning of March 6 in the fight against Santa Anna's centralist regime.

A popular legend has come to sum up essence of the battle. It maintains that as the siege drew to a close, Colonel Travis gathered his command to tell them they could expect no more help and that to stay meant certain death. He drew a line on the ground with his sword and then asked all those willing to stay and fight to cross over and join him. According to the legend, all but one did. True or not, this story reflects the self-sacrifice that the Alamo has come to symbolize. People around the world recognize the courage displayed by the Alamo defenders. This is why, while on this hallowed ground, the Daughters of the Republic of Texas ask you to remember the Alamo as a place where brave men died in the defense of Liberty.