

Harry Arthur McArdle - Painter

San Antonio, Texas

### **Explanatory notes on "Dawn at the Alamo"**

The Alamo Mission defended by 182 Texans, was, after ten days and nights bombardment captured by the Mexican Army of 4,000 men, under the dictator Santa Anna; on the morning of the 6th of March 1836.

There was not one defendant left living. One woman and her baby of Caucasian race, with some Mexican women and children were all that escaped from that "hell of slaughter".

In regard to the view; the spectator is supposed to be where the west pavement of Alamo Plaza is now — a little South of Houston Street — and looking southeast, from which position the Alamo Church is seen as presented in the picture.

A portion being hidden by what is now a warehouse (Hugo & Schmeltzers.) but was then the Convent: in an upper room of which Bowie was killed on his cot, where he was dying of pneumonia.

Although other artists had depicted famous scenes from the Alamo or the fort itself, Henry McArdle was the first to attempt to capture the entire battle scene on one canvas.

He painted his first version of Dawn at the Alamo in 1875. The painting was critically acclaimed but could not find a buyer. McArdle lent the painting to the state of Texas, along with another large battle canvas, Lee at the Wilderness, in hopes that the state would eventually purchase the paintings. Unfortunately, they both were destroyed in the Capitol fire of 1881.

Recreating Dawn at the Alamo became something of an obsession for the artist. McArdle had twin, and sometimes conflicting aims for Dawn at the Alamo: to inspire patriotism, and to provide a historically accurate visual depiction of the battle. So while he labored intensively to research technical information about the fortifications, weapons, uniforms, and other details, **he also intentionally departed from the historical record to make the painting more dramatic and symbolic.**

Amidst the blood and chaos of the scene, the "Big Three" heroes of the Alamo are prominently depicted. On the lower left, **Jim Bowie** can be found rising from his sick bed to use his famed knife. On the lower right, **David Crockett** rushes into the fray, though not wearing his trademark coonskin cap and buckskins as in the 1875 version. The most significant change from the 1875 version was in the role of **William B. Travis**. In the second Dawn at the Alamo, McArdle greatly enhanced the physical size of Travis to make him the dominant figure in the painting.

The world famous "Victory or Death" letter was penned by Lt. Col. William Barrett Travis while besieged within the Alamo by the Mexican army in San Antonio de Bexar. The Travis letter is universally regarded as one of the most heroic letters ever written. Facing almost certain death, Travis vowed never to surrender or retreat and to "die like a soldier who never forgets what is due to his own honor & that of his country — **Victory or Death.**"

The Travis letter is dated February 24, 1836. Some have mistakenly referred to this as Travis' last letter from the Alamo. He wrote at least four more letters. Travis wrote a letter to General Sam Houston dated February 25, 1836 and three letters dated March 3, 1836. One of Travis' letters dated March 3, 1836 which urgently requested aid for the Alamo was received by the Convention at Washington, Texas on March 6, 1836. The delegates to the Convention at Washington had declared the independence of Texas four days before on March 2, 1836.

Travis never did surrender or retreat. After a thirteen day siege by thousands of Mexican soldiers under the command of Mexican President Antonio Lopez de Santa Anna, the Alamo fell on March 6, 1836. All of the Alamo's 189 defenders, including William Barrett Travis, were killed. The country he and the others died for, the Republic of Texas, was only four days old.

The original "Victory or Death" letter written by William Barrett Travis on February 24, 1836 is located in the Texas State Library and Archives in Austin, Texas.

Use this website to read more about the painting: <https://www.tsl.texas.gov/mcardle/alamo/alamo10-01.html>

The following is the "basic" information you need to cover when giving your tour. If you don't know about the Battle of the Alamo, please research on your own.



Blood-red flag, symbol of "no quarter" = take no prisoners.

Mexican Flag of the Constitution of 1824

William B. Travis – "Victory or Death." The artist wanted him to be the dominant figure in the painting.

Jim Bowie can be found "rising from his sick bed" to use his famed knife (Bowie Knife). That is why looks like a ghost – he was not at the actual battle. He was sick in bed.

Davy Crockett – using "Ol' Betsy" as a weapon. Notice not wearing coonskin cap.

Susanna Dickenson with child "Babe of the Alamo". Symbolizes the heroism of the woman in the Texas Revolution.