

The Texas War of Independence



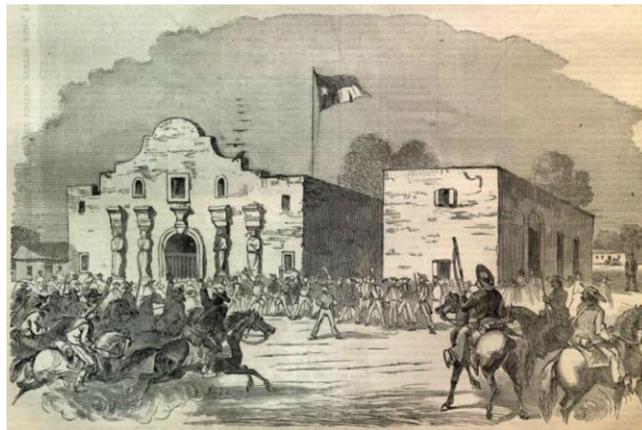
In 1820, Moses Austin, a U.S. citizen, asked the Spanish government in Mexico for permission to settle in sparsely populated Texas. Land was granted, but Austin died soon thereafter, so his son, Stephen F. Austin, took over the project. In 1821, Mexico gained independence from Spain, and Austin negotiated a contract with the new Mexican government that allowed him to lead some 300 families to the Brazos River. Under the terms of the agreement, the settlers were to be Catholics, but Austin mainly brought Protestants and slaves from the southern United States. Other U.S. settlers arrived in succeeding years, and the Americans soon outnumbered the resident Mexicans. In 1826, a conflict between Mexican and American settlers led to the Fredonia Rebellion, and in 1830 the Mexican government took measures to stop the influx of Americans. In 1833, Austin, who sought statehood for Texas in the Mexican federation, was imprisoned after calling on settlers to declare it without the consent of the Mexican congress. He was released in 1835.



Moses and Stephen Austin

In 1834, Santa Anna, a soldier and politician, became dictator of Mexico and sought to crush rebellions in Texas and other areas. In October 1835, Anglo residents of Gonzales, 50 miles east of San Antonio, responded to Santa Anna's demand that they return a cannon loaned for defense against Indian attack by discharging it against the Mexican troops sent to reclaim it. The Mexicans were routed in what is regarded as the first battle of the Texas Revolution. The American settlers set up a provisional state government, and a Texan army under Sam Houston won a series of minor battles in the fall of 1835.

In December, Texas volunteers commanded by Ben Milam drove Mexican troops out of San Antonio and settled in around the Alamo, a mission compound adapted to military purposes around 1800. During the Texas Revolution, a convention of American Texans meets at Washington-on-the-Brazos and declares the independence of Texas from Mexico. The delegates chose David Burnet as provisional president and confirmed Sam Houston as the commander in chief of all Texan forces. The Texans also adopted a constitution that protected the free practice of slavery, which had been prohibited by Mexican law. Meanwhile, in San Antonio, Mexican General Antonio Lopez de Santa Anna's siege of the Alamo continued, and the fort's 185 or so American defenders waited for the final Mexican assault.



Battle of the Alamo

In January 1836, Santa Anna concentrated a force of several thousand men south of the Rio Grande, and Sam Houston ordered the Alamo abandoned. Colonel James Bowie, who arrived at the Alamo on January 19, realized that the fort's captured cannons could not be removed before Santa Anna's arrival, so he remained entrenched with his men. By delaying Santa Anna's forces, he also reasoned, Houston would have more time to raise an army large enough to repulse the Mexicans. On February 2, Bowie and his 30 or so men were joined by a small cavalry company under Colonel William Travis, bringing the total number of Alamo defenders to about 140. One week later, the frontiersman Davy Crockett arrived in command of fourteen Tennessee Mounted Volunteers.

On February 23, Santa Anna and some 3,000 Mexican troops besieged the Alamo, and the former mission was bombarded with cannon and rifle fire for 12 days. On February 24, in the chaos of the siege, Colonel Travis smuggled out a letter that read: "To the People of Texas and All Americans in the World.... I shall never surrender or retreat.... Victory or Death!"

On March 1, the last Texan reinforcements from nearby Gonzales broke through the enemy's lines and into the Alamo, bringing the total defenders to approximately 185. On March 2, the Texas' revolutionary government formally declared its independence from Mexico.

In the early morning of March 6, Santa Anna ordered his troops to storm the Alamo. Travis' artillery decimated the first and then the second Mexican charge, but in just over an hour the Texans were overwhelmed, and the Alamo was taken. Santa Anna had ordered that no prisoners be taken, and all the Texan and American defenders were killed in brutal hand-to-hand fighting. The only survivors of the Alamo were a handful of civilians, mostly women and children. Several hundred of Santa Anna's men died during the siege and storming of the Alamo.

Six weeks later, a large Texan army under Sam Houston surprised Santa Anna's army at San Jacinto. Shouting "Remember the Alamo!" the Texans defeated the Mexicans and captured Santa Anna. The Mexican dictator was forced to recognize Texas' independence and withdrew his forces south of the Rio Grande River.

Texas sought annexation by the United States, but both Mexico and antislavery forces in the United States opposed its admission into the Union. For nearly a decade, Texas existed as an independent republic, and Houston was Texas' first elected president. In 1845, Texas joined the Union as the 28th state, leading to the outbreak of the Mexican-American War.

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