

# Remember the Alamo!



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Henry McArdle's "Dawn at the Alamo" (above) was completed around 1905 after careful research. William Travis is seen on the wall at the right, with Davy Crockett just below him, using his rifle as a club.

## March 6, 1836

**T**HE MISSION OF SAN ANTONIO DE VALERO, later known as the Alamo, was one of the many missions that Spain set up in the Americas to help bring Christianity to the Native Americans. In 1718, the Spanish, who were governing Mexico and colonizing what is now the southwestern portion of the United States, established the settlement of San Antonio de Bejar at the site of present-day San Antonio, Texas. Built on the San Antonio River, the settlement had its own *presidio*, or fort, to protect the settlers from unfriendly Native Americans. The Mission of San Antonio de Valero, a large, strong-walled structure that included the mission church, was built on the other side of the river.

By 1793, the mission had been abandoned. It was occasionally used as a fort, but the *presidio* across the river was a much better fort and still served the people of San Antonio de Bejar. In fact, until the massacre that took place on March 6, 1836, the Alamo was not a place anyone would choose to remember. How did "Remember the Alamo" become such a famous battle cry?

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## An Invitation from Mexico

To answer that question, we will have to consider what was going on in Texas in the years before 1836. In 1821, a man named Stephen Austin led a large group of American settlers into Texas, which was then governed by Mexico. Stephen's father had been promised 66,000 acres by the Mexican government, which wanted him to bring 200 families into the region to help develop the land and defend it from hostile Native Americans. But Stephen's father had died before he could do this, so Stephen took over. He led a group of more than 200 families into the land his father had been promised, and for the next two years, he worked with the Mexican government to establish his claim to the land. Finally, in 1823, the Mexican government agreed that if the settlers would pledge allegiance to Mexico and adopt the Roman Catholic religion, they could remain on the land and consider it theirs.

These new settlers were willing to leave the United States for several reasons. Many of them were slaveholders and saw in Texas a chance to farm and grow cotton on very large plantations. Others owned large amounts of money to people back in the States, and the Mexican government had promised to protect them from the people to whom they owed money. Still others thought that Texas was a new frontier where they could start over again on better land and begin a new life. Whatever their reasons, historians believe that approximately 30,000 settlers had moved to Texas in the ten years following Stephen Austin's first colony.

## Mexico Grows Concerned

The Mexican government grew concerned over this fact because such a large number of settlers could be difficult to control. In 1830, the Mexican congress passed laws restricting further immigration. The border was officially closed. But the area was too large to be patrolled, and new settlers continued to arrive.



Stephen Austin, known as the Father of Texas, brought 200 families to the area in 1825.

The Lyda Hill Texas Collection of Photographs in Carol M. Highsmith's America Project, Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division.



**Martin del Castillo y Cos**

The Mexican government resented the fact that it couldn't control the flood of immigrants. Many border skirmishes took place, and the hostility grew between the settlers and the government that was issuing orders from Mexico City.

Antonio Lopez de Santa Anna, who had elected president of Mexico in 1833, seized absolute power in 1834. In the fall of 1835, he sent his brother-in-law, General Martin Cos, into Texas to patrol the border and enforce the immigration laws. He believed the Texians\* were about to rebel against his rule, and he felt it was time to overpower them by force. Under General Cos, Mexican soldiers moved into settlements and occupied towns, perhaps hoping that a show of force would ward off revolution. But this was not to be.

### **Texians Revolt**

The Texians responded by arming themselves, and defied the soldiers openly. On October 2, 1835, in a little town east of San Antonio, called Gonzales, the Mexicans demanded the surrender of a cannon. The Texians fired the cannon in response, and the Mexicans were forced to retreat. It was a very short battle, but it has since come to be known as “the Lexington of the Texas Revolution” because, like the battle of Lexington in our War for Independence, it marked the beginning of open revolt.

The Texas settlers now set against the vast forces of Santa Anna's army. The United States government would send no official aid because at that time, it did not want to interfere in Mexican affairs. Some southern states secretly sent aid because they wanted to help their slaveholding neighbors, but their help was not enough to change the odds. Even though the Texians won a decisive victory at San Antonio

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\*The word Texian was used until after Texas became a republic in 1836. At that time, it was changed to Texan.



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**Susanna Dickinson**  
(1814–1883)

was sent by Santa Anna to Sam Houston bearing news of the massacre at the Alamo.

in December of 1835, (General Cos surrendered at the Alamo, promising never to fight against Texians again!), the worst battle lay only a few months away.

### A Devastating Defeat

Many different versions have been told describing what took place at the Alamo that following March. It has been difficult for historians to piece together exactly how many defenders and how many Mexicans fought and died. But according to at least one source, 188 defenders, including Davy Crockett, William Travis, and James Bowie, lost their lives in the ninety-minute battle. The same source estimates that anywhere from 1,800 to 2,400 Mexican soldiers attacked the Alamo under Santa Anna's command.

One survivor, Susanna Dickinson, was sent by Santa Anna to be his "messenger of defeat." She carried the news of the massacre to Sam Houston and presented him with a letter from Santa Anna, who requested that the Texians return to their homes and submit to his rule.

The legend of the Alamo is one of heroism and glory. It is a story of brave men who died so that others could be free. But it is important to remember that legends are popular versions of stories that are handed down from earlier times.

As historians, we should look beyond the legend. The battle at the Alamo and the Texas Revolution were fought for several reasons. Some wanted Texas to be a self-governing state. Some wanted it to be an independent republic, and some hoped that it would soon become a part of the United States. Many Texas settlers were cotton growers and slaveholders who hoped to profit from the rich Texas soil. The Mexicans under Santa Anna wanted to retain control and develop the land for Mexico. Because it is both legend and history, the story of the battle at the Alamo offers us two interesting views of an important moment from our past.

## *From Colonel Travis' Appeal for Help, 1836*

*In the 1820s, thousands of Americans moved to Mexico for the opportunity to settled on fertile land. Conflict between these settlers and the government of Mexico arose and by the mid-1830s, Texans were fighting for their independence from Mexico. The battle at the Alamo became the most famous event in that revolution. Sam Houston, commander of the Texas army, did not think that the old mission called the Alamo could be held against the Mexican army. But Colonel W. Barret Travis, commander of the Texas defenders, was sure they could hold the Alamo until additional help arrived. No reinforcements arrived because of delays in getting messages through to other Texans. The selection below is the appeal of Colonel Travis to "all Americans" to help.*

February 24, 1836

To the People in Texas and All Americans in the World

Fellow Citizens and Compatriots:

I am besieged by a thousand or more of the Mexicans under Santa Anna. I have sustained a continual bombardment and cannonade for twenty-four hours and have not lost a man. The enemy have demanded a surrender. Otherwise the garrison is to be put to the sword if the fort is taken. I have answered the summons with a cannon shot. Our flag still waves proudly from our walls. *I shall never surrender or retreat.*

I call on you, in the name of Liberty, of Patriotism, and of everything dear to the American character, to come to our aid. The enemy are receiving reinforcements daily. I am determined to sustain myself as long as possible and die like a soldier who never forgets what is due to his own honor and that of his country. *Victory or death!*

W. Barret Travis  
Lieutenant Colonel, Commanding



A portrait of W. B. Travis

Commanding of the Alamo -  
 Copy Sep. 24<sup>th</sup> 1835 -  
 To the People of Texas &  
 all Americans in the world -  
 Fellow Citizens & Compatriots -  
 I am besieged, by a thousand  
 or more of the Mexicans on San  
 Antonio. I have with me  
 a continual Bombardment &  
 cannonade for 24 hours & have  
 not lost a man - The enemy  
 has demanded a surrender at  
 discretion, otherwise the garrison  
 are to be put to the sword, if  
 the fort is taken - I have answered  
 the demand with a cannon  
 shot, & our flag still waves  
 proudly from the wall - I  
 shall never surrender, or retreat.  
 Then, I call on you in the  
 name of Liberty, of patriotism &  
 every thing dear to the American  
 character, to come to our

aid all dispatch - The means of  
 receiving reinforcements daily &  
 with no doubt increase to three or  
 four thousand in four or five days.  
 If this call is neglected, I am deter-  
 mined to sustain myself as long as  
 possible & die like a soldier  
 whose only regret is not to  
 have died with his own  
 country -  
Victory or Death  
 William B. Travis  
 St. Cal. Comdr

When the enemy appeared in sight  
 we had not three barrels of corn -  
 We have since found in several  
 places 80 or 90 bushels & put into  
 the river 20 or 30 head of horses -  
 Travis

Colonel Travis' letter

## From Davy Crockett's Journal, 1836

*Born in 1786 to a Tennessee pioneer family, Davy Crockett joined the Tennessee militia as a young man and fought in the War of 1812. He was also a politician, serving first as a justice of the peace and then in Congress, before moving to Texas in 1835. He was at the Alamo in 1836 during the battle between the Texas army and Santa Anna's Mexican army, and he died on March 6, 1836, when the Alamo fell to the Mexican forces.*

### February 23, 1836

Early this morning the enemy came in sight, marching in regular order, and displaying their strength to the greatest advantage, in order to strike us with terror. But that was no go; they'll find that they have to do with men who will never lay down their arms as long as they can stand on their legs. . . .

We have held a short council of war, and, finding that we should soon be completely surrounded, and overwhelmed by numbers, if we remained in the town, we concluded to withdraw to the fortress of Alamo, and defend it to the last extremity. We accordingly filed off, in good order, having some days before stored all the surplus provisions, arms, and ammunition in the fortress. We have had a large national flag made; it is composed of thirteen stripes, red and white, alternately, on a blue ground with a large white star of five points in the center, and between the points the letters. As soon as all our band . . . had entered and secured the fortress in the best possible manner, we set about raising our flag on the battlements.

### March 3

We have given over all hopes of receiving assistance from Goliad or Refugio. Colonel Travis **harranged** the **garrison**, and concluded by **exhorting** them, in case the enemy should carry the fort, to fight to the last gasp, and render their victory even more serious to them than to us. This was followed by three cheers.

**harranged:** argued strongly

**garrison:** the men in an army post

**exhorting:** urging with a strong argument

## Davy Crockett: Legendary Hero

Davy Crockett was both a real person and a larger-than-life Western legend. While Crockett was an expert frontiersman as well as a politician, he would most likely not be widely remembered except for a series of dime novels and articles written about him. They told wild tall tales about his frontier life. Some of earlier stories were cultivated by Crockett as a way to win votes during political elections. But soon stories about Davy Crockett were part of the folklore of the Wild West. He became a frontier superhero who could leap across rivers, wrestle bears, and fight wildcats, as well as being a hero of the Alamo. These stories did not always reflect his true personality and character as an excellent frontiersman, a good family man, and a fair politician and leader. The legends, and the later movies and television shows that continued them, would overshadow the real man, who was patriotic, courageous, and kind.



The title page from Davy Crockett's Almanack (1836), shows Crockett wading the Mississippi River on stilts.





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*American artist John Gadsby Chapman painted this portrait of frontiersman Davy Crockett after his death defending the Alamo.*