

Anahuac, June 1832: An Episode in Mexico's Federalist Wars

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The traditional story of the 1832 disturbance at Anahuac revolves around two personalities: Juan Davis Bradburn and William B. Travis. The former was a Kentuckian in the



Portrait of William Barret Travis by McArdle, The McArdle Notebooks, Archives and Information Services Division, Texas State Library and Archives Commission.

service of the Mexican government and the later was a native of South Carolina who had recently immigrated to Texas from Alabama. Bradburn, a colonel in the Mexican Army in command of Fort Anahuac, located close to where the Trinity River emptied into Galveston Bay, used his power to harass the colonists by interfering with their trade and right to self-government. Travis, a young lawyer, incurred Bradburn's wrath by challenging the

colonel's authority. The clash between the two men resulted in what could easily have become a major revolt if Mexican officials had not intervened on the behalf of the colonists and removed

Bradburn from command, and from Texas. In this interpretation of the clash, the colonists had stood up to a petty tyrant and won.

As in most historical incidents, the events that occurred in June 1832 were more complex than the above explanation. Mexico, which had opened Texas to immigration from the United States, determined that the policies enacted to regulate the flow of foreigners were not being enforced. While some *empresarios*, such as Stephen F. Austin, attempted to screen those arriving to make sure they would become responsible and law-abiding colonists, others did not. Moreover, an increasing number of Americans had begun to arrive on their own, lured by rumors of free land. Contrary to regulation, colonists were settling along the coast, which enabled them

to carry on a lucrative illicit trade. Officials in Mexico City clearly saw that Texas was in danger of becoming Americanized. If the trend continued, what would stop these foreigners, who appeared not to value Mexican citizenship and the other benefits given to them, from attempting to reunite with the country of their birth and taking Texas with them?

Mexico's concern over Texas' future resulted in the passage of the Law of April 6, 1830. The decree closed Texas to immigration by Americans. Mexican families were encouraged to move to Texas from other states within the federal republic. Troops were sent to Texas with orders to build additional forts in order to provide a visible government presence and help intercept smuggled goods coming from the coast and across the Louisiana border. Moreover, the seven year grace period on no taxes on trade was coming to an end and arrangements were made for the establishment of custom houses and tax agents. These and other steps were intended to bring Texas back under Mexican control.

Mexico's ongoing political struggle between the states' rights oriented Federalist and the nationalistic Centralists even reached the Department of Texas in the state of *Coahuila y Tejas*. Although the national government had laid out the basic framework of colonization, it left it to the states to determine its own laws on immigration. A state official, José Francisco Madero, arrived in 1831 to issue land titles to colonists. He also authorized the founding of a small settlement called Liberty, located on the Trinity River several miles above its mouth. Bradburn, acting as an agent of the Centralist administration then in power, voided Madero's actions, claiming the recent national decree superseded state law. Later that year, George Fisher, a Hungarian in the service of the national government, arrived to assist Bradburn in regulating trade and collecting taxes. Resentment against these officials grew among the colonists, who viewed the new rules, enforced in part by convict-soldiers assigned to Bradburn, as examples of

tyranny. Although Austin repeatedly warned the colonists not to take part in Mexico's political struggles, their republican upbringing caused many of them to side with the Federalists.

In June 1832, the situation on the gulf erupted in hostilities. The spark was Bradburn's arrest of two local attorneys, Patrick Jack and William Barret Travis. With no jail at hand, the colonel had his prisoners placed in a brick kiln inside Fort Anahuac. Civil authorities demanded the men's release and captured nineteen Mexican soldiers to hold until Bradburn met their demands. Although face-to-face meetings between Bradburn and the colonists failed to break the stalemate, the time spent talking allowed both sides to send for help. Colonists in the gulf coast region vowed to take the fort by force if necessary. On June 26, 1832, an engagement occurred between the Mexican garrison at Fort Velasco, located near the mouth of the Brazos River, and Texan reinforcements on their way to Anahuac. Known as the Battle of Velasco, the combined casualties from the fight totaled 12 killed and 30 wounded, with losses roughly equal on each side. Outnumbered and surrounded, however, Col. Domingo de Ugartechea surrendered the fort. More bloodshed was avoided when Col. José de las Piedras arrived from Nacogdoches, removed Bradburn command, and released Jack and Travis.

Two weeks earlier, on June 13, 1832, a delegation of colonists had met on Turtle Bayou to discuss the situation. Certainly any hostile action against government officials, especially the military, would have to be explained satisfactorily if they were to escape punishment. They couched their difficulties with Bradburn in the context of the ongoing rivalry between the Federalists and the Centralists. In their argument they had an unlikely ally: General Antonio López de Santa Anna. A barracks revolt, begun at Vera Cruz in January, had called on the general to "preserve the federal constitution and the laws." Accepting leadership of the movement, Santa Anna began a campaign to force President Anastasio Bustamante, a Centralist,

from office. The colonists knew of Santa Anna's revolt and supported it. Therefore, the delegates penned a document known as the Turtle Bayou Resolutions in which they contended that their actions against the Centralists and in favor of Santa Anna.

Mexican authorities had been concerned with events in Texas. On July 16, 1832, General José Antonio Mexía arrived off the mouth of the Brazos River. He arrived with a contingent of soldiers to investigate the cause of the disturbance and take action if needed. A more fortunate choice of inspector could not have been made of the Texans. Mexía, a staunch Federalist and Santa Anna supporter, accepted the Texans' explanation of events and greeted them as fellow republicans. On August 14, 1832, President Bustamante stepped down, clearing the way to Santa Anna's ascendancy to the presidency.



General Jose Antonio Mexia
(1790-1839) by Antonio Serrano.
UC Berkeley, Bancroft Library.

On October 17, 1832, *The (Brazoria) Constitutional Advocate* reported the following news: “*From Matagorda. On the reception of the news at Matagorda, of the arrival of Col. S. F. Austin, with four armed vessels off the Brazos bar, having on board four hundred troops from the army of Santa Anna, sent to take possession of the forts in Texas & arrest the progress of military domination amongst us, a few individuals who had casually met on this occasion, drank the following toasts.*”

“*By Benjamin Beale. Austin's colony—While the sun continues to shine, the dew's of Heaven to descend upon her fertile soil, may her free born citizens never be compelled to crouch.*”

By Seth Ingram. The tree of liberty—Now under the operation of the pruning hook of Gen. Santa Anna; may it hereafter bloom more beautifully, and bear fruit more abundantly.

By Ira Ingram. The constitution and laws of the Mexican federation—May the return to an unawed [sic], pure and enlightened administration, promised by present appearances, be speedily realized and long enjoyed; these we have sworn to support, by them we will stand, or with them fall.

By S. Hoit. A. C. Buckner, and others who recently fell in defence [sic] of civil liberty—they will long, long live in the hearts of their countrymen.

By D. Decrow. Genl. Santa Anna—May the close of his political existence be similar to that of the great Washington, shroaded [sic] in glory.

By N. B. Williams. Genl. Santa Anna—The hero of constitutional liberty, and proscribed patriot under the shackles of tyranny; may the sun of his political glory sit in the ocean of freedom, and the herald to its enemies throughout the habitable globe.

By Jas. Norton. The Mexican Constitution—Lately smothered in the dark and lowering clouds of anarchy and confusion—like a phoenix for the ashes of despotism it hath arisen; may its benign and cheering influence be proclaimed by the heralds of freedom throughout the Mexican States.

By S. Love. May the laws of the nation be our guide, and the constitution our polar star.

By J. Jameson. The citizens of Austin's colony—May they cordially unite, and remain so forever.

By J. Cummins. To the citizens of Texas—May they be united in support of the constitution and laws.

By W. Clapp. The memory of the brave men who recently fell in defence [sic] of civil rights—may it long be cherished in the hearts of their countrymen.

By P. Kinsey. Stephen F. Austin—His timely arrival in the Colonies shows him to be our true friend in times of need.

By W. Barch. The law of the 6th of April, 1830—May it fall by its own hand on the tomb of its own father, and of Iturbide.”

The colonists clearly thought the events of June 1832 had worked out in their favor and that they had a benefactor in Santa Anna.

References

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