

Alamo Myths and Misconceptions

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The story of the Alamo is known around the world. Like all legendary events, however, myths and misconceptions have sprung up that many people now take as fact. However, historical interpretation must be based on evidence. In the cases below, the evidence is either lacking or contradictory. Take a look at the following instances where evidence reveals some of the better known points of the Alamo story deserve updating.

- **The winter of 1836 was one of the coldest in Texas history.**

The idea has somehow developed that 1836 was one of the coldest winters in Texas history. One fact that reinforces this notion is that the Mexican Army encountered a freak blizzard in route to Texas that began on the evening of February 13 and continued throughout the next day. The weather during this storm was severe enough to kill horses, mules, men, and camp followers.¹ The snowstorm, however, did not extend into Texas.

Two observers in Texas in 1836, William Fairfax Gray and Colonel Juan Almonte, both kept records of the weather in their journals. From their entries information can be gathered that reveals the weather at the time of the battle. A cold front arrived on the evening of February 25 that dropped the temperatures into the 30s. Prior to that, however, it had been "shirt sleeve" weather. It remained cold and rainy but warmed to nearly 60 degrees (F) on February 29. That night, a second cold front swept the region. The temperature gradually warmed over the next few days. It remained cool on March 6, but by March 8 Gray proclaimed "Fine weather." Any Texan should recognize this as a description of typical Texas weather.

- **The Battle of the Alamo bought time for Sam Houston to build his army.**

The notion that the men of the Alamo died buying time for Sam Houston to build an army is well-entrenched in Alamo lore, but a review of Houston's activities shows it to be unfounded. On November 12, 1835, the Consultation (the provisional government of Texas) appointed Sam Houston Commanding-General of the Texas Army. His authority, however, extended over the regular army, leaving him unable to legally issue orders to the volunteers already in the field.² Houston dispatched recruiters to raise the regular army as well as agents to acquire arms, uniforms, and other supplies. With no troops to command, Houston received a furlough on January 28 in order to take care of personal business. He spent part of his leave conducting negotiations with the Cherokee Indians.³ With a treaty successfully concluded, Houston rode to Washington-on-the-Brazos, where he served as a delegate to the constitutional convention, remaining there until March 6.⁴ During his stay, the new government reconfirmed his appointment as commanding-general of the Texas Army, giving him control over all troops - regulars and volunteers. Houston arrived at Gonzales on March 11, finding there a relief expedition ready to march to San Antonio. Learning that the Alamo had fallen, though, Houston assumed command of this force and started the retreat eastward.

- **The men at the Alamo died not knowing that Texas had declared its independence.**

It is true that the Alamo garrison most likely died unaware that the delegates at the constitutional convention at Washington-on-the-Brazos had adopted a Declaration of Independence on March 2, 1836. Nevertheless, the Alamo garrison was in favor of

independence and fully expected the delegates to secede from Mexico. The garrison had even sent its own delegates to the convention with instructions to vote for independence. Travis addressed the issue of independence in a letter sent from the Alamo on March 3, 1836:

"Let the Convention go on and make a declaration of independence, and we will then understand, and the world will understand, what we are fighting for. If independence is not declared, I shall lay down my arms, and so will the men under my command."

Thus, Texas' Declaration of Independence would not have surprised them - it was what they desired and expected.⁵

- **There were no survivors.**

"Thermopylae had her messenger of defeat; the Alamo had none."⁶ This famous quote conveys the notion that none survived the Battle of the Alamo. It is true that nearly all of the Texans under arms inside the fort were killed in the March 6, 1836, attack. However, nearly twenty women and children, who experienced the twelve days of siege leading to the final assault, were spared and allowed to return to their homes. The survivors also included Joe, the slave of William B. Travis. The best known Alamo survivor, Susanna Dickinson, was sent to Gonzales by Santa Anna with a warning to the Texans that the same fate awaited them if they continued their revolt.⁷

- **The only Texans who rallied to the aid of the Alamo were 32 men from Gonzales.**

One question frequently asked about the Battle of the Alamo is why did more Texans not answer Travis' poignant pleas for help. The arrival of the Gonzales Ranging Company on the morning of March 1, 1836, is the only documented instance of

assistance.⁸ Much scorn has been heaped on Colonel James W. Fannin, whose 400-man battalion remained at Goliad, only 100 miles away. Fannin's detractors ignore the fact that he also faced an advancing Mexican column led by General José Urrea and could not leave his post unguarded. Travis' letters were effective in bringing recruits to the field. The reality is that time and distance were formidable obstacles to overcome. More than 350 volunteers had gathered at Gonzales in preparation to march to the Alamo's relief when news of its fall reached the town.⁹ It was this collection of men that formed the nucleus of Sam Houston's army that eventually defeated Santa Anna at San Jacinto on April 21, 1836.¹⁰

- **The men of the Alamo could have left at any time because they were volunteers.**

Although the majority of the Alamo's garrison was composed of volunteers, they were volunteers in the 19th century military sense of the word. These men had signed an oath of allegiance to the Provisional Government of Texas, declaring

"I will serve her honestly and faithfully against all her enemies and opposers whatsoever, and observe and obey the orders of the Governor of Texas, the orders and decrees of the present and future authorities and the orders of the officers appointed over me according to the rules and regulations for the government of Texas."¹¹

Citizen-soldiers, these men were bound to defend any post they were assigned and were not free to leave on their own.

- **William B. Travis was disliked by the garrison.**

Travis fares rather poorly in the popular media, usually portrayed as a pompous

martinet with few friends. In reality, Travis was outgoing, gregarious and respected by his peers.¹² One fact that has helped create the notion that the men of the Alamo disliked Travis was the volunteers' refusal to take orders from him, electing James Bowie as their leader instead.¹³ The election of Bowie had more to do with the ongoing philosophical dispute between regulars and volunteers than it did the garrison's opinion of Travis.¹⁴ The volunteers simply did not want to take orders from a regular officer, even someone they respected such as Lieutenant Colonel William B. Travis of the Texas Army.

- **The Battle of the Alamo would not have taken place had the garrison followed Sam Houston's orders to blow up the fort and leave San Antonio.**

On January 17, 1836, Houston wrote Governor Henry Smith that he had

"ordered the fortifications in the town of Bexar to be demolished, *and if you should think well of it* [italics added for emphasis], I will remove all the cannon and other munitions of war to Gonzales and Copano, blow up the Alamo, and abandon the place, as it will be impossible to keep up the Station with volunteers," ¹⁵

Thus, Houston requested permission to give the order to destroy the Alamo - permission that Governor Smith did not grant. The lack of horses and mules meant that the cannon, ammunition, and other supplies could not have been removed even if the governor had agreed with Houston's plan.¹⁶ On February 2, 1836, Bowie expressed the following view to Governor Henry Smith:

"The Salvation of Texas depends in great measure in keeping Bejar out of the hands of the enemy. It serves as the frontier picquet guard . . . Col. Neill & Myself have come to the solemn resolution that we will rather die in these ditches than give it up to the enemy."¹⁷

Endnotes

¹ José Enrique de la Peña, *With Santa Anna in Texas* (College Station: Texas A & M University Press, 1997), 26-29; Vicente Filisola, *Memoirs for the History of the War in Texas* (2 vols.; Austin: Eakin Press, 1987), 2:157-159.

² Henry W. Barton, "The Problem of Command in the Army of the Republic of Texas," *Southwestern Historical Quarterly* (January 1959), 300.

³ John H. Jenkins, *Papers of The Texas Revolution* (10 vols.; Austin: Presidial Press, 1973), 4:176, 260-261.

⁴ William Fairfax Gray, *From Virginia to Texas, 1835: Diary of Col. Wm. F. Gray* (Houston: Fletcher Young Publishing Co., 1965), 125. For Houston's activities from January 28, 1836, to March 11, 1836, see Llerena B. Friend, *Sam Houston: The Great Designer* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1985), 66-68.

⁵ John H. Jenkins, *Papers of The Texas Revolution* (10 vols.; Austin: Presidial Press, 1973), 4:128, 160, 263-265, 324-325, 504-505. Béxar elected four delegates: Lorenzo de Zavala, José Francisco Ruiz, José Antonio Navarro, and Juan Seguin. On February 1, 1836, the Alamo garrison elected two delegates of their own: Jesse B. Badgett and Samuel Maverick. Maverick did not leave the Alamo until March 2, 1836.

⁶ John H. Jenkins, "Notes And Documents: The Thermopylae Quotation," *Southwestern Historical Quarterly* (October 1990), 299-304. Attributed to Edward Burleson, historians believe the quote was supplied to him for a speech as he had little formal education and would have most likely been unaware of this ancient battle.

⁷ See <http://www.thealamo.org/education/fun-facts.html#11> *Were there survivors at the Alamo?*

⁸ John H. Jenkins, *Papers of The Texas Revolution* (10 vols.; Austin: Presidial Press, 1973), 4:475, 502, 504; Alan Huffines, *Blood of Noble Men: The Alamo Siege & Battle* (Austin: Eakin Press, 1999), 103.

⁹ John H. Jenkins, *Papers of The Texas Revolution* (10 vols.; Austin: Presidial Press, 1973), 5:22-23.

¹⁰ John H. Jenkins, *Papers of The Texas Revolution* (10 vols.; Austin: Presidial Press, 1973), 5:69.

¹¹ John H. Jenkins, *Papers of The Texas Revolution* (10 vols.; Austin: Presidial Press, 1973), 4:11, 13-14; Eugene C. Barker, "The Texas Revolutionary Army," *The Quarterly of the Texas State Historical Association* (April 1906), 227-261. For a discussion of volunteers within the American military, see Richard B. Winders, *Mr. Polk's Army: The American Military Experience in the Mexican War* (College Station: Texas A & M Press, 1997), Chapter 5: The Volunteers.

¹² For a current and objective biography of Travis, see Willaim C. Davis, *Three Roads to the Alamo* (New York: HarperCollins, 1998).

¹³ John H. Jenkins, *Papers of The Texas Revolution* (10 vols.; Austin: Presidial Press, 1973), 4:320, 327-328, 339,

¹⁴ See Richard B. Winders, *Mr. Polk's Army: The American Military Experience in the Mexican War* (College Station: Texas A & M Press, 1997), Chapters 4 & 5; John H.

Jenkins, *Papers of The Texas Revolution* (10 vols.; Austin: Presidial Press, 1973), 3:306-308.

¹⁵ John H. Jenkins, *Papers of The Texas Revolution* (10 vols.; Austin: Presidial Press, 1973), 4:46.

¹⁶ John H. Jenkins, *Papers of The Texas Revolution* (10 vols.; Austin: Presidial Press, 1973), 4:127, 424-425,.

¹⁷ John H. Jenkins, *Papers of The Texas Revolution* (10 vols.; Austin: Presidial Press, 1973), 4:236-238.