

Remember the Alamo

Has there been a time in your life when the odds seemed to be stacked against you? Maybe your sports team had to play a game against another team that was older, stronger, and faster. Maybe you had a big school project that was difficult and challenging. Or maybe your music teacher asked you to learn a new composition that was harder than anything you had played before.

How would you react if these situations happened to you? Would you take the field, pick up your pencil, or open your sheet music to tackle the challenge in front of you? Doing so would require a lot of courage and bravery. However, refusing to give up—despite how difficult something may be—serves a bigger purpose. Playing in a hard game will make you a better athlete, completing a challenging school project will make you a better student, and learning a new song will make you a better musician.

Deep in the heart of Texas in 1836, a group of some 200 Texans—including Tejanos and other volunteers—bravely defended the Alamo against thousands of invading troops led by Mexican president and General Antonio Lopez de Santa Anna.¹

Before we talk about the Battle of the Alamo, we first need to understand that the Alamo wasn't always a military fort and Texas wasn't always an American state.

The Alamo, located on the banks of the San Antonio River, was initially a Franciscan mission that was built by Spanish settlers in approximately 1718. Known then as Mission San Antonio de Valero (in honor of St. Anthony of Padua), Spanish missionaries and Native American Catholic converts lived and worked at the mission for nearly 70 years. The mission was turned into a military fort in the early 19th century and got its name "El Alamo" from the Spanish soldiers who were stationed there. The new name came from the Spanish word for cottonwood (the fort was surrounded by cottonwood trees) and honored the soldiers' hometown, Alamo de Parras.²

After an 11-year revolution, Mexico won its independence from Spain in 1821. Coahuila and Texas, formerly Spanish provinces, joined as one Mexican state under the 1824 constitution.³

However, at this time, not many people had settled in Texas; many Mexicans didn't want to move to the big, lawless territory that left new settlers vulnerable to attacks from Comanche and Apache tribes in the area.



To get people to come to the area, the Mexican government offered immigrants (primarily from the U.S., but also from France, Germany, Ireland, Denmark, England, and Scotland) land grants and an exemption—or free pass—from paying taxes for a minimum of seven years. All they had to do was settle the land, pledge their loyalty to Mexico, and become Catholic.⁴ These Anglo-American settlers would call themselves “Texians”⁵—a name later shortened to “Texans.”

But as more immigrants outnumbered the Mexican population in Texas, the situation changed. The Law of April 6, 1830 outlawed immigration from the United States to Texas, but there was still a problem with people coming to Texas illegally.^{6,7} In 1833, Santa Anna was elected president of Mexico. Many Texians hoped that he would roll back some of the Law’s restrictions. However, instead of being a voice for greater freedom for Mexican citizens as hoped, Santa Anna ended up being a violent leader who established Centralist rule, which meant more power for the government and less freedom for the people.

Texian efforts to convince the Mexican government to grant them separate statehood within the Mexican confederation had failed. They became frustrated with the lack of representation in the Mexican government. The Mexican government took away cannons and essentially got rid of local and state militias. Furthermore, they knew about the violence and looting that was unleashed in Zacatecas at the hands of Santa Anna (Located in central Mexico, the state of Zacatecas was the first state to rebel against the Centralist Mexican government in early 1835. Santa Anna and his troops brutally crushed the rebellion).⁹ As tensions continued to increase, and the hope for reform and peace with the Mexican government gave way to the inevitability of war, the Texas Revolution officially began in 1835.

Texian, volunteer American, and Tejano (Texians of Spanish descent) forces worked together to successfully gain control over the town of San Antonio de Béxar during the Battle of Béxar in December 1835. San Antonio was an important post because of its strategic location. There were two main roads that linked the Mexican interior and Texas; San Antonio was situated along one of them and it was guarded by the Alamo fort. The Alamo was the frontline warning system that would stave off enemy advances and warn Texian settlements about incoming attacks.¹⁰

However, the Alamo wasn’t much in terms of defense capabilities and there were rumors that Santa Anna was headed their way with approximately 6,000 troops.¹¹ After the Béxar victory, many volunteers who helped win the battle returned to their homes. General Sam Houston questioned whether the Alamo was worth reinforcing and maintaining at all. Governor Henry Smith disagreed and refused to allow for the Alamo to remain unguarded. Alamo Commander Lt. Colonel James Clinton Neill knew how important the Alamo’s position was on the frontlines against the enemy. He worked to build it up and, through his leadership, convinced others how important it was.

Slowly but surely over the next few months, reinforcements began to arrive to aid the fight for Texas independence. Among them was entrepreneur-adventurer James Bowie, Lt. Col. William B. Travis, and Tennessee congressman and frontier hero, David Crockett. They all soon came to see, as Travis described, that the Alamo was the “key to Texas.”¹²

In February 1836, Neill had to temporarily return home, resulting in Travis and Bowie taking joint command of the garrison. Not long after, Santa Anna arrived with his Centralist army and demanded that the fewer than 200 Texians and their allies, barricaded in the fort, surrender. Travis fired a cannonball in response—making clear that they had no intention to abandon the garrison. But the odds were not in their favor and they needed more help. Travis dispatched a message pleading for help: “The enemy in large force is in sight. We want men and provisions. Send them to us. We have 150 men and are determined to defend the garrison to the last.”¹³

After Santa Anna’s forces fired on the fort for 24 hours, Travis wrote another letter on February 24, 1836, to the “people of Texas and all Americans in the world.” Travis wrote, “I am besieged, by a thousand or more of the Mexicans under Santa Anna—I have sustained 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 walls—I shall never surrender or retreat. Then, I call on you in the name of Liberty, of patriotism & everything dear to the American character, to come to our aid, with all dispatch - The enemy is receiving reinforcements daily & will no doubt increase to three or four thousand in four or five days. If this call is neglected, I am determined to sustain myself as long as possible & die like a soldier who never forgets what is due to his own honor & that of his country—Victory or Death.”¹⁴

Just over 30 more troops arrived, but it was not enough.

On March 6, 1836, at approximately 5:00 am, more than 1,000 men of Santa Anna’s army stormed the Alamo. In just under 90 minutes, the Alamo defenders suffered a devastating defeat. Santa Anna left no surviving combatants and at least 189 defenders were killed. [Editor’s note: Noncombatant women and children were given safe passage.]¹⁵

Though the battle was lost, “Remember the Alamo!” became a rallying cry fueling the resolve and commitment to Texian resistance. While the Alamo siege was happening, Texians declared independence from Mexico at the Convention of 1836 on March 2.¹⁶ The sacrifices and bravery of the Alamo defenders further solidified Texian’s determination to form their own republic and ultimately led them to victory over Santa Anna at the Battle of San Jacinto.

Footnotes

1. <https://www.thealamo.org/remember/battle-and-revolution/defenders#sortByName>
2. <https://www.history.com/topics/latin-america/alamo>
3. <https://www.thealamo.org/remember/battle-and-revolution/revolution-timeline>
4. <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/remembering-the-alamo-101880149/>
5. <https://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/entries/texian>
6. <https://www.thealamo.org/remember/battle-and-revolution/revolution-timeline>
7. <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/remembering-the-alamo-101880149/>
8. <https://www.thealamo.org/remember/battle-and-revolution/revolution-timeline>
9. <https://www.thealamo.org/remember/battle-and-revolution/revolution-timeline>
10. <https://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/entries/alamo-battle-of-the>
11. <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/remembering-the-alamo-101880149/>
12. <https://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/entries/alamo-battle-of-the>
13. <https://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/entries/alamo-battle-of-the>
14. <https://www.thealamo.org/remember/battle-and-revolution/travis-letter>
15. <https://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/entries/alamo-battle-of-the>
16. <https://www.thealamo.org/remember/battle-and-revolution/revolution-timeline>

Additional Resources

- <https://www.thealamo.org/remember/battle-and-revolution/defenders#sortByName>
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- <https://www.thealamo.org/remember/battle-and-revolution/revolution-timeline>
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