

Texas history: the battle of the alamo

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The siege and the final assault on the Alamo in 1836 constitute the most celebrated military engagement in Texas history. The battle was conspicuous for the large number of illustrious personalities among its combatants. These included Tennessee congressman David Crockett, entrepreneur-adventurer James Bowie, and Mexican president Antonio Lopez de Santa Anna. Although not nationally famous at the time, William Barret Travis achieved lasting distinction as commander at the Alamo. For many Americans and most Texans, the battle has become a symbol of patriotic sacrifice.

Traditional popular depictions, including novels, stage plays, and motion pictures, emphasize legendary aspects that often obscure the historical event. To understand the real battle, one must appreciate its strategic context in the Texas Revolution. In December 1835 a Federalist army of Texan (or Texian, as they were called) immigrants, American volunteers, and their Tejano allies had captured the town from a Centralist force during the siege of Bexar. With that victory, a majority of the Texan volunteers of the "Army of the People" left service and returned to their families.

Nevertheless, many officials of the provisional government feared the Centralists would mount a spring offensive. Two main roads led into Texas from the Mexican interior. The first was the Atascosito Road, which stretched from Matamoros on the Rio Grande northward through San Patricio, Goliad, Victoria, and finally into the heart of Austin's colony. The second was the Old San Antonio Road, a camino real that crossed the Rio Grande at Paso de Francia (the San Antonio Crossing) and wound northeastward through San Antonio de Bexar, Bastrop, Nacogdoches, San Augustine, and across the Sabine River into Louisiana.

Two forts blocked these approaches into Texas: Presidio La Bahia (Nuestra Senora de Loreto Presidio) at Goliad and the Alamo at San Antonio. Each installation functioned as a frontier picket guard, ready to alert the Texas settlements of an enemy advance. James Clinton Neill received command of the Bexar garrison. Some ninety miles to the southeast, James Walker Fannin, Jr. , subsequently took command at Goliad. Most Texan settlers had returned to the comforts of home and hearth. Consequently, newly arrived American volunteers-some of whom counted their time in Texas by the week-constituted a majority of the troops at Goliad and Bexar.

Both Neill and Fannin determined to stall the Centralists on the frontier. Still, they labored under no delusions. Without speedy reinforcements, neither the Alamo nor Presidio La Bahia could long withstand a siege. At Bexar were some twenty-one artillery pieces of various caliber. Because of his artillery experience and his regular army commission, Neill was a logical choice to command. Throughout January he did his best to fortify the mission fort on the outskirts of town. Maj. Green B. Jameson, chief engineer at the Alamo, installed most of the cannons on the walls.

Jameson boasted to Gen. Sam Houston that if the Centralists stormed the Alamo, the defenders could " whip 10 to 1 with our artillery. " Such predictions proved excessively optimistic. Far from the bulk of Texas settlements, the Bexar garrison suffered from a lack of even basic provender. On January 14 Neill wrote Houston that his people were in a " torpid, defenseless condition. " That day he dispatched a grim message to the provisional government: " Unless we are reinforced and victualled, we must become an easy prey to the enemy, in case of an attack. "