

SAM HOUSTON

A Revisionist Look at the Life & Career Of the 'Hero of San Jacinto'

There is no more enduring American hero than Sam Houston, who led the rebellious Texans to victory over the Mexicans at San Jacinto, which helped gain Texas its independence. His strategy was a cunning retreat designed to lead the Mexican dictator Santa Anna into a clever trap at San Jacinto, according to the standard histories. But is there more to the story?

BY BRUCE MARSHALL

In truth, Houston never had any intention of making a stand at San Jacinto, and by the end of the campaign the majority of his officers and men despised him as an egotistical military incompetent who shamelessly stole the laurels due others. The credit for San Jacinto belongs to his determined little army who won a stunning dual victory over both the Mexicans and their own commander.

Only recently have serious researchers looked behind the veil created by Houston sycophants. John Jenkins, until his mysterious death in 1989 the foremost authority on Texana, when editing the memoirs of Amasa Turner, a captain at San Jacinto, asserted that, "Most of the anti-Houston material . . . has been deliberately and designedly prevented from coming into print."¹ And Stephen L. Hardin in his book *Texian Iliad*, published in 1994, stated "The time has come for scholars to set aside the hagiography penned by political hacks and hero worshippers in order to gain a fresh perspective on the 'Sword of San Jacinto' and his role in the campaign."²

Now, in my recent book, *Uniforms of the Alamo and the Texas Revolution and the Men Who Wore Them, 1835-1836*, the dark side

of Sam Houston, from many long-suppressed sources, all of them officers or men of Gen. Houston's army, is shockingly exposed.

BACKGROUND

Longstanding grievances accumulated by the Anglo-Kelt settlers in Texas, who had come to outnumber the original Mexicans by a ratio of approximately five-to-one, led to a skirmish at Gonzales on October 2, 1835, over a small cannon the Mexicans sought to retrieve from the American settlers. It became the "Lexington of Texas" and began the Texas Revolution in earnest. After winning the skirmish, Texan militia assembled at Gonzales and marched on Bexar, as San Antonio was popularly known then, and laid siege to the city.

THE DEBUT OF SAM HOUSTON

While they were encamped near San Antonio in late October the volunteers were addressed by several leaders. First was Stephen F. Austin. Though without any real military training or experience other than fighting Indians, he had been named

The residents of the city of Houston, Texas, might never look at their city name the same way again. Recently, researchers have begun to unearth information about Sam Houston that has never made it into the history books or the popular conscious. His own contemporaries accused Houston of cowardice and incompetence, and thought of him as

a man who stole the glory from the efforts of others. Author Bruce Marshall has done what no one has done so far, that is, take the existing material about Houston and expose the real man, not the glorified figure of political and historical hacks that inundates most mainstream histories. At left, a jaunty Houston poses for a photo with cane and hat.

general. After Austin came a relative newcomer, Sam Houston, recently elected a delegate to the forthcoming consultation in November. Houston clearly wanted Austin's job, and meant to get it by whatever means necessary. Houston hammered at three points. "It was easy to discover that his chief wish was that the troops in the field should be immediately disbanded," observed Col. (then Captain) Robert M. Coleman, one of the volunteers. "One of the first acts of the consultation," Houston attempted to persuade them, "should be the appointment of a major general and the provision for a regular army for Texas," and to make a treaty with the Indians. According to Coleman, "he used every art to discourage the army; he even attempted to scare the soldiers to their homes by insinuating that the northern Indians in Texas were about to commence hostilities."³ Later at the consultation, Houston was to present himself as the only man in the army with the credentials of major general and capable of negotiating the treaty with the Indians, as he had for much of his life lived with the Cherokees.

Following this astonishing harangue by Houston, William H. Jack gave a rebuttal, reassuring the volunteers of the necessity of first capturing San Antonio, and rebuking Houston's scare tactic. Jack carried the day.

Mortified by this setback, Houston (probably a manic-depressive by today's standards) went into a depression and, lacking what many came increasingly to suspect were his usual stimulants of "whiskey and opium," according to Coleman, attempted to blow his brains out with a pistol. He was dissuaded with difficulty by James Bowie and Francis W. Johnson. "Such," observed Coleman, "was the conduct of Sam Houston on his first appearance in the army of Texas."⁴

On the way to the consultation at San Felipe de Austin, then the capital of the Anglo settlements, Sam Houston made every exertion to sabotage Austin's volunteer army. Without authority, he ordered cannon and reinforcements headed for San Antonio to turn back. At Gonzales, according to Coleman, Houston "renewed his intimacy with his old associates, whiskey and opium, in whose society, while at that place, he indulged without restraint."⁵

Whatever the stimulus, by the time Houston had reached San Felipe his confidence had returned and he immediately lobbied for the post of major general and the creation of a regular army and a treaty with the Indians. All, he argued convincingly, should be entrusted to his hands.

Houston was a handsome giant, a "man's man," hale, hearty and charming. Sober or drunk, he was awesome to most. Few at the consultation had witnessed his bizarre behavior at the encampment of the Army of the People. And heavy drinking was to some on the frontier a sign of manhood, not a vice, if a man met the other criteria of frontier acceptance. Earlier, a Mexican officer sent to inspect Texas, Gen. Manuel de Mier y

Terán, in his observations noted that the Anglo Texans worked hard, then often drank themselves into oblivion when their work was finished.⁶ As for the more serious allegation of opium addiction, Houston partisans say this was a misconception caused by his frequent sniffing from a vial of hartshorn on which he depended as a stimulant. Whatever the case, Houston cut a bigger-than-life figure among the mostly unsophisticated Texans. He had been a protégé of Andrew Jackson, and was highly skilled in the rough and tumble of Tennessee politics. And he knew how to ingratiate himself and fit in with the camaraderie of the grog shop habitués.

There were indignant detractors, to be sure. In an angry letter to the president of the consultation at San Felipe, George Huff and Spencer H. Jack denounced Houston and his "hangers on" as "traitors" and in fact, the country's "worst and most dangerous enemies." Zeroing in on Houston, they charged, "[H]is conduct here has evidenced the most discontented and envious of spirit mixed with the most unmeasured vanity." After reciting instances of his efforts to discourage the volunteers and turn back reinforcements, cannon and supplies from reaching the army in the field, they characterized Houston as a "vain, ambitious, envious, disappointed, discontented man, who desires the defeat of our army—that he may be appointed to the command of the next."⁷

Houston, however, played his ace. He had been a major general of Tennessee militia, the only one of the Texans to have held such a high military rank, or anything close to it. He boasted, "I will discipline my troops and make them as invincible as were the veterans of Napoleon."⁸ He made a virtue of his dissolute life among the Indians and that he had been the adopted son of a Cherokee chief (Bowles, as he was known) by presenting himself as the emissary best qualified to negotiate peace treaties with the Indians. He won.

HOUSTON TAKES COMMAND

Sam Houston was made major general and commander-in-chief of a state army, to consist of 1,120 regulars, plus 150 Rangers. In accord with Houston's design, the Army of the People besieging San Antonio was curiously left unprovided for.⁹

Also created was a state—not national—government. This and a declaration that they were fighting for "the republican principles of 1824" were setbacks for those favoring independence. A governor was chosen, Henry Smith, strangely enough an independence advocate, and a general council was created.¹⁰

Until now Stephen F. Austin, the foremost *empresario* who had guided the Anglo-Keltic settlers through all of their formative years from the 1820s, had been clearly their leader. But at the consultation Sam Houston had cunningly outmaneuvered him and was now the undisputed leader of the Texans. Austin, his humiliation complete, departed to seek funds in the United States.

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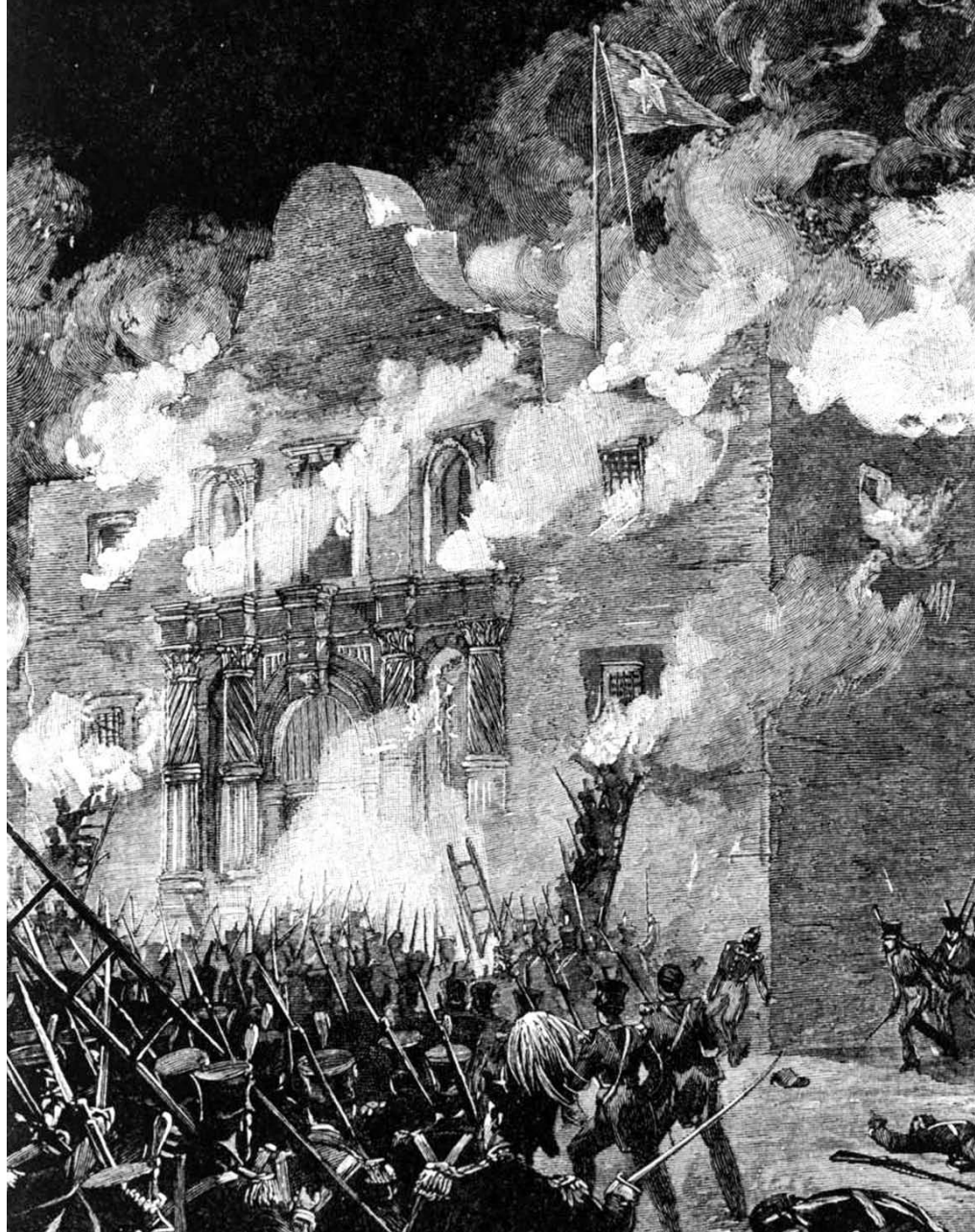
On December 5, 1835, the Army of the People, under command of Francis Johnson and Ben Milam, stormed and captured San Antonio. Johnson then unveiled plans to attack the Mexican port of Matamoros at the mouth of the Rio Grande.

During all this time the man who had been named as commander-in-chief of the regular Texas army by the general council, Sam Houston, was noticeably absent. He had done nothing to assist the campaign against Bexar. In fact, he had worked against it. He now bestirred himself and from his headquarters issued a proclamation calling for volunteers. In it he referred to those at San Antonio as the Army of the People. Those under his command he called the Regular Army. Part of the army, according to his appeal, was to be an auxiliary volunteer corps, also under him as commander-in-chief. By this he sought to gain authority over all Texas forces, including Johnson and James W. Fannin, at Goliad, who at this point were essentially acting on their own.¹¹

On December 16, the council created a cavalry of 384 men under William B. Travis, and a Ranger force of 168 under R.M. Williamson (called “three-legged Willie” because a deformed leg caused him to wear a peg leg with his real leg out at an angle).¹² Thus was the Texas military organized at last, at least on paper. But rivalry continued as to who would become the ultimate leader. In some ways the rivalry was more deadly than the enemy.

THE RIVALS CONVERGE

Johnson and Dr. James Grant, a former Scottish Highland officer who was now his co-leader following the death of Ben Milan in the siege of Bexar, set out on the road to Matamoros via Goliad. William B. Travis and James Bowie arrived at the Alamo,



During much of the real fighting in the Texas War for Independence, Sam Houston was noticeably absent, while making pompous proclamations and calling for volunteers. The credit really should go to the tough little army who made their famous stand, as well as competent commanders such as Johnson and Grant. Houston took six days to reach the Alamo, while the trip should have only taken two. His transfer of his small force to the fort was done with the greatest of reluctance. His overall command was based on incompetence and personal arrogance. Above, the Mexican force prepares for the scaling of the Alamo walls. Pictured top left is Susanna Dickinson, the only adult survivor of the Alamo massacre, rescued by English-speaking Mexican Gen. Juan Almonte.

taking joint command.

In late January the various rivals for military leadership met at Goliad. Each was determined to gain control and become the savior of Texas: Houston, Fannin, and Johnson and Grant, who now styled their followers the Federal Volunteer Army of Texas.¹³ Fannin won control of the troops at Goliad. Reaching an accommodation with Fannin, Johnson and Grant moved to

the vicinity of San Patricio on their way to Matamoros. Houston, the big loser at this point, skulked back to San Felipe to lick his wounds and await developments.

In San Antonio about 150 men had assembled under Bowie and Travis, including David (Davy) Crockett. The Alamo cast a spell over all who commanded it, despite an order from Houston to blow it up and abandon it. Both Bowie and Travis saw it as “the key to Texas.”¹⁴

There was much to be said for this from a military standpoint, despite Houston’s aversion to defending forts. At the Alamo was the largest collection of artillery (21 guns) between Mexico City and New Orleans. It would have been utter folly to abandon this, the Texans’ greatest military asset, without resistance. Plus, if the enemy could be stopped at Bexar, the Anglo settlements eastward would be spared the ravages of war.

THE ALAMO BESIEGED

On February 23, the Mexican army under Santa Anna himself was sighted only a few miles outside of San Antonio. The Texans hastily pulled back inside the Alamo and prepared for a siege.

Santa Anna’s army, including reinforcements following, consisted of 4,473 infantry, 1,024 cavalry, 182 artillerymen, 185 sappers, 60 *presidials* afoot and 95 mounted—more than 6,000 men. The Alamo defenders still numbered at this point only 150.¹⁵

Santa Anna demanded surrender. Travis, now the commander because Bowie had fallen ill, answered with a cannon shot. Travis immediately sent out appeals for assistance.

On February 28, James Fannin, the commander at Goliad, in response to the appeal from Travis, set out half-heartedly with 300 men and four cannon to reinforce the Alamo. But only a few miles out he thought better of it and turned back.

From Sam Houston nothing was heard.

On March 1, in the dead of night arrived the only reinforcements that ever came, 32 men from Gonzales under Captain Albert Martin. One had a blind wife and eight children. The number of Alamo defenders was now 182.

On March 4, Sam Houston received notice of his renewed commission. With the greatest reluctance he prepared to go to Gonzales to take command of the 400 or so men congregating there to go to the relief of the Alamo. He took his time, reaching Gonzales on March 11, a six-day journey that could have been made in one or two days. He claimed there was no hurry because reports from Travis at the Alamo were lies, and those from Fannin of Mexicans approaching Goliad were also lies, meant to improve their popularity over his.¹⁶ According to Creed Taylor, a spunky fighter who had taken part in the capture of Bexar, “We could have reached him (Travis) in two days, by March 5 at the most.”¹⁷

At Gonzales, Houston found pandemonium. Two Mexicans had arrived telling that the Alamo had fallen on March 6 after a 13-day siege. This was confirmed by the arrival of Susanna

Dickinson and her baby, the only white survivors. She had been spared by Santa Anna so she could tell of the massacre of the entire garrison and, hopefully, panic the Texans into flight. This psychological ploy was highly successful.

Among the first to panic was Sam Houston. “He became much agitated and showed every symptom of fear; he would sometimes rave like a madman, at other times seemed much dejected,” according to Robert Coleman.¹⁸ By all accounts he hastily dumped that army’s only two cannon into the Colorado River without spiking them (from which they were fished out soon after by the Mexicans). He ordered the town of Gonzales burned as well as outlying farmhouses. All equipment that could not be transported was burned, including tents and camp baggage. The haste was so great, pickets posted three miles west of town were not called in, and many families were left behind also—including

the blind Alamo widow with eight children. Thus began, in the words of Creed Taylor, “the most disgraceful retreat ever recorded in any history.”¹⁹

Houston next ordered Fannin to abandon Goliad, where Fannin had restored the old stone presidio, calling it Fort Defiance. It had 14 guns. On March 18, a Mexican army led by Gen. José Urrea appeared before Fannin’s Fort Defiance, and Fannin, bowing to Houston’s order, began a sluggish retreat. His force of more than 400 men was overtaken

and captured by the Mexicans and the entire command, save a few who escaped or were spared because they were medical personnel, were shamefully executed by direct order from Gen. Santa Anna.

A MEXICAN STANDOFF

Houston had stopped at a point on the east bank of the Colorado River opposite Beason’s Ferry. He had all the boats brought over to his side of the river including the steamboat *Yellow Stone*. Reinforcements added along the way now brought his army up to between 1,300 to 1,500 men. Camped opposite him on the west bank, but with no way to cross, was Gen. Joaquín Ramírez y Sesma with some 600 to 800 Mexican soldiers. Now, thought many, was the time to turn and fight. If the Texans crossed over and attacked, and things went badly, they could retreat via the boats. The only advantage Ramírez y Sesma had was two cannon, perhaps the two Houston had unwisely jettisoned at Gonzales. For six days they sat facing each other. The Mexicans couldn’t act, because of high water and no boats; Houston hinted at action but took none.

The army wanted to fight. But Houston consulted no one and didn’t call a council of his officers. Instead, upon receiving the disheartening news of the massacre of Fannin’s force, he ordered another retreat. Suspicion grew among officers and men that his plan, if he had one, was to retreat all the way to the Sabine River, hoping to lure the Mexicans into American terri-

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—Robert Coleman*



The unsinkable Antonio López de Santa Anna (1794-1876) had a fascinating career. He styled himself “the Napoleon of the West” but was defeated in one engagement because he took a *siesta* and forgot to post guards in the face of the enemy. Deciding on a military career, he became an infantry cadet at age 16. He led a rebellion in the name of freedom against an emperor and then ruled as a dictator. Surviving defeats and well-founded accusations of corruption, he served as president of Mexico 11 times and went on to die in bed at the age of 82.

tory where they would then be dealt with by the United States Army. Along the way every town and farm would be burned so as to leave no sustenance for the advancing Mexican armies. This scorched earth policy would leave all of Anglo Texas utterly destroyed economically. Morale plummeted. Many sought furloughs in order to return to their homes to protect their families. Others simply deserted. Nearly half to two-thirds of Houston’s army evaporated at this point.²⁰ By now many had begun to distrust Houston’s abilities, his integrity, and even his valor. In Coleman’s opinion, “His chief aim was his personal safety.”²¹ It was only years after the campaign that Houston himself confirmed that he had “intended to retreat even to the banks of the Sabine” and in still another speech confessed that he had “determined to retreat and get as near to Andrew Jackson and the old (U.S.) flag as I could.”²²

Those still with him at this dismal point might have been even more disquieted had they known that his title of major general from the United States was questionable. In his former political career in Tennessee he had been elected to the office of governor and earlier to that of adjutant general of state militia. This militia position carried with it the rank of major general. In Texas, Houston had played that card at every opportunity. Texans, most of whom had Southern origins, have the Southerner’s traditional awe of titles. They took his at full face value. But in fact, it was mainly political. In the regular United States Army he had served only briefly during the Creek War in 1814 under Andrew Jackson, rising only to the rank of second lieutenant before being discharged for wounds. Thus his actual regular Army rank had been a quite modest one and his actual military experience very limited and of short duration.²³

“THE RUNAWAY SCRAPE”

Sam Houston now retreated to San Felipe, which his dwindling army reached on March 28. Since the evacuation of Gonzales, virtually all of the Anglo-Keltic population was in panicky flight with what belongings they could carry by hand, horse, or wagon. This exodus became known as “the Runaway Scrape.” Property and livestock were abandoned and personal belongings jettisoned *en route* to increase mobility if wagons or teams became disabled. Worse, villainous scoundrels took advantage of the refugees, stampeding them with exaggerated alarms, then looting their possessions when abandoned.

Those in flight were not limited to the women, children, and elderly, as glossed over by many of the history texts. Virtually the only reinforcements now were American volunteers, gallantly motivated by desperate appeals from Texas agents in the United States. The arriving volunteers from the United States had the dismaying experience of passing hundreds of armed Texans fleeing in the opposite direction.

Adding to the growing suspicion that Houston had no true intention of making a stand were his own actions in trying to turn back volunteers *en route*. Dr. Nicholas Descomps Labadie, a Canadian who had settled in Texas and now accompanied the army, claimed to have heard Houston send orders that reinforcements that had reached Robbin’s Ferry on the Trinity River in far east Texas were to halt.²⁴ Coleman added to this, saying that a written order was sent by Houston via a Maj. Digges that all arriving volunteers should halt at the ferry to await Houston’s retreating army, whose arrival there would be in a few days. This caused the temporary halt there of a large number of mounted volunteers under former Mississippi Governor John A. Quitman, according to Coleman.²⁵ The reinforcements didn’t arrive until after San Jacinto.

The army remained only a day at San Felipe. Houston ordered the retreat to continue on to Groce’s plantation, Bernardo, in the Brazos bottomlands. This raised particularly bitter outcries from his soldiers and the refugees. San Felipe was the capital of Anglo Texas. It should be defended at all cost, many argued. In fact, two company commanders, Mosley Baker

and Wiley Martin, mutinied. Making a virtue of necessity, Houston detailed them to defend two crossings of the Brazos River. Then he pulled out. San Felipe was burned.

SANTA ANNA'S FATAL MISTAKE

Santa Anna in the meantime had divided his force. He led one unit of about 750 cavalry and infantry with one cannon hoping to overtake the Texas government, then fleeing towards Harrisburg (now a suburb of Houston). Others were to locate and engage the Texas army by separate routes. At this point none of the Mexicans was quite sure exactly where Houston and his army were, but they were convinced, as were many of the Texas soldiers themselves, that the Texas commander had no intention of making a stand, but instead would retreat until past the Sabine River. At the plantation of Jared Groce, the wealthiest man in Texas, Houston gave his army the rudiments of drill and some discipline, which they needed but didn't care for. He now had about 500 or so highly dissatisfied men. During the two weeks the army spent there in the Brazos bottomlands, eating Groce's corn and cattle, Secretary of War Thomas Jefferson Rusk arrived with a message from the interim president, David G. Burnet:

Sir: the enemy are laughing you to scorn. You must fight them. You must retreat no farther. The country expects you to fight. The salvation of the country depends on you doing so.²⁶

It expressed the feelings of most Texans, including Houston's army. But there was a certain grim humor to it, as President Burnet was fleeing faster than anyone. He was now at Harrisburg near the coast. If Houston didn't stand and fight, Rusk was authorized to take command of the army himself. Houston reluctantly called in Coleman and instructed him to circulate among the soldiers and say that, pressured by Rusk, he would, at the fork in the road ahead take the south road—leading to Harrisburg—rather than the other which led to the border with the United States. But few expected him to keep his promise.²⁷ Many hoped that Rusk would take over then and there, but instead he stayed with the army, joining it.

There was open talk that, if Rusk would not take charge, the commander-in-chief should be replaced nonetheless. Favorites were Sidney Sherman, now a lieutenant colonel, and another aggressive hawk, John A. Wharton, the adjutant general.

Houston was well over six feet tall, a handsome, imposing fellow and a charismatic speaker, with an ego equally as large as himself. Most histories describe Houston as 6'4"; one sycophant even claiming 6'6". However, Houston's biographer Marquis James, in *The Raven*, says Houston's U.S. Army record shows him as 6'2".²⁸ He dressed in civilian clothes with a hat whose brim was rolled to resemble a Revolutionary War tricorne with a cavalier's plume. Both Sherman and Wharton, while not impressive

physically or in eloquence, were each natively outfitted in smart looking uniforms, which gave them a certain appeal in addition to their hawkish boldness.

It was at this point that insubordination became such a problem than Houston had some graves dug and posted notices that any who "beat for volunteers" would be tried and shot. That, temporarily at least, put a lid on thoughts of wholesale mutiny.

Mollifying the men slightly was the arrival, despite Houston's orders to restrain further reinforcements, of two small cannon while the army was at Groce's plantation, a gift from the citizens of Cincinnati, Ohio. The soldiers dubbed them "the twin sisters."

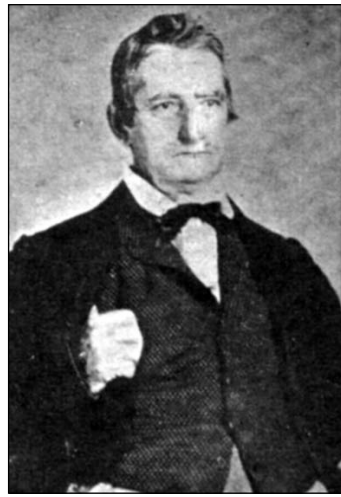
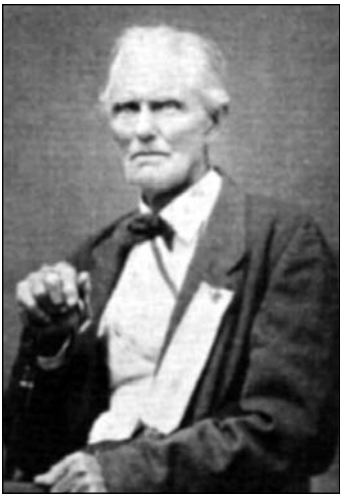
In the meantime, Santa Anna, learning that the Texas president and his cabinet were at Harrisburg, hurried there. He found the city deserted except for three printers turning out a last edition of *The Telegraph and Texas Register*. From them he learned Burnet and his cabinet had left only three hours before for the coast near New Washington. He hurried a flying squadron of dragoons after them under Col. Juan Almonte. As the dragoons reached the beach, Burnet and those with him were pulling away from the shore in a rowboat, working the oars vigorously. Almonte ordered his men not to fire as there was a woman in the boat—Mrs. Burnet.

At Harrisburg Santa Anna had the city burned. He then headed northeast in pursuit of the elusive Houston and all that was left of the Texas army. He now knew that Houston had left Groce's plantation about April 12, still retreating eastward. His determination to catch and overtake Houston's tattered army, coupled with his growing confidence from being victorious so far, plus his utter contempt for the rag-tag enemy led by an alcoholic "general" who was not even respected by his own men, now caused Santa Anna to make reckless mistakes, which would be his undoing. His army was weakened by being divided into five separate wings under himself, generals Ganoa, Urrea, Ramírez y Sesma and Italian-born Vicente Filisola. Most had about 600 to 800 men each, with Filisola having the largest part of the army, approximately 4,000 men. Santa Anna, dangerously in advance of all, had a force of only 750 cavalry and infantry with but a single cannon, "The Golden Standard," a 12 pounder. Perhaps uneasy of this danger in the unlikely event Houston should turn and fight, but unwilling to slow his pursuit, Santa Anna sent word back to Filisola at his base at Fort Bend to hurry 500 reinforcements to him under his brother-in-law, Gen. Martín Perfecto de Cos.

Much speculation has come down through the years that Houston, an erstwhile protégé of Gen. Andrew Jackson, now the American president, had a secret understanding with Jackson. Houston would, under this possibility, retreat to the Sabine, the more or less border with the United States, and sucker the Mexicans into the borderland where the U.S. Army in Louisiana, under Gen. Edmund Gaines, would then come into the fray and trounce the Mexicans. This would explain perhaps

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—David G. Burnet



Houston's insistence on continued retreat until the Texas Redlands, where the border was vague, or the American border at the Sabine, was reached. No documentary evidence of this has yet surfaced. But there is some faint circumstantial evidence. For instance, there was an understanding between the Texans and the American government, arranged perhaps surreptitiously by Stephen F. Austin, whereby if the Indians of east Texas menaced white people in the border area, either in Louisiana or Texas, Gaines could put the disorder down with American troops. Using this agreement, Gaines, claiming Indians were about to take advantage of the distraction of the Texas settlers in their struggle with the Mexicans, actually moved some of his soldiers into Texas and stationed them around Nacogdoches. This would be the trap Houston would lead the Mexicans into, if true, and a clever plan at that. It would vindicate him as a cunning strategist, rather than the posturing but gutless coward many accused him of being. If it was a pre-arranged plan it had merit. But, unfortunately for Sam Houston, his army was fed up with his continuous retreat and would have no more of it.

THE FORK IN THE ROAD

As the retreating Texans neared the fork in the road and the crucial decisions had to be made whether to continue on toward the American border or hook southward to the right toward Harrisburg to meet the Mexicans, Houston and his army were themselves at the fork in the road in their relationship with each other. The night before the fork in the road was to be reached the Texan camp was in a state of high excitement. Secretary of War Rusk, and most of the officers were pressuring the commander-in-chief to take the south fork—the Harrisburg road—for the confrontation they desired with the Mexican dictator, whose position had been learned from captured dispatches.²⁹ This was obviously the will of the rank and file. Houston was still reluctant. Some expected him to desert that night.³⁰

On April 17, the vanguard reached the crucial fork in the road. As yet no order had been received as to which route to take, according to several contemporary accounts. Houston was lagging behind. Standing at the gate of his property at the crossroads was a Mr. Roberts, according to Dr. Labadie. When Labadie and others inquired which fork was the Harrisburg road, Roberts, in a loud, clear voice announced with a wave of

Was there anyone who respected Houston at the time? The men pictured above, Capt. Amasa Turner, Dr. Nicholas Labadie, Thomas Jefferson Rusk, secretary of war of Texas, and David G. Burnet, interim Texas president (from left to right), seemed to be sworn enemies of Houston, especially Turner (pictured in advanced age here). After the brief fight at San Jacinto, Houston's army was eager to fight. In fact, when Santa Anna appeared, the force was up at 4 a.m., and in parade mode. It is shocking to think that Houston at this time had given instructions that no one was to wake him before 8 a.m. This alone is a major blot on his record. At the same time, Mexican reinforcements were moving toward Houston's force, evening the fight (while Houston slept, mind you). Once up, he rejected the notion that those arrivals were reinforcements at all. His men, however, knew better.

his hand, "that right hand road will take you to Harrisburg just as straight as a compass!" At once a shout went up, "To the right, boys, to the right!" The vanguard then turned down the Harrisburg road, with the rest of the army following behind jubilantly.³¹ If Houston had not made up his mind by then the decision was made for him by his army. "We compelled Old Sam to take the road to Harrisburg," chortled Amasa Turner, captain of Company B, Burleson's regiment of infantry.³²

Confirming that Houston had planned to take the other road was the arrival of Mrs. Pamela Mann, a formidable woman who turned up to reclaim her yoke of oxen, until now pulling one of the cannon. She let Sam Houston know in no uncertain terms that he had violated his assurance to her that the borrowed oxen were to go to the Trinity. Now that he had changed course she demanded them back. And despite his protest that they were vital, the pistol-toting Mrs. Mann unhitched them and made off with them.

The two armies were now on a collision course.

On April 20, 1836, they met at a place called San Jacinto. There was a small but indecisive skirmish, during which Santa Anna had his bugler play the *Deguello*, signaling no quarter.

April 21, everyone in the Texan ranks was eager to fight—all except their commander it appeared. The men rose early with reveille at 4 a.m. They paraded, awaiting orders, according to Labadie. But the only order from their commander-in-chief was that he was not to be disturbed before 8 a.m. He was sleeping.

When Houston awoke he received a nasty surprise. Coming

across Vince's Bridge was Gen. Cos with the 500 reinforcements Santa Anna had requested. They had force-marched all night. Now Santa Anna possessed a more or less two-to-one advantage. If further reinforcements arrived from Filisola or other of the Mexican columns, the Texans had no chance at all.

Houston lamely tried to pass off Cos's arrival as "only a sham—no reinforcement."³³ His men were not deceived. Later, when asked by the captured Santa Anna why he had allowed Cos's men to slip through, Houston offered this explanation, "I didn't want to take two bites from one cherry."³⁴ It was a glib, but unconvincing cover for a serious mistake.

At this point Houston had 783 bitter die-hards left. Santa Anna now had at least 1,250, perhaps more.

Until now Sam Houston had consulted no one, held no councils. But now his officers were insistent in demanding a council. Exactly what transpired during the conference is a matter of dispute.

The officers wanted to fight. But they were in disagreement as to whether it was wiser to remain in their favorable position for the Mexicans to attack them, or to attack the Mexicans. Houston cautioned that, in either case, the Texans were "raw militia" with none but himself having ever been in a "general engagement," whereas the Mexicans were "well-disciplined regulars."³⁵ Instead, he proposed building a portable bridge upon which to escape, a proposal which met with universal disdain. The conference broke up in indecision, divided on whether to await a Mexican attack or attack themselves. None, however, wanted any further retreat.

When word spread about the encampment of Houston's plan for a portable bridge, it was met with derision. "The men said they would not work to build a bridge," remembered Amasa Turner, "but would go out and whip the Mexicans while Old Sam built his bridge."³⁶

This was reinforced by Dr. Labadie, who said, "An immediate hand-to-hand fight was the desire of all the men."³⁷

All day Col. John Wharton had moved about the camp agitating the soldiers: "Boys, there is no other word today but fight! Fight!" adding, "The enemy has thousands that can and will concentrate at this point within the next few days . . . (we) have no reasonable expectations of a stronger force. . . . The enemy must be fought today, lest tomorrow prove too late."³⁸ He also agitated Houston: "Sir, the men are willing and ready and anxious to meet the enemy," according to Turner. Turner, who was present, said, "Old Sam said the officers will not fight—they have so decided in council this day." Wharton said they would and the men too and, "Unless you order otherwise, I will order the army to form for battle."³⁹

Then, according to several accounts, an exasperated Houston replied, "Fight then and be damned."⁴⁰

Houston admirers have a very different version. According to biographies written by his supporters, Sam Houston arose

that morning confident, determined this was the day to do battle, exclaiming, "The Sun of Austerlitz [one of Napoleon's greatest victories] has risen again." He went about the encampment during the morning visiting each mess, conducting his own poll concerning their willingness to fight. Receiving an overwhelming affirmative response, he told the Texans "very well, get your dinners and I will lead you into the fight, and if you whip them every one of you shall be a captain."⁴¹ Late in the afternoon, he secretly sent his best scout, Erastus ("Deaf") Smith, to destroy Vince's Bridge, over which more Mexican reinforcements might come. Without the portable bridge, destruction of Vince's Bridge also cut off the Texans' only escape route.

This could be questioned as another serious error by Houston, though as things turned out it fortunately didn't matter. But most strategists would argue that it is never wise to back yourself into a corner with no means of retreat. Cortes had done this when he burned his ships at Vera Cruz, but he was motivated by distrust of the resolve of his men. Whether this was also Houston's motive can only be guessed.

There was no recourse for either army but to fight. Santa Anna had chosen his camp poorly, hemmed in mostly by water and the Texans. Houston's choice was even worse. While enjoying a good defensive position, he now had water on three sides and the Mexicans in front.

Wharton, according to Labadie, was now going about the camp exuberantly proclaiming that the order to fight had been given at last.⁴² It was now past three in the afternoon, unusually late to begin a battle. But the army assembled eagerly. Even as the Texans were now forming up for battle, Houston was hesitant, according to Mirabeau B. Lamar, the new colonel of cavalry. "Houston came to me and said, 'Col. Lamar, do you really think we ought to fight?'"⁴³

Having decided by now that the Texans weren't going to attack, at least this day, the Mexicans were relaxing. There were no lookouts that the Texans could discern. Cos's men, exhausted by their overnight march, were sleeping. Most of Santa Anna's infantry, exhausted from spending most of the night constructing a makeshift barricade, were also asleep. Even the dictator himself was having a late siesta. Texas folklore has it that he was dallying amorously with a mulatto slave woman, Emily Morgan, found at the Groce plantation. Dubbed "the Yellow Rose of Texas," she supposedly was purposely distracting the dictator to help the Texans. There is no truth to this popular yarn.⁴⁴ Mexican cavalymen were riding their horses bareback to and from the water. The Mexicans were literally about to be caught napping.

Whether or not he was making a virtue of necessity, Houston, after assigning each unit its place in the coming battle, now mounted a magnificent white stallion named Saracen, acquired from Groce while at his plantation. Both he and Rusk gave short speeches, ending with an unforgettable battle cry: "Remember the Alamo! Remember Goliad!"

Until now Sam Houston had consulted no one, held no councils. But now his officers were insistent in demanding a council. Exactly what transpired during the conference is a matter of dispute.

The determined little band now totaled 783: with about 33 left in camp, some as guards, some sick, 750 were now in battle array. The last hope of Texas moved forward to their date with destiny. It was now 4:30 in the afternoon.

The first inkling the Mexicans had of the Texan advance was when a bugler summoned Col. Pedro Delgado with a warning that the enemy was approaching. Delgado, hardly able to believe what he had heard, climbed atop an ammunition box to see for himself. The mile or so of high grass between the two positions partially concealed the silently approaching Texans, Houston on his white horse, in the lead. They were now within two hundred yards of the Mexican breastworks, a flimsy affair of boxes and baggage, and in the act of turning around and positioning their tiny cannon. Delgado, stunned, observed:

I saw their formation was a mere line of one rank, and very extended. In their center was the Texas flag; on both wings they had two light cannons, well manned. Their cavalry was opposite our front, overlapping our left. In this disposition, yelling furiously, with a brisk fire of grape, muskets and rifles, they advanced resolutely upon our camp. There the utmost confusion prevailed.⁴⁵

Halfway to the enemy breastworks Houston ordered a halt and commanded the men to fire. But the frontier army disobeyed. They reckoned the distance too far for effective fire. ‘Fire away! God damn you, fire! Aren’t you going to fire at all?’ Houston roared.⁴⁶ In this moment of confusion Col. Rusk, at the top of his voice, shouted a countermand, ‘If we stop we are cut to pieces. Don’t stop—go ahead—give them hell!’⁴⁷ The men obeyed Rusk, not Houston. Disobeying their commander-in-chief probably saved the Texans, for their ongoing rush prevented the Mexicans from firing the ‘Golden Standard’ effectively and rallying. At this point one of the ‘twin sisters’ had to cease firing, according to one of the gunners, Ben McCulloch, because Houston was prancing his horse right in front of the cannon.⁴⁸ ‘I thought it was very strange for him to be there for it was not the place for a sane general to be,’ Amasa Turner opined. ‘No good reason could be given for his being there.’⁴⁹

About this time, when the Texans were about 60 yards from the barricade, ‘Deaf’ Smith came thundering along the line on a lathered horse shouting, ‘Vince’s Bridge is down! Fight for your lives! Vince’s Bridge is down!’⁵⁰ At 40 yards Saracen went down, hit by multiple bullets. At the barricade the Texans poured over, firing and reloading, though some, instead of reloading, used their rifles as clubs on the disorganized Mexicans, or their deadly Bowie knives. After an initial hasty resistance at the barricade, most of the Mexicans, particularly those who hadn’t even been able to unstack their muskets, became panic-stricken and took flight. On both sides discipline broke down completely, and it was every man for himself.

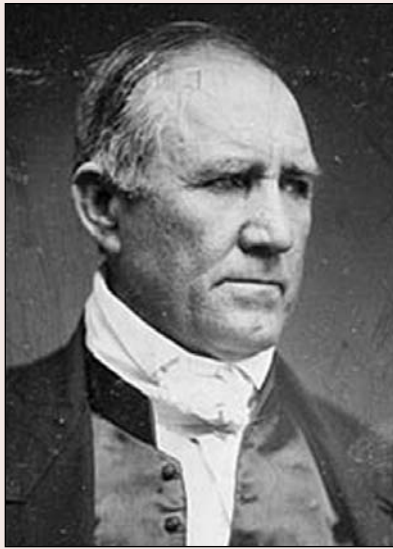
‘Once the Mexican soldier panics,’ Col. Delgado admitted ruefully, ‘there is no stopping him.’⁵¹ Among the first of the



Stephen Austin is one of the most underrated figures in Texas history. The problem with Austin was that he had not the glory-hogging nature of Houston. Houston himself referred to Austin as the true ‘father of Texas,’ while, for various reasons, Houston received the glory. None of the battles fought with Santa Anna during the War for Texas Independence could even remotely be credited to the leadership skills of Houston, while Austin, who was very well connected with the U.S. government, engaged in some engineering of the safety of the white population in the south from the threat of Mexicans and Indians.

Mexicans to make a getaway was Santa Anna himself, the self-styled ‘Napoleon of the West.’ Mounting the finest horse, a black stallion also from Groce’s plantation, he speedily outdistanced the other fugitives. A number of his staff were right behind him. Leaderless, the Mexicans, except for a few scattered pockets of resistance, fled in all directions. Many, unable to swim, bunched up at waterways, where they were cut down by shots from the Texans’ well-aimed rifles, or brained with the butt end of the rifles and, not infrequently, fell to the Texans’ well-honed Bowie knives.

Houston mounted a runaway Mexican cavalry horse caught by an aide and allegedly rejoined the fight, slashing at fleeing Mexicans with his saber. But, according to Amasa Turner, he hung back, not passing the Mexican camp.⁵² As the struggle passed beyond the camp, Rusk and Wharton, the latter



ARCHIVE PHOTOS

Detractors Report a Strange Side to Sam Houston

Sam Houston (1793-1863) was born in Virginia and moved to the western frontier at an early age, where he lived among the Cherokees. He had no formal education but became surprisingly literate.

While living among the Cherokees, he drank so heavily he earned the name “Big Drunk.”

Houston crossed the Red River into Mexican Texas on December 2, 1832. His motives for entering Texas have been the source of much speculation. Whether he did so simply as a land speculator, as an *agent provocateur* for American expansion intent on wresting Texas from Mexico, or as someone scheming to establish an independent nation, Houston saw Texas as his land of promise.

Houston and his men defeated Santa Anna’s forces at the decisive battle of San Jacinto on the afternoon of April 21, 1836. During this engagement, Houston was wounded severely. The capture of Santa Anna the next day made the victory complete. Houston became forever enshrined as a member of the pantheon of Texas heroes and a symbol for the age.

On May 9, 1840, Houston married 21-year-old Margaret Moffette Lea of Marion, Alabama. A strict Baptist, Margaret served as a restraining influence on her husband and especially bridled his drinking.

Houston was famous for his penchant for dressing in women’s clothing. This was apparently a practice acquired from the Cherokees, who liked to decorate their clothing with lace and fancy fabric accents. It has been reported that Houston wore lingerie on the outside of his regular clothing, a practice that was overlooked in the wake of his great military successes. Can any of our TBR readers tell us: Is there some truth to these reports about Houston or are they just propaganda?

—JOHN TIFFANY

described as “the keenest blade at San Jacinto,”⁵³ had now usurped Houston’s authority and were exercising such direction as they could over the virtually out-of-control Texans.

In another of his questionable acts, Houston, now on his third horse and with a bullet in his left ankle (that it was a copper ball created some suspicion it came from one of his own men), called for retreat to be sounded on the drum. None obeyed. “Parade, men, parade!” he commanded futilely. “Halt! Glory enough has been gained this day, and blood enough has been shed. . . . Gentlemen! Gentlemen! Gentlemen! I applaud your bravery but damn your manners.”⁵⁴

Again Rusk countermanded him. “Your order, general, cannot be obeyed. . . . No, it is not enough while the enemy is in sight.”⁵⁵

“Have I a friend in this world?” Houston asked bitterly.⁵⁶ He was fearful that other Mexican reinforcements might arrive while the Texans were in total disorganization. In his state of nerves, he thought that had actually happened when a column of Mexican prisoners was seen approaching from about a half mile away, guarded by Texans. Thinking they were Filisola’s men, he threw up his hands in despair, crying, “All is lost! All is lost! My God, all is lost!”⁵⁷

Followed by some of this staff, he then rode back to the Texan bivouac. Captain Amasa Turner, whose company had been designated to guard the Mexican camp to prevent looting, observed, “At the time he left he appeared the most distressed crazy creature I ever saw. He did not appear to have one particle of sense left.”⁵⁸ Such was the role of Sam Houston at San Jacinto.

The entire battle lasted only about 18 minutes. It was, in truth, won by its spunky rank and file, despite their general. But he got the acclaim.

The bitterness of most of the officers and men who served in the campaign was perhaps best summed up by Capt. Jesse Billingsley, who was wounded at San Jacinto. “Houston is the basest of all men, as he has, by willfully lying, attempted to rob that little band of men of their well earned honors on the battlefield of San Jacinto. He assumed to himself credit that was due to others.”⁵⁹

Interim President Burnet called Houston “the prince of humbugs.”⁶⁰

But their voices were drowned out by the swarm of newcomers who poured into Texas after San Jacinto. Soon the newcomers outnumbered the original Texans. All had absorbed an image of Sam Houston from reading newspaper accounts in the United States, which universally praised him as “the Sword of San Jacinto.”⁶¹ He was in their uncritical eyes the savior of Texas. In the election held September 5, 1836, he was swept into office as president of the new Republic of Texas. He received 5,119 votes over only 587 for Stephen F. Austin, whom even Houston was later to concede was truly “the Father of Texas.”⁶² ❖

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