

## **Battle of the Alamo**

The siege and the final assault on the Alamo in 1836 constitute the most celebrated military engagement in Texas history. For many Americans and most Texans, the battle has become a symbol of patriotic sacrifice.

In December 1835, a Federalist army of Texan immigrants, American volunteers, and their *Tejano* allies had captured San Antonio 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 forts blocked the two approaches into Texas: Presidio La Bahía (Nuestra Señora 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.

Newly arrived American volunteers constituted a majority of the troops in Bexar. Neill was determined to stall the Centralists on the frontier. Without speedy reinforcements, the Alamo could not long withstand a siege. At Bexar were some twenty-one artillery pieces of various calibers. 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. Major Green B. Jameson, chief engineer at the Alamo, installed most of the cannons on the walls. On January 19, **James Bowie** rode into the Alamo compound, and what he saw impressed him. As a result of much hard work, the mission had begun to look like a fort. Neill, who well knew the consequences of leaving the *camino real* unguarded, convinced Bowie that the Alamo was the only post between the enemy and Anglo settlements. Colonel Neill had complained that "for want of horses," he could not even "send out a small spy company." If the Alamo were to function as an early-warning station, Neill had to have outriders. Governor Smith directed Lt. Col. **William B. Travis** to take his "Legion of Cavalry" and report to Neill. Only thirty horsemen responded to the summons. Travis made his way toward Bexar with his thirty troopers. Reinforcements began to trickle into Bexar. On February 3, Travis and his cavalry contingent reached the Alamo. About February 8, **David Crockett** arrived with a group of American volunteers. On February 14, Neill departed on furlough as illness had struck his family and that they desperately needed him back in Bastrop. While Neill was on leave, Bowie would command the volunteers, Travis the regulars. Both would co-sign all orders and correspondence until Neill's return.

They learned that **Santa Anna's** Centralist army had reached the Rio Grande and the army arrived in Bexar on February 23. As Texans gathered in the Alamo, Travis dispatched a hastily scribbled missive to Gonzales: "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." Travis and Bowie understood that the Alamo could not hold without additional forces. Their fate now rested with the General Council in San

Felipe, Fannin at Goliad, and other Texan volunteers who might assist the beleaguered Bexar garrison.

Santa Anna sent a courier to demand that the Alamo surrender. Travis replied with a cannonball. There could be no mistaking such a concise response. Centralist artillerymen set about knocking down the walls. Once the heavy pounding reduced the walls, the garrison would have to surrender in the face of overwhelming odds. Bottled up inside the fort, the Texans had only one hope – that reinforcements would break the siege. On February 24, Travis assumed full command when Bowie fell victim to a mysterious malady variously described as "hasty consumption" or "typhoid pneumonia." As commander, Travis wrote his letter addressed to the "people of Texas & all Americans in the world," in which he recounted that the fort had "sustained a continual Bombardment and cannonade for 24 hours." He pledged that he would "never surrender or retreat" and swore "Victory or Death." The predominant message, however, was an entreaty for help: "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." On March 1, thirty-two troops attached to Lt. George C. Kimbell's Gonzales ranging company made their way through the enemy cordon and into the Alamo. Travis was grateful for any reinforcements, but knew he needed more.

On March 5, day twelve of the siege, Santa Anna announced an assault for the following day. There was simply no valid military justification for the costly attack on a stronghold bristling with cannons. Around 5:00 a.m. on Sunday, March 6, he hurled his columns at the battered walls from four directions. Texan gunners stood by their artillery. As about 1,800 assault troops advanced into range, canister ripped through their ranks. Staggered by the concentrated cannon and rifle fire, the Mexican soldiers halted, reformed, and drove forward. Soon they were past the defensive perimeter. Travis, among the first to die, fell on the north bastion. Abandoning the walls, defenders withdrew to the dim rooms of the Long Barracks. There some of the bloodiest hand-to-hand fighting occurred. Bowie, too ravaged by illness to rise from his bed, found no pity. The chapel fell last. By dawn, the Centralists had carried the works. The assault had lasted no more than ninety minutes. As many as seven defenders survived the battle, but Santa Anna ordered their summary execution. By eight o'clock, every Alamo fighting man lay dead. Currently, 189 defenders appear on the official list, but ongoing research may increase the final tally to as many as 257. Though Santa Anna had his victory, the common soldiers paid the price as his officers had anticipated. Accounts vary, but best estimates place the number of Mexicans killed and wounded at about 600. Mexican officers led several noncombatant women, children, and slaves from the smoldering compound. The most famous of these survivors were **Susanna W. Dickinson** and her infant daughter, Angelina Dickinson. After the battle, Mrs. Dickinson traveled to Gonzales, reporting the fall of the post to General Houston. The intelligence precipitated a wild exodus of Texan settlers called the **Runaway Scrape**.

Adapted from the Handbook Online website:

<http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/AA/qea2.html> (accessed January 21, 2008).