

# William Barrett Travis

From time to time, events, individuals, and circumstances coincide to create an historically significant event. As a result, the individuals involved often rise to national or even international fame. Brother William Barrett Travis was one such man.

Authors throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> Century have impugned Travis' character and painted him a haughty, unlikeable man. This negativity got an early start on the pages of Amelia Williams' Doctoral Dissertation at the University of Texas in 1931, and was promoted to the motion picture screen in John Wayne's *The Alamo* (1960). It was given new life in John Lee Hancock's Alamo movie in 2004.



The facts, however, conflict with this negative evaluation of Travis. Travis came to Texas in 1831, and within the space of a year had managed to be thrown in jail for inciting the colonists to thoughts of independence. Had he really been so reviled as the movies and the dissertation portrayed him, it is unlikely that the loyal colonists of the Austin Colony would have stood up for him as they did in 1832. It is also very unlikely that the volunteers would have stayed in the Alamo to stand with him against an overwhelming army. Those facts are completely at odds with an arrogant, condescending man... but completely consistent with a man who could write such elegant prose as he did at the Alamo. Such a man would inspire men to do great things.

William Barrett Travis was born near the community of Red Bank, South Carolina on August 9, 1809.

Young Travis moved to Alabama with his family in 1818. There he attended school in Sparta, where he later apprenticed with James Dellett, a prominent local lawyer. He passed the bar and began practicing law by age 20. He supplemented his law career by teaching school. In this capacity, he met and married Rosanna Cato, one of his students. Travis and Rosanna settled in Claiborne, Alabama, where he started the *Claiborne Herald* newspaper, and where their son, Charles Edward, was born in 1829. There also, Travis joined the Masonic order in Alabama Lodge #3. The marriage with Rosanna failed. According to local gossip, this was because Travis believed Rosanna had been unfaithful and was carrying another man's child (Susan Isabel). He then (allegedly) murdered the man who fathered Susan and fled to Texas.

Travis arrived in Texas in early 1831 an illegal immigrant, as Anglo immigration was now banned by Mexican law. He located his law practice in Anahuac with Patrick C. Jack while he learned to speak Spanish. Here he quickly became embroiled in activities of the "war party" that was seeking independence. In June 1832 his actions almost triggered open conflict when he and Patrick Jack were imprisoned in Anahuac by Col. John Bradburn, a Kentucky mercenary in the Mexican Army. Austin's colonists, while not condoning Travis' actions, nonetheless were angered by the indeterminate incarceration without charges.

Members of the Brazoria Militia concocted a plan to free Travis and Jack by force. Their plan to sail the schooner *Brazoria* to Anahuac fizzled when they got into a pitched battle with the garrison of Fort Velasco at the mouth of the Brazos River. The colonists "won" the battle, but a Mexican flotilla doused their hopes for a fight at Anahuac. Colonel José de las Piedras from Nacogdoches eased tensions by interceding on Travis' behalf, and had the two men released to local authorities, thus avoiding a confrontation. It is plain that armed conflict with Mexico at this point would have been disastrous.



The winds of change continued to push the Colonists on a collision course with the Central Government.

Travis moved his practice to San Felipe and was accepted into the local government. Here he met and courted Rebecca Cummings, with plans to marry her after his divorce with Rosanna was final. Here, too, members of the war party authorized Travis to capture Captain Antonio Tenorio at Anahuac. This he did in June 1835 with a contingent of 25 men. As the months passed, tensions mounted. Stephen Austin had always been a strong voice for restraint, but in the fall of 1835, Austin agreed that war was the only solution. The skirmish in October at Gonzales over an inconsequential cannon lit the fuse that was finally to explode in open war. Like many others, Travis arrived at Gonzales too late to take part, but traveled to Bejar to take part in the first siege of the Alamo.

Travis returned to San Felipe before the siege ended. Then in January 1836, Governor Henry Smith ordered him to recruit 100 men and reinforce Colonel James Neill at Bejar. He was able to recruit only 29, with whom he arrived at Bejar in early February. Colonel Neill immediately left him in command of his small contingent of regulars and departed to attend “urgent family matters.”

Sam Houston dispatched James Bowie to Bejar to evaluate conditions and to destroy the mission and retrieve the cannon if Governor Smith acceded. Governor Smith did not concur, and Bowie fell under the spell of the place, deciding to stay and defend it. When Travis arrived in mid February, he too became enthralled with the idea of defense.

A more indefensible location has seldom been manned. The mission compound could be easily surrounded on an open plain in sight of Bejar, with walls of adobe and rubble construction only about nine feet high, with sizable weak points on both north and south ends of the compound. Major Green B. Jamieson, the garrison’s engineer, had done his best to repair the breaches, but his timber and earth repair had unintentionally made the north wall easier to scale than the adobe walls that flanked it. The mission would have been more easily defended had it been a third as large. As it was, the walls of the mission compound stretched over 900 feet. Had the entire Texian contingent been assigned as riflemen, the defenders would have been stretched paper thin, with over four feet between each man. And of course, they could not all be assigned to shoulder arms. There were twenty-one cannon of various caliber -- each of which should have had a crew of six to eight men, but which were probably manned by three or perhaps even two at the beginning of the battle.

Travis was a man of letters. He penned letters from the Alamo daily, requesting reinforcements. His first was to Judge Andrew Ponton of Gonzales, briefly describing his command and the enemy and asking for reinforcements. The day after retreating to the mission walls, he penned a letter to the outside world. The letter plainly and eloquently describes their condition and entreats the reader for assistance. This letter, which begins, “To the People of Texas and All Americans in the World” is recognized by many military experts as the preeminent military document of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century.

The garrison received continual bombardment by cannon and mortar fire for 12 days. Then, in the chill quiet of the predawn blackness on Sunday, March 6, 1836, General Santa Anna began his attack. The long rifles of the Alamo garrison now became a liability, as they were much slower to load than the smoothbore muskets of the Mexican troops. Striking from the darkness at known weak points in the walls, the Mexican attack made three assaults on the walls, the third of which breached the walls as the dawn began to lighten the eastern sky. By daylight, the moans of wounded soldados, and the broken and lifeless bodies of the combatants strewn haphazardly across the plaza bore stark testimony to the horror that transpired that dawn. Bowie and Crockett, Dickenson, Bonham, and Travis, all Freemasons, lay lifeless, tangled in the choreography of death as the ululating threnody of the winnowing wind whipped through the still compound. William Barrett Travis was just twenty-six years old that cold March morning.

Santa Anna ordered the Texian bodies stacked and burned. The battle was, he said, “of no importance.” In this statement, he was very wrong.

“Remember the Alamo!” and “Remember Goliad” became rallying cries at San Jacinto and stirred the Texians to ultimate victory. The courage and resolution of the soldiers on both sides of the battle lives on through the ages.

Written by Sam Whitley, Texas History Committee, Grand Lodge of Texas

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