

How Slavery Led to the Texas Revolution

By Lynn Burnett

In the depths of the winter of 1819, three slaves fled a Louisiana plantation. Heading west, they sought freedom across the Sabine River, the border into Spanish Texas. The slave master James Kirkham followed quickly on their heels, hoping to convince Spanish officials to return the people he considered to be his property. Before crossing the Sabine, Kirkham stopped at a tavern, where he met a man named Moses Austin who was also travelling to Texas. Austin was headed to the same destination: San Antonio, where he planned to ask permission from Spanish authorities to settle American families in Texas. Austin believed such settlement would be profitable because the land was excellent for developing a slave-based cotton economy. The slave catcher at the tavern was exactly the kind of man Austin hoped would purchase land in his new settlements. The two men decided to make the long journey to San Antonio together.

Austin's plans were connected to major events in world history. New technology coming out of the British Empire had recently allowed for the mass production of cheap cotton cloth, and the British had begun supplying a voracious global market with fabric that was lighter, softer, more durable, and easier to clean than anything most people had ever had access to. Cotton production quickly became one of the most profitable enterprises in the world. When the War of 1812 ended, hundreds of thousands of White Americans flocked to the territories that would become Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana. In one of the largest mass migrations in American history, they established the cotton plantations that soon provided the raw material for the British manufacturing industry. Slaves who had once grown rice and tobacco now worked in the cotton fields from before sunup to after sundown. As the profits to be reaped from slavery skyrocketed, America's commitment to the institution strengthened beyond anything the American Revolutionaries a generation earlier could have imagined.

By 1819, the price of good cotton growing land in the South had become unaffordable to all but the wealthy. Across the Sabine River in Spanish Texas, however, was land as excellent for growing cotton as any in Mississippi: and it was cheap. If Austin could convince the Spanish officials of Texas to allow him to build American settlements, settlers would come. They would purchase the land from Austin, and he would become a wealthy man. Moses Austin, however, would soon be killed. And although his son Stephen would make his father's dream a reality, it would not be in Spanish Texas, but in a newly independent Mexican nation that fiercely opposed slavery. Although Mexico, like Spain, invited American settlers into Texas, Mexico pushed back hard against Americans bringing their slaves. Tensions soon grew between American settlers fighting to expand slavery, and Mexicans fighting to abolish it. Those struggles would soon be at the heart of the Texan Revolution, Texan independence... and the acceptance of Texas as a new American slave state.

Indigenous Texas; Mexican Independence

When Moses Austin rode into Texas in 1819, the Mexican War of Independence had been raging for nearly a decade, and Mexico would soon emerge victorious. However, neither the Spanish nor the Mexicans had ever been the masters of Texas. That title belonged to the Comanches.

The Comanches had gained fantastic wealth and power by monopolizing the horse trade on the Great Plains, sweeping from Texas up to Canada. The northern plains were too cold to breed horses, and numerous indigenous peoples looked to the Comanches – the master horse breeders of the central plains – to supply them with enough horses to be successful in trade, travel, hunting, and war. The Comanche reach was vast, extending even beyond the indigenous plains: they supplied the British in Canada, and the French in Louisiana. Horses were vital, and the French and British were willing to offer the best weapons available in exchange... weaponry superior to Spanish arms. In addition to this wealth and firepower, Comanches were raised hunting and fighting on horseback. Their abilities in war were practically mythic. So was their ferocity. Spanish attempts at enticing Comanches into missions were, at best, a dismal failure.

Indeed, the Spanish Empire had only been able to maintain a presence in Texas by paying tribute to the Comanches... but when the Napoleonic Wars washed over Europe in 1803, Spain's ability to pay such tribute was greatly diminished. When the Mexican War of Independence erupted in 1810, it disappeared entirely. Meanwhile, as Comanche relations with the Spanish deteriorated in Texas, Americans were pouring south and building a cotton empire that would surpass even India by 1820. The hundreds of thousands of American migrants required an endless stream of horses and mules to plow the fields, turn the cotton gins, and haul the cotton bales to the ships that would take them across the Atlantic. The Comanches responded to this vast new market, and to Spain's failure to pay tribute, by decimating Spanish settlements and driving Spanish herds to American trade posts on the border of Texas. Comanche raids were massive: in 1817, a single, thousand-strong war party stole ten thousand horses and mules. Comanches systematically removed Spanish wealth and channeled it into American hands. In doing so, they played a crucial role in the rise of the American South as the primary supplier of cotton to the British Empire, and in the demise of Spanish power in the Southwest.

When Moses Austin arrived in San Antonio, the capital city was filled with refugees from the countryside, where Comanche raids had destroyed the ranches and haciendas. The Mexican War of Independence had also ravaged the city: many local Tejanos – as the Mexicans of Texas were called – had joined the rebellion, often because they were upset at the Spanish government's inability to protect them from Comanches. The Spanish had crushed the rebellion in Texas, killing hundreds of rebels in San Antonio alone. Rebel families all across eastern Texas had fled into the vast territory of the Louisiana Purchase. Entire towns were depopulated overnight.

With ranchers and farmers either fleeing the Comanches or the Spanish, San Antonio's food supply vanished. Attempts at resupplying were intercepted by Comanches. The governor of Spanish Texas, Antonio Martínez, reported that soldiers were deserting because "they were dying of hunger." So were their horses.

It was two days before Christmas in 1820 when Moses Austin and the slave catcher James Kirkham rode into San Antonio. At first, they were not received well: Governor Antonio Martínez distrusted Americans, who had refused to stop arming and paying Comanche raiders. However, Austin produced a Spanish passport, and explained that he was a former Spanish subject in the Louisiana Territory, before it was transferred to France, and then to the U.S. When these transfers were made, the King of Spain had declared that any Spanish subjects of the area could resettle in any part of New Spain. Austin requested resettlement in eastern Texas... and that he be allowed to start a settlement of 300 American families there, focused on the production of cotton. Austin promised that all settlers would become Spanish subjects.

The governor took a few days to discuss the matter with local Tejano leadership, as well as with the military commander of the Texas province, Joaquín de Arredondo. Arredondo had come to believe that there was no military solution to Comanche power in Texas, especially after the region's near-total depopulation during the Mexican War of Independence. Texas could only be secured by building up the non-Native population and economy. Former attempts to entice settlers to the dangerous region had failed. With Spanish power collapsing in Texas, General Arredondo hoped that Austin's settlement could entice a growing population to the region, as well as resources and industry. If the Americans helped a cotton economy take root, Tejanos could participate as well. Perhaps the opportunity would entice settlers from the rest of the Spanish New World. If the population grew, the Comanches could be forced to cease their raids. Ranches, haciendas and farms could be rebuilt. It was the best option the general could imagine. The rest of the Tejano leadership agreed. Moses Austin got his contract.

Kirkham did not get what he wanted: he was informed that his slaves had headed deeper into Mexico. There was nothing to be done. On the journey home, Kirkham made a deal to purchase some mules that had been smuggled from the royal corral. When he told Austin, the two men had an argument, with Austin believing that Kirkham's actions would jeopardize his contract. In the middle of the night, Kirkham stole off with all the horses and supplies, leaving Moses Austin to trek on foot through a cold winter. He was gravely ill by the time he made it home, and died shortly after. For the moment, it appeared that the contract Moses Austin had made with the Spanish amounted to nothing.

Stephen Austin & the Struggle Over Slavery in the Mexican Constitution

Shortly before the Spanish defeat, a group of Tejanos rode into Louisiana, carrying with them Spanish pardons for all Tejano families who had rebelled and fled into American territory. The group also planned to meet Moses Austin, and travel with him back to Texas to help him choose the land for his settlement. Instead, Tejanos were greeted by his son, Stephen, who rode back with them as the inheritor of his father's project. As the group approached San Antonio, they received news of Mexico's victory. Governor Martínez assured Austin that nothing had changed: with or without the Spanish, the Tejano leadership supported his father's settlement plans.

Austin went to work advertising his settlement in newspapers throughout the South. The ads described rich lands, perfect for growing cotton... and affordable to the average American. The advertisements made it clear that settlers would receive additional acreage if they brought a wife, additional acreage for each child, and additional acres for each slave. What Stephen Austin was offering was enticing. It was a chance for average White Americans who couldn't afford good cotton lands to become landowners and cotton producers. The land was so cheap that an average farmer who could otherwise never afford to purchase slaves could do so with the money they saved. Austin was offering the average White southerner a chance to get ahead. And yet, many who found Austin's plan enticing still had their doubts: for they saw Texas as a violent, lawless land, promising little certainty. It was too big a risk.

By the time Austin began running his advertisements, American newspapers had been reporting on Comanche raids and the Mexican War of Independence for a decade. They had also been reporting on the pirates who raided Spanish slave ships heading for Cuba, and who smuggled those slaves into the U.S. through Texas. In the eyes of many Americans, Texas was a haven for "bands of outlaws in arms, tribes of Cannibal Indians," and "gangs of daring smugglers," to quote one newspaper. Newspapers also reported that Tejanos were on the edge of starvation, "afraid," one paper wrote, "to venture a mile on the account of the Indians."

Texas was also viewed as a place that slaves escaped to... and a place without a legal structure to enforce their return. Americans reading Austin's advertisements didn't doubt that he was selling excellent land for a cheap price: but he needed to convince them that Mexico would be willing and able to protect them and their property... and especially their slaves. Austin was flooded with letters from potential settlers, asking him about Mexico's stance on slavery, and if the new nation had given Austin assurances that slavery would be legally protected. Austin quickly realized that settlers would not take the risk of moving to Texas without such assurances. Governor Martínez urged him to travel to Mexico City: with officials busy creating a new government, Austin's presence in the capital would be the only way to get their attention. And so, in the spring of 1822, Austin set off on the 2000-mile journey.

Austin was in luck. Following independence, Mexico had immediately formed a commission to study the security of the frontier states of California, New Mexico, and Texas. Mexican officials especially feared the enormous population imbalance at the Texan border. 400,000 Americans had just migrated to the cotton lands of the South, but in the wake of Comanche raids and the War of Independence, there were a mere 2,500 Mexicans living in Texas... most of them hundreds of miles from the border. Officials realized there was little they could do to prevent Americans from forcing their way into Texas. In the words of the commission: "The most important problem is the security of the Province of Texas . . . It would be an irreparable loss to the Empire if this beautiful province is lost. In order to save it there remains only one recourse – to populate it." The commission issued a dire warning: "If we do not take the present opportunity to people Texas, day by day the strength of the United States will grow until they leave their center and annex Texas, Coahuila, Saltillo, and Nuevo Leon like the Goths, Visigoths, and other tribes assailed the Roman Empire." Mexico, at its founding, foresaw its painful future.

When Austin arrived in Mexico City in April of 1822, all Mexican legislators agreed that settlement was necessary, and that Americans were realistically the only people who would migrate to Texas in large numbers. Mexican legislators also agreed, however, with something that would make Austin's project impossible: they all wanted to abolish slavery. The ideals of the Mexican War of Independence had called for the equality of all peoples, and had been explicitly antislavery from its inception. Mexico now sought to craft legislation that was consistent with the principles of its independence struggle.

In August, the Mexican congress opened debates over Texas settlements. When it came to the issue of American settlers bringing slaves, some congressmen responded with calls for the immediate abolition of slavery throughout Mexico. Francisco Argandar, the representative from Michoacán, roared: "If they wish to come, they will do it under the condition that they will not have slaves! This will be the highest honor of the Mexican nation." Others, however, sought a middle ground. Concerned that total abolition would make American settlement impossible, these legislators proposed allowing Americans to bring their slaves, and then gradually phasing out slavery once settlement in Texas had succeeded. Austin, understanding that no Mexican legislators were willing to take a hardcore proslavery stance, met with as many legislators as he could to try and at least lengthen the amount of time that slavery in Texas would be allowed to exist. When Congress began debating a plan to gradually abolish slavery over the next ten years, Austin tried to intervene, writing: "I am trying to have it amended so as to make them slaves for life and their children free at 21 years . . . but I do not think I shall succeed."

On January 3, 1823, Mexico passed legislation allowing American settlers to bring slaves, while gradually phasing slavery out after settlements had been established. Austin's settlement was also granted official recognition by the Mexican

government. However, Austin still struggled to attract settlers, because new antislavery measures made it obvious that Mexico hoped to abolish slavery in the near future. In July of 1824, a national law was passed banning the slave trade: "Commerce and traffic in slaves," read the bill, "proceeding from any country and under any flag whatsoever, is forever prohibited in the territory of the United Mexican States." Any slaves brought into Mexico against this law would be freed by "the mere act of treading Mexican soil." The language of the bill, however, left an opening for slaves to be brought into Mexico – just not sold there – leaving an opening for Americans to bring slaves who had been purchased in the U.S. However, for American settlers hoping to participate in the slave-based cotton economy, it made little sense to purchase land in a country where the support of slavery was clearly unstable... even if the land was cheap.

Austin pinned his hopes on the Mexican constitution being developed in 1824. The Texas representative, Erasmo Seguín, was a powerful ally of Austin's settlement plans: in fact, Seguín had personally guided Austin into Texas. Seguín's priority was creating safety and stability for Tejanos, which meant growing the population and developing the economy. If that meant allowing slavery in Texas, Seguín would accept it. As debates over the constitution raged, Austin wrote to Seguín: "There are two obstacles which slow down emigration to this province and the entire nation . . . One is the doubt that persists if slavery is permitted, the other is religion." Austin knew that the matter of Catholicism was beyond his control, but he urged Seguín to do everything in his power to allow Americans to "bring and keep their slaves." Seguín would have done this even without Austin's constant pressure. Under his urging, and that of other Tejanos, Mexico's constitution of 1824 made no mention of slavery: it left the divisive issue up to the states.

With the issue of slavery now under state control, most states immediately abolished it. Texas was the major outlier, but even there Austin's plans encountered trouble. Because Texas did not have a large enough population to become a state, it was merged with the state of Coahuila... meaning that decisions about the Texas frontier would be made by the large population far to the west of Texas, and not by the Tejanos who supported American settlement. Austin and his Tejano allies thus turned their attention towards influencing the legislation coming out of Saltillo, the capital of the new state of Coahuila-Texas.

American Settlers Push Back on Mexican Abolition

As Austin worked to influence Mexican legislation in favor of American settlement, he also continued to build that settlement. He secured financial investments from major cotton merchants, promising massive returns for the cotton gins and equipment they provided. He petitioned Mexican officials for the right to build seaports, arguing that only direct cotton shipments to Europe would bring prosperity to Texas. In order to secure slavery in a nation that wished to abolish it,

Austin drew up codes for extreme punishment to deter runaways. A White person aiding a runaway slave would be forced into hard labor and fined \$1000 – a fantastic sum at the time. Slaves could receive 100 lashes merely for stealing. Such policies helped slave owners feel at least somewhat reassured that their human property would be safe in Austin's settlement. Within a few years, slaves made up a quarter of the population, and Austin's settlement was producing an annual 200,000 pounds of cotton. It was a start to Austin's vision, but nowhere near the 45 million pounds produced yearly in Alabama.

Austin also developed militias to drive out local indigenous peoples. Referring to the local Karankawa tribe, Austin ordered the militia to "pursue and kill all those Indians wherever they are found." The small and relatively powerless tribe was decimated. When it came to the larger Tonkawa tribe, Austin convinced them to move with a peace treaty, combined with the threat of violence. The Comanche, on the other hand, were untouchable... but they were good trading partners. The settlers in Austin's colony continued to purchase horses from Comanches, just as they had done in the South... and the Comanches continued raiding Mexican settlements in order to provide those horses.

Tejanos had hoped that American settlement would help stop Comanche raids; instead, it just brought the American market closer. Still, Tejanos held out hope that a flourishing cotton economy would benefit them as well: Austin had doubled the non-native population by bringing in two thousand settlers and slaves within three years. Those two thousand bodies cleared rivers for navigation and trade, and began building a network of roads. Settlers initiated a robust trade between Texas and New Orleans. The infrastructure they created in a few years was greater than anything Spanish negligence had produced in the past century. And so, even when hundreds of Comanches ransacked San Antonio for six days in 1825, Tejanos held out hope. When Stephen Austin met his goal of settling 300 families that year, Tejanos granted him the right to build additional settlements.

Meanwhile, the state of Coahuila-Texas began writing its constitution. In June of 1826, Austin received a letter from Baron de Bastrop, the only representative of Texas at the state congress. Bastrop warned that the congress was preparing to insert an antislavery article into the state constitution: "If I cannot succeed in removing it, or at least modifying it," he wrote, the American settlements "will be completely ruined." Soon, Austin would see for himself what the antislavery threat was. The proposed Article 13 of the new Coahuila-Texas constitution read: "The state prohibits absolutely and for all time slavery in all its territory, and slaves that already reside in the state will be free from the day of the publication of the constitution in this capital."

Liberal and conservative legislators in Coahuila had come together to support Article 13, with the liberals being ideologically opposed to slavery, and the conservatives seeing abolition as a way to destroy the growing American settlements that they viewed as a threat. Tejano leaders panicked. San Antonio's

town council sent an emergency appeal to the state congress, warning that the immediate abolition of slavery would be a “deathblow” to Texas. Austin followed their lead, sending a petition to congress warning that abolition would cause American settlers to quickly abandon the territory. The potential for economic development would be destroyed in Texas for many years to come, he wrote. Austin also sent his younger brother, James “Brown” Austin, to the state capital of Saltillo to work directly with Tejano leadership, and to keep him informed of developments.

Soon, rumors were swirling in Austin’s settlements that the slaves were about to be freed. Fears of slave rebellions spread: settlers worried that if slaves knew they would soon be free, they would worry about their owners rushing them back to the U.S., and would fight to prevent that. Settlers began turning against Austin, feeling that he had given them false assurances that Mexico would protect slavery. Some prepared to leave. As Austin struggled to keep his settlement from falling apart, the rumors that slavery was about to be ended in Texas spread through southern newspapers.

From the state capital, Brown Austin sought to buy time. If congress could put off emancipation for a few years, perhaps a different legislature would be more favorable. Hoping to pull at the heartstrings of antislavery legislators, Brown went so far as to argue that freeing slave children would actually hurt them. As long as they were slaves, children would be fed and sheltered, he argued... but if they were freed, they would become impoverished vagabonds, starving in the street, and forced into a life of crime. Brown argued that such children should continue to be enslaved at least until they were teenagers and able to support themselves. Meanwhile, Governor Blanco wrote to the congress, warning them that Austin’s settlers would probably rebel if slavery was immediately abolished. The governor urged them to forbid the importation of more slaves, while allowing the settlers to keep the slaves they already had.

Heeding the warning of a possible rebellion, the final version of Article 13 in the Coahuila-Texas constitution allowed American settlers to keep their slaves. It even gave them a six-month window in which to purchase new slaves. However, any children born of slaves would be born free, and slave children born before Article 13 would be freed when they became young adults. This meant that there would be no future generations of slaves in Texas. The new state constitution did not immediately abolish slavery, but it did put an end to the expansion of slavery in Texas and ensure slavery’s slow death.

Upon hearing the news, American settlers on their way to Texas stopped in their tracks and turned around: Article 13 was a deal-breaker for further settlement. And the antislavery measures didn’t stop there: after the six-month period allowing new slaves to be brought into Texas expired, Coahuila-Texas imposed an ongoing census of the enslaved population in Coahuila-Texas, to ensure that new slaves were not being brought in. A five hundred peso fine – the peso was equivalent to the dollar at the time – was imposed on anyone caught transporting a pregnant slave back to the

U.S., where their children would be born into slavery. Finally, new legislation mandated that when a master died, a minimum of ten percent of their slaves must be freed. The American settlers and their Tejano allies responded to these laws by simply ignoring them, knowing that there was little the state congress could do to enforce the laws along the distant Texan frontier. Even so, the new antislavery laws had the effect of preventing further American immigration into Texas. Austin would have to do more than simply ignore the laws if he wanted to grow his settlements.

In March of 1828, roughly a year after the passage of Article 13, Austin called together a meeting of leading figures in his settlement to “seek a way around the problem of emancipation,” to use the words of historian Andrew Torget. The group came up with a scheme: they would ask the state legislature “for a law guaranteeing that all labor contracts signed in foreign countries would be honored in Mexico.” They would claim that this was an effort to bring in non-slave labor from the U.S., and that they needed such a law so that American workers could trust that contracts they signed in the U.S. would be honored in Texas. Once the law was in place, however, they would simply force slaves in the U.S. to sign official lifetime “contracts” before crossing into Texas. Tejano legislators quickly embraced the plan: they waited for a moment when the Coahuila-Texas government was overwhelmed by other issues, and pushed the bill through while the Congress was too distracted to examine it closely. Austin then contacted his cotton merchant allies in the U.S., who funded advertisements telling American settlers that all they had to do was obtain official work contracts for their slaves. With this loophole in place, Americans once again began migrating to Texas.

The abolitionist spirit in Mexico, however, remained a problem for Austin’s settlements. In 1829, Spain attempted to reconquer Mexico. In order to deal with the invasion, Congress granted President Vicente Guerrero emergency powers. Guerrero – a man of indigenous and African heritage – used these powers to circumvent the Mexican Constitution and declare the immediate abolition of slavery throughout Mexico. As the news of the presidential decree moved across Austin’s settlements, so did talk of revolution. Mexican military officials warned the Coahuila-Texas government that they did not have the power to suppress an uprising, and the government panicked: even those who despised slavery begged President Guerrero to exclude Texas from his antislavery decree in order to prevent an uprising they didn’t have the power to control. Fearing an American revolution in the north, Guerrero caved in and excluded Texas from his decree of abolition. Even if he hadn’t, however, it wouldn’t have mattered: Guerrero had abused his wartime powers, and was soon overthrown. All of his decrees were voided.

Rising Tensions: Mexico Pushes Back on American Settlement

Even though revolution had been averted in 1829, events in the early 1830s moved the American settlers quickly in that direction. When General Manuel de Mier y

Terán was sent on an off-the-records mission to assess the American settlements, he issued a dire warning to Mexico City: American settlers greatly outnumbered Mexicans in the region. They had far more economic might and displayed no concern for Mexican laws. They traded almost exclusively with the U.S., as did their Tejano allies. The Texas settlement had essentially become an extension of the U.S. reaching into Mexico. General Terán warned Mexico City that it needed to take urgent steps to reassert Mexican authority in Texas by suspending any further U.S. immigration.

The events leading up to the Texas Revolution now unfolded rapidly. In order to encourage immigration to Texas, Mexico had originally granted Americans a tax-exempt status for seven years. In 1830, that period ended. Mexico's new president, Anastasio Bustamante, heeded General Terán's advice and used the new taxes gathered in Texas to build military outposts. Such outposts were often constructed at the mouths of major rivers where trade occurred, and were used to enforce tax collection. Congress also forbade any further American immigration to Texas.

All of this increased tensions with the American settlers, and none of it did anything to prevent further arrivals. Instead, in 1831 the global cotton market hit a new high. In order to take advantage of soaring profits, cotton production ramped up dramatically in the South, and thousands of Americans poured over the border into Texas to take advantage of the cheap cotton-growing land. They understood that the move to Mexico came with instability around the question of slavery, but the higher profits to be gained in the 1830s made the risk worth it to thousands of settlers. Indeed, between the time that Mexico forbade further American immigration in 1830 and the outbreak of the Texas Revolution in 1835, the American population more than doubled in Texas, from 10,000 to over 21,000.

In 1832 another event transpired that pushed the American settlements further towards revolution: the Coahuila-Texas government outlawed the use of the "work contracts" American settlers had been using to bring in slaves. In doing so, the last semi-legal means of bringing slaves into Texas was closed. American settlers and their Tejano allies responded by petitioning Mexico City for separate statehood from Coahuila, so that Texans could create their own laws. When that statehood was denied, Austin travelled to Mexico City himself, hoping to convince legislators in person. He got nowhere. In his frustration, Austin sent a letter to his Tejano allies urging them to form an independent state government even without Mexico City's approval. The letter was intercepted, and Austin was thrown in jail for treason.

Meanwhile, Mexico was in turmoil: ever since its independence in 1821, the nation had been torn between the forces of federalism and centralism, or of greater state and local control versus a more powerful central government in Mexico City. As Austin languished in jail, Mexico's new president, Santa Anna, made a move to totally centralize the nation: he abolished the constitution, decreed that the states would now be run by his own personal appointees, and set himself up as a dictator. This predictably led many states into open revolt, but because Santa Anna was

famous as the general who had helped push back the recent attempt at Spanish reconquest, the military was deeply loyal to him and helped him crush the popular uprisings. Mexico thus slipped into a civil war with the centralists on one side, and the federalists on the other.

When Austin was released from jail in August of 1835, tensions were skyrocketing in Texas. Santa Anna had sent more military reinforcements to the newly constructed and widely hated fortresses. The greater military presence and recent attempts at collecting taxes from the American settlers had pushed many of the settlers to fiercely oppose Santa Anna. The settlers, of course, had always sought stronger independence, especially when it came to creating their own laws regarding slavery. That desire for Texan independence now led Texans to support the federalist cause in Mexico's civil war.

The Texas Revolution

By October, violence was breaking out between American settlers and the Mexican soldiers stationed at the military outposts. Leaders amongst the settlers and the Tejanos, determined to form an independent Texas at long last, formed a General Council tasked with creating a new government. One of the very first laws they passed was to make it illegal for any free Black people to enter Texas. Furthermore, all Black people in the settlement who were free were to be immediately enslaved. The Council also appointed Sam Houston to be the general of the Texan army, and sent Austin to the U.S. to secure funds and generate public support for the revolution.

Austin's deep connections to cotton merchants made him the ideal figure for this work, and it would indeed be these cotton merchants who funded the Texas Revolution. They also helped to circulate newspapers throughout the South filled with sensational stories framing the Texan independence struggle as a race war, with White American settlers being pitted against the racially inferior Mexican forces of Santa Anna, who was coming to incite slave revolts and murder the White population. Such newspaper accounts led thousands of White Southern men to rush to the defense of Texas: such men would make up a full 40 percent of the Texan rebel army. These reinforcements were badly needed, for slave revolts had begun breaking out in Texas as the potential promise of freedom approached in the form of Santa Anna's army, and many of the settlers were more occupied with preventing slave uprisings than preparing for war. In one instance, a hundred slaves suspected of planning rebellion were rounded up, and either whipped nearly to death or hung.

The Texans waited in terrified expectation as news of Santa Anna's ruthless crushing of revolts in Zacatecas and Coahuila reached them. Soon, Santa Anna's forces approached the Alamo. The 150 defenders of the small fortress had been expecting reinforcements that had never arrived. They had been weakened by

dysentery and were running low on food and water. Santa Anna knew this. His army was ten times larger than the forces at the Alamo. It was clearly only a matter of time before the Texan rebels would surrender, but on March 6, 1836, Santa Anna attacked anyway. After the attack, when Mexican soldiers took the few survivors as prisoners, Santa Anna ordered them to be hacked to death, and the bodies of the dead to be piled up, doused in oil, and burned. Shortly afterwards, when the town of Goliad was captured and 400 American soldiers had surrendered, Santa Anna ordered them to be massacred. When these atrocities were reported in the U.S., it set White American hearts aflame, and facilitated a deep anti-Mexican hatred that laid foundations for future war.

Texas declared its total independence from Mexico just days before the attack on the Alamo. Their declaration was deeply influenced by America's Declaration of Independence, and the Texas Constitution that followed weeks later was also modeled on America's. Although many leading American settlers and Tejanos had started the struggle for independence seeking separate statehood within a federalist Mexico, the White Americans who had recently flooded into Texas to take advantage of the cotton boom had no such interest. Neither did the White Southern men who had rushed to defend Texas in a "race war" against Mexicans and liberated slaves... and who made up nearly half of the rebel army. More than anything else, however, it was the knowledge that they were about to face the brutality of Santa Anna that led the more established American settlers like Austin to make the decisive break from Mexico.

As for the Tejano leadership: of the fifty-nine delegates making these decisions, only two Tejanos had been included. By the time of the Texas Revolution, Tejanos made up a mere fifteen percent on the non-Native population. If the Texans succeeded at independence, Tejanos would find themselves a small minority in a majority White nation. Furthermore, the Americans who flooded into Texas during the Revolution had been inspired by the fierce anti-Mexican rhetoric whipped up in the U.S., and the flood of recent American immigrants taking advantage of the cotton boom of the 1830s had none of the experience of working closely with Tejanos that earlier settlers had. The days of American settlers collaborating with Tejano leaders were fading fast.

As the Texas delegates rushed to create their new government, news of Santa Anna's massacres burned their way across the Texas countryside. Thousands of Texans stopped whatever they were doing, leaving their tools in the fields and food at the table to flee for their lives. They not only feared the Mexican army, but the growing threat of slave rebellions as Santa Anna neared. The general had every intention of freeing the slaves, writing to his minister of war: "There is a considerable number of slaves in Texas also . . . who according to our laws should be free. Shall we permit those wretches to moan in chains any longer in a country whose laws protect the liberty of man without distinction of cast or color?" As Santa Anna neared Texan plantations, slaves began fleeing to his lines, and plantation owners began rounding up their slaves and driving them towards the U.S. in massive numbers. As they did,

torrential rainstorms broke out, and thousands of Tejanos, American settlers, and slaves became trapped together as rivers flooded and blocked their path of escape.

Meanwhile, General Houston ordered the Texan army into a full retreat. Greatly outnumbered, his army threw their cannons into the Guadalupe River so they wouldn't be slowed down, and burned any supplies they couldn't carry to prevent Santa Anna's forces from gaining access to them. Houston's retreat was also strategic: he wanted to fight on more familiar ground closer to the American settlements, and in a more wooded terrain that gave his army an advantage over the Mexican cavalry.

As Santa Anna pursued Houston's retreating army, he displayed his greatest weakness: Santa Anna was overly confident, and in his overconfidence he divided his forces to search for the retreating Texan army. Soon afterwards, Houston's army had a moment of luck: they captured a messenger carrying Santa Anna's plans and location. Realizing Santa Anna had divided his forces, Houston reversed his retreat. Once again displaying his overconfidence, Santa Anna had camped his men in a dangerous location: in the middle of a plain with a lake on one side, and a marsh on another. He also allowed his men to rest without establishing an adequate lookout, creating an opening for Houston's forces to launch a devastating surprise attack. On April 21, 1836, the Texan rebels slaughtered Santa Anna's forces. With shouts of "Remember the Alamo!", they shot down Mexican soldiers as they tried desperately to retreat across an unforgiving marshy terrain. While the Americans buried their own, the Mexican dead were left to rot, leaving the landscape strewn with skeletons. Mexican prisoners of war were sold into slavery.

When Santa Anna was taken prisoner, the Texans negotiated with him: they would spare his life and allow him to return to Mexico City if the dictator ordered the rest of his army to retreat... and if he used his influence to urge the Mexican government to accept an independent Texas, with an expanded border at the Rio Grande rather than the traditional border at the Nueces River. Santa Anna agreed. As the Mexican army retreated, slaves fled to join their ranks. Santa Anna had also been forced to agree to return all such escapees. However, none of Santa Anna's agreements held legitimacy in the eyes of the Mexican nation: they had been made by one man under threat of death, not by Congress or the people of Mexico. Santa Anna's deals with the Texans were viewed as cowardly and disgraceful, and he was forced from power. Mexico did not accept Texan independence... and it would not return slaves. From this moment on, Mexico became widely seen as a southern sanctuary for those fleeing the horrors of Texan cotton plantations.

Texas: An Isolated Slave Nation in an Era of Global Abolition

In the summer of 1836, Sam Houston, hailed as the revolution's great war hero, was elected president in a landslide. President Houston immediately began advocating

that Texas join the United States: the vast majority of White settlers identified as Americans and desired Texas annexation, and becoming part of the U.S. could prevent Mexico from attempting to retake Texas. Statehood would also lead to further migration, and thus to greater wealth and development in Texas. President Andrew Jackson, however, refused to consider it... precisely because his own intelligence experts were telling him that reconquest by Mexico was likely. Jackson urged Congress not to consider Texas annexation, lest in embroil the U.S. in a larger war with Mexico.

Even more important than concerns over war with Mexico were concerns over the expansion of slavery. Tensions had been rising between the slave and the free states for over a decade by the time of the Texan Revolution, but there was a relative balance of power between the North and the South in Congress. Admitting Texas to the union would tip that balance towards the political interests of slavery, leading congressmen from the North to fiercely oppose annexation. Neither President Jackson nor his successor Martin Van Buren were willing to stoke the fires of the growing North/South divide. Annexation was thus off the table. However, President Jackson, recognizing the fierce support for annexation in the South, officially recognized Texan independence from Mexico on his last day in office.

In order to create more pressure for annexation, Stephen Austin, now the Texan Secretary of State, developed a plan. He warned American legislators that if Texas was not accepted as part of the U.S., that it would quickly emerge as a rival to American cotton interests. To make the threat real, Austin immediately sought direct trade relations with Europe... relations that Texas, if it were to remain independent, would certainly need. Before the revolution, nearly all of the cotton from Texas went to the cotton markets of the American South, from where they were shipped internationally. Under this system, the South profited, but Texans lost about half of their potential earnings paying American middlemen. If Texas was to survive as an independent nation, it would require more profitable, direct trade with Europe... and if that were to happen, Texas would indeed emerge as a rival to U.S. cotton. Austin, however, wouldn't live to see if his attempts to pressure the U.S. into annexation would work: he caught a deadly case of pneumonia in the cold winter winds on 1836.

Meanwhile, Texas diplomats arrived in London, hoping to forge a relationship with the world's greatest military and economic power, and its greatest consumer of cotton. Texas was completely broke after the revolution, and hoped to secure loans from Great Britain, as well as diplomatic recognition and direct trade. By the mid-1830s, however, Great Britain had adopted a strong anti-slavery stance. Texans hoped that the promise of a vast new source of cotton would tempt the British Empire to exclude Texas from its antislavery efforts, but this was not the case. The Empire had no interest in supporting a new nation founded on pro-slavery principles, and refused to recognize Texas as a legitimate nation at all. Unable to secure direct trade, loans, or even basic diplomatic recognition from the world's greatest consumer of cotton, President Houston realized that Texas had no means to

pressure the U.S. into accepting annexation. Texas would have to blaze its own, separate path.

In a world that was steadily moving towards abolitionism, Texas, rather than emerging as an influential cotton empire, found itself internationally isolated. Unable to secure loans from either the U.S. or Great Britain, Texas found itself with no revenue to form a government. Texas attempted to remedy the problem by taxing imports, but that only led to mass smuggling. Texas then attempted to tax its own citizens, but had no means to enforce such tax collecting. The new nation was unable to run a postal service, pay its government officials, and was even forced to dissolve the small navy it had built during the revolution... which led to even more smuggling, especially of slaves from Cuba. In what became a symbol of the struggles of independent Texas, the Texan Congress literally met in a barn.

Despite the Republic of Texas's struggles with finances and international support, White Southerners poured into the new nation in greater numbers than ever before. The cotton economy was still booming, and as always, Southerners were attracted by cheap Texan land. And now that Texas was free from the laws of Mexico, it finally offered slave owners a secure investment. In fact, the Texan Constitution offered far stronger support for slavery than the U.S. Constitution did... and unlike in the U.S., there was no growing abolitionist movement or North/South divide to threaten the future of slavery. Indeed, one of the goals of Texas's new constitution was to ensure White Southerners that the practice of slavery would be fiercely protected: according to the constitution, neither Congress nor slave owners themselves were allowed to emancipate slaves, or to place any limitations on the importation of slaves from the U.S. With such protections in place, both the White and the slave populations tripled in Texas between 1837 and 1840 alone. Almost all of these migrants wanted a part of the Texan slave-based cotton wealth: the crop made up 95 percent of the new nation's exports.

Despite the enormous influx of American immigrants, Texas had failed in its quest for American statehood, failed at its need to secure international relations, and failed to become financially secure and even form a functioning government. Thus, when it came time for the next presidential election, the anti-Houston candidate Mirabeau Lamar won a landslide 96 percent of the vote. President Lamar cast aside the idea of annexation entirely. If Texas were to become an American state, he warned it would be subjected to the growing influence of abolitionism. It was better to remain independent, and to be a refuge for slaveholders as abolitionism grew in the U.S. Lamar envisioned an independent Texas that would grow in strength over time, and which would push westward, stretching "from the Sabine to the Pacific" as he put it in his inaugural address. As one article described Lamar's dream: American slaveholders "will look to Texas as the Hebrews did to the Promised Land for a refuge and a home."

Houston had also declined in popularity because of his attempts at making peace with indigenous groups rather than waging war on them. Houston's indigenous

policies were partly personal – he had been adopted by Cherokees during his youth – but primarily practical. Texas was in no position to take on a powerful indigenous nation like the Comanches. However, as settlers pushed further and further into indigenous territories, raids on Texan settlements became more common. Mirabeau Lamar promised Texans protection... in the form of explicitly exterminationist campaigns. In Lamar's first message to Congress, he called for "an exterminating war" on indigenous warriors, "which will admit no compromise and have no termination except in their total extinction or total expulsion." After decimating the small Indian populations in eastern Texas, Lamar authorized war on the powerful Comanches to the west, leading to mass violence. Although the Comanches did retreat into their vast territory, the western frontier of Texas was devastated in the process, and the struggling new nation was pushed further into bankruptcy.

Things did not get any easier from there. In 1839, a depression hit, and cotton profits were soon cut in half. With its economy based on a single crop, the nation teetered on the brink of economic collapse. Texas slashed its entire military budget and stopped all repayments on its vast national debt, ensuring that it would never receive the foreign loans it desperately needed. Then, storms in 1842 and 1843 destroyed much of the cotton crop. Immigration from the U.S. ceased. As Texas weakened, fears of slave revolts escalated. Many slaves escaped into Mexico during these years.

Mexico, of course, took note of all this. Although the nation was still locked in a state of continuous rebellions and coups between the forces of centralism and federalism, Mexicans of all political persuasions agreed that retaking Texas was vital. They also worried that time was running out. Many Mexicans worried that slaveholders in the U.S. were not only planning to annex Texas as soon as circumstances allowed... but were aiming to take other parts of Mexico as well in order to bring new slave states into the Union and tip American political power decisively in favor of slavery. In the words of Mexico's minister to the U.S., Manuel Gorostiza: "The fundamental purpose of the plot is to take possession of the entire coast of Texas, reunite it with the United States, make Texas into four of five slave states, in order to obtain by means of the new senators and representatives that these states name the preponderance in the Congress in favor of the South, therefor to sacrifice the interests of the North to those of the South and to prepare for a separation from the North which sooner or later must happen, and is already believed to be near." Although there was no such concerted plan, many Mexicans, like abolitionists in the United States, feared otherwise.

However, Mexico quite simply did not have the power to retake Texas, especially given the tripling of the Texan population since the revolution. Despite this fact, in March of 1842, 700 Mexican soldiers retook San Antonio, while separate forces took the towns of Goliad and Refugio. These small Mexican forces knew that they would not be able to fend off the far larger forces Texas was capable of mobilizing, but that was not the point. The Mexican army sought to gain the support of the now marginalized Tejano population and turn them against the Americans. And by

holding the towns, the Mexicans had forced Texan men to abandon their cotton crops at the height of the planting season to join militias, thus threatening the year's cotton harvest. The Mexican forces, having served their purpose, vanished before the Texans ever arrived. Then, in September, a Mexican army of 1200 took San Antonio again. President Houston – who had been re-elected after Lamar's failures – ordered a Texan force of 700 into Mexico to retaliate. When the Texan army was captured, the weakness of the nation was further revealed.

Abolitionist Pressures From the British Empire & American Annexation

The world's greatest consumer of cotton saw an opportunity in the chaos of Texas. Manufactured cotton products made up a full half of the British Empire's monumental exports, and 82 percent of that raw cotton came from the southern United States. However, the British Empire had adopted an antislavery stance, abolishing the practice in its own colonies, and even using its immense navy to hunt down slave ships and pressure other countries to abandon slavery. The Empire was also seeking alternative sources of raw cotton that did not depend on slave labor. And although Texas was deeply committed to slavery, when Great Britain looked at the struggling new nation, they imagined that Texans might be open to abandoning slavery... in exchange for the support of the British Empire. British diplomats hoped that by funding a slave-free cotton empire in Texas, and by shifting British imports away from the American South and towards Texas, that they could create pressure on the American South to let go of slavery as well. British diplomats also imagined that a strong Texas, in alliance with the British Empire, could be one of the best ways to prevent further American westward expansion and the growing power that came with it.

Texans, however, had a deep distrust of the British. Ever since Texan independence, British abolitionists had heaped scorn on their society: one member of the British Parliament had even floated the idea of funding a colony for free Blacks in northern Mexico, in order to inspire more slaves to escape and thereby destabilize "the piratical society called the State of Texas." Antislavery activists in London discussed plans to secretly send abolitionists to work in Texas. Although neither of these ideas ever got off the ground, they became attention-grabbing headlines throughout Texas and the American South and stirred deep anti-British sentiments. Such stories also created enough paranoia to fuel widespread conspiracy theories that the British Empire was going to fund the Mexican army to reconquer Texas, although there was no evidence for such plans.

Then, in the summer of 1843, British representatives openly discussed their desire to abolish slavery in Texas at the World Antislavery Convention. Although what was said at the convention did not represent the goals of the British government, the news that swept through Texas like fire did not make such distinctions. Texans,

imagining an imminent threat from Great Britain, panicked. Even Texans like ex-President Mirabeau Lamar, who feared American abolitionism and who dreamed of building an independent, slave-based Texan empire extending to the Pacific, now embraced annexation to the United States as the best way to preserve slavery. The Houston administration made a renewed push for annexation, this time emphasizing how the collapsing Texan economy made it increasingly more vulnerable to the British.

During this time, American President John Tyler was receiving his own intelligence about the British desire to influence Texas in order to deal a blow to southern slavery and prevent westward expansion. In this context, the United States entered secret negotiations for Texas annexation in the fall of 1843. President Tyler was deeply concerned with preserving slavery, and saw the annexation of Texas as a means to strengthen slave interests in the U.S. However, in order to gain the support of northern Congressmen, his administration presented the issue as a national security concern: would they really allow the British Empire to develop a base of power just to the west of the U.S.? With the issue of annexation framed as preventing a British threat, support for annexation in Congress grew. To keep up the pressure, President Houston openly pursued a stronger relationship with the British Empire as the American Congress debated annexation.

Then, in February 1844, everything changed. The man who had built up support for annexation in the Senate – Secretary of State Abel Upshur – was killed in an explosion. His successor, John Calhoun, brashly championed annexation as a way to strengthen slave interests in the U.S. Overnight, the support that Secretary Upshur had built by framing annexation as a national security issue vanished. Northern senators were furious at the deception, and on June 8, 1844, annexation was soundly rejected in the Senate.

The issue of annexation, however, was not yet settled. In November, James Polk won the presidential election running on a platform of western expansion, including the annexation of Texas. In one of his last acts as president, John Tyler, arguing that the American public had voted in favor of annexation when they voted for Polk, was able to push an annexation deal through Congress. He did so using legally questionable means that required a bare majority vote rather than the traditional two-thirds. Texas immediately accepted the American offer of statehood, and officially joined the union on December 29, 1845.

Postlude: Towards the Confederacy

The American acceptance of Texas as its twenty-eighth state was a major act of aggression towards Mexico, quickly followed by another, in the form of the U.S.-Mexico War. During that war, Tejanos who had originally supported American settlements in a desperate hope to develop the area and gain protection from

Comanche raids now fought the very settlers they had once tried to support. Amongst them was Juan Seguín, the son of Erasmo Seguín... the man who had originally guided Stephen Austin into Texas.

When the U.S.-Mexico War ended in 1848, vast amounts of conquered Mexican land was added to the United States. The following decade would be defined by struggles over the expansion of slavery into these territories... struggles that led directly to the Civil War. When that moment came, Texas joined the Confederacy, explaining that they opposed "the debasing doctrine of the equality of all men, irrespective of race or color," and thus left the U.S. as a means of "holding, maintaining and protecting the institution known as negro slavery." The same ideology that had done so much to create Texas itself later drove it into the Confederacy. By that time, there were 182,000 slaves in Texas – making up a full third of its population – and Texas had turned itself into the dominant cotton-growing region in the U.S. It remains so today.