

# BATTLE DIGEST™

Lessons for Today's Leaders

Volume 2 ★ Issue 3

Early American Wars:

## The Alamo

**DATE:**

Feb. 23 – March 6, 1836

**LOCATION:**

Present-day San Antonio, Texas

### OPPOSING FORCES

**Republic of Texas Forces:** 180–200 soldiers, volunteers, and militia under Lt. Col. William Barret Travis and Col. James Bowie.

**Mexican Army:** Between 4,000–6,000 troops under Gen. Antonio López de Santa Anna, President of Mexico.

### HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE

During the Texas Revolution, the Mexican Army clashed with Texan forces on several battlefields – the most famous of which was the Alamo. During this 13-day siege, a small group of defenders held out against overwhelming odds only to die in the final Mexican assault on the Alamo mission. Although it was clearly a tactical defeat for the Texans, this legendary “last stand” was a sentinel event during the Texas Revolution. The battle, more than any other event, galvanized Texans’ popular support against Gen. Santa Anna, President of Mexico. Not only did the brave defenders buy time for Sam Houston to build his Texan army, but they also created the symbol that would rally the support and manpower to defeat Santa Anna just weeks later at the Battle of San Jacinto. Today, the Alamo still evokes sentiments of patriotism, courage, and determination against great odds.

### STRATEGY & MANEUVER



Gen. Santa Anna

**Actions by the Texans** – After Mexico gained independence from Spain in 1831, President Santa Anna consolidated control of the government and began restricting freedoms across the country. He centralized power, imposed higher taxes, and enacted laws restricting further American settlement in Mexico. These heavy-handed policies stoked the flames of an independence movement that had been growing among both Tejanos (Hispanic residents) and Texans (American

settlers) in the province of Texas. In September of 1835, Santa Anna dispatched Gen. Martín Perfecto de Cos with 500 troops to reestablish control. (*Map 1*) By October, Texas delegates had formed a provisional government, known as the Consultation

The initial clash came when Cos’s forces attempted to seize a cannon at Gonzalez but were forced to retreat to San Antonio de Béxar. When he tried to counterattack at Concepción in October, the Texans again beat him back. By December, Texas forces had completely ejected Cos’s forces from Texas. With the Mexican Army gone, around 100 Texan soldiers occupied the old Franciscan mission of San Antonio de Valero, commonly called the Alamo. But Sam Houston, the overall commander of Texas forces, believed that the mission would be difficult to defend. He intended to pursue a Fabian strategy by withdrawing into the countryside and harassing the Mexican Army, while

he built a force capable of defeating his weakened opponent. Houston dispatched famed adventurer Col. James “Jim” Bowie and 30 men to destroy the Alamo buildings and remove its cannons prior to withdrawing.



Col. Bowie

When Bowie arrived on 19 January 1836, however, he and the garrison commander, Col. James C. Neill, decided to defend the mission. They understood that Houston needed time to recruit men and appeal to the civilian population for supplies. Bowie estimated

it would take 1,000 men to effectively defend the sprawling complex. With only 110 men on hand, Bowie and Neill sent urgent requests for reinforcements.

The Alamo compound, comprising nearly three acres, had been built in 1781 as a Spanish mission. The central feature was a large courtyard surrounded by buildings and walls. (*Map 2*) On the north and west perimeters, small buildings pressed against stone walls varying in height from 9 to 12 feet, and 3- to 4-feet thick. On the south side, a single-story building called the low barracks butted against the stone face adjacent to the 10-foot-wide courtyard entrance. On the east side stood the two-story former convent (later referred to as the long barracks), stretching 200 feet with the corral further east. An obvious weak point remained in the southeast corner, where Cos’s troops had originally built a flimsy barricade to fill a 50-yard gap between the familiar façade of the mission chapel and the walls of the long barracks.

Although it had been effective at defending against marauding Indian tribes, the Alamo wasn’t built to face an army. As the