

Manifest Destiny: Texas and Conflict with Mexico

The term manifest destiny was coined in the 1840s. The phrase appeared in an editorial in the *United States Magazine and Democratic Review* in 1845. The editorial said that the United States had a “manifest destiny to overspread the continent allotted by Providence.” *Manifest* means “clear or obvious”; *destiny* means “something that is bound to happen,” and *Providence* refers to God’s oversight of the world. The writer meant that God had given the United States a clear right to extend its authority across the continent, and that the nation was destined to do so. This idea was popular with many Americans during the 1840s and 1850s. They had seen their country growing and concluded it was destined to continue growing until it covered the whole continent. “Manifest Destiny” was an expression of pride in the young, growing nation, but it was also a way of justifying the displacement of native peoples and supporting other land-hungry actions of the 1800s.

Early Settlement of Texas: Stephen Austin

The settlement and annexation of Texas can be seen as an example of America pursuing its “manifest destiny.” Mexico had won its independence from Spain in 1821. During the 1820s, small numbers of Americans began moving into the Mexican province of Texas from the southeast to raise cotton and sugar on plantations.

In 1821, Stephen Austin was given permission by the newly installed Mexican government to establish settlements in East Texas. In 1822, he and 300 families entered Texas. More immigrants followed. In less than a decade, there were 25,000 Americans, including many slaves, in Texas. The settlers far outnumbered the 4,000 Mexicans living there. Concerned about the growing imbalance, the Mexican government banned all further settlement by Americans and all further importation of slaves.

Texans—transplanted Americans and native Mexicans—asked several times for autonomy. They declared that they needed slaves to work their plantations and wanted to rid themselves of Mexican government in general. Austin was jailed by the new Mexican dictator, General Antonio Lopez de Santa Anna, for delivering the most recent request for autonomy, and the Texans rebelled. Santa Anna had seized control of the Mexican government in 1834 and declared himself president.

Battle of the Alamo

The Texas Revolution ended almost as quickly as it had begun. The fighting lasted from late 1835 to April 1836.

The most memorable battle of the revolution was the Battle of the Alamo. The Alamo was a mission-fortress built by Spanish priests in San Antonio. About

1,500 to 2,000 Mexican troops besieged the fort defended by fewer than 200 Texans. The siege began in February 1836 and ended twelve days later when Mexican cannons blew huge holes through the walls. Mexican soldiers entered the fort through the gaps in the walls, and all 182 Texans as well as 1,500 Mexican soldiers died during the heroic defense.

The defense of the Alamo was led by William B. Travis. When Santa Anna demanded that he surrender, Travis is said to have replied, “The enemy has demanded my surrender. I have answered their demand with a single cannon shot. I shall never surrender.”

Among the other defenders who died during the siege of the Alamo were Davy Crockett and Jim Bowie, who had shared leadership of the men with Travis until falling ill. Both Crockett and Bowie were well-known frontiersmen, and both have become folk heroes. Crockett was from Tennessee. He had fought with Andrew Jackson during the Indian Wars in the southeast and had served in Congress from 1827 to 1835. Crockett was an expert rifleman. At the Alamo, it is said that Crockett’s marksmanship killed five successive Mexican gunners who were manning a cannon hundreds of yards from the Alamo walls. Jim Bowie was born in Kentucky and spent most of his life in Louisiana before moving to Texas. He or his brother invented the Bowie knife, which is used for hunting.

During the Battle of the Alamo, Mexican and American Texans proclaimed their independence. Two months after the Battle of the Alamo, Texan troops led by General Sam Houston charged into battle during the Battle of San Jacinto crying “Remember the Alamo!” The slogan emerged as a reminder of the defeat and as an inspiration to continue the fight. The Texans defeated Santa Anna in that battle and secured their independence, later electing the hero of the Battle of San Jacinto, Sam Houston, as their first president. (53)