

Beyond The Battleground: The Competing Legacies Of San Jacinto

BY JAMES E. CRISP

If you were to ask the average Houstonian to describe the legacy of the Battle of San Jacinto, the answer might well be: “Look around you!” In other words, all that Houston is today – all of the political and economic development of Texas and the American Southwest through the last 171 years – is sometimes attributed to the outcome of the test of arms and courage on that pivotal day of April 21, 1836.

But put aside for a moment the claim of the battle’s “decisiveness.” It is, after all, a very dubious proposition that a different outcome on that single day would have permanently put a stop to the expansion of the United States across the territories of northern Mexico, given the growing disparity in power and population between Mexico and the United States in the mid-nineteenth century.

Rather than imagining what might have been had Santa Anna won the contest that day, think instead about another kind of “legacy.” How does this event from the distant past shape the way we think about ourselves and our world today?



Henry A. McArdle, Dawn at the Alamo, 1905.
Courtesy Texas State Library & Archives Commission.

A legacy is by definition a powerful link between the past and the present. Whatever the precise physical realities of critical events such as the Battle of San Jacinto, it is the broader narratives in which we embed such events that determine for us their historical significance and their meaning for our own lives. The events and narratives that are celebrated through monuments, commemoration, and historical art become a part of the “collective memory” of a people. They are the stories that we tell—again and again—to explain our world, to anchor our values, and to assert our identities. These stories, in other words, become the sacred myths of our societies.

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For the Texas story, San Jacinto is doubly important, because as the anthropologist, Michel-Rolph Trouillot, noted in *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*, the Mexican General Antonio Lopez de Santa Anna lost *two* battles there. Santa Anna, said Trouillot, “was doubly defeated” on April 21, 1836:

He lost the battle of the day, but he also lost the battle he had won at the Alamo. [Texan General Sam] Houston's men had punctuated their victorious attack on the Mexican army with repeated shouts of “Remember the Alamo! Remember the Alamo!” With that reference to the old mission, they doubly made history. As actors, they captured Santa Anna and neutralized his forces. As narrators, they gave the Alamo story a new meaning. The military loss of March [sixth] was no longer the end point of the narrative but a necessary turn in the plot, the trial of the heroes, which, in turn, made final victory both inevitable and grandiose.¹

In Texan historical mythology, the heroic sacrifice at the Alamo made the victory at San Jacinto possible by critically delaying Santa Anna long enough for Sam Houston to pull together the army which finally defeated

the Mexican dictator. Trouillot is closer to the truth when he argues that it was actually the outcome of the Battle of San Jacinto which made possible the traditional Texan interpretation of the Alamo's meaning. It would have been a very different story—in both senses of the word—if Santa Anna had prevailed and become the victorious narrator of the war in Texas.

Instead, as Trouillot's fellow-anthropologist, Holly Beachley Brear, has found in her native San Antonio, speakers—that is, story-tellers—at the Fiesta celebrating San Jacinto Day recount a “unified narrative with the sacrificial fall of the Alamo and the victory at San Jacinto as the inseparable alpha and omega of the Texas creation mythology.”²

Moreover, in her book, *Inherit the Alamo: Myth and Ritual at an American Shrine*, Brear describes what she takes to be a racist sub-text within the sacred narrative of blood sacrifice and miraculous redemption: “In this ideology, Fiesta [marks] the end of chaos and backwardness characterizing Texas under Mexican dominance; to ‘the faithful,’ Fiesta San Antonio is



McArdle, The Battle of San Jacinto, 1898. Courtesy The State Preservation Board, Austin, Texas

the secular Easter six weeks after the Good Friday of the Alamo's fall."³

For most Texans, the most obvious and memorable pairing of the Alamo and San Jacinto is to be found in the gigantic paintings of the two battles that hang today on either side of the entrance to the Senate Chamber of the Texas State Capitol. *Dawn at the Alamo* and *The Battle of San Jacinto* may be encountered not only within the walls of the Capitol but also in countless book-jackets, posters, and illustrations of historical texts. There is a racial message also to be found in these iconic works by the San Antonio-based artist Henry A. McArdle, but it is a more complex message than the one Brear describes in *Inherit the Alamo*.

McArdle began these massive works of art in the 1870s, and by 1874 he had produced a preliminary sketch of what would later become *Dawn at the Alamo*.⁴ However, he soon put this first project aside and worked instead for the next twenty years on *The Battle of San Jacinto*. The reason for doing the paintings "in reverse order" becomes obvious when one realizes that McArdle was determined to achieve historical authenticity as well as aesthetic merit in what were to become the two greatest paintings of his life.

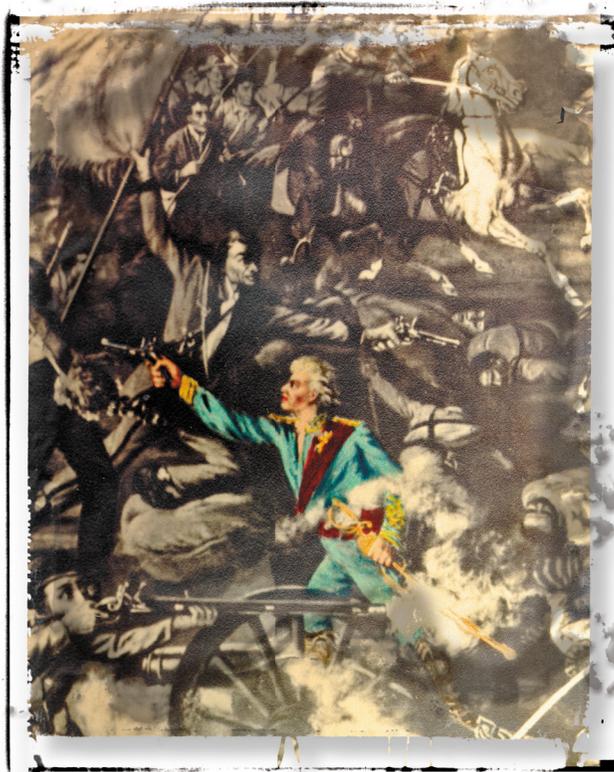
The artist conducted numerous interviews and extensive correspondence with the veterans of the Texas Revolution who were eyewitnesses to the battles, and for obvious reasons, there were a lot more surviving Texans who had fought at San Jacinto than there were men who had been inside the Alamo. (There were a few of the latter available, however. McArdle corresponded with both Mexican General Santa Anna and Texan Colonel Juan N. Seguín—the latter having experienced the siege as a defender of the old mission before being sent out as a courier, and eventually commanding a company of rebel *tejanos* under Sam Houston at the final battle.)⁵

Unfortunately, by the 1870s the San Jacinto veterans were beginning to die off in increasing numbers, and McArdle

wanted not only to interview them, but for as many of them as possible to see the finished work. He did not complete his San Jacinto masterpiece until 1898. McArdle returned in earnest to his Alamo painting only after his cross-town rival Robert Jenkins Onderdonk displayed in 1903 his dramatic painting *Crockett's Last Fight* (hanging today as *The Fall of the Alamo* in the Grand Foyer of the Governor's Mansion in Austin). McArdle's *Dawn at the Alamo* finally appeared two years later in 1905.⁶

Of the many comparisons that can be made between McArdle's two paintings, one of the most striking is his contrasting depictions of the Mexican soldiers and officers. Not surprisingly, some of these men are shown as fleeing the San Jacinto battlefield, but many of the Mexicans at San Jacinto are portrayed as fighting gamely in a doomed cause—none more so than the gray-haired "brave and chivalrous" General Manuel Castrillón, a red sash across the breast of his blue uniform, his head and raised pistol directly to the foreground from the Texan flag-bearer, Sergeant James A. Sylvester.

The Mexicans depicted in McArdle's hellish *Dawn at the Alamo* are more brutish than chivalrous, however. Texan art historian Sam DeShong Ratcliffe has described them as "plasticene, psychotic murderers," and Emily Fourmy Cutrer has called McArdle's vision of the combatants "Manichean"—with the Force of Evil embodied in the dark and "apelike" Mexican soldier locked in combat with a Davy Crockett whose whiteness and noble bearing are highlighted by the artist's technique. "Crockett and the Mexican are not merely two men," asserts Cutrer, "they



From *McArdle Notebook*, detail of Castrillón and Sylvester (flag-bearer), *The Battle of San Jacinto*. Courtesy Texas State Library & Archives Commission.

are two races that represent opposing forces in the painter's mind."⁷

Was it simply the Mexican slaughter of the Alamo defenders that provoked this bestial iconology in McArdle's 1905 painting, so different from his portrayal in the earlier painting of the Mexicans at San Jacinto? Apparently not, because a close look at McArdle's preliminary sketch from the 1870s for *Dawn at the Alamo* shows a far more sympathetic view of the Mexicans—not unlike his treatment of them in *The Battle of San Jacinto*.

This more benign view may best be appreciated by returning to the depiction of the death of Davy Crockett. Unlike the scene described by Emily Cutrer, the Mexican soldier fighting with Crockett in McArdle's early sketch is neither dark nor "apelike." He looks like a perfectly normal—indeed, even handsome—Mexican soldier. Another contrast may be found just above and to the right of Crockett in both versions of the work—atop one of the Alamo's walls—where the commander of the fortress is about to give up his life for Texas.



McArdle, detail of Crockett's combat, preliminary sketch, 1874.



McArdle, detail of Crockett's combat Dawn at the Alamo, 1905.

Alamo historian Reuben Potter described in 1874 the death of William Barret Travis in McArdle's more evenhanded version as follows: "Travis is seen in a death grapple with a Mexican standard bearer, a struggle in which both are going down along with the banner which its bearer had vainly attempted to plant." There are no obvious visual clues that indicate which of the two men is the Mexican, which the American, as they fight to the death over the future of Texas.⁸

Not so in the revised version of *Dawn at the Alamo*! This time a remarkably tall, uniformed Travis blasts away at the head of the bearer of the Mexican

flag; but Travis is unaware that he is about to be stabbed in the back by the bayonet of a sinister, leering Mexican infantryman—who did not appear at all in the original sketch.

Unfortunately, McArdle's 1905 painting is typical of its time. This work, like the creation of the Alamo shrine itself from the ruins of the old mission, came about in the early twentieth century just as Texas and the United States were passing through one of the most difficult and painful periods in the history of American race relations, with Mexican-Americans as well as African-Americans being relegated to a second-class citizenship of

legal segregation and disfranchisement. Artistic productions from this time—in novels, cartoons, and silent films as well as serious works of art and history—often carry racial baggage that can cause pain or embarrassment when read or viewed today.⁹

On the other hand, the principal artistic commemorations of the Battle of San Jacinto—most notably the sleek star-topped monument completed in March 1938 (largely with New Deal dollars from Washington)—bear few overt marks of the official racism of the past.¹⁰ The Alamo—both the site and the story—has been during the past century far more often the focus



McArdle, 1874 preliminary sketch for Dawn at the Alamo as shown on page 167 of *Sleuthing the Alamo*.



McArdle, detail of Travis' combat, Dawn at the Alamo, 1905.

of both anti-Mexican sentiments and the retributive protests against racism and “Yankee imperialism” than has been the less iconic, less universally familiar San Jacinto battleground.¹¹

Yet hard feelings related to the Texas Revolution remain, even in twenty-first century Houston. According to Lori Rodriguez, writing in the *Houston Chronicle* on Texas Independence Day, 2006, “civic leaders were caught off guard” early in the year by negative reaction among the city’s Hispanics (now 42 percent of the population and the largest ethnic group in town) to a newly arrived Major League Soccer team’s chosen name of “Houston 1836.” Team owners claimed that the year referred to the founding of the city rather than to the famous battle that separated Texas from Mexico, but it did not help their case that the five-pointed star of the team’s new logo bore a silhouette

of General Sam Houston on horseback—a clear, if second-hand,

Houston 1836 soccer team logo. Courtesy of Houston Dynamo.



reference to his victory at San Jacinto. (A similar pose by Sam Houston in the form of an equestrian statue stands guard today over the city’s Hermann Park.)¹²

In January 2006, University of Houston history professor Raúl Ramos published an editorial in the *Chronicle* arguing that the new name and logo would divide the city rather than unite it by reminding its many inhabitants of Mexican origin of the defeat of a Mexican army, the secession of Texas from Mexico, and a “sometimes shameful history” of “American conquest culminating in the invasion of Mexico in 1846 and the loss of almost half of its territory.”¹³ Shortly thereafter, a visit from Harris County Commissioner Sylvia Garcia to soccer team owner Philip F. Anschutz convinced him that for business reasons if no other, a quick name change was in order.¹⁴ Today the team is known as Houston Dynamo; the star and the general on horseback are long gone.¹⁵

Letters to the editor and statements to the press by Anglo Houstonians in reaction to these developments made it clear that whether angry or merely hurt over the protest and the turn of events, they believed that those who were offended by the historic references in the soccer team’s short-lived “Houston 1836” logo simply did not appreciate the state’s proud history. “It disappointed me,” said local historian C. David Pomeroy Jr.,

“because obviously some Hispanics don’t understand their Texas history and heritage. I celebrate July 4 and Sept. 16 (Mexico’s independence day) as part of our state history. It saddens me more that the educational system hasn’t gotten that story over. We haven’t gotten past those old prejudices.”¹⁶

What most of the Anglo-Texans failed to appreciate is that Ramos and those who agreed with him were not ignorant of San Jacinto’s place in the Texan narrative of freedom and independence; what Ramos was doing was embedding the Battle of San Jacinto in a counter-narrative which emphasized not the defeat of a dictator’s army by a handful of rebel farmers, but the aggrandizement of Mexican territory by the aggressive, expansionist “United States of the North.”

In contrast to Ramos’s narrative, the central elements in the traditional Anglo-Texan creation story begin with the planting and patient nurturing of a colony in the “wilderness” by Stephen F. Austin, the “Father of Texas” (even though Texas, as Juan Seguín’s ancestors could attest, had been established more than a century before Austin’s arrival). Next comes the imposition of arbitrary rule and exorbitant taxation of the industrious Anglo-American settlers by a distant, distracted, and ultimately dictatorial central government. When the Texans (including *tejanos* such as Juan Seguín) rise up in revolt, most of their citizen-soldiers are mercilessly slaughtered after being defeated by large Mexican armies at the Alamo and at Goliad.

In the Anglo-Texan narrative, the victory at San Jacinto, coming after it appeared that the Texan cause was all but lost, powerfully appeals to Texan pride because its dimensions and consequences seem almost unbelievable: hundreds of Mexicans dead and hundreds more captured, including the feared autocrat of Mexico himself, yet with scarcely a dozen Texan casualties; effective Texan control over a vast and rich territory; the welcoming of Texas into the community of nations after recognition by the major powers of the world; and all

this accomplished on their own, by a desperate and outnumbered ragtag army consisting almost entirely of volunteers.

The events of the Texas Revolution, including San Jacinto, take on a very different meaning when seen in the context of the Mexican narrative of the first half of the nineteenth century. The steady erosion of Spanish and then Mexican territory in North America through the arrival of Anglo-American settlers, followed close behind by the armies of the United States, is the central theme of a plot line that becomes predictably repetitive. The pattern of infiltration, revolt, claims of independence, and rapid absorption into the North American colossus is remarkably similar, whether the action is played out in West Florida, Texas, or California – even to the point of Americans in each of these territories claiming to be a free republic and brandishing a new flag with a single star!

Rather than focus on the specifics of Santa Anna's humiliating defeat at San Jacinto, Mexicans interpreted the events of 1835 and 1836 as simply more of the same: Americans were pouring across the border—legally at first, and then as armed invaders—in a manner that made the Texas experience seem hardly unique. One of the clues to the different Mexican perspective on the Texas Revolution is the standard inclusion in that narrative of the conflict of an event which is almost never a part of the Texan creation story: the occupation of East Texas (specifically, Nacogdoches) in mid-1836 for several months by United States Army units dispatched from Louisiana. (The American government claimed that the post-San Jacinto occupation was intended to protect Texan civilians against Indian attacks, and that the entry was sanctioned by an existing treaty with Mexico, but the tacit military/diplomatic statement was far louder than the official humanitarian excuse.)

This direct intervention, writes historian Josafina Zoraida Vásquez of the Colegio de México, along with the aid pouring *sin empacho*—without embarrassment—into Texas from other parts of

the United States, shows that this was not in essence an internal revolt by adopted Mexican citizens dissatisfied with their national government, but rather a “true international war.” Mexico, claims Vásquez, in reality fought “two wars with the United States”—in 1835-36, and again in 1846-48. In this opinion, she echoes the claims of nineteenth-century Mexican soldiers and statesmen, who saw the hand of the American government behind the Texas Revolution, and blamed the United States directly for the resulting loss of territory.¹⁷

Vásquez points to Sam Houston, in particular, as an agent of American imperialism.¹⁸ Is this accusation justified? Almost certainly, yes. Houston was sent to Texas by President Andrew Jackson in 1832, ostensibly as a roving ambassador to the Comanche Indians, but clearly as another set of eyes and ears for Jackson in a land that he (and other American presidents) had long coveted. After crossing back over the Sabine River into Louisiana, Houston posted a letter to Jackson from Natchitoches on February 13, 1833.

After extensive travel across Texas, and enough politicking to get himself elected to an upcoming convention which would draft a series of demands on the Mexican government, Houston reported to Jackson that he was sure that “nineteen-twentieths of the population of the province” actually desired “the acquisition of Texas by the United States.” He was certain that the impending convention would demand at least separate statehood within Mexico for Texas, and predicted that “unless Mexico is soon restored to order” Texas would take action to separate itself completely from the Mexican nation.

Houston would be ready for any contingency, but his ultimate loyalty was clear. “I may make Texas my abiding place!” he told Jackson, and vowed that “in adopting this course, I will *never forget* the country of my birth.” He promised to keep Jackson well informed of “any facts, which could enable you, during your administration, to acquire Texas.”¹⁹ For the rest of his life, as long as Texas was outside of

the American Union, Houston strove to bring it in, and when it was in the Union, he strove to keep it there.

Thus there are two narratives—one might say two myths—that each oversimplify the complex truths about the Battle of San Jacinto. Houstonian Jan DeVault, the president of the Friends of the San Jacinto Battleground, was exactly right when she told the *Houston Chronicle* during the recent fracas over the naming of the soccer team that “History is never simple.” Said DeVault, a member of the Daughters of the Republic of Texas: “You can't think [simply] of Texas versus Mexico. That's too narrow. If this controversy helps us look at history with wider eyes and a bigger focus, then hooray.”²⁰

Hooray, indeed. One of the main activities of DeVault and other members of the Friends of the San Jacinto Battleground has been the sponsorship over the past few years of the annual San Jacinto Symposium, a blend of academic and popular presentations, open to the public, on the history of the Texas Revolution and the Texas Republic.

Interestingly, some of the recent speakers at the San Jacinto Symposium (now held every April at the University of Houston), have presented material which, while generally favorable to the Texan cause, have lent considerable credence to the central claim of the Mexican narrative of the Texas Revolution: that it was largely a creation of American interests, if not of direct intervention by the government of the United States.

Just last year (2006) not long after the argument over the meaning of “1836” had played out in the pages of the *Chronicle*, symposium attendees were treated to a crackerjack PowerPoint presentation on the Texas Navy by Jonathan W. Jordan, author of the newly-published *Lone Star Navy: Texas, the Fight for the Gulf of Mexico, and the Shaping of the American West*. In this really superb book, Jordan combines great writing with remarkable technical expertise and an understanding of the complex geopolitics

into which the Texas Navy blithely sailed in the days of the Republic.

Jordan makes a good case for his argument that “The Texas Navy, as much as the Battle of San Jacinto, saved Texas, and thereby altered the history of the American West.”²¹ Moreover, he shows just how central American help was to the success of the Navy and the Revolution. According to Jordan, “If the United States was Texas’s biological parent, then shipping lanes from New Orleans were the umbilical cord that kept the rebellion alive during its embryonic months.”²²

Significantly, what Jordan calls Texas’s very “first naval victory”—the capture of the *Correo Mejicano* in September 1835—was carried out by the American-registered armed schooner *San Felipe* owned by the Texan firm of McKinney & Williams. This ship also happened to be carrying Stephen F. Austin from New Orleans to Texas, with the intention, says Jordan, “of forcing Mexico to accept the Americanization of Texas.”²³ It is further telling that the prisoners from the Mexican ship were put in irons aboard their ship, and the “*Correo Mejicano*, now flying an American flag, . . . set sail for New Orleans in the company of the *San Felipe*.”²⁴

Another recent speaker at the San Jacinto Symposium is Edward L. Miller, whose book *New Orleans and the Texas Revolution* has gathered much recent acclaim. Miller goes even further than Jordan in asserting American interest in and control over the Texas Revolution. He argues that the outcome of the war in Texas was largely determined by stage managers working from the shadows of the Crescent City both to shape the goals and to secure the success of the struggle. In a bold interpretation which will inevitably be controversial, Miller claims that the concerns of the Anglo-American settlers in Texas and their leaders were essentially secondary to the plans of powerful commercial interests in New Orleans and their schemes for American territorial expansion.²⁵

Finally, there is the team of Bill and Marjorie K. Walraven, who have compared Texas muster rolls and land grants with lists of U. S. Army deserters to arrive at the conclusion that perhaps as many as two hundred soldiers from the United States—some actually deserters, some only taking that convenient designation temporarily—may have participated in the Battle of San Jacinto.

The Walravens explained to their Symposium listeners the importance of the many references to *bayonets* at this battle; these weapons were standard issue for U. S. Army soldiers, but not likely to be carried by Texas settlers. They suggest that Sam Houston, well aware of this fact, took pains to indicate that bayonets were not used by the Texans at San Jacinto—but anecdotal evidence indicates otherwise. Also noting that not only the famous Twin Sisters cannon, but many of the men who were expertly firing these guns at San Jacinto seem to have been fresh arrivals from the United States, including some from Fort Jessup, Louisiana, the Walravens conclude that “the presence of U. S. soldiers at the battle of San Jacinto shows that the role of the United States in the Texas Revolution has been greatly underestimated.”²⁶

It should be noted that none of these researchers who seem to have added some force to the “Mexican narrative” of Professor Ramos (who was a speaker himself at the 2003 San Jacinto Symposium) are from the ranks of left-wing revisionist academics or other varieties of pointy-headed intellectuals. Before their retirements, Bill Walraven was a columnist for the *Corpus Christi Caller-Times* and Marjorie was a high-school history and journalism teacher.

Edward L. Miller taught Texas History in San Antonio, where he is now a public-school administrator. He became interested in the New Orleans connection to the Texas Revolution as a member of the San Antonio Living History Association, as he researched the uniforms worn by the New Orleans Volunteer Greys (whose regimental flag was captured by Santa Anna at the Alamo and sent back to

Mexico City as proof of American complicity in the Texas rebellion).

Jonathan Jordan is a practicing attorney who now lives in the Atlanta area, and whose ten-year stint as a lawyer in Houston gave him the incentive and the opportunity to turn his passion for the Texas Navy into a book that has garnered high praise from professional historians.

As one of those professional historians (with only a slightly pointy head), it has been my privilege to attend each one of the San Jacinto Symposia since the founding of the series in 2001, and it has been my honor to be the moderator of the event each year since 2003. What I and the truly civic-minded founders of this institution have tried to give Houston and Texas is a forum where history can be carefully separated from myth without sacrificing the popular passion for the past.

We have also brought together as speakers descendants of Sam Houston and Sidney Sherman to argue about what *really happened* on April 20 and 21 of 1836; fierce detractors and ardent defenders of General Houston’s vision and actions in the San Jacinto campaign; bearded Texian re-enactors, skilled archaeologists, *tejano* scholars, and even historians from Mexico City, including the fiery Josafina Zoraida Vásquez and the studiously careful but slyly provocative Miguel Soto of the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México.

Differing opinions – differing narratives – are respected at the San Jacinto Symposia, but pointed questions are directed to every speaker and panelist by an audience that combines strong opinions and great expertise – sometimes even in the same questioner! If a “legacy” is a powerful link between the past and the present, then I think that this city and state can be very proud of the people—especially those from the Friends of the San Jacinto Battlefield—who have created this marvelous forum, and crafted this valuable legacy. ✨