

# A Masonic Nation

*by*

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## **Introduction**

The birth of both the Grand Lodge of Texas and the State of Texas are so inextricably linked that one could be excused for thinking that they were one and the same thing. On 1<sup>st</sup> March 1835 Bro. Anson Jones (Harmony Lodge No. 52, Philadelphia & first Grand Master of Texas) and four other Master Masons met at Brazoria, Texas and decided to petition the Grand Master of Louisiana for a dispensation and a charter to form a Masonic Lodge in Texas. On 2<sup>nd</sup> October the same year the first shots of Texan independence were fired at Gonzales, Texas, by Bro. Eli Mitchell (Gonzales Lodge No.30) under the command of Bro. Col. John H. Moore (Lafayette Lodge No.34) against opposing Mexican forces.

## **Early Texas**

The name Texas is derived from the native Indian word 'tejas' meaning 'friend', which was used by the early Spanish settlers to the territory in the 1600s. Texas at that time formed part of Spain's overseas empire. There is a record of an Irish missionary priest in Texas in the 17<sup>th</sup> century by the name of Murphy, and in 1776 the Spanish governor was another Irishman, Hugo O'Connor. Philip Nolan from Belfast was one of the first English speakers in Texas. He was involved in minor mapping of the region and was known as a filibuster and mustang dealer; he was killed by a force of Spanish soldiers sent to arrest him in 1801.

The first recorded Mason to have entered Texas was Bro. Major Zebulon Pike, a member of Lodge No.3 from Philadelphia, who scouted the headwaters of the Arkansas and Red Rivers and the settlements around the Rio Grande in 1806 and '07.

Texas at this time was sparsely populated and colonising the region became a priority for the Spanish authorities. America was viewed with suspicion as a predominantly Protestant country, with ambitions of expansion towards its Catholic neighbour. Oddly enough it was to Ireland that the Spanish and later the Mexicans turned when looking for new colonists. In 1821 Mexico and its territory of Texas gained its independence from Spain, and by this time a number of Irish immigrants had settled in the region. Included in these were four Irishmen named James Power, James Hewetson, John McMullen and James McGloin, who all were granted licences to bring over Roman Catholic Irish settlers. These early Irish colonists became an important ingredient of the Texas Story.

The use of strong arm tactics by General Antonio Lopez de Santa Anna, the new Mexican president and dictator, to disarm local militias, his order to expel all illegal immigrants, the abolition of slavery, and the suspension of the Constitution of 1822 led to growing dissent among the colonists. When Mexican soldiers went to the town of Gonzales, at the end of Sept 1835 to take back a small cannon from the inhabitants they where stalled from doing so and a call went out from a Capt. Albert Martin for reinforcements to all the local colonists. This incident became known as the famous

'Come and Take It' incident. The men involved in this first encounter are known as "The Old Eighteen", being only 18 in number prior to reinforcements arriving. Of the 18, no less than 6 were Masons. By 2<sup>nd</sup> Oct the colonists now numbering around 160 men, 26 of whom are confirmed Masons, under the command of Col. John Moore made contact with the enemy who numbered about 200 dragoons. The number of Irish in the 160 is not recorded but going by the surnames, they were well represented. The sought after cannon was brought into action by the colonists and within minutes the battle was over, with the Mexicans leaving the field. The war had begun!

In December 1835 at Washington-on-the-Brazos, the Texas Declaration of Independence was signed by Bro. Sam Huston (Cumberland Lodge No.8, Tennessee) and 58 other delegates from around the state. Of the 59 signatories, 22 have been confirmed as Masons.

### **The Battle of The Mission San Antonio de Valero**

From the 23<sup>rd</sup> Feb to the 6<sup>th</sup> March 1836 (13 days) one of the most famous and well documented sieges in history took place at a disused fortified mission in central Texas which lay on the only road from Mexico to Louisiana. Officially known as the Mission San Antonio de Valero, it is better known as The Alamo. At this location the Mexican Army of some 5,000 to 6,000 men and 20 cannon, led by General Antonio Lopez de Santa Anna, was confronted by a make-shift force of Texans of between 182 and 250 men and 24 cannon under the joint command of Bro. Lt. Col William Barret Travis (Lodge No.3, Alabama) and Bro. Lt. Col Jim Bowie (Loge L'Humble Chaumiere (Humble Cottage Lodge) No.19, Louisiana). Bro. Travis commanded the regular troops, while Bro. Bowie commanded the volunteers. When Bro. Bowie took sick, overall command was assumed by Bro. Travis. However, Bro. Travis was killed early in the final assault on the last day, pistol and sword in hand standing his ground facing the enemy. Bro. Bowie was killed in his cot, and as he was believed to be suffering from pneumonia it is unlikely that his attackers had too hard a task.

Into this melting pot came another famous Mason, Bro. Davy Crockett, frontiersman, congressman, and adventurer. Having been defeated in the 1835 elections he famously told his constituents 'You all can go to hell.... I'm going to Texas! With his 12 'Tennessee Boys' he rode into the Alamo and into legend. Initially he was believed to have died swinging his musket as a club until he was overcome by his attackers. It is now accepted that he was one of seven defenders captured at the end of the battle. On the orders of Santa Anna that there were to be no prisoners, these seven were brutally tortured before being executed at sword point. A witness to this act, a Mexican officer recorded in his diary that the men accepted their fate and died without complaint. No record survived to tell us what lodge Bro. Crockett belonged to. He did however, place his apron in the safe keeping of the sheriff of Weakley County, Tennessee. The apron was preserved by the sheriff's family.

Another brother whose records did not survive is Bro. James Butler Bonham. Who was the last man to enter the Alamo. A close friend of Bro. Travis he was twice dispatched to bring back reinforcements but to no avail. On the last of his missions, having been refused by Bro. Lt. Col Fannin any men, he turned his horse and galloped back to the Alamo and his own certain death.

Bro. Capt. Almaron Dickinson, an expert cannoneer, was in charge of artillery at the Alamo. He was one of 'The Old Eighteen' from Gonzales. During the battle he directed

his wife to display his Masonic apron in the hope of mercy from any of the Mexican Freemasons in the opposing army when they took possession of the fort. It is said that she covered herself and their young daughter with the apron. They were indeed spared and were brought to Santa Anna after the battle. Santa Anna's offer to adopt the little girl was refused. Bro. Dickinson was killed at his post.

The total number of Masons who perished at the Alamo is not known, as after the battle the bodies were piled on to a pyre and set alight. However, we do know that 12 native born Irishmen and 14 others bearing Irish surnames are documented as having been identified as having died at the Alamo. Many of these men hailed from Co. Wexford and Co. Tipperary and had come over for a new and better way of life in Texas.

On 27<sup>th</sup> march 1836 Bro. Col. James Fannin and 406 of his men were massacred at Goliad by Mexican Forces after they had surrendered. On the orders of Santa Anna they were all shot. Attempts to burn their bodies failed and they were left to rot. Again both Masonic and Irish settlers figured among the dead.

On the 21<sup>st</sup> April at the Battle of San Jacinto, Bro. Gen. Sam Houston lead his army of 700 to final victory over the Mexicans screaming his famous war cry 'Remember the Alamo! Remember Goliad!'. So savage was the attack by the Texans that many Mexicans simply threw down their arms shouting 'Me no Alamo! Me no Goliad!' In eighteen minutes it was over. The Texans had 6 killed while the Mexicans had 630 killed, 208 wounded, and over 700 captured. Santa Anna was captured trying to escape the field. Bro. Anson Jones is reputed to have carried the newly issued charter for the first Masonic lodge in Texas, Holland Lodge No.36, in his saddle bags during the battle.

Of the 700 men in Bro. Houston's army 100 were Irish.

### **General Antonio Lopez de Santa Anna**

Without any doubt this most controversial figure in the whole story is a source of much debate among Masons. When captured, disguised as a corporal, he gave the Masonic sign of distress to his captors, two of who were Masons, and who accepted their obligation as such. They had no idea who they had caught, it was only when they had placed him with the other prisoners and saw how the prisoners reacted to him did they realise who they had. He was brought to Bro. Sam Houston where it is alleged he gave the sign again. Many believe that Houston spared him from the fate that had so readily been dispensed to the men at the Alamo and Goliad because of this. Bro. Houston denied this, always stating that he did not want to make a martyr of Santa Anna, that it was the best way to get the other Mexican armies out of Texas and therefore of securing Texan independence.

Many others believe that Santa Anna was never a Mason but had knowledge of grips and signs of the craft which he used for his own purposes. They also believe that the Masonic apron that he owned was stolen. It is also true that to date no Masonic lodge or constitution has ever stated that Santa Anna was a member.

However, if one looks to early Mexican Masonry, a clearer picture emerges of the man/Mason. The only two political parties at that time in Mexico were the Yorquinos (Federalists) and the Escoceses (Centralist). Translated they are the York and Scottish Rite parties. In fact in 1828 two 'armies' led by the Grand Masters of each competing Grand Lodge met outside of Mexico City and fought a battle for supremacy. Bro. Nicholas Bravo led the Scottish Rite while Bro. Vicente Guerrero, who led the York Rite,

went on to victory. Santa Anna was one of Guerrero's main allies along with Bro. Joel Poinsett (Past Master of Recovery Lodge No. 31, Greenville, Solomon's Lodge No. 1, Charleston, South Carolina and Deputy Grand Master of the Grand Lodge of South Carolina) the American Ambassador to Mexico! Eventually, Santa Anna overthrew Bro. Guerrero and took full power for himself.

By no means can Santa Anna be considered as a creditable Mason, he did not conform to the principles of Freemasonry as known to the Order worldwide, but, by Mexican standards, where Masons actively and openly used their Masonry to promote themselves, interfere in local politics and the affairs of the State and Church, then on the evidence available that he was most likely a Mason, albeit a corrupt and very distasteful one. It is contended that he believed that he was subjugating a rebellious faction of his people, repelling foreign invaders (illegal immigrants from the U.S.) and defending the territory and laws of his young nation, and that, to him, justified his actions.

The fact that he sought relief when he gave none, disregarded his Masonic obligations and then expected them to be forthcoming from others, does not preclude this man as having been a brother Mason. He was a man of *his* time and circumstances, not ours!

### **Texas After the War**

From 1836 till 1846 Texas was a republic, governed from its own capital, The City of Austin, named after Bro. Stephen F. Austin (St. Louis Lodge No.111), The Father of Texas. All of its presidents were Masons, as were all of the vice-presidents during this period. Bro. Sam Houston being elected the first president, and Bro. Anson Jones was its last. In 1844, Bro. George K. Teulon, Grand Secretary of the Grand Lodge of the Republic of Texas, observed "Texas is emphatically a Masonic Country: Our national emblem, the 'Lone Star', was chosen from among the emblems selected by Freemasonry, to illustrate the moral virtues -- it is a five-pointed star, and alludes to the five points of fellowship".

Today there are 110,00 Masons in 889 lodges in Texas. The Grand Lodge of Texas is based in the City of Waco, and its Grand Lodge Room seats 4,000 brethren.

The Texas/Irish community still flourishes today and many can trace themselves back to those early colonists. One can visit town/cities by the names of Dublin, Ennis, Kileen, Shamrock and of course San Patricio (St. Patrick). The City of Refugio, once called Wexford, still maintains its Irish origins from when it was colonised by The Power/Hewetson settlers from Co.Wexford in 1834.