Launching a Nation, 1836–1848

At Washington-on-the-Brazos, the men who declared Texas independent from Mexico on March 2 also established an ad interim government under a constitution drafted by the time they adjourned on March 17, 1836. They also selected as leaders of the infant nation men who had been in the vanguard of critical attacks against the Centralists—among them David G. Burnet, who was chosen president, and Lorenzo de Zavala, the new vice-president. To carry on the independence movement, the framers of the Constitution of 1836 empowered the temporary government to solicit loans, issue promissory notes, negotiate treaties, develop a navy, and recruit men and provide supplies for the army. This ad interim government would serve until constitutional elections scheduled for December 1836.

Santa Anna’s defeat at San Jacinto had solved one of the new nation’s problems, but many remained. First, the fate of the Mexican commander became a source of discord. Many Texans demanded his execution in retaliation for the slaughters at the Alamo and Goliad. Others counseled holding him hostage until Mexico complied fully with the Treaties of Velasco, so-called because the seat of the ad interim government had been moved from Galveston Island to Velasco. After Santa Anna signed the Treaties on May 14, Burnet made plans to release him, hoping the general would honor his pledge of returning to Mexico and working to ensure Mexico’s recognition of Texas independence. However, angry Texas troops returned Santa Anna to captivity as he was about to sail for the United States in June, and he was not released until November.

The military displayed a similar divisiveness. As before independence, volunteers remained faithful to their own company commanders—many of whom thirsted to inflict further vengeance on (any) Mexicans for the atrocities committed at the Alamo and Goliad and resisted acknowledging the new commander of the army, Thomas Jefferson Rusk. (Sam Houston had left for New Orleans to seek medical assistance for a leg wound suffered at San Jacinto.) Worse yet, the government languished in dire financial straits, much of the land was devastated, and the Plains Indians still roamed the hinterlands preying on settlements. Furthermore, the fear of a Mexican invasion to regain the lost territory haunted the nation.
In an effort to speed up the institution of a permanent government, Burnet in July 1836 implemented plans to hold a general election in September, instead of December as previously planned. Citizens were to vote on the constitution drafted during the March convention at Washington-on-the-Brazos, express their feelings on the possible annexation of Texas to the United States, and elect officials for their new government. Sam Houston's victory at San Jacinto had made him immensely popular, and in the September contest he won easily for president with 5,119 votes to Henry Smith's 743 and Stephen F. Austin's 587. Voters chose Mirabeau B. Lamar as their vice-president.

In the plebiscite, Texans also approved the constitution overwhelmingly and gave a mandate for annexation to the United States. By so doing, the majority revealed the deep-seated connection they felt to their country of origin. They wished to keep part of what they had left behind them (the Texas constitution resembled the one written in Philadelphia in 1787 and those of other American states) and their vote exhibited an unmistakable endorsement of the transplantation of U.S. institutions to a region that for generations had been dominated by Native Americans, then by Spaniards, and then by Mexicans.

**Republicanism**

Exactly what type of culture came to the forefront in 1836? Although people of different backgrounds inhabited the republic, the Anglo-American way of life dominated all others, and English became the nation's primary language. As Protestants, Anglo Texans subscribed to the notion of religious toleration, though they harbored a mistrust toward Catholics. The right of free enterprise—the freedom to compete in the marketplace without governmental interference—was taken wholesale from the United States and reigned as Texas's chief economic tenet. Just "redeemed" from the Mexicans and Indians, frontier Texas offered boundless opportunities—to be pursued, perhaps, on the backs of the people deemed unworthy of the republican triumph.

Politically, Texans believed in a republican system of government like the one many of them had known in the United States. Unlike the more aristocratic forms of government that existed in Europe, republicanism bestowed sovereignty upon the masses. In this political model, a constitution stipulated the duties of government, carefully divided the government into three branches, which regulated one another through a permanent system of checks and balances, and ensured the rights of citizens before the law. Regularly scheduled elections of public officials guaranteed that the will of the people would be paramount.

The political figures who took office to lead the Republic of Texas on October 22, 1836, were themselves products of the Anglo-American political tradition. The president, Sam Houston, was a veteran of American politics, most prominently serving as a U.S. congressman from 1823 to 1827, then as governor of Tennessee from 1827 to 1829. The vice-president, Mirabeau B. Lamar, had served in the Georgia legislature. Stephen F. Austin, appointed to the post of secretary of state, had been a member of the Missouri territorial legislature for several years before coming to Texas, while Henry Smith, assigned the position of secretary of the treasury, had acted as provisional governor following the Consultation of 1835. Other important figures who served as architects of the young nation include Thomas J. Rusk, as secretary of war, and William H. Wharton, as minister to the United States; both men had lengthy credentials as political activists.
Houston’s first administration included a mixture of political allies and opponents, a development Houston relished for at least two reasons. First, he sought to create national harmony by integrating the most prominent prewar political factions into the government—Austin had led the peace party, while Wharton represented the war party. Second, displaying further political insight, he had determined to have his political enemies in the capital, where he could keep an eye on them.

The Politics of Caution

One of President Houston’s most immediate concerns was securing diplomatic recognition of the Republic of Texas by foreign powers. Without it, Texas was no more than an errant province within a legitimate nation (for Mexico still had not recognized Texas’s independence), and as such it could not secure credit in order to seek financial aid from other nations, sell land, or even legislate its own affairs with any kind of credibility. Since the days of the Consultation of 1835, leaders of the independence movement had taken steps toward legitimizing their government; lobbying efforts in Washington, D.C., had been underway since the spring of 1836. With independence won and a mandate for annexation to the United States already expressed, recognition by President Andrew Jackson was a necessary first step toward joining the country from which so many Texans had descended; the United States could annex an independent country, but it could not even consider annexing a part of Mexico. In the fall of 1836, however, Jackson feared northerners’ reaction to a simmering but potentially explosive issue: abolitionists saw talk of annexing Texas as part of a southern conspiracy to add new slave states to the Union. Washington, therefore, rebuffed the overtures of the Texas minister, and Jackson delayed appointing a chargé d’affaires to the republic until the last day of his term in 1837. The United States thereby became the first country to recognize the Republic of Texas; it would be another two years before any European countries did so.

Aside from the question of recognition, Houston’s government grappled with numerous internal problems, among them financial distress. The Texas Congress, which had assumed power with the September elections of 1836, lacked the resources to pay its bureaucrats and elected officials, its army, or any part of the $1.25 million debt that had accrued since the formation of the provisional government. To raise money, congress passed acts to impose taxes on imports, property, and livestock and levied other types of duties, but such gestures yielded little revenue since most Texans had very little cash and faced high obstacles to economic development. The government’s efforts to borrow money largely met with failure.

President Houston attempted to alleviate the financial crisis through a policy that combined gamble with austerity. So desperate was congress to pay the governmental bureaucracy, foreign diplomats, the military, and sundry creditors, that in June 1837 it commenced printing paper money in the form of promissory notes. As ordinarily happens when governments take such chances, depreciation quickly set in and weakened the currency. Houston believed strongly in a strict economy, however, and his politics quickly turned toward frugality. Along with other essentials, defense became a major target of budget reductions. In May 1837, Houston dealt with the problem that the army of volunteers posed to civilian order and to the budget by furloughing all but 600 soldiers (the others could be recalled to duty upon notice), offering them a paid return to New Orleans if they wished to leave for the United States or 1,280 acres of land apiece if they opted to
make the republic their home. Houston also saved money by avoiding campaigns against the Indians whenever possible. But even with the budget cuts in place, when Houston left office in 1838, the public debt stood at close to $2 million.

Despite its problems, the Houston administration set the new country on its feet and pushed it away from the Mexican past and into an American future. The First Congress fixed the boundaries of the Republic of Texas at the Rio Grande, from its mouth at the Gulf of Mexico to its source in the Rockies, then northward to the forty-second parallel (Figure 4.1). It also began to readjust the (Mexican) political hierarchy at the local level into one more in keeping with the U.S. tradition. The Mexican municipios became county units, and the district courts assumed the function of the alcaldes.

The Houston administration also passed legislation to encourage immigration and raise revenue; for this it turned to land, the government's most tangible resource. The ad interim government had provided headrights (grants of land that obliged grantees to comply with certain conditions, such as improving the land) in order to entice volunteers into the Texas army. Laws passed by the congress now established a similar land policy to reward veterans.
and to populate the vast region of the republic—under the least generous of these headrights, heads of families received entitlements as large as 640 acres; single men qualified for 320 acres. Officials hoped to attract other colonists to Texas who would purchase the public lands and thereby provide needed revenue for the treasury, but few people could afford to buy real estate. Therefore, the government continued to populate the republic by holding out offers of free land. Generally, provisions of the grants required citizens to live in Texas for three years and make improvements on the land before their titles to it became official. This measure obviously was an attempt to attract well-intentioned settlers as opposed to speculators or shifty newcomers fleeing the law, creditors, or familial responsibilities elsewhere. Between 1836 and 1841, the government apportioned close to 37 million acres.

Another accomplishment of the Houston government was the development of new forms of defense. Congress allocated funds for the establishment of a small navy, and local militias composed of citizen-soldiers now replaced the disbanded volunteer army. To protect the settlements, Congress in May 1837 created a law enforcement corps that would later take on the name “Texas Rangers.” During the period of the republic, however, most of the Texas Rangers were ordinary citizen-soldiers who volunteered to complete a specific mission and, upon accomplishing it, usually returned home to resume their private lives. Some of these men, however, did patrol the range for prolonged periods. In concept and in practice, these roving companies duplicated the “strike and pursue” tactics of the Tejano militia, upon which defense of the frontier had rested in the 1820s and 1830s. Not until later did a law enforcement outfit constituted of “elite” recruits take on the official name of Texas Rangers. By then, the unit was perceived of as a unique Texas invention.

The Politics of Action

The Constitution of 1836 stipulated that chief executives of the republic were to serve three-year terms, except for the first president, whose initial term was limited to two years. Furthermore, although presidents could serve alternate terms, they could not succeed themselves. Thus, in 1838 Houston searched, with limited success, for a candidate (and possible successor) whose politics resembled his own.

During this period in Texas history, formal political parties did not exist, but factions, mainly pro- or anti-Houston and his policies, had already formed. Vice-President Lamar (Figure 4.2), who expressed dissatisfaction with many of the president’s programs, headed the opposition to Houston. Whereas Houston counseled acceptance of a treaty he personally had negotiated in February 1836 for the provisional government’s recognition of Cherokee claims to Northeast Texas lands in return for a pledge of neutrality during the upcoming war for independence, Lamar recommended that the republic’s senate reject the treaty and denounced Houston for failing to eliminate the Indian danger on the western frontier. Furthermore, Lamar faulted Houston for his lack of success in foreign relations: the president had not gained Mexican acknowledgment of the independence of the republic, and he had pursued U.S. annexation as a major goal. Lamar, on the other hand, rejected incorporating the republic into the United States, for he envisaged Texas remaining an independent republic that might one day be a great power. Lastly, the vice-president blamed the financial condition of the republic on Houston’s fiscal ineptness. Campaigning on remedies for the incumbent’s mistakes, and with little opposition from the Houston faction, Lamar easily took the presidency.
Lamar’s politics differed from those of his predecessor, especially in his management of the nation’s finances. The new president sought to alleviate the republic’s financial woes through a $5 million loan, which he never managed to secure. Undaunted, he issued nearly $3 million of non-interest-bearing promissory notes. Other forms of legal tender followed, but with little reserves in the treasury and only the public honor and the public lands to back it, Texas money cheapened. By one estimate, a dollar of the republic’s paper money in 1841 equaled no more than 12 to 15 cents in U.S. currency.

Despite such setbacks, Lamar spent extravagantly. Relying on the new currency the government had printed, what credit was still available, revenue from business licenses (such as those levied on taverns), taxes levied on slaves, the expectation of acquiring a $5 million loan in Europe, and $457,380 that the republic had managed to borrow from a bank in Philadelphia in 1839, Lamar built up the navy and increased the ranks of frontier garrisons in order to launch a campaign against the Indians—an effort that cost the nation $2.5 million. In addition, he relocated the capital, at considerable expense, from Houston to a small settlement (renamed Austin) on the Colorado River; the move made in 1839 sought to lure people to the west but also to lash out against Sam Houston’s power, as his political following lay along the Houston–Galveston axis. Furthermore, under Lamar, the cost of maintaining the postal service increased, as did the expense of expanding the bureaucracy. Lamar pursued the recognition of the republic in Europe with vigor, and his
plans to build Texas into an empire of some standing led him to subsidize a military excursion into New Mexico in 1841-42 to try to expand the republic, a fiasco that became known as the Santa Fe Expedition (see page 102). Some historians view Lamar's agenda as visionary, others as foolish; still others perceive it as part of a well-thought-out plan to secure the survival of a nation bordering the United States but ostensibly unwanted by it, at least until the mid-1840s.

More sensible policies helped the republic along the road to permanence. The Homestead Act passed in 1839 protected citizens from seizure of their homestead, tools, and work animals for any debts they might have incurred; this legislation had its antecedents both in the Hispanic tradition and in a decree passed by the congress of Coahuila y Tejas in 1829. An empresario system instituted in 1840-41 and modeled on the Mexican colonization program of the 1820s and 1830s called for issuing contracts to immigration agents entrusted with settling colonists in specified areas within a stipulated number of years; this initiative sought to replace the less than effective land policy that used headrights as inducements. Here, again, the congress attempted to attract upstanding families to the republic. In respect to education, Lamar in 1839 and 1840 signed bills credited with laying the groundwork for the system of public education in Texas. The provisions set aside four leagues (17,714 acres) of land in each county for the establishment of a primary school, and they designated that a good amount of the public land be retained for the establishment of two colleges. Funds generated from the sale or rental of these lands or profits derived from the sale of minerals extracted from them would fund the institutions of higher learning. Again, Lamar's programs had precedents in a plan laid out by the Coahuiltecanos. In 1826, Béjar and Saltillo had submitted a proposal by which the state would donate land to create two colleges, and in 1832 Nacogdoches had proposed that the state set aside four leagues of land in that municipality for the establishment of a permanent fund to erect a school. The Coahuila y Tejas legislature had in fact decreed these proposals in 1833.

Retrenchment

By 1841 the republic's debts amounted to nearly $7 million, and the country seemed to be on the verge of a complete financial collapse. The Houston partisans had watched much of Lamar's doings with dismay, none more so than Houston himself, who as a congressman from San Augustine County had continued to perpetuate political factionalism. Deciding to recapture the office he had yielded by law in December 1838, he publicly attacked Lamar for the woeful economic standing of the nation. But Houston raised other salient political points for the Lamar faction to answer as well. On the stump, he criticized Lamar's relocation of the capital from Houston to Austin as too expensive, and he claimed that the new site was too vulnerable to Indian depredations. He reproached Lamar for the unsuccessful, costly, and embarrassing Santa Fe Expedition. The issues, however, soon took a second stage to negative campaigning, as both sides stooped to gossip, charges of scandal, and invective. At election time, Houston easily defeated David G. Burnet, the Lamar camp's candidate, and he served as president for the second time from December 1841 to December 1844.

With Houston back in office, bureaucratic retrenchment ensued. Congress terminated dozens of offices, lowered the salaries of public officials, and reduced the republic's military forces to a few companies of Rangers. Peace initiatives with the Indians again replaced a policy of active confrontation. Fiscal policy also changed course. Houston's government
overturned laws passed by the Lamar administration authorizing the printing of money and the pursuit of foreign loans. During his second term, only about $200,000 of new money was printed, and Houston spent less than $600,000, borrowing from the future—when, presumably, tax revenues would be greater, the public lands would be sold, and better and larger loans would be negotiated.

In December 1844, Anson Jones, secretary of state under Houston, won the presidency on a platform to stay the course his predecessor had set. He did just that but, like Houston, could never rein in the republic's debt; since the government had yet to make any repayments on it, by 1846 it had swelled to more than $10 million.

**Demographic Growth**

Fundamental to the stability of the republic was an increase in the number of its citizens. Though difficult to determine precisely, the population grew rapidly during the republic's existence, to about 162,500 in 1848, according to one estimate. At this time, most Texans made their homes in the eastern sections of the republic, though the majority of Texas Mexicans continued to reside in the more familiar cultural milieu of what had been the Department of Béxar.

Several factors explain the population growth. Natural reproduction accounted for part of it, but more substantial was a renewed flow of immigration. From the United States came people enticed by the republic's headrights. Others arrived to escape the depression of 1837 then gripping the United States; in the late 1830s and 1840s, Texas offered limitless opportunities to start afresh, both for those wanting to wrest their living from the soil and for land speculators. So many destitute and indebted Americans fled their hometown sheriffs for the Lone Star during this era that one historian claims "the debtor-fugitive element of Texas was substantially higher than that of mature American communities."

Equally responsible for population increases during the period of the republic was the empresario system introduced by the Lamar administration in 1840-41.

The Peters Colony became the most successful enterprise to grow out of Lamar's new immigration program. Established in 1841 in the upper fringes of the republic, west of a line from the modern-day counties of Grayson and Dallas, empresario W. S. Peters and his associates brought to the colony 10,000 to 12,000 people by the early 1850s. These newcomers to northern Texas had descended primarily from the Ohio Valley and the northeastern United States, and they established a cultural atmosphere reminiscent of their Yankee and midwestern origins, founding successful towns such as Dallas.

Two other major colonies established during the 1840s had origins in Texas's visions for attracting European settlers, as well as in plans by foreign empresarios to bring people to Texas. Among these organizing agents were Henri Castro (a U.S. naturalized Frenchman) and members of a German benevolent company called the Adelsverein society. Castro received a contract first; in 1842 President Houston had approved an agreement permitting him to settle Europeans in land west of San Antonio. Castro was to offer each family 320 acres, single males 160 acres, and he was to bear the expense of colonization. He recruited mainly from residents of Alsace and Lorraine in the border region of eastern France-Germany, many of them financially strapped Alsatian-speaking Catholics. The first of a wave of Castro's immigrants stepped onto Texas soil for the first time in late 1843—most of them in pitiful condition, but with high hopes of acquiring land in Texas. In September 1844, Castro began building Castroville (in modern-day Medina County), eventually bringing about 2,000 people to the town and to three others.
Almost at the same time as Castro negotiated his contract, members of the Adelsverein, a philanthropic society of German nobles, met in Bleichr, Germany, to consider plans for settling Germans in Texas. Among those taking an interest in the colonization enterprise was Prince Carl of Solms-Braunfels, who became the commissioner general for the project. In this capacity, Solms-Braunfels traveled to Texas to find desirable land for German immigrants. He located such suitable tracts at the confluence of the Comal River and the Guadalupe River and bought the property from its two owners. There he founded a new town christening it New Braunfels (after his family’s name). With immigrants—mainly from the laboring stratum and the ranks of political dissenters—moving into New Braunfels by spring 1845 and with his mission accomplished, Solms left for Germany, leaving John Meusebach (his replacement as commissioner general) to finish the task of consummating the project. New settlers continued to arrive, and in 1846 Meusebach settled them in Fredericksburg. All told, the Adelsverein sent about 7,000 Germans to the Central Texas Hill Country, but by 1847 it determined to end the costly venture. The settlers, however, remained permanently in Texas.

Other Europeans sailed to Texas on their own. Tired of facing economic distress at home and lured by the seemingly boundless opportunities in North America, an array of groups responded to the glowing accounts of Texas as a land of promise. Illiterate peasants mixed with literate political refugees and skilled artisans as Irish, French, English, Scottish, Canadian, Swiss, Scandinavian, Czech, and Polish arrivals established colonies in Texas in the 1840s and 1850s.

The Rise of Towns

New prospects for the republic, new and different types of immigrants, and new venues of commerce acted as stimuli for the growth of existing towns and the birth of new ones. Pre-independence communities such as Gonzales, Victoria, Brazoria, Velasco, Liberty, Nacogdoches, Goliad, Washington, Refugio, and Jonesborough kept their vitality, while new cities such as Shelbyville, Richmond, La Grange, Columbus, Independence, and Clarksville grew with the republic (Figure 4.3).

The above list includes the “lesser” towns of the republic—the major cities during the period were Houston, Galveston, Austin, and San Antonio (Figure 4.4). Of the four, Houston had an edge in importance. Its origins lay in the grand plans of two brothers, Augustus C. and John K. Allen, who had scrupulously searched for a strategic town site in the rich cotton and timberlands between the Brazos and Trinity rivers, where transportation by water would be convenient. Having located the spot at the confluence of Buffalo and White Oak bayous, the founders of Houston energetically laid out streets and reserved plots for a school, churches, courthouse, and even the nation’s capitol. Through shrewd lobbying, the Allens convinced lawmakers that Houston was the ideal spot for the seat of government, and on November 30, 1836, an act of the legislature so recognized the city. Although its seat as the capital of the republic lasted only until 1839, the city evolved into a commercial entrepôt. Steamboats navigating Buffalo Bayou brought travelers, entrepreneurs, prospective settlers, and goods and supplies directly into town; the ships departed with raw materials from the area’s plantations and farms. By 1845, some 14,000 bales of cotton left Houston on steamships and sloops bound for outside markets.

The nearby community of Galveston, blessed with one of the best natural harbors on the Gulf of Mexico west of New Orleans, similarly grew out of its prospects as a center for trade. Established by the Galveston City Company of Colonel Michel B. Menard, Samuel
May Williams, Gail Borden, and others, the town by the late 1830s rivaled Houston in the cotton trade.

The town of Austin originated under unique circumstances. Planned by President Lamar as the capital of the fledgling republic in 1839, the government laid out the settlement on the Colorado River, and by October of that year republic officials occupied crudely built structures. After its shaky start, Austin began to gain acceptance as the capital site, despite its location in what in those years represented the westernmost line of the frontier.

While Houston, Galveston, and Austin sprung directly from Anglo-American enterprises, the fortunes of San Antonio and Laredo differed. In the 1830s and 1840s, Bexar was still recovering from the destruction caused by the sieges of 1835 and 1836, and it remained vulnerable to Indian attacks and reoccupation expeditions from Mexico. Laredo, meanwhile, faced periodic occupations by Mexican armies and Texas volunteers. Both towns remained isolated from the Anglo settlements, though Anglo outsiders began drifting into San Antonio in the late 1830s, creating friction with the dominant population of Mexicans.
Despite the ruggedness of frontier living and the hard economic times, urbanites appreciated the advantages city living offered them: as a marketplace, the city brought people, resources, and ideas together. For the literate public, the larger cities featured professional theatre performances, social organizations, newspapers, and opportunities to obtain a private education. Businesspeople, lawyers, and doctors walked alongside blacksmiths, gunsmiths, wheelwrights, tanners, saddlers, tailors, and carpenters. Some urban workers agitated for improved conditions in their trade. In 1838, printers in Houston formed the Texas Typographical Association and, in what is considered the first work stoppage in Texas, struck that year and won a slight wage increase. Conversely, businesspeople in Houston, Matagorda, and Galveston founded organizations that they termed “chambers of commerce,” apparently for the purpose of settling legal disputes among themselves without resorting to litigation.

Farms, Plantations, and Ranches

The liberal land policies of the republic helped numerous Texans begin new lives as farmers. Cotton and corn remained the common staples in most agricultural areas of the republic.
In spite of bad weather, crop-destroying insects, and other difficulties, small farmers and slaveholding planters helped advance cotton as the most reliable export commodity, though by no means was the crop their material salvation. Farmers supplemented their earnings by raising domesticated animals and planting side plots of vegetables and fruit trees. Most provided their own services—blacksmithing and the like—frequently with the assistance of the entire family or, as in the case of plantation owners, with the help of slaves.

The slave plantation, generally situated in southeastern and eastern Texas, stood during this time as an important part of the agrarian sector. With impediments to slavery removed following independence, Texans immediately acted to define the institution. The Constitution of 1836 guaranteed the legality of human property by providing that persons in bondage at the time of the document's writing would continue in that status. Subsequent laws passed by the republic's congress augmented constitutional provisions. Legislation specified various punishments for those found guilty of stealing slaves, encouraging slaves to run away, giving refuge to fugitive slaves, or abetting slave insurrection. With such official support, slavery as an institution experienced brisk expansion in the republic. The number of plantations increased, as did the slave population, from 5,000 black persons (all but a handful of whom were enslaved) in 1836, to 38,753 in 1847, according to a state census taken that year.

The sorry lot of blacks in Texas rested on racial prejudices and discrimination that went all the way back to Elizabethan England, and plantation owners saw blacks as innately inferior. Slave codes carefully defined the status of blacks as chattels in perpetuity. Laws imposed the most severe penalties on blacks found guilty of assaulting or murdering a white person, sexually assaulting a white woman, or committing arson, though the white community easily could and often did turn to lynch law to avenge anything it considered an unacceptable act against a white person. Because of the inherent cruelty of slavery, whites desperately feared slave plots against them, and companies of volunteers patrolled the countryside to try to suppress any possible trouble and stay on the lookout for runaways. Most slaves lived out their days without the possibility of relief from arduous fieldwork, which in Texas usually meant the planting, care, and harvesting of cotton, corn, and sugarcane. Furthermore, slaves could expect beatings and even death as punishment for failing to meet the work expectations of their owners, for being insolent, or for attempting to escape. The slave system made no exception of women. Slave women worked wherever ordered, often fulfilling domestic duties during part of the day then, during another, sent to the fields to clear land, plow acreage, and pick the crops. Alongside men they cared for the horses and mules, milked cows, and fed hogs. At day's end, they turned to cabin chores, including cooking, cleaning, sewing, gardening, and whatever new tasks demanded attention. Enslaved women faced cruelty just as did their men folk, and it might come to women in especially terrible forms, as in the loss of their children to sale or their rape by men in authority, among them the white master or overseer.

Although a failed escape would bring them severe penalties, many slaves attempted to gain their liberty in the 1830s by fleeing and then joining the East Texas Indians, such as the Cherokees. In the 1840s, other runaways turned south, finding assistance from Texas Mexicans who escorted them through the sparsely settled, semi-arid frontier between Central Texas and the Rio Grande, and on into Mexico. That country soon became a haven for runaway slaves; an estimated 3,000 fugitive slaves found refuge in Mexico by the early 1850s.

Not every black person in the republic was a slave, for Texas was home to a very small number of free blacks, about 300 according to the above-mentioned census of 1847. These
people held a tenuous status, however, for both the government and society refused to acknowledge their freedom. Whites discouraged free blacks from living as full citizens of the republic, applying the same negative attitudes and laws toward them as they did toward bondpeople.

Cattle and horse ranching remained the chief economic pursuits in East Texas. Though raising livestock in the region had long been a Spanish and Mexican enterprise, Anglos added a new dimension to it when they imported ranching traditions from the southern United States, primarily South Carolina. Although large cattle herds could be found in the various Anglo-American settlements of the republic, the most successful ranches lay in the Coastal Prairie, a grassland region running south along the Gulf Coast to the mouth of the Sabine River to the San Antonio River, extending for seventy-five to one hundred miles inland, its western limits near Victoria.

Sheep raising also continued but underwent change. Anglo Americans who brought their sheep to Texas cross bred them with Spanish sheep, which had been raised in the region since the colonial era. And in the 1830s and 1840s, Mexican shepherds drove flocks northward into Texas, while European immigrants introduced varieties of sheep from their native lands. Despite the wide interest in the sheep-raising industry, this aspect of agribusiness did not exactly thrive during the period of the republic.

The Texians

*Texian* was a term that expressed the people’s identity with and pride in the new land, and the republic was fertile soil for the emergence of a strong nationalism. Texans, after all, had a revolutionary past to glorify, one replete with war heroes who symbolized a tradition of fighting against tyranny. By the 1840s, the Alamo emerged as a symbol of Texian pride, standing for valor and martyrology in the cause of liberty, and the people toasted (and still do) the Alamo’s place in Texas lore. Independence Day and San Jacinto Day became dates for firecrackers, patriotic speeches, parades, and all sorts of outdoor festivities. Leaders of the era proclaimed the nation’s uniqueness and encouraged the perpetuation of the values and ideas expressive of “Texian culture,” traits such as resiliency, self-reliance, courage, and faith in the promise of the future of the republic held.

As was already suggested, however, some new arrivals from the United States and Europe were not exactly upstanding and law-abiding citizens. Consequently, in its early years the republic was a more-or-less undisciplined society in which individualism was often expressed without much inhibition. In the fledgling towns, rowdy, vulgar, sometimes even violent behavior flourished, the substantial consumption of alcoholic beverages only fueling the general lawlessness. Bowie knives were commonly touted by folks whose habit of swearing constantly seemed to reinforce their ruggedness, while “gentlemen” turned to the duel to settle insults and disagreements.

In many cases descended from remote wilderness areas of Kentucky, Alabama, or Tennessee, where violence was a survival mechanism, immigrants to the republic typically fended for themselves. These people often chose to settle private quarrels without the assistance of legal authorities, few of whom served the frontier anyway.

Social pressures emanating from the persistent threat of danger, under which many Texans lived, further fed the population’s general belligerence. Texans valued manly prowess and displays of courage in the face of danger—a destructive storm, Indians, Mexican soldiers or bandits, the dueling opponent, a wild animal, or whatever hostile force came
their way. Not surprisingly, the most highly esteemed members of society were military heroes.

But the very bravado that led people to stand up and fight against their enemies also nourished a disorderly society. A violent feud involving the so-called “Regulators” and “Moderators” (labels traceable to feuds that originally started in Appalachia) erupted in East Texas over land titles in the late 1830s. The 1840s saw a series of public shootings and murders, and a reign of terror spread over Shelby County until President Houston sent in the militia to quell the lawlessness. Smaller feuds, however, continued to spin off from this disorder for the rest of the nineteenth century.

The considerable degree of lawlessness on the frontier notwithstanding, the republic was, of course, also home to a great many honest, principled citizens whose responsible behavior balanced that of the others. Indeed, the vast majority of immigrants were decent, law-abiding folks who were proud to call themselves Texans.

The Indians

The government of the Republic of Texas had no Indian policy to inherit. As of 1836, it had no standing treaties to honor, as old ones made between Mexico and the hostile tribes were now void. The Constitution of 1836 said nothing of recognizing Indian rights to the land, and the government was too new to have judicial precedent to guide it.

Many of the old tribes from the colonial era barely clung to life, but now the survival of all Indian groups grew more tenuous as they faced a rapidly expanding Anglo population as well as the alternating Indian policies of Houston, which urged conciliation, and those of Lamar, which called for displacement and extinction. The Karankawas, for one, suffered further setbacks as Anglo pioneers founded new towns and ranches along the coastal lands that long had been Karankawa hunting and foraging grounds. Debilitated by sickness, alcoholism, and malnutrition, the Karankawas seemed unable to stop the encroachment or the attacks leveled against them by the settlers during the mid-1840s. By then, the Karankawas teetered near extinction as a recognizable tribe. The Caddos, meanwhile, saw only a slight interlude from their own misery of poverty and displacement. Lamar’s plan to expel Indians had led several Caddo bands to retreat into Oklahoma, but Houston’s reelection as president had prompted them to return to Texas and establish themselves along the northwestern stretches of the Brazos River. As of 1845, the Caddos believed they had found safety in their new camps located some distance away from the westernmost Anglo settlements.

As early as 1823, a delegation of Cherokees had journeyed to Mexico City seeking land titles for their people. Mexico had never honored their requests, but, as noted, the Cherokees and Sam Houston consummated a treaty in February 1836 acknowledging Cherokee rights to certain lands in East Texas. The First Congress rejected the agreement, reasoning that the treaty had been negotiated by the ad interim government and thus did not obligate the republic to honor it, that the lands inhabited by the Cherokees had never been awarded by the Mexican government, that the Indian lands actually belonged to the empresario contract given to David G. Burnet, who had already settled several families therein, and that Indian attacks on the settlements had continued despite the treaty.

Duwali, the Cherokee leader, had expected approval of the treaty, for Houston had supported it unwaveringly, but with the election of Lamar, the Cherokees were soon disappointed. The new president harbored fixed attitudes against Indians. He had been in
Georgia when whites there had expropriated Creek Indian lands, and the persistent attacks on settlers committed by the most hostile tribes, combined with his belief that some Cherokees were part of a multiracial conspiracy to destabilize the republic, fueled his hardline policy toward all American Indians and, most prominently, his push for the expulsion of the Cherokees. Despite Duvall’s logical argument outlining the Cherokees’ legitimate claims to the East Texas lands promised them, Lamar pressed his demand for their removal: either the Cherokees would leave peacefully or they would be forcibly evicted. The Indians chose to resist, and at the Battle of Neches, in present-day Van Zandt County, regular troops and two volunteer companies defeated the Cherokees and killed Duvall on July 16, 1839. Cherokee resistance died with the chief, and the remainder of his people departed across the Red River into the Indian Territory (Oklahoma) or dispersed into Mexico.

To the west, hostile tribes, as independent as ever, roved the plains during the mid-1830s. Especially fierce were the Kiowas and Comanches: the former had first appeared in the Texas Panhandle from the northern Plains in the early nineteenth century; the latter for years had fought off, and even raided, Apaches, Spaniards, and Mexicans. In southern Texas, Kiowas and Comanches looted ranches and settlements; in the Laredo area, they made off with thousands of horses and mules. Between the Nueces River and the Rio Grande, they caused so much destruction of homes and fields that within a year after the war for independence the area had experienced an abrupt decline in population and a suspension of economic development. In Central and North Texas, these Plains Indians were just beginning to feel pressure from land-hungry whites, and Anglos soon began to establish farmsteads close to Comanche hunting grounds, a foreshadowing of wholesale intrusion. Simultaneously, settlements old and new tantalized the Comanches with items that the Indians found quite useful for survival. Consequently, the Comanches consistently breached the treaties that the Houston government had negotiated. Complicating things further, the Comanches had no real tribal government, principally functioning as nomadic, autonomous bands. Therefore, agreements reached with one group meant little to all the other groups of Comanche people.

In their first encounters with the Plains Indians, Anglo Texans found them every bit as formidable as had the Spaniards and Mexicans before them—the Texans’ Kentucky long rifles proving largely ineffective against mounted warriors on the open plains. But by the late 1830s, the Texans began to develop better methods of fighting the Comanches. The “strike and pursue” tactic of the mounted ranging companies, endorsed by Lamar, was one such technique.

By 1840, it seemed as if both sides might be ready for a truce; several Comanche bands expressed a willingness to talk in order to end the Ranger strikes, while numerous other problems plagued Lamar’s government. Comanche raids, furthermore, had left a pattern of property destroyed, settlers dead, and captives taken in their wake.

In March, twelve Comanche chiefs, along with eighteen other men and thirty-five women and children, arrived in San Antonio to negotiate for the release of captured white women and children. The Indians brought with them a young white prisoner by the name of Matilda Lockhart, who reported that several other captives remained behind. Meeting in the Council House (a room in the local jail), Texas authorities informed the chiefs that they were to be taken into custody and held ransom until all the white captives were returned. The chiefs made a break for freedom, whereupon the Texans opened fire, killing many of the Indians as well as two Texans. The fighting then spilled into the street, where the carnage continued. When the shooting finally stopped, thirty-five Comanches, including five women and children, and seven or eight Texans lay dead.
The so-called Council House Fight (which the Indians considered a treacherous massacre) poisoned relations between the Texans and the Comanches, and it soon led to an all-out war between the two peoples. In August 1840, nearly 1,000 warriors plundered Victoria and Linnville. Texas Rangers under Ben McCulloch gave chase, and upon engaging the Indians they served them two punishing defeats.

Subsequently, the Rangers kept the Indians on the run. Among the leaders in these campaigns was John Coffee "Jack" Hays, a Tennessee immigrant in charge of a San Antonio outpost. Armed with the revolver patented by Samuel Colt in the eastern United States in 1836, Hays launched a tactical war that used the element of surprise and a policy of giving no quarter. Effective as Hays’s tactics proved, periodic raiding of settlements by the Indians continued throughout the era of the republic. In October 1844, Houston successfully negotiated a treaty of peace and commerce with the Comanches and other western tribes at Tehuacana Creek (in modern-day McLennan County).

As part of his Indian policy, Houston authorized a trading post at Tehuacana Creek to conduct trade with the Comanches, who needed guns, ammunition, blankets, metal knives, clothing, and an assortment of manufactured items for cooking, hunting, and even leisure. In return the Comanches exchanged (as they had in earlier decades) horses and mules they stole from Mexico, rival Indian nations, and even from Anglo Americans. This type of commerce proved beneficial to both parties. The Comanches found the new post at Tehuacana Creek (and others established along the frontier line) a convenient, central point at which to acquire coveted goods, and white traders found ready markets in the United States for the bartered livestock, the demand coming from the military, American settlers trekking west to Oregon and in need of draft animals to pull their wagons, and western farmers who needed horses and mules to clear lands. Despite such efforts to bring tranquility to the republic, conflict between the Indians and the Texians never ceased completely.

The Tejanos

Texas Mexicans had found themselves caught between two worlds during the independence movement. A few Tejanos had assumed prominent roles alongside Anglos, and their presence had been conspicuous at Washington-on-the-Brazos, the Alamo, and San Jacinto. While some had envisioned their destinies tied to the capitalist economic order fostered by Anglo Americans in the 1820s, others were cautious toward a people who expressed disgust and contempt for them as Mexicans.

For Tejanos, the post-1836 reality presented a departure from a way of life rooted in the Texas frontera: they were at a numerical disadvantage, business was conducted in a different language, and they were not completely familiar with the new form of politics. Despite guarantees in the Constitution of 1836, Tejanos seemed defenseless against a people who freely expressed their dislike for them and openly desired retribution against their race for Santa Anna’s carnage at the Alamo and Goliad. The wrath of whites was strong and swift: throughout the old Department of Béxar, Mexican families were banished from their homes immediately after the Battle of San Jacinto, and rancheros later had great difficulty recovering their scattered stock. In the late 1830s, the Mexicans of San Antonio felt like “foreigners in their native land,” as increasing numbers of Anglos moved into the area. According to Juan Seguín, who served as mayor of the city (1841–42), Béxareños came to him seeking protection from harassment by white antagonists. “Could I leave them defenseless, exposed to the assaults of foreigners, who on the pretext that they were Mexican,
treated them worse than brutes?” he asked. By the summer of 1842, Seguín had become a refugee in Mexico, seeking to flee the animosity of whites who considered him an accomplice in Mexican efforts to reconquer Texas.

Notwithstanding their quandary, Tejanos molded a place for themselves within the new society. While remaining faithful to the tenets of their cultural past, they adopted many of the new customs and habits. Anglo-American institutions with which they interacted, moreover, eventually acculturated them into embracing many of what would become mainstream concepts, values, judgments, and patterns of behavior.

Therefore, in the Tejano communities continuity accompanied change. The old upper class, which traced its origins to the colonial era, endured, albeit precariously. It was most visible in the Béjar area, where the Navarros, the Seguins, and other prominent families had long been entrenched. Some of these oligarchs went on to serve as members of the Texas congress; Navarro, as the representative of the Béjar district to the Republic’s House of Representative, fought fervently to protect those of his Tejano constituents who lacked titles to lands granted them by Spain (and which Anglos coveted), but to little avail. The majority of Tejanos were less fortunate in finding a niche in Anglo society. Most of them supported themselves by carrying on, as their people had done for many years, in the ranching and freighting enterprises.

**Learning and Plain Folks**

As colonists, Anglo Texans had complained, somewhat unjustifiably, of Mexico’s failure to provide them with adequate educational opportunities. Once independent, Texans faced so many problems in improving the general welfare that they themselves failed to remedy the same situation they had decried on the eve of independence.

Education, therefore, did not improve much during the years of the republic. Even Lamar’s ambition to attain educational grandeur produced but one public school—this in Houston during the 1839–40 school year—but citizens improvised in creating informal institutions of learning. In rural areas, mothers taught their children in makeshift classrooms. Whenever possible, communities employed teachers, many of whom received payment in produce and most of whom lacked proper training, seeing teaching more as a way to supplement their livelihood than a profession. Education thus remained rudimentary, the unpredictable weather, the demands of tending to livestock and crops, and raids by the Indians all interfering with the routine of structured learning. Educational reforms, such as calls for universal public education, that were gaining in popularity in the United States at the time hardly reached Texas.

Well-to-do Texian families were, however, able to educate their children by sending them to private schools. Female academies, also known as “seminaries,” were numerous during the days of the republic but usually short-lived. While they existed, they emphasized courses designed to provide the “appropriate instruction” for young women—basic reading and writing skills with a smattering of math, history, or geography. Parents with enough money to do so sent their children to private schools in the United States.

The lamentable condition of education and the travails of living on a frontier naturally impeded the advancement of the arts, and few artists of merit emerged from the days of the republic. One who did so was Jefferson Wright, who achieved recognition as the semi-official painter of the short-lived nation. Among other notable works, Wright painted famous portraits of President Sam Houston. Literary pieces, some of them historical, found
their way into print, but citizens of the republic produced little literature they could claim as their own.

What frontier people did have was a knack for relating a genre of folksy literature—namely, colorful tall tales and yarns of exaggerated humor. The literature of the republic, thus, was largely in the oral tradition of common folks, a difficult genre for scholars to trace and preserve. Typical themes included humankind’s struggle with nature and exploits of heroic men like Davy Crockett and even “Old Sam” the president. Houston’s affinity for whiskey, his unhurried drawl, and his fondness for whistling made him a subject with whom plain people could identify.

Still, there existed enough of a reading public that newspapers prospered. The Telegraph and Texas Register, founded during the days of independence, led the way in respectability and staying power. From its headquarters in Houston, it kept citizens of the republic abreast of the issues of annexation, real-estate promotions, immigration, presidential campaigns, and local politics.

Competition for the Houston paper came principally from Galveston, but a number of papers also developed in the interior. When Austin arose as the new capital, at least two significant newspapers started publication to cover political matters at the seat of government and carry the news of frontier affairs. Once settlement spread to northeastern Texas in the 1840s, newspapers emerged there also, covering such episodes as the ongoing local feud between the Regulators and the Moderators.

Transportation

The intellectual condition of the citizens of the republic—indeed just about everything that touched the lives of people, including the economy—was hampered by the poor state of transportation. During the period, Texans remained dependent for mobility on existing waterways and crude roads. People commonly traveled down the several rivers to the Gulf, but with great difficulty, since boat captains had to navigate around numerous obstacles and seasonally contend with water levels that were alternately too low or too high. Outlets into the Gulf presented similar problems—river mouths could be shallow, erratic (because silt and sandbars can shift), or simply impassable. Land travel was no less inconvenient. Since dirt roads did not drain well, downpours could hamper commerce for months, the standing water and thick mud stalling stagecoaches, freight wagons, and mail service and shutting down trade between the interior and Gulf ports. Consequently, different parts of the republic remained isolated from one another, and practically no funds to subsidize improvements in the infrastructure were forthcoming from the financially strapped government.

Recognition in Europe

At the same time that Texans were pursuing annexation to the United States, their agents in Europe petitioned for diplomatic recognition and loans that might assist the republic with its monetary shortfall. Eminent among the envoys was James Pinckney Henderson, who tempted the English with the opportunity to acquire prime access to Texas cotton and the chance to sell British manufactured goods in the republic. But England wished to maintain cordial relations with Mexico, and strong abolitionist sentiment in Great Britain
opposed recognizing a nation committed to nourishing slavery. The British, therefore, could only consent to a trade agreement in 1838. The French balked at formally recognizing a country whose independence might be short lived, and they, too, would concede only to a temporary commercial arrangement.

With the all-important European recognition eluding the republic, Lamar commissioned James Hamilton, a former governor of South Carolina and an enthusiastic backer of the Texas experiment, to assist Henderson. Hamilton also had the assignment of negotiating Lamar's desired $5 million loan. With a need to acquire new friends in North America and the prospect that Texas would remain independent of the United States, the French government directed the secretary of the Washington legation, Count Alphonse de Saligny, to inspect the young nation. The count's favorable impression, verified by other observers, finally led France, on September 25, 1839, to become the first European nation to recognize the Republic of Texas. His work accomplished, Henderson returned home, but Hamilton traveled to other nations seeking similar treaties. In September 1840, he convinced the Dutch to acknowledge Texas's sovereignty.

In due time, Hamilton returned to Britain, where he reminded his hosts that friendly relations could indeed produce mutually beneficial commercial windfalls; diplomatic ties might also give England the clout it needed to thwart the westward expansion of the United States. Confident that a treaty would serve their interests, the British in November 1840 also extended diplomatic recognition to the republic.

However commendable Hamilton’s achievements, he had not been able to secure the $5 million loan desired by President Lamar to buoy the Texas economy. The traditional story, that Hamilton failed in France due to the "Pig War" in Texas, is a colorful one. According to this oft-repeated explanation, while in Austin the Count de Saligny engaged in an undignified altercation with his innkeeper after the Count's servant shot and killed some pigs eating corn reserved for the Count's own consumption. When the Texas government failed to support the Count against the enraged innkeeper, the owner of the derelict hogs, Saligny left in a huff and advised his government not to extend the loan. Actually, this trifling episode had little if any bearing on France's decision. The French had their own money problems, and they could ill afford to risk a large sum on an economy as unsteady as that of Texas. Indeed, Hamilton never blamed Saligny for the failure to get the loan approved, and Britain rejected Hamilton's financial appeals for the same reasons as had France.

**Friction with Mexico**

Mexico still refused to honor the Treaties of Velasco, so even as European nations recognized the sovereignty of Texas, Mexico sought to return its wayward province to the fold. To that end, it assigned saboteurs to Texas to try to undermine the government. An alliance discovered in 1838–39 between Vicente Córdova and Manuel Flores—two Tejanos with ties to Mexico's military in Matamoros—and the Cherokees seemed part of a design to prevent Texas from maintaining its independence. Equally plausible, Córdova and Flores now acted as leaders of discontented Tejanos in the Nacogdoches area who turned to the Mexican government in a desperate gesture to alleviate their oppressed status under the new Anglo-led government.

Houston had tempered his policy toward Mexico—militarily and economically, he reasoned. Texas could not afford another war with the erstwhile mother country. Lamar,
however, risked provocation by talking up his plans for expansion to the south and the
west. Diplomatically, he offered to buy the disputed region between the Nueces River and
the Rio Grande, but privately he prepared to carry out his grand illusions of empire. Such
dreams led to the ill-fated Santa Fe Expedition of 1841.

Lamar posited that if Texas were to incorporate New Mexico (he merely assumed that
the New Mexicans would prefer to live under the Texas flag than that of Mexico), the
acquisition would enhance Texas's destiny in several ways. First, it would help the nation
share in the trade between Santa Fe and Missouri (such commerce had begun in the 1820s),
collecting specie at customhouses that would aid the struggling economy. Second, it would
give Texas persuasive leverage in its position in the middle of the continent. Lastly, it might
even be a stepping-stone for further expansion toward the Pacific. Along this train of
thought, if Texas were to annex California, it would enjoy strategic and commercial benefits
on two oceans.

Without the consent of Congress, Lamar assembled an expedition of 320 armed men for
his expansionist campaign and dispatched them to Santa Fe, New Mexico, on June 20, 1841.
After a trying and desperate march of about 1,000 miles, the Texans, under the command
of Hugh McLeod, arrived in New Mexico in October only to be intercepted by soldiers who
subdued them without difficulty. The invaders quickly realized that the people of Santa Fe
did not welcome their proposal of annexation, and the Texans were escorted all the way to
Mexico City, where they were promptly imprisoned. Back in Texas, the Congress did not
take Lamar's blunder lightly. It censured him and might have commenced impeachment
proceedings against him had his three-year term not been drawing to a close.

Mexico responded daringly to Lamar's gamble. In February 1842, President Santa Anna
ordered General Rafael Vásquez across the Rio Grande and into San Antonio. The Mexicans
captured the city on March 5, in an apparent gesture to reassert Mexico's claim to territory
as far north as Béxar (or, conversely, to negate the Texans' insistence that the republic
extended to the Rio Grande). Though Vásquez lowered the Mexican flag and returned to
Mexico after only two days of occupation, San Antonio fell to the Mexicans once again in
September, this time to troops under the command of General Adrián Woll, who took some
sixty prisoners with him when forced to retreat by Texan volunteers arriving at the scene.

Texans, who had been on edge since the Vásquez raid, felt inspired to vindicate their
nation's honor. Houston, now ten months into his second presidential term, commanded
General Alexander Somervell to lead a volunteer expedition of about 750 men toward the
Rio Grande: its mission was to patrol the border to prevent further invasions. The general
reached the river without incident in early December and took Laredo. Part of his force
then marched downriver in the direction of the Mexican village of Guerrero, where Somer-
vell decided to go no farther.

Approximately 300 of the volunteers ignored the general's decision, opting to press a
counteroffensive deeper into Mexico. At the little town of Mier, on Christmas Day 1842,
Mexican infantrymen who had been occupying the town for the last two days overpowered
some 260 of the intruding Texans. The surviving members of what became known as the
"Mier Expedition" were taken prisoner and then marched toward Mexico City. On Febru-
ary 11, 1843, the Texans managed to escape, though only four of them actually made it
back to the republic, for Mexican troops recaptured 176 of them. At this point, the would-be
escapees were forced to draw from a pot containing 159 white beans and 17 black ones.
The unfortunate ones who had drawn a black bean were lined up against a wall and shot
to death (Figure 4.5). The Mexican authorities confined the remaining prisoners in the
capital.
Annexation

The Mier Expedition jarred Texans into rethinking their Lone Star status. Annexation to the United States, though loudly rejected by Lamar, had ever been the dream of most Texans, and the ignominious defeat at Mier now heightened many people's preference for statehood. Joining the Union, as Texans saw things, would bring benefits in the form of financial and military security. People's distrust of the republic's currency and the ever-increasing public debt seemed to be taking Texas toward bankruptcy. Militarily, the republic stood vulnerable to Mexico's hostilities—and the Plains Indians continued to threaten settlers on the frontier. Many in the United States also found the annexation of Texas an appealing prospect. Those with an eye for Texas lands, among them real estate speculators and southern slaveholders who hoped to profit from an increase in land values once Texas entered the Union, displayed particular interest.

Public debate in the United States during 1843 and 1844 revived hopes of the annexation of Texas. Following the Mier Expedition, Houston had begun making overtures toward England and France regarding closer commercial ties, especially if they persuaded Mexico to concede independence to Texas. Diplomatic recognition by Mexico, Houston hoped, would end Mexico's harassment of the republic. By early 1844, sentiment in the United States was shifting toward annexation. Some U.S. citizens worried that Britain (which now offered Texas assistance, ostensibly in defense of its commercial treaties) might gain undue influence in North America; others actively embraced the spirit of Manifest Destiny—the concept that it was the intended fate and duty of the United States to occupy the continent from the Atlantic to the Pacific.

In the southern United States, advocates for the annexation of Texas advanced reasons similar to those offered by Texas Anglos back in 1836: Americans had, through intrepidity, industriousness, and farsightedness, transformed Texas into a region of flourishing farms, ranches, and villages. Texas's vast lands held out seemingly unlimited prospects for
economic development and must be absorbed into United States, lest they fall back into the clutches of the Mexican government. Of course, the real reason behind Southerners' keen interest in the matter was slavery: the South's foremost spokesperson, John C. Calhoun, had argued publicly for the annexation of Texas so that slavery could be expanded.

But the annexation of Texas faced solid resistance from Northern abolitionists and Free Soilers (those who opposed the expansion of slavery) who argued vehemently against adding another slave state to the Union, as well as from members of the Whig party, who direly predicted a war with Mexico should the United States acquire Texas. Among all the contention, an annexation treaty negotiated in April 1844 proved abortive, the U.S. Senate rejecting it by a vote of thirty-five to sixteen. Meanwhile, Houston renewed his courtship of the British and the French while simultaneously sympathizing with the pro-annexation camp. He later likened his strategy to that of a woman playing off two suitors in order to gain a commitment from the one she loved.

When James K. Polk, the Democratic party candidate for U.S. president, won election on an expansionist platform in November 1844, the U.S. Congress again took up the matter of incorporating Texas into the Union. The next month, outgoing president John Tyler proposed the annexation of the republic through a joint resolution. This maneuver required only the majority consent of both houses of Congress, instead of the approval of two-thirds of the Senate required for a treaty. Congress expedited the annexation resolution, and on March 3, 1845, President Tyler signed the bill. According to the terms of the act, Texas won admission to the Union as a single state (though it was agreed that as many as five states could be carved out of the former republic) and retained title to its public lands, as a means of repaying its debts. Annexation helped neutralize British influence in the middle of the continent, satisfied U.S. voters’ endorsement of continental expansion, and opened new opportunities for more people who wanted to speculate with the vast lands of Texas.

For Texans, annexation meant a path to relief from public debt and a new measure of military security. When the new (and last) president of Texas, Anson Jones, called a special session of congress in June 1845, the offer of annexation met little resistance. Meantime, a constitutional convention drafted a state constitution that the voters approved overwhelmingly in October; a few weeks later, the U.S. Congress accepted it as well. President Polk signed the Texas Admission Act on December 29, 1845 (Figure 4.6). In February of 1846, James Pinckney Henderson was the first to assume the office of governor of Texas.

The War with Mexico

As many had feared, Mexico expressed indignation that the United States dared to annex land that it considered part of its sovereign territory. The Mexican minister in Washington immediately protested the approval of the joint resolution, and diplomatic relations between the two nations deteriorated rapidly. The Mexican minister prepared to return home, as did his American counterpart in Mexico City. War seemed imminent.

Polk aimed to pressure Mexico into formally ceding the coveted lands in its Far North. To this end, he assigned General Zachary Taylor and his forces to a post near the Rio Grande, but he also made a last effort to reconcile differences through diplomacy. The most crucial issue preventing compromise was the disputed territory between the Nueces River and the Rio Grande. Throughout New Spain's colonial era, the Nueces River had been considered the northern boundary of the state of Tamaulipas and the southern border of Texas, but the Texans argued that the Treaties of Velasco had recognized the Rio Grande
as the republic's southern border. (Asserting the Rio Grande as being the dividing line between Texas and Mexico, Texas had since 1836 also claimed the region stretching from the source of the Rio Grande in southern Colorado, thence north and east to the western boundaries established by the Transcontinental Treaty of 1819—see Figures 4.1 and 4.3.) John Slidell, the U.S. special envoy sent to Mexico City in December 1845 to resolve the issue, was to press for the Rio Grande as the boundary line, but also to offer the Mexican government $5 million for the New Mexico territory and $25 million for California. Mexico rejected his offers, and by March 1846 Slidell was homeward bound.

As Slidell traveled back to Washington, Polk pondered his next move. Fate seemed to favor the president, for on May 9, 1846, news arrived from Taylor that he had skirmished with Mexican cavalry near present-day Brownsville on April 25 and incurred casualties of sixteen men killed or wounded. At this point, Polk delivered a war message to Congress, reasoning that “Mexico has passed the boundary of the United States, has invaded our territory, and shed American blood on American soil. She has proclaimed that hostilities exist and that the two nations are now at war.” Congress approved the war resolution a few days later.

Causes

Historians traditionally offer two broad interpretations to explain the causes of the U.S. war with Mexico. One school of thought sees Mexican officials as belligerent and irrational
in failing to act in good faith toward resolving the boundary question, thereby compelling Polk to declare war. In 1846, the Centralists, the same party that had issued the Law of April 6, 1830, and had expressed anti-American feelings on numerous occasions, were back in power in Mexico. Holding out the Centralists as irreconcilable Anglophobes, this first group of historians posited that the Centralists had initiated the hostilities by ordering troops across the Rio Grande to attack Zachary Taylor’s camp on the north bank of the river. A counterview holds that Polk simply manipulated the United States into the war. In this interpretation, the United States provoked the conflict as a means of acquiring Texas and California. Expansionist fervor, with capitalism as its driving force, motivated ambitious Americans to take whatever steps necessary to acquire Mexico’s Far North: even initiating war with Mexico. Naturally, most scholars from Mexico subscribe to this point of analysis, seeing their nation as a pawn in a game of U.S. imperialism.

Recent historiography, however, presents a more objective treatment of the war with Mexico. One body of thought maintains that national preservation forced Mexico to fight. The Mexican people would have revolted against any leader who had not resisted U.S. designs on their territory. Thus, politicians of every persuasion in Mexico publicly advocated war with the United States—to do otherwise would have invited popular censure and internal rebellion. Revisionist historians from Mexico suggest another motive for the bravado: a military victory would have permitted the prevailing political party to maintain power for many years to come. Whatever the case, Mexican leaders considered retreat impossible, so the government opted to face the United States head-on rather than risk self-destruction.

In the same vein, yet another recent interpretation says Polk pursued a provocative plan of bluff and intimidation. In the United States, Mexicans were regarded as a degenerate Indian race unable to exert a stable influence over their own land. It was, therefore, Americans’ providential duty, some in the United States believed, to occupy the Far North and redeem it from Mexican ineptitude (as well as from hostile Indians). Once the more deserving American nation possessed the expanse embracing New Mexico, Arizona, and California, its citizens would transform it into a prosperous garden, just as their enterprising predecessors had done in Texas. Polk’s administration hoped to annex all of Mexico’s Far North without resorting to military force. But when Mexico was ultimately backed into a corner at the Rio Grande, the president’s hand was forced to play the war card.

War

The U.S. offensive involved a three-pronged attack: the invasion of New Mexico and California, northern Mexico, and central Mexico through Vera Cruz on the Gulf Coast. While some 6,000 Texans participated in the U.S. campaigns, it was the mounted volunteers who gained the most notoriety. The Texas Rangers, as they preferred to be called by this time, became the “eyes and ears” of Zachary Taylor’s army. Led into battle under such illustrious figures as John Coffee “Jack” Hays, Ben McCulloch, William A. “Big Foot” Wallace (Figure 4.7), Mustang Grey, and Samuel H. Walker, Ranger companies and regiments earned a reputation as being second to none, prompting Taylor to single them out for commendation. But the activities of the Rangers in certain campaigns created bitter memories in Mexico, for in many cases the Rangers carried their frontier individualism to extremes: they wreaked havoc on innocent civilians and cold-bloodedly disposed of anyone whom they suspected of abetting the resistance movement. When Texas Rangers went on expedi-
tions in search of Mexican guerrilla forces, they brought back no prisoners, shooting the guerrilleros on the spot. After Taylor won a decisive victory at Buena Vista in February 1847, the Rangers received orders to reinforce General Winfield Scott’s command, already in Mexico City by September 1847. Assigned to protect Scott’s supply line from the coast, the Rangers cleared the jungles of guerrilleros and again earned praise for their courage. But their reputation for committing atrocities preceded them when they arrived in Mexico City on December 6 to join Scott. People murmured their fears of Los Diablos Tejanos (the Texas Devils), and the Rangers did little to allay such dread, continuing their practice of abusing Mexicans—including random shootings, looting, lynching, and the hurling of insults—until war’s end, which came with the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo on February 2, 1848.

The treaty confirmed the United States’ title to Texas and turned over California and New Mexico to the norteamericanos. Under the agreement, the United States paid Mexico $18.25 million for these regions, which constituted almost half of the Mexican nation. The treaty also stated that those of Mexican descent living on the newly taken lands would enjoy the full rights of U.S. citizenship and that their property rights were to be respected inviolably.

The conflict left a hostile legacy between Mexico and the United States. Mexico began to blame all of its ills on the imperialists and vigorously condemn all things Yankee. For
the United States, the war brought the issue of slavery's expansion to the forefront: would the new territories be organized on a "slave" or "free" basis? In this issue, Texas would play a vital part, for its acceptance into the Union had strengthened the South's hand in the fiery debate over the future of slavery in the United States.

End of the Lone Star Republic

Swift and significant changes had transpired in the course of Texas history between 1836 and 1848. During this time, the claim over Texas once held by Native Americans, then Spaniards, and finally Mexicans ended. For those who had lived through the transformation, a look back showed a world at once different and familiar.

Most markedly distinguishing the mood of people in 1848 from that of the pre-independence period was the conviction that they now commanded their own destiny. An unpopular dictatorship had been removed, "backward" rule had been replaced by "enlightened" politics, and a "wilderness" had been tamed for "civilized" humanity. Texans toasted their triumph on national holidays and other patriotic occasions, their beliefs in American ideals reinvigorated now that they were U.S. citizens. Could anyone question the success of the government founded by Washington, Adams, Hamilton, Jefferson, Madison, and Monroe?

Other differences were not difficult to discern. A new population had largely replaced Texas's old inhabitants, though Anglo Americans had outnumbered the native Tejanos as early as the mid-1820s. By 1836, Texas was home to only a few settlers from overseas; by 1848, European colonies dotted the terrain. Cities had taken different forms. New urban layouts resembled the typical American city of the day, with the developers largely abandoning the old Spanish traditions of urban planning. Cultural influences now defined the state's geography: East Texas contained many transplanted folks from the Old South; North Texas, near modern-day Dallas, was settled by pioneers from Missouri, Arkansas, Kentucky, Tennessee, and Illinois; Central Texas attracted southerners who owned successful plantations and European settlers, especially Germans on its western fringes; South Texas remained the stronghold of Tejanos, especially the regions around San Antonio and Laredo. Occupations, leisure-time activities, and styles of architecture and dress were only a few of the many things that now set apart the world of Texans in 1848 from that of Mexicans in 1836.

But the Texas of 1848 was too closely tied to the preceding historical era to have rejected the Mexican legacy completely. However much Texans might associate Mexico with ignorance, their fifteen-year experience under Mexico had left its imprint on them, and Anglos had carried that influence into the period of the republic. The Hispanic tradition continued in the laws the Texans decided to keep, the empresario systems of Mexico and the Republic of Texas, the approach toward financing education, and even the strategy behind the organization of law enforcement groups such as the Texas Rangers.

Material conditions were more or less the same in 1848 as they had been a dozen years earlier. Obviously, the Texans had not been exceptionally successful in creating a vibrant economy (although they did ensure its capitalist basis), workdays still lasted from sunup to sundown in rural regions, the state of transportation was only slightly better than it had been in Mexican days, and daily hardships of struggling against diseases and hostile Indians, of fetching water and disposing of waste, remained just as severe.

The general class structure of the republic also had carried over from the 1830s. Anglos dominated society, of course, but the majority of black Texans still served as slaves, Mexi-
cans largely occupied the lower stratum, and whites persisted in regarding the Indians as irredeemable savages.

As the 1850s began, all who resided in the State of Texas were caught up in the same historical currents as were other Americans. People disagreed over the meaning of republicanism, had different material ambitions, and each of the various cultural groups desired to retain its special identity even as it enjoyed the benefits of being American. The electoral process gave Americans an arena for arriving at some consensus, but conflict and violence remained alternatives for defending deeply held convictions. Indeed, within a dozen years after the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, Texans found themselves seceding from the Union they had fought so hard to join.

Readings

Books and dissertations


Clarke, Mary (Whatley), Chief Bowles and the Texas Cherokee (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1971).


McDonald, David, José Antonio Navarro: In Search of the American Dream in Nineteenth-Century Texas (Denton: Texas State Historical Association, 2010).
The History of Texas


Sibley, Marilyn McAdams, Lone Stars and State Gazettes: Texas Newspapers before the Civil War (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1983).


———, The First President of Texas: The Life of Mirabeau B. Lamar, President of the Republic of Texas (Austin: Pemberton, 1977).


Spellman, Paul N., Forgotten Texas Leader: Hugh McLeod and the Texas Santa Fe Expedition (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1999).

Tijerina, Andrés, Tejanos and Texas Under the Mexican Flag, 1821–1836 (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1994).


Winders, Richard Bruce, Sacrificed at the Alamo: Tragedy and Triumph in the Texas Revolution (Abilene, TX: State House Press, 2004).


Articles


