

San Antonio Missions

National Historical Park
National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Celebrate



Texas!

Revolution And The Missions

The San Antonio Missions are silent witnesses of the Texas Revolution. On the 150th anniversary of the birth of the Republic of Texas (1986), their venerable towers and sturdy walls recall the rumble of drums, the hooves of cavalry, and the crash of guns during the tumultuous revolution.

THE TEXIANS COME TO MISSION CONCEPCION

Armed with American rifles, the Texians formed the army of the people marching from La Bahia to San Antonio. They were deadly and efficient frontiersmen who had claimed victory at Goliad over a detachment of Mexican regulars. The Anglo-Texian shout of October 1835, "On to San Antonio!" echoed across the plains. The motley force of 300 men, under General Stephen F. Austin, increased as it headed toward San Antonio. First they would come to the four Spanish missions just downriver from the settlement.

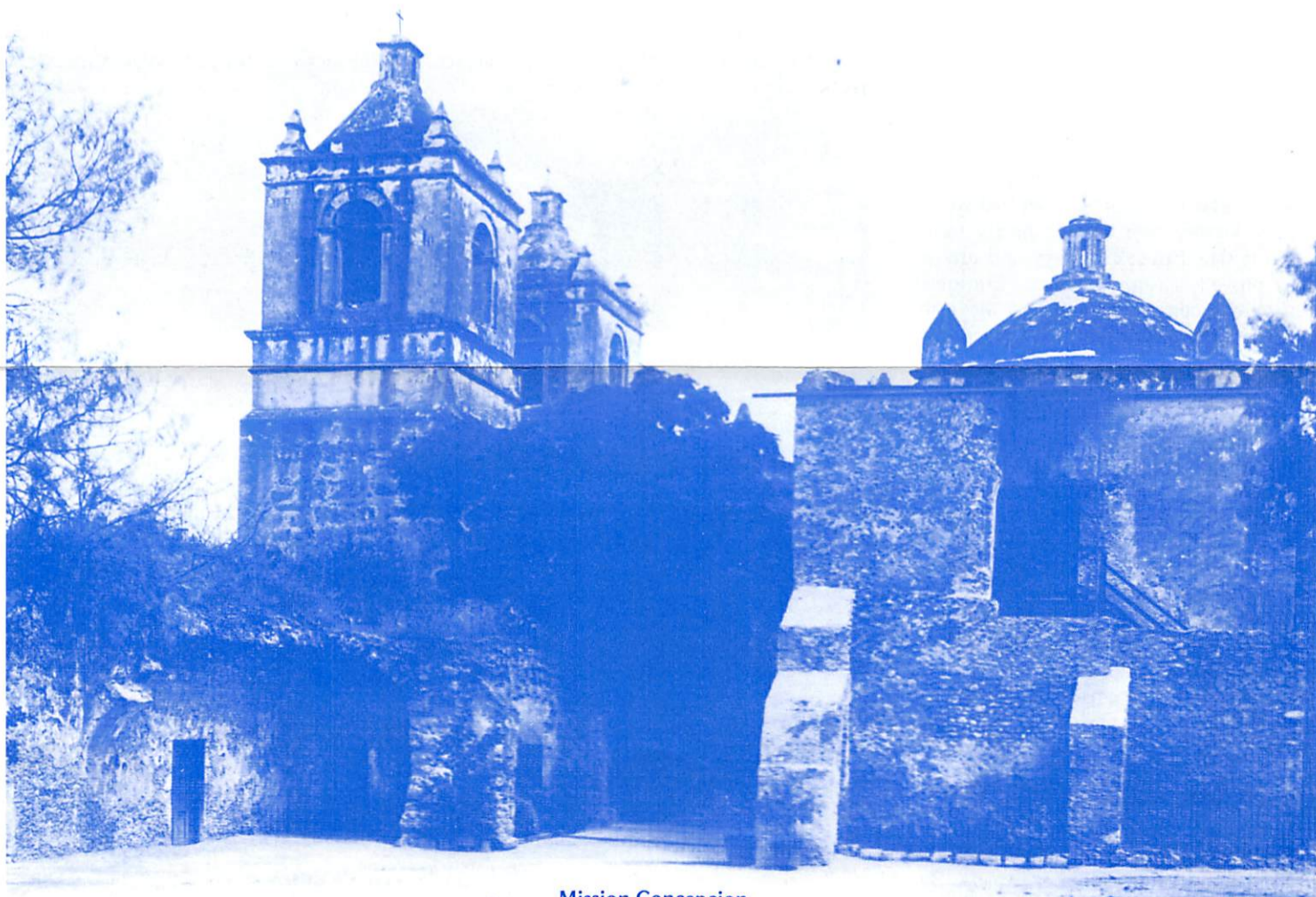
In San Antonio, General Martin Perfecto de Cos and his embattled troops waited. Cos, brother-in-law to General Antonio Lopez de Santa Anna, had been assigned to ensure government control over Texas and to arrest rebel factions, but was in a position to do neither. His cause was as unpopular as his situation was precarious. Santa Anna had revoked the Constitution of 1824 and declared himself dictator, but Texians had pledged to uphold the republican constitution.

When Austin reached Salado Creek (near present-day Brooks Aerospace Medical Center), he sent a delegation under a flag of truce to negotiate the surrender of government forces. When Cos refused, Austin marched his army to Mission San Francisco de la Espada, about eight miles south of downtown San Antonio. Austin established headquarters at the mission, and on Oct. 27 ordered Colonel Jim Bowie to reconnoiter north of Espada. As Bowie marched his two companies northward along the river bank,

they entered Missions San Juan Capistrano and San Jose y San Miguel de Aguayo, then proceeded to Mission La Purisima Concepcion where they made camp.

An almost level prairie, dotted with a few mesquite trees, extended from Concepcion to the river bend just west of the mission. The bend, "spirited with timber formed two sides of a triangle of nearly equal extent." (River alterations make it difficult to pinpoint locations, but very likely this site was 500 yards to a mile west of Concepcion, the present river bank of St. Peter's and St. Joseph's Children's Home.) Bowie wrote, "we proceeded with the division composed of 92 men, rank and file . . . to examine the missions . . . we marched to Concepcion, and selected our ground in a bend of the river San Antonio, within about five hundred yards of old Mission Concepcion."

On the evening of the 27th, Col. Bowie divided his force into two battle groups, and



Mission Concepcion



General Stephen F. Austin

Photo courtesy of Institute of Texan Cultures, San Antonio.

placed one on each of the two wooded sides of the triangle. Captain Fannin's company secured the south side of the triangle. Thirty seven men from the companies of Captains Coleman, Goheen, and Bennet, under command of Bowie, secured the north side. Six night guards were posted while a seventh kept vigil from the cupola of Mission Concepcion which overlooked the whole countryside.

THE BATTLE AT CONCEPCION

Dawn on the eighth came with dense fog, so that even the guard on the mission roof was unable to detect enemy movements. At 8:00 a.m., Mexican infantry supported by a large force of cavalry charged across the open prairie. Their continued blaze of fire was far less effective than the deadly aim of Texian riflemen camouflaged in the timber near the river bank. About 80 yards away a Mexican brass double-fortified four pounder fired grape and cannister into Fannin's line, but sharpshooters quickly cleared the cannon. Twice again Mexican artillery men bravely attempted to man the cannon in the open field and both times they were prevented by withering fire from Texian marksmen. Three more times the infantry regrouped and charged across the prairie, only to be repulsed. After four hours of battle, the Mexican troops retreated. Col. Bowie's detachment of 92 men had won a decisive victory over a force nearly four times its size. Bowie's strategy and use of cover proved far superior to the European method of open warfare used by Mexican regulars. The Texians even managed to capture a four pounder cannon, and some reports claim it was a sturdy, long six pounder. One of Bowie's soldiers, Richard Andrews, was killed while two others were wounded. General Cos's troops suffered 67 killed and many wounded. Valor was evident on both sides. Every Mexican soldier of an artillery group remained by his cannon until killed or wounded. Colonel Bowie in his report to General Austin noted, "No invidious distinction can be drawn between any officer or private on this occasion. Everyman was a soldier, and did his duty, agreeable to the situation and circumstances under which he was placed."

"ON TO SAN ANTONIO!"

Later the same morning the main army of Texians arrived from Mission Espada. By

November they had surrounded the village of San Antonio and the siege was on. Cos's soldiers were low on supplies, including fodder for their horses. After five days of bitter fighting, Cos surrendered on December 5, 1835. Colonel Burleson gave Cos the honors of war, and the Mexican general agreed never to fight against the colonists.

In a communique on December 14, 1835, Burleson reported, "General Cos left this morning for Mission San Jose and tomorrow commences his march to the Rio Grande, after complying with all that had been stipulated." The last structures that General Cos beheld as he rode south with his troops were the omnipresent towers and cupola of Missions Concepcion and San Jose.

THE MISSIONS UNDER THE REPUBLIC OF TEXAS

The Texas Senate and House of Representatives, when scarcely four years old, enacted a law on January 13, 1841 declaring Missions Nuestra Senora de la Purisima Concepcion, San Jose y San Miguel de Aguayo, San Juan

Capistrano, and San Francisco de la Espada, properties of the Catholic Church in Texas for religious and educational uses. Five days later, the legislature enacted a second law declaring that mission San Antonio de Valero ("The Alamo") was property of the Church for similar purposes.*

Texas, an infant nation based on constitutional principles that gave preference to no religion, defined those properties where the Church for more than a century had carried out the spiritual care of souls. The flags of five sovereign nations have flown in the brisk Texas skies, yet the Texas national government alone has related to the San Antonio Missions in this uniquely democratic way. Spanish monarchs claimed ownership over all ecclesiastical properties in Texas and the rest of their world empire. Years later, the Mexican Republic secularized the San Antonio Missions converting them into government property. In the last half of the 19th century, the American federal government and the short-lived Confederacy were oblivious of the missions and took no measures to recognize them or to promote their historical significance.

It was the legislature of the sovereign nation of Texas, by virtue of the powers invested in it by the Constitution of 1836, that in effect laid down the legal foundations for virtually all which now characterizes the San Antonio Missions: Churches with freedom to worship; religious institutions unencumbered by government ownership; historical monuments to the first missionaries who brought Christianity and civilization to Texas; proud symbols of Texas independence and particular way of life; and ultimately, the first of many steps leading to a National Park where, today, our American heritage is appropriately enshrined.

Gilbert R. Cruz
Park Historian

* On April 23, 1883 the State of Texas purchased "The Alamo" and placed it under the custodial care of the city of San Antonio. In 1905 the state bought other parts of the Alamo grounds which had been occupied by a private business, and the Alamo and grounds were delivered to the Daughters of the Republic of Texas for preservation and care.



General Martin Perfecto de Cos

Photo courtesy of Institute of Texan Cultures, San Antonio.