

THE OTHER MESSENGERS

An exhibit by S. Katherine Keckeisen



The Alamo Messengers by Bruce Marshall, painting,
Susanna Dickinson Museum

Five days after the Battle of the Alamo, Susanna Dickinson and her 15-month-old daughter, Angelina, set out for Gonzales. General Santa Anna had directed Susanna to carry word of the fall of the Alamo to General Houston, and to announce that Santa Anna intended to march on Gonzales next. Thus, Susanna Dickinson earned the title “Messenger of the Alamo”, and for the next sixty-five years, historians proclaimed that Susanna and Angelina were the only survivors of the massacre.

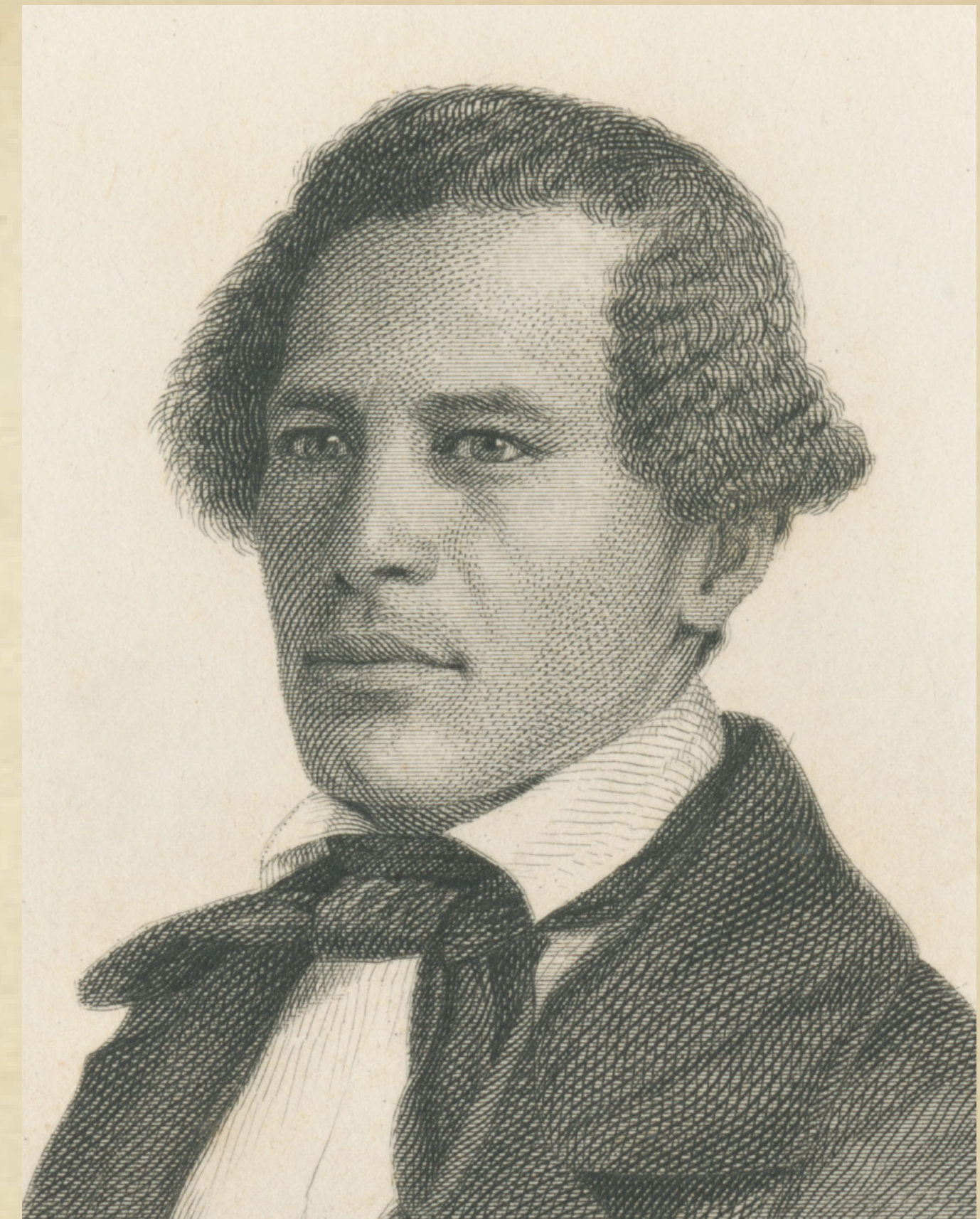
But this was not true. At least 17 other women, children, and enslaved individuals walked out of the carnage inside the Alamo. Each of them bore the physical and mental scars of their thirteen-day ordeal, and yet almost no mention was made of any of them except in a few military reports. Not until the 20th century did their stories even begin to be reported. Who were these people? And why, for almost 200 years, have their stories been largely unheard?

JOE TRAVIS

Not everyone who took up arms against the Mexican forces perished on March 6, 1836. One man, Joe Travis, defended the Alamo and lived to tell his story. But Joe's story was, for the most part, ignored due to the fact that he was a slave.

Joe was born into slavery around 1815 on a farm near Lexington, Kentucky. His mother, Elizabeth, was a field hand who raised seven children. According to Joe's brother, William, their mother was the daughter of an enslaved woman and Daniel Boone, the great American frontiersman. Joe was forced to move to Texas with his second owner, and there he was sold to John Cummings. Cummings' sister, Rebecca, was engaged to William Barrett Travis and, in 1835, John Cummings sold Joe to Travis. Travis made Joe his body servant and took Joe with him into the Alamo when Santa Anna attacked.

On the morning of March 6, the cries of the attacking Mexican forces awoke the garrison inside the Alamo. Travis grabbed his gun, mounted the wall, and began firing upon the invading forces. Joe followed his master's example, but once Travis was killed, Joe retreated to the safety of a storeroom where he continued to fire his gun through the loop holes in the door.



There are no known portraits of Joe Travis. This lithograph of his brother, William W. Brown, might be as close as we ever come to seeing Joe's face. Brown was a fugitive slave who went on to write several narratives of his experiences. He was a tireless lecturer and he aided fugitive slaves in Buffalo, New York.



Joe Identifies Alamo Bodies by Gary Zaboly

Eventually, the Mexican troops captured Joe, and when they discovered who he was, they spared his life so that he could help identify the bodies of William Travis, David Crockett, and James Bowie. That night, as the bodies of his fellow Alamo defenders burned on huge funeral pyres, Joe managed to escape from his captors and slip quietly out of town. On the road to Gonzales, Joe met Susanna and Angelina Dickinson, and accompanied them the rest of the way. From there, Joe joined the mass exodus of soldiers and citizens fleeing Santa Anna's oncoming army. Known as the "Runaway Scrape," the refugees made it to Washington-on-the-Brazos, where many already recognized Joe as "Travis's Negro" and asked him about his experiences inside the Alamo. When members of the Texas provisional government called Joe to testify about the fall of the Alamo, one listener remarked that "he related the affair with much modesty, apparent candor, and remarkably distinctly for one of his class."

Joe's heroism and fame did not bring him freedom. He was still considered the property of William B. Travis's estate and was rented out to help pay off the estate's debts. He later returned to the Travis family plantation in Alabama where it is believed he remained for the rest of his life. To the local African American community, Joe was raised to the level of hero, but historians relegated him to a mere footnote, at best. At worst, Joe was portrayed as a vaudeville-esque caricature, who hid himself during the battle when his "spirit of bravery was entirely quenched" and who had jumped into the bushes at the smallest sign of danger during his travels with Susanna Dickinson.

Recently, more has become known about Joe and the part he played during the Battle of the Alamo. Many modern Texas historians credit Joe with giving the clearest and most complete account of the final battle. Some even go so far as to call Joe Travis the true "Messenger of the Alamo."

Fifty Dollars

WILL be given for delivering to me on Bailey's Prairie, seven miles from Columbia, a negro man named Joe, belonging to the succession of the late Wm. Barret Travis, who took off with him a Mexican and two horses, saddles and bridles. This negro was in the Alamo with his master when it was taken; and was the only man from the colonies who was not put to death: he is about twenty-five years of age, five feet ten or eleven inches high, very black and good countenance: had on when he left, on the night of the 21st April ult. a dark mixed sattinet round jacket and new white cotton pantaloons. One of the horses taken is a bay, about 14½ hands high very heavy built, with a blaze in his face, a bushy mane and tail, and a sore back; also the property of said succession, the other horse is a chesnut sorrel, above 16 hands high. The saddles are of the Spanish form, but of American manufacture, and one of them covered with blue cloth. Forty dollars will be given for Joe and the small bay horse, (Shannon,) and ten dollars for the Mexican other horse and saddles and bridles.

If the runaways are taken more than one hundred miles from my residence, I will pay all reasonable travelling expenses, in addition to the above reward,

JOHN R. JONES, Ex'r of W. B. Travis.

Bailey's Prairie, May 21st, 1837. 70-3m tf

This reward notice for Joe's capture was placed in the *Telegraph & Texas Register* by John R. Jones, who was the executor of the William B. Travis estate. Joe had escaped during a ball held to commemorate the Battle of San Jacinto. He managed to evade capture for seven months, but was eventually caught and returned to Jones.

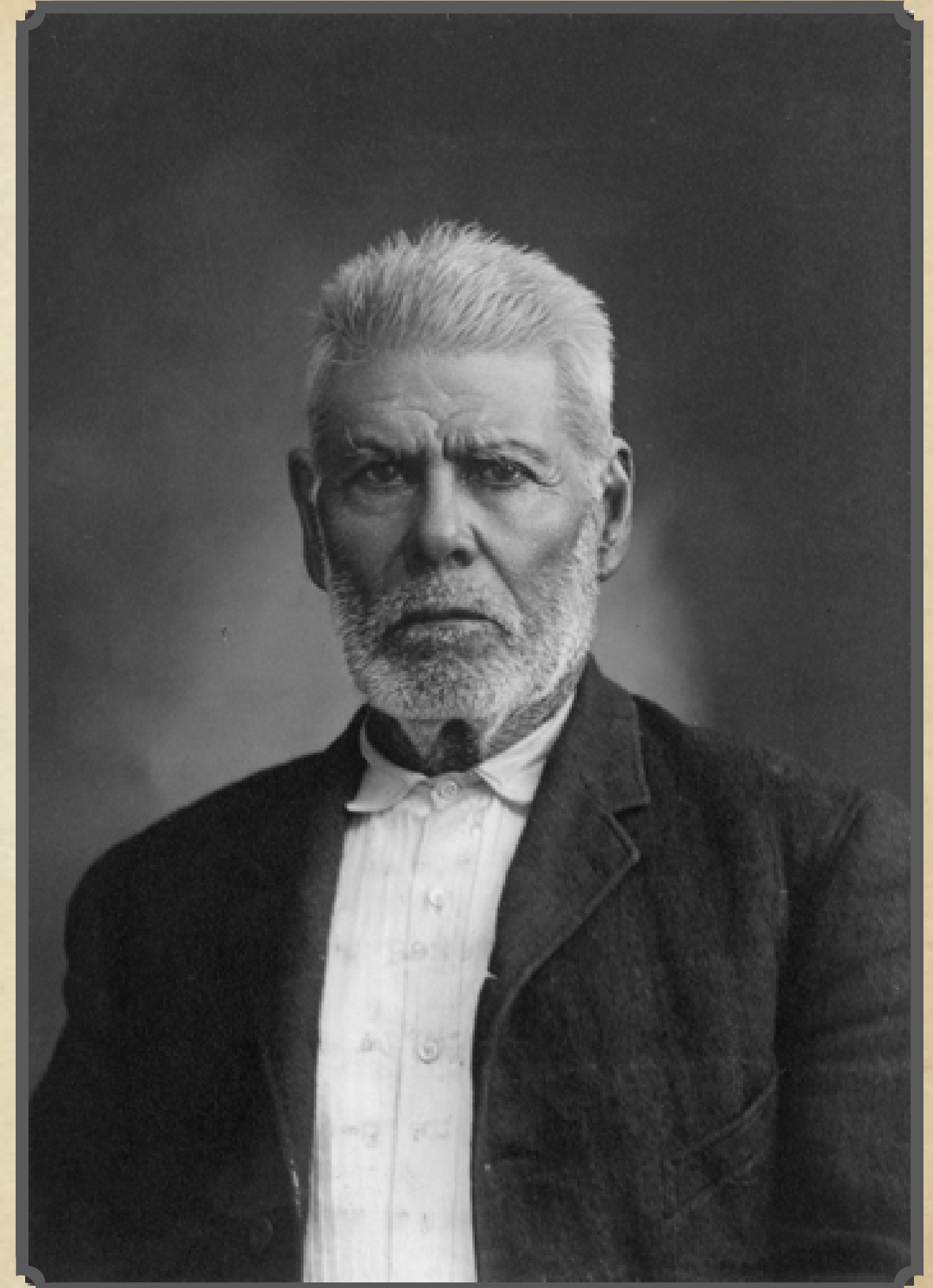
Telegraph & Texas Register, May 26, 1837

ENRIQUE ESPARZA

“History says that only a woman and one child escaped from the massacre of the Alamo, but a San Antonio lady has made the discovery that history is wrong.” — *San Antonio Sunday Light*, November 10, 1901

In 1901, the *San Antonio Sunday Light* published an article revealing that Adina De Zavala, an ardent researcher and Texas historian, had found “another child of the Alamo.” Enrique Esparza, by that time 73 years old, had been a young boy when his family sought shelter inside the walls of the Alamo.

Esparza’s father Gregorio was a Tejano, a Mexican Texan of Spanish decent. Gregorio had joined the band of Texans determined to defend the Alamo against the Mexican army at all costs. When Santa Anna’s forces descended upon San Antonio de Bexar in late February 1836, the Esparza family had been preparing to leave the city for the safety of the countryside. Caught unawares, Enrique’s mother, Ana, had no choice but to take her children and join her husband inside the Alamo. For thirteen days, Ana, Gregorio, and their four young children endured the almost-constant shelling of the Alamo by the Mexican artillery.



Enrique Esparza, Adina De Zavala Papers, Dolph Briscoe Center for American History



Gregorio Esparza by Cecil Lang Casebier
(1951)

On the seventh day, a three-day armistice was called and Santa Anna offered to let the Americans go unharmed if they surrendered. According to Enrique: “During the armistice my father told my mother she had better take the children and go, while she could do so safely. But my mother said: ‘No, if you’re going to stay, so am I. I will stay by your side. If they kill one they will us all.’” Three days later, the Mexican forces attacked and Gregorio Esparza was killed in the battle. Afterwards, Gregorio’s brother, Francisco, who had sided with Santa Anna, was given permission to go into the Alamo to look for his brother’s body. He found it, according to Enrique, “where the thick of the fighting had been.” Francisco took his brother’s body and buried it in the Campo Santo cemetery, making Gregorio Esparza possibly the only man who died defending the Alamo who was not burned in the large funeral pyres.

Ana Esparza and her children were captured and taken to Santa Anna with the other survivors. When asked where her husband was, Ana sobbed, “Dead at the Alamo.” Santa Anna then gave her a blanket and two silver dollars, and dismissed her.

After the initial article in 1901, Enrique Esparza recounted his memories of the Alamo to other newspapers. Many in the general public wondered why Esparza’s story had not been heard before, but among the local community, the answer was simple: he, like many other Tejano survivors, might not have been believed. The bias against Mexican Americans was more blatant in some interviews than others. In a 1902 article about Esparza, the interviewer noted that “although he is Mexican, his gentleness and unassuming frankness are like the typical old Texan” and that he “tells a straight story.” The interviewer seems to imply that other Tejano survivor accounts could not be trusted, but the interviewer felt Esparza was enough like a white Texan that he could be believed.

JUANA NAVARRO ALSBURY & GERTRUDIS NAVARRO

Juana Navarro Perez Alsbury and her sister Gertrudis Navarro belonged to one of San Antonio's most elite families. The sisters were the nieces of José Antonio Navarro, an original signer of the Texas Declaration of Independence, and Don Juan Martín Veramendi, who had served as the Governor of Coahuila and Texas in 1832 and 1833. Juana had even gone to live with the Veramendis when her parents could no longer care for her and her siblings. Juana was raised as a sister to Ursula Veramendi, who would later marry James Bowie.

Even before the Alamo, Juana had endured heartbreak and loss. Ursula, Juana's beloved adopted sister, had died along with her two children in the 1833 cholera outbreak. A year later, Juana's first husband, Alejo, died just before the birth of their son, Alejo, Jr. In January 1836, Juana married Dr. Horatio Alsbury, one of Stephen F. Austin's "Old Three Hundred" who had come to San Antonio to fight for Texas independence. But when Santa Anna's forces marched on the city two months later, Juana and her sister, Gertrudis, found themselves without protection. Dr. Alsbury was out on a scouting mission and was unable to return to his family.



Gertrudis Navarro (Dolph Briscoe Center for American History)

James Bowie considered Juana and Gertrudis his sisters and decided to have them brought into the Alamo with him for their safety. During this time, Bowie was bed-ridden due to typhoid fever, so Juana and Gertrudis acted as his nurses during the siege. The day of the battle, Juana, Gertrudis, and Alejo, Jr. hid themselves in one of the officer's quarters. Juana later recalled that, while she saw little of the fighting, she could hear "the roar of the artillery, the rattle of the small arms, the shouts of the combatants, the groans of the dying, and the moans of the wounded." At one point, a Mexican soldier burst through the door and shouted at Gertrudis, "Your money or your husband," to which she shakily replied, "I have neither money nor husband!"

When the battle was over, the women were found by Juana's first husband's brother, who was fighting with Santa Anna. He took them to their father's house in San Antonio. Juana and Gertrudis's father, Angel, had remained loyal to Santa Anna so they would be safe with him.

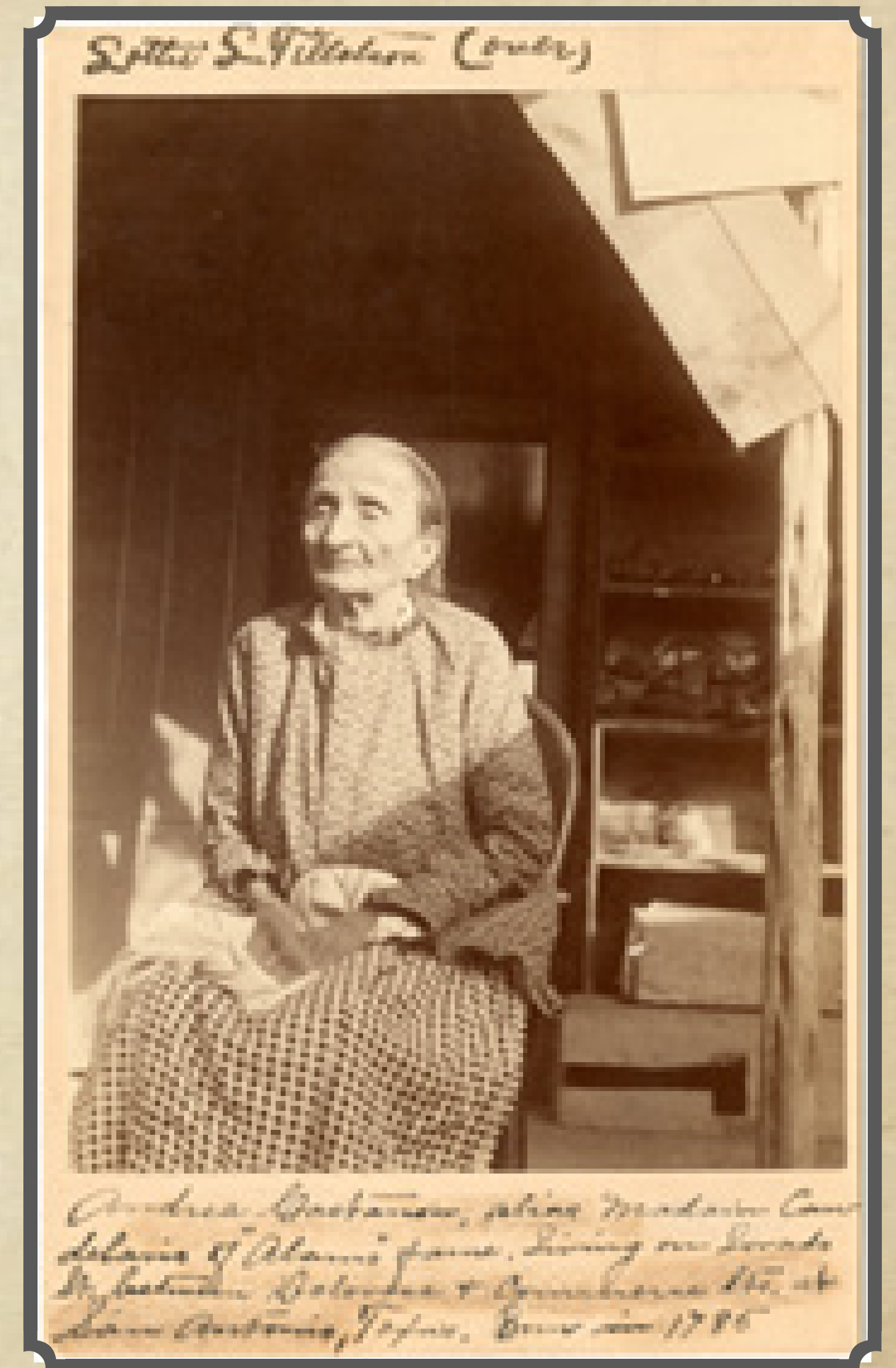
Over the years, there have been conflicting reports as to whether the Navarro sisters were inside the Alamo during the fall. Juana repeatedly swore that she had been in the Alamo at the time of its fall and regularly petitioned the government for compensation for her services during the siege and for valuables seized by the enemy. But according to the official testimony Susanna Dickinson gave on September 23, 1876, "the two women escaped to the enemy & betrayed our situation about 2 days before the assault." Meanwhile, Enrique Esparza stated in a 1907 interview that "Mrs. Alsbury was at the Alamo when it fell, and that during the last days of the siege she and Mrs. Esparza were Bowie's nurses."

MADAM CANDELARIA

One of the most controversial figures from the Alamo battle is Andrea Castañon de Villanueva, know more commonly as “Madam Candelaria.” Even today, historians are unable to agree about whether her story was true or not. Her account of the Alamo changed with each telling and she appeared to have been everywhere and to have witnessed the deaths of Travis, Crockett, and Bowie.

Candelaria was born in 1785 and in the 1830s she married Candelario Villanueva, who was a member of Captain Juan Seguin’s company in the Texas Revolution. In her later remembrances, Candelaria says she was called to the Alamo to nurse James Bowie, who was sick with typhoid fever. She claimed to have received a letter from General Houston “asking her to look after his friend Bowie, and nurse him herself.”

During the final battle, Madam Candelaria never left Bowie’s side and was with him when he died. But the details change from one account to the next. In 1892, Candelaria told a reporter that Bowie had died in her arms before the Mexicans broke into the Alamo. When they entered the room where Candelaria sat with Bowie’s lifeless body in her lap, “one of them thrust a bayonet into the lifeless head of Colonel Bowie and lifted his body from my lap. As he did so the point of the weapon slipped and struck me in the jaw.” But in another article published just after she died in 1899, Candelaria claimed to have thrown herself in front of the troops who stormed into Bowie’s room and that they bayoneted her in the arm and in the chin before killing Bowie.



Madam Candelaria (Dolph Briscoe Center for American History)



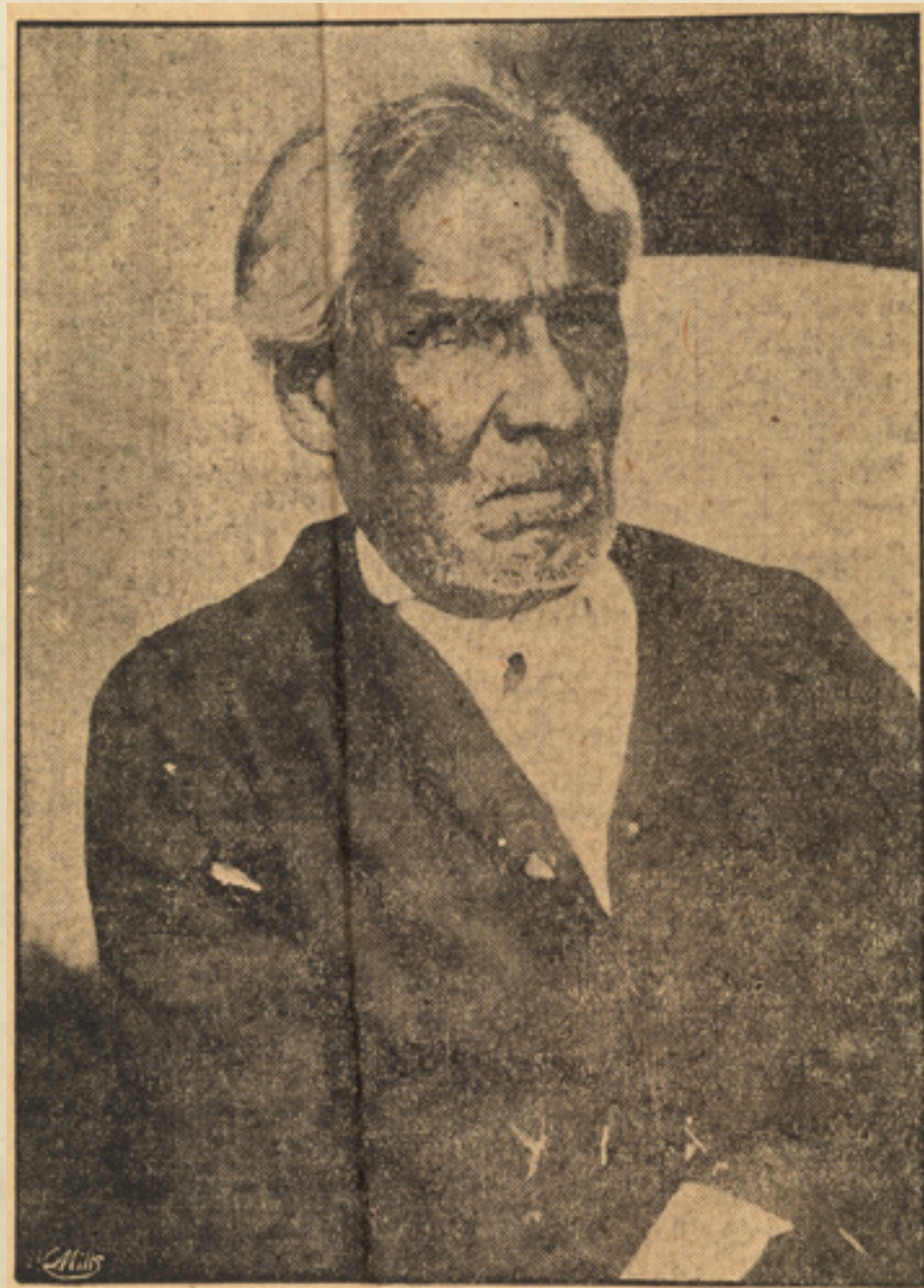
Madam Candelaria (DeGolyer Library, Southern Methodist University)

In William Corner's 1890 book *San Antonio de Béxar – A Description and a Guide*, Candelaria claimed to have seen Susanna Dickinson's husband, Almeron, leap to his death from the top of the church with his son tied around his waist. While the exact details of Almeron Dickinson's death remain unknown, historians do know that the Dickinsons only had one child, Angelina, who survived the battle and left with her mother.

Whether true or not, Madam Candelaria's story has become part of the Alamo legend. Her story changed several times over the years, but she never wavered in her claim to have been there during the battle. In her later years, Madam Candelaria entertained visitors in San Antonio with her ever-changing stories of her time inside the Alamo.

VOICES FROM THE AFTERMATH

After the fall of the Alamo, the residents of San Antonio were left to pick up the pieces and repair their broken city. In later years, some of these “*bejareños*” (as the citizens of San Antonio de Béxar were known) would tell newspaper reporters of the ghastly sights they encountered after the fight for the Alamo was over.



In a 1910 *San Antonio Light* article, Juan Vargas stated that he had been pressed into service by the Mexican army. During the thirteen day siege, Vargas “waited on them, performed kitchen and equipage tasks about camp” and, once the Alamo was taken, he “bound up the wounds of the injured [...] and helped to bury the dead.” Vargas said the “earth ran red” with blood as he piled the dead into trenches and onto bonfires.

Juan Vargas, image from *San Antonio Light*, Dolph Briscoe Center for American History, Texas Newspaper Collection

Fellow *bejareña*, Eulalia Yorba, encountered a similar sight when she entered the Alamo after the battle was over. She, and many other local women, were ordered to the Alamo to do what they could for the dying and the wounded. Many years later, Yorba remembered entering the chapel and seeing “the scene of death and – yes, slaughter. [. . .] The floor was literally crimson with blood. The woodwork all about us was riddled and splintered by lead balls. [...] The dead Texans lay singly and in heaps of three or four or irregular rows here and there all about the floor of the Alamo.”



Front page of *San Francisco Sunday Call* with illustrations featuring Eulalia Yorba



Pablo Díaz from the *San Antonio Light*, Dolph Briscoe Center for American History, Texas Newspaper Collection

As a teenager, Pablo Díaz witnessed some of the most horrific sights from the aftermath of the Alamo. As he cautiously entered town after the battle was over, Díaz crossed the river and found that it was “congested with the corpses” of Santa Anna’s men. According to Díaz, the local Spanish magistrate (*alcalde*), Francisco Antonio Ruiz, had been given the task of burying the dead Mexican soldiers, but the numbers were so overwhelming that Ruiz had most of the corpses thrown into the river. Díaz stated that the bodies “stayed there for many days until finally the *alcalde* got a force sufficient to dislodge them and float them down the river.”

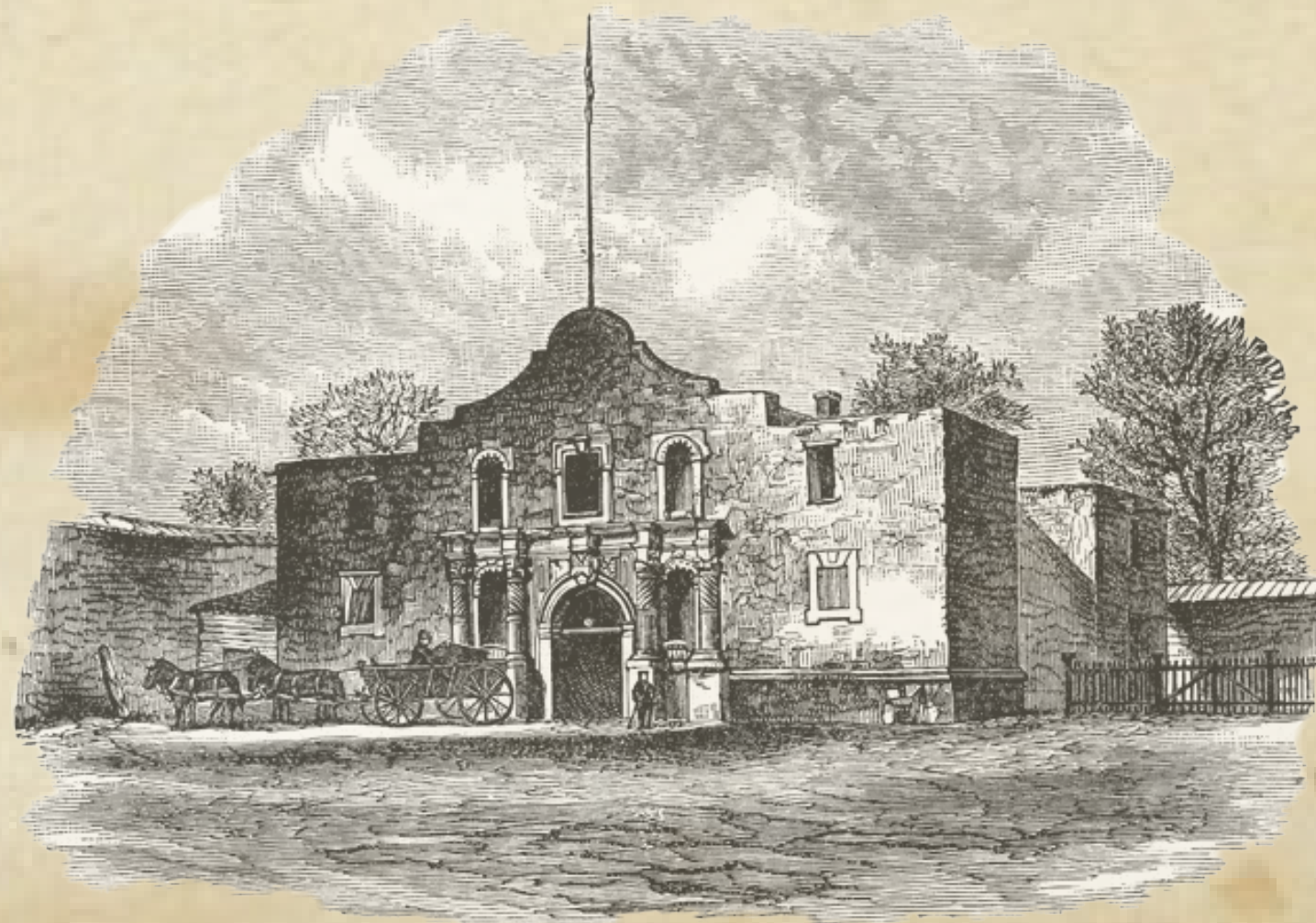
But what was most recalled, even decades after the cannons were silenced, was the smell. Santa Anna had ordered that the bodies of the Texians be burned in two large funeral pyres that were built in the plaza near the Alamo. Juan Díaz, who was a young boy during the siege, told reporters that he “did not go to the plaza when the dead were burned [. . .] but the odor of it permeated every part of the city. It was sickening and for weeks and months people shunned the Alamo.” Pablo Díaz did go to the plaza the day the bodies were burned and recounted later:

“The story [of what happened] was told by the silent witnesses before me. Fragments of flesh, bones and charred wood and ashes revealed it in all of its terrible truth. Grease that had exuded from the bodies saturated the earth for several feet beyond the ashes and smoldering mesquite faggots. The odor was more sickening than that from the corpses in the river.”

MORE THAN ONE MESSENGER

As the years passed, the story of the Alamo became larger than life and the defenders became American legends. For decades afterwards, it was believed that the only account of the fall of the Alamo came from Susanna Dickinson. It wasn't until the early 20th century that other survivors began to be "discovered," but their names are still not as well-known as Crockett, Bowie, or Travis. They were not Anglo-American men; they were Latinos, Tejanos, and African Americans. They were illiterate. Many were women.

We may never know the exact details of what happened on March 6, 1836. But what we do know comes from more than a single "Messenger of the Alamo". These other stories help form a clearer picture of how the Alamo defenders spent their last hours. They have also helped to detail the horrific aftermath of the battle. So perhaps we should do more than just "Remember the Alamo" and also remember those who lived to tell the tale.



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