

Susanna Dickinson, Messenger of the Alamo

A series of introductory essays inspired by the stories told at Brush Square Museums.

By Katie Bender

History is not a fixed monument, a street name, or the victor's sole prerogative. History belongs to whoever tells it. It is a never-ending tapestry that is woven of the past to signal to the future the values of the present. We all take part in the making of history, in our origin stories and myths. In doing so, we come closer to knowing ourselves. The history told at the Susanna Dickinson Museum and the O.Henry, here at Brush Square in Austin, looks closely at the lives of a handful of folks who shaped Texas. They are a diverse group of surprising, difficult, generous, tough, ambitious, sentimental, and foolish people. Getting to know them, we begin to appreciate the complexity of who we are and how we got here.



Landscape with Fisherman, by George Caleb Bingham. Digital image. Artsy, 2008,
<https://www.artsy.net/artwork/george-caleb-bingham-landscape-with-fisherman>

Susanna's Early Years

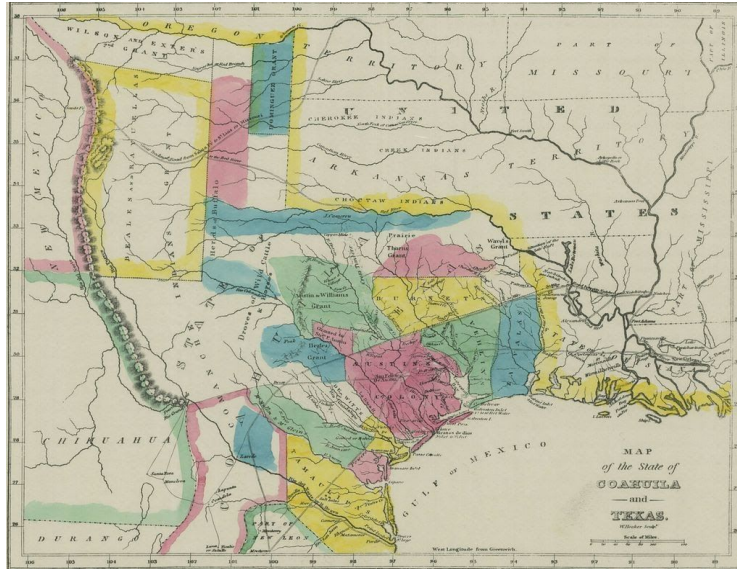
Susanna Arabella Wilkerson was born in Hardeman County, Tennessee in 1814. Family legend tells (1) that at the age of fifteen her sweetheart Almeron Dickinson asked for her hand in marriage and she said no. Almeron, a blacksmith from Pennsylvania, was fifteen years her senior and ready to settle down. He arranged to marry Susanna's best friend, and Susanna agreed to serve as the bridesmaid. However, somewhere between him escorting her to the church and the ceremony itself, she must have had a change of heart. They never made it to the wedding and eloped to Bolivar, Tennessee where on May 24th, 1829, they were married. (2). Within months they were headed to the state of Coahuila y Texas on Mexico's northern frontier. Susanna was a woman who forged her own way.



Map of the region of the first Mexican Empire, 1821. Digital Image. Wikipedia. 2020, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mexican_Texas

Mexico's Northern Frontier

Settlers came to Mexico's northern frontier in floods in the 1820s and 30s. The prospect of cheap land and easy access to citizenship made the newly independent Mexico an attractive place to settle, especially since the crash of 1819 and ensuing economic turmoil meant that many citizens of the United States had nothing left to lose. It is estimated that in 1834, Coahuila y Texas had 20,700 Anglo-Americans and their slaves while the native Mexican (Tejano) population remained around 4,000 (3). Susanna and Almeron Dickinson arrived in the Green DeWitt Colony on February 20th, 1831, in the town of Gonzales where, as a married man, Almeron was granted one league of land in what is now Caldwell County, as well as the property in town (4). Four years later, in December of 1834, Susanna gave birth to their first and only child, Angelina Elizabeth Dickinson. Susanna and Almeron may have felt as settled as could be expected living on the frontier, but turmoil in Mexico's capital was about to upend the world they were building for themselves.



Map of the conjoined state of Coahuila and Texas with major land grants shown in color. Digital Image. Texas State Historical Association. <https://tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/npm01>

Civil War

In 1834, Antonio López de Santa Anna made a deal with the Centralists that led to him becoming president, taking unlimited control of the government, abolishing the constitution of 1824, and replacing state legislatures with military outposts (3). Settlers and Tejanos began to feel Santa Anna's heavy hand in the form of new taxes on imports, restrictions to settlers bringing in slaves (slavery was officially illegal in Mexico), and an increased military presence at ports of entry and outposts. In 1835, civil war felt inevitable. Almeron, whose experience with artillery made him a valuable asset, joined with a group of volunteers determined to reclaim a cannon taken by the Mexican army in Gonzales. Their success legitimized the necessity for such volunteer militias. Shortly thereafter, Almeron headed to Bexar (now San Antonio) to repulse Mexican General Cos, leaving Susanna and their young daughter.

Displaced on The Frontier

In response to Santa Anna's dictatorial take-over, impromptu volunteer militias sprung up as did would-be governments. The result was chaos, with militants attacking settlements, pillaging, and looting. Gonzales was attacked by one of these militias while Almeron was away, and the Dickinson house was looted and burned. Writing to Stephen F. Austin of the event Launcelot Smithers wrote: "The companes that is coming has broken open allmost Evry house...and stole 100 dollars...of Miller-and Treated the wimon of this place worse than all the comanshee nation could have done-and dragged me out of the house and nearly beat me to death becos I was in

the house of Mr. Dickerson.” (5). Having survived such a traumatic experience, Susanna and Angelina went to Bexar to join Almeron.

Refuge in the Alamo

The church bells of San Fernando on the main plaza in Bexar rang out on the morning of February 23rd, 1836. Santa Anna’s army had been sighted five miles away, many days earlier than expected. Approximately one hundred and fifty volunteer soldiers along with twenty non-combatants; women, children, enslaved people, found themselves sheltering in the Alamo mission together. Shots were fired, Travis refused to surrender, and to everyone’s surprise, Santa Anna chose not to attack immediately. The next twelve days must have been surreal as those sheltering inside eyed Santa Anna’s army of nearly two thousand without, scraping together what provisions they could, and hoping for reinforcements.



Dawn of the Alamo, Henry Arthur McArdle. Digital Image. Texas State Historical Association.
<https://tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/qea02>

The Battle of the Alamo

Shouts from the advancing Mexican army woke everyone early on the thirteenth day, and Susanna hid in the ruins of the church with Angelina. Almeron rushed in to warn her when the army had breached the walls, and then returned to his post. It was the last time she’d see him. The ensuing battle was brief but the memory of it would stay with Susanna for the rest of her life. She told and retold the story in vivid detail, recounting the gruesome battle and the people who’d died, some of them brutally and right in front of her, shaping it into a personal and national narrative of trauma that was repeated through Texas again and again. In the aftermath,

she heard a Mexican soldier asking for her by name. As she was escorted out, a bullet hit her leg, and whether intentionally or by accident she would never know (4).

Survivors

Of the survivors, nineteen women, children, and enslaved people were left alive. Everyone else either died in battle or was executed on Santa Anna's orders immediately after. Santa Anna interviewed Susanna and was so taken by little Angelina that he offered to adopt the child. Susanna was horrified and declined (4). Seeking to send the right message regarding the battle and the strength of his army, Santa Anna selected Susanna as his messenger. She would be escorted back to Gonzales where Sam Houston was stationed and present him with Santa Anna's letter. For the journey, she was given a horse and was escorted by a man named Ben, a black servant of one of Santa Anna's Generals. On the way out of town, they were joined by Joe, Travis' slave, who had also survived the battle and who went with them despite the distinct possibility that his return to Sam Houston's camp would mean a return to enslavement (6).



Santa Anna in Military Uniform. Digital Image. Wikipedia. 2020, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Antonio_López_de_Santa_Anna

Susanna tells her story

Along the way and in Gonzales both Susanna and Joe told the story of the battle of the Alamo, their eyewitness account, and word spread like wildfire. On hearing the news, Sam Houston ordered his troops to head further East. In what is known as The Runaway Scrape, the entire town fled and the place was burned to the ground. Susanna was twenty-two, she had lost everything but the clothes on her back, she was injured, her husband was dead, and her daughter was of an age to require constant care. The strength it must have taken to pick up and keep going is unimaginable. Like many others she went to Houston, then the seat of the provisional government, seeking reparations for the loss of her husband.

Starting from Scratch

Houston was a rough and tumble outpost. Built on a swamp and hastily erected to support the new government, it was too hot in the summer, too cold in the winter, filled with rats, mosquitos, and disease (3). Susanna scraped out a living for her and Angelina as best she could and on November 27th, 1837, she married John Williams. This second marriage proved intolerable, and after four months, Susanna was granted a divorce for “indignities such that rendered her life intolerable with him; cruelty and barbarity which caused Susanna an abortion; and further, he abused and beat her child beyond endurance”(1). On December 20th, 1838, Susanna entered into her third marriage to Francis P. Herring, but this marriage too was brief, as he died five years later of digestive fever (4). Throughout these years Susanna became the face of the battle of the Alamo, serving as an eyewitness to help other people get reparations for the loss of loved ones at the battle. Repeatedly her own claim was denied (1).

Independence at Last

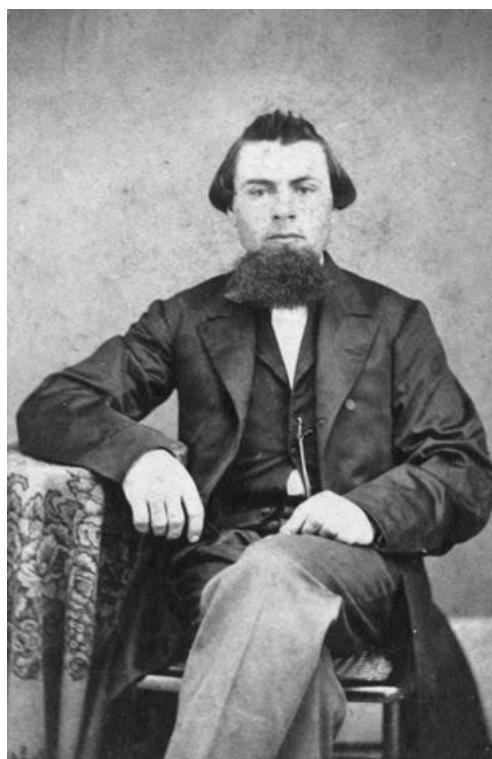
In 1847, at the age of thirty-three, she married a fourth time to a man named Peter Bellows. During these years, she operated a boarding house and became increasingly involved in the church (7). One of her borders, a man named John Maynard Griffith, married Angelina and they moved to Montgomery County where Angelina had three children (4). Finally, in 1854, Susanna was awarded full power of agent and attorney over the estate of Almeron Dickinson which included the league of land in Caldwell County they had been granted by the Mexican Government in 1831 (1). Susanna promptly sold the land and opened a boarding house in Lockhart, Texas. She was a savvy businesswoman and an excellent host. Given a small bit of capital, she was able to build a business that made her, for the first time in her life, independent. In 1857, one year later, Bellows divorced her for “taken up residence in a house of ill fame” andcommitting adultery” (1).



Angelina Dickinson. Digital Image. Texas State Historical Association.
<https://tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/fdi36>

Susanna and Joseph in Austin

Six months later Susanna married Joseph Hannig, a cabinet maker from Germany. Hannig was twenty years her junior. In 1858, the Hannigs moved to Austin, Texas. Susanna sold her land in Lockhart to set Joseph up with a cabinet shop on Pecan Street (4). In 1869, right in the center of Austin's business district, Joseph built the stone house that would, more than a century later, become The Susanna Dickinson Museum. The couple was prosperous and generous. Joseph expanded his business and real estate ventures, eventually becoming an alderman of Austin. The Hannigs raised three of Angelina's children and often welcomed extended family from Germany into their home to stay as long as necessary. Susanna died in 1883. Joseph remarried, but when he died six years later, he specified that he wished to be buried next to Susanna (4).



Portrait of Joseph William Hannig. Digital Image. The Dolph Briscoe Center for American History, The University of Texas at Austin, 2006-2014.

https://www.cah.utexas.edu/db/dmr/image_lg.php?variable=di_05757

Susanna the Storyteller

In her lifetime, this land we now call Texas would be claimed by Spain, Mexico, the Republic, the United States, and the Confederacy. In each iteration, stories of valor, generosity, hardship, deprivation, violence, and idealism would be told to define the people and their culture. In 1878,

Susanna was interviewed by Charles W. Evers of the Wood County Sentinel of Ohio about her experience at the Alamo. He wrote "I fancied I saw almost a wild light dancing her eyes for a moment, and it would not be strange, for her recital of the events of that awful day will excite the most stolid listener. If Mrs. Hannig was so inclined or if her circumstances required it (happily they do not) she could go on a lecture platform and draw crowded houses in any city in the United States..."(7). Susanna's stories, her eyewitness account, and her returning again and again to that battle shaped the myths that are the backbone of Texas.



Portrait of Susanna Dickinson, by Henry McArdle. Digital Image. Texas State Library and Archive Commission. 2020, <https://www.tsl.texas.gov/lobbyexhibits/struggles-texans>

1. C. Richard King, *Susanna Dickinson: Messenger of the Alamo*, (Austin: Shoal Creek Publisher, Inc., 1976), 4, 57, 63, 78, 71.
2. Bond of Almeron Dickinson and B.D. Johnston for the marriage of Dickinson and Susanna Wilkerson. Hardeman County, Tennessee, May 24th, 1829, Original Document, DRT Library.
3. Stephen L. Hardin, *Texian Macabre*, (Buffalo Gap, Tx: State House Press, 2007), 16, 17, 92,
4. Gale Hamilton Shiffrin, *Echoes from Women of the Alamo*, (AW Press, 1999), 7, 14, 18, 19, 25.
5. *The Papers of the Texas Revolution, 1835-1836*, John H. Jenkins, General Editor, (Austin: Presidial Press, 1973), vol. 4, 501: Walter Lord, *A Time to Stand*, (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1961), 95.
6. Ron J. Jackson, Jr., and Lee Spencer White, *Joe, the Slave Who Became an Alamo Legend*, (University of Oklahoma Press: Norman Publishing, 2005), ?.

7. Susanna Dickinson File, DRT Library.