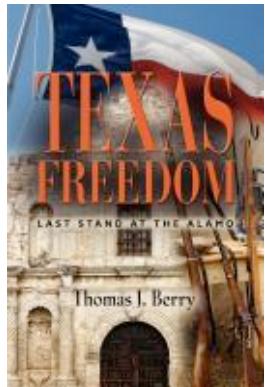


TEXAS FREEDOM

LAST STAND AT THE ALAMO

Thomas J. Berry



175 years ago in the vast fertile plains of the Texas borderland, a largely volunteer rebel army of 187 colonists stood defiantly against the hardened forces of 3000 Mexican troops for 2 weeks in the spring of 1836. The bravery and sacrifice of these men and women gave Texas new heroes and a fiercely guarded independence. Their testament and strength of character is still felt throughout this country as we remember the Alamo.

Texas Freedom

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First Edition

Chapter 1

Natchez, Mississippi
September 19, 1827

“P

Two men faced each other left side to left side, each holding a flintlock pistol at eight paces. They stood on a long, wooded sandbar that protruded out on the Mississippi River, a few hundred yards from the outskirts of the sleepy town of Natchez. Although the late morning sun was still making its rise in the east, the shimmering heat and thick humidity remained as a silent witness to the unfolding confrontation.

“One!”

Fifteen men stood along the Mississippi bank of the shoreline watching the action, with expressions that ranged from the mildly interested to the downright hostile. Supporters for each duelist, they came out to show their allegiance and to see the bloodletting that often accompanied these fights. Their clothing represented all walks of life, from politicians and lawmen to butchers, blacksmiths and farmers.

“Two!”

The river was narrow at this point; no more than seventy feet across to the opposite shoreline which constituted the outskirts of Vidalia, Louisiana, and the banks on each side were dotted by small brush and tall grasses. The insects were out in abundance, causing many of the men to swat at them in a vain attempt to keep them at bay. The heat was not oppressive this time of year, allowing the distinctive fragrance of the majestic eight foot tall yellow spicebush to flourish along the banks.

The sandbar, although small and narrow, provided a unique location for local duels. Situated offshore, it was isolated from the town proper yet provided a good vantage point to watch the unfolding events. When Dr. Thomas Maddox challenged to a duel a member of a rival political group in Alexandria, it was meant to end the hostilities that clearly divided their small town. Samuel Levy Wells IV reluctantly agreed to the staged fight, although he wished his opponent was anyone other than his learned friend.

“Three!”

Wells, who also acted as the current sheriff of Rapides County, deep in Louisiana, knew the stakes all too well. Twice before in recent months rival members met to end their differences in an honorable duel – and both times the events had ended without any fight at all. This duel today was going to end it one way or another. Honor for both sides demanded nothing less.

Once agreed on, the date, time, and location of the duel became a simple matter of a business arrangement.

“Fire!”

A shot rang out, following in quick succession by a second. All eyes looked for any sign of a strike – a body crumpling to the ground, a cry of pain or surprise – but if they wanted blood, they were disappointed tonight. Both duelists continued to face each other, unharmed by the errant shots whose echoes slowly died away along the riverbank.

Beside Wells stood his Second, Major George McWhorter, and Dr. Richard Cuny, who was there to tend to his wounds, should any injury be sustained. Maddox was supported by his Second, Colonel Richard Crain, and his own physician, Dr. James Denny. It was the duty of the Second to step in and try and stop the fighting if possible, and act on the duelist’s behalf in delivering the challenge and setting up the details of the fight.

“Too bad!” someone yelled from the bank above.

“Fire again!” another called out.

Dr. Denny took a few moments to try to reason with both combatants, to no avail.

“This is senseless, and someone could get killed right here, right now!” he declared in earnest. His protestations fell on deaf ears, however.

Both Wells and Maddox agreed to a second round, and after a few minutes, the countdown was repeated by McWhorter. Again both men failed to hit his opponent.

“Come on! I want to see some blood this time!” someone called out from the wooded area on the sandbar where three men, all supporters of Sam Wells, stood watching the fracas. Dr. Cuny’s brother, General Sam Cuny, stood next to a young entrepreneur named James Bowie and his best friend Warren Hall. They had accompanied Wells and his party that morning by skiff across the river from Vidalia.

The two duelists facing each other on the sandbar, who only moments before had shot to kill, simply smiled and walked forward, their hands outstretched.

“Good one, Thomas!” said Wells, his hands warmly clasping those of his opponent.

“And you, also, Samuel,” Maddox replied earnestly. Friends before their rival groups put them at odds today, Wells and Maddox were ready to put their hostilities aside now that honor had been satisfied.

“It’s time for a drink!” Wells shouted to anyone in earshot. “And Dr. Maddox is buying!” The six men who had, just moments ago, stood opposed each other turned as one and began walking off the sandbar, none the worse for wear.

"Hey!" yelled a voice from above, "Just short of the mark, Sam!" A large man with deep set hazel eyes and long black side burns began walking out of the wooded area behind them, approaching the group as they headed for the embankment of the Mississippi. Standing just over six feet in height and possessing a stout body that would make a prize-fighter step back, James Bowie smiled broadly. A strong supporter of Wells, Bowie had already developed a well-earned reputation as a formidable adversary in both political and personal circles.

It was another man however, the brother of Well's physician, General Sam Cuny, who felt the need to continue the fight. This time he directed his attention to his old nemesis Colonel Crain, Maddox's Second.

Drawing his pistol, Cuny approached the colonel. "What say we use this event to finish our own differences, colonel? I feel the need to give the people what they really want." The pair had fought together against the Indians and each other for years in the western territories, and had brought their rivalry back home with them, bad feelings and jealousy swirling around the pair and their associates like mosquitoes on a warm afternoon on the bayou.

Bowie, coming up behind his friend, drew his own pistol as a precaution, and Crain did likewise when he saw the barrel of Cuny's weapon pointed at him. Only when Wells turned and talked to Cuny, urging him to back down, did the general lower his weapon and put it away. But Crain was not ready to let it rest.

"Don't you dare challenge me, you belligerent oaf!" Crain shouted. Raising his own pistol, he saw that Cuny had replaced his weapon but Bowie had not. He fired in Bowie's direction, and when he realized he had missed, he hastily tried to reload.

Bowie, surprised at this turn of events, quickly returned fire. His lead shot also failed to find its mark.

"Damn pistols are useless! Hate 'em!" Bowie roared.

The next volley from Crain found red blood for the first time that day. It was General Cuny who took the bullet, a round lead ball fired into his right thigh, severing a major artery. As the older man fell to his knees and then collapsed backward, a small torrent of blood poured from his wound. His face turned white as a ghost and Bowie looked on in shock and surprise.

"No, you don't, Crain!" called out Bowie as he threw down his spent pistol and pulled out a long, wicked looking knife in his meaty hand. Nine inches of solid steel, with an edge sharpened to a razor thickness; Bowie's knife was a very effective and deadly weapon.

A recent gift from his brother, Rezin, the sharp knife gave James Bowie a feeling of satisfaction. There would be no misfiring. No moments wasted when opportunities for action were few and fleeting. He ran towards Crain

who looked around desperately for support from his friends. His pistol empty, the colonel flung the solid piece of hardware with terrific force at the man now charging at him like a bull.

Bowie was running hard and closing fast on his prey when the cold steel weapon flew from his opponent's hand and struck him with full force on his forehead. The large man dropped to his knees, blood gushing from his head wound, but he refused to go down. He staggered to his left and leaned against an old, fallen tree that had long ago toppled partially into the swirling mud of the Mississippi. The water's edge was only a few feet away. Bowie, still gripping his long knife, leaned heavily against the tree trunk, trying to regain his senses.

Blood had been spilled and his opponents were quick to swarm in around him. Before they could close in, Bowie's friend, Major McWhorter, ran to his defense, pulling his own pistol while Dr. Denny ran and put his arm around Bowie's chest to support him. The doctor attempted to walk him off the field of battle towards Bowie's skiff, which was tied to a tree along the shoreline. However, his presence did not deter the jackals that swirled around the two men.

Bowie was as much feared for his courage and fighting skills as any man in the county, and he had a long list of enemies. The man who he would have rated at the head of that list now approached him with pistol drawn.

Chapter 2

Alexandria, Louisiana
December 13, 1826

Ten Months earlier...

The whistle of the ferry sounded loud and clear as it made its final approach, but James Bowie did not acknowledge it. As several men and women made their way slowly towards the exits, he studied his cards one last time, his face impassive. Several groups hung back, anticipating his next move; all eyes seemed to hang on what he would do next. The smoke from the cigars hung lazily in the small confines of the ferry's lounge, and seemed to wage a battle with the fresh morning breeze coming off the Mississippi; so far the acrid smell of the cigars was winning.

Bowie looked carefully between each of the three men facing him, almost willing them to call his bluff. The man on his left, an Italian immigrant with big pockets and an even larger belly, shifted nervously but remained quiet. His thick black mustache moved up and down rapidly as he finished the last of the pork rinds from the bowl on the table.

"Gentlemen, I believe that was our last call," Bowie said at last. "And quite a fitting end to this game it is too." He quickly slapped his five cards on the table and spreading his hands out wide, announced to all who remained, "Royal Flush!"

"Damn you, Bowie!" cried the man to his right. "I lost twenty dollars today...my wife is gonna kill me!"

"You should hedge your bets better next time, Mr. Vice President. And don't let your emotions dictate your decisions – you wanted to beat me so badly you refused to give up on a bad hand. In fact, I was counting on it. But don't let the rest of your War Hawks hear about your hefty loss this morning...the press in Washington will have a field day!"

John C. Calhoun stood up, grumbling. A tall man of medium build, with a thick head of brown hair, he appeared frustrated by the events of the day and snapped his fingers towards a group of officers standing in a corner. One of his aides, a captain, suddenly appeared at his side holding his cap and a heavy overcoat.

"Mr. Calhoun, the carriage is waiting," the officer said with a slight apprehension.

"Thank you, Grant, I think I'll walk into town today. Do me some good."

Bowie glanced over and smiled at the man who was helping John Quincy Adams run this glorious country. Capitalism was alive and well, and his pockets just got a little bit fuller this morning.

Another man came over to the table, his overcoat already buttoned up to the top of his collar, a look of impatience evident on his face.

“Good way to start the morning, dear brother,” James said amicably.

“Good way to lose your shirt, if you ask me.”

“Now, John, is this how you want to start your new session off in the state house? Grumpy and bad tempered? Would be bad for the poor people of Louisiana.”

“I’ll be just fine, thank you James,” his brother retorted but then a smile creased his face and he barely suppressed a laugh.

“Next time you’re in the capital however, I suggest you don’t pay Mr. Calhoun any visits. He didn’t look too happy at being out twenty dollars.”

“Hey, I was intending to go out there on this trip but I cut it short. Now I’m going to have to look him up next time – just to rub it in!”

A few moments later, the Bowie brothers appeared on the gangway and spotted their good friend Caiaphas Ham waving at them from the dock. The cold winter wind was sweeping a biting chill along the wooden gangway and many people were hunched over, trying to wrap themselves tighter in their thin jackets in a futile attempt to keep themselves warm. Carrying his bag in one hand, James walked gallantly down the creaking planks that served to commute passengers and luggage from docking ships.

“Greetings, old friend!” Bowie said before Ham could react. They gave each other a warm handshake and, for a moment, all was well with the world. Caiaphas was a charming, handsome man, blond and blue-eyed, a throwback from the days where knights rescued damsels in distress and slew dragons on bouts of wild adventures. Standing just under six feet, with a body that packed more than a few hardened abs, Caiaphas was a hawk among doves...and his charming presence and winning smile made him quite a number of close friends. But none more than James Bowie.

“How was your trip to Arkansas, Big Jim? You cut short your side trip to Washington, I take it.”

“Tiring as usual, but I think some fortunes may just be around the corner, my friend. I surveyed the land where many of my grants are held and, God willing, they are one step away from full settlement. I can’t believe we’re so close to getting away with this scam! A little forgery can go quite far if you do it right. Just need approval from the federal land office and they are ours free and clear!”

Just then another man walked over to join them. Rezin Bowie, the second eldest of the clan after John, stood half a foot shorter than his brother, but he was barrel-chested and stronger than two mules put together

– at least from the way James tells it. At 33, Rezin was three years senior to his taller but more outgoing sibling, and had the maturity and logical disposition that kept both of them on the good side of the law. At least so far.

“So they’re going to approve them, then?” Rezin asked, his gravelly voice starting to show a little excitement.

“Well, I was planning on doing some personal cajoling in the capital but...well, the election for sheriff is near, and John needed to be back to take his seat in the state house. The Eighth legislature starts on the first of the year. So I came home instead.”

“Well...we’ll sit tight for now, I guess.”

“Yeah. So how are things in Rapides Parish these days, Cai? I don’t hear shit when I’m gone for so long.”

Caiaphas Ham didn’t respond at first but slowed down his pace before coming to a stop next to a large oak tree on the outskirts of the town. The area was filled with people going to the docks and those newly arrived passengers walking towards their final destination. The air was alive with the sounds of activity and the passage of life.

Bowie stopped beside him, glaring. “What’s the matter, Cai?”

Ham looked down at his feet, not sure how to put his thoughts into words – the right ones were critical now.

“Well, since you left there’s been a lot of activity in Alexandria. Most of it perpetuated by the men like Wright and Crain.”

“Oh? Just what kind of activity are we talking about? I thought things would get better now that the election is almost here.”

“That’s the point. Norris Wright feels that if he loses the election for sheriff – he’ll put the blame squarely on your shoulders. He is the incumbent you know and takes his job seriously, and I believe he has staked his career on continuing on as such. He has made himself a nice living, especially when he supplements his income by taking payoffs and bribes from the Blanchard brothers and other moonshiners around town. His cohorts have a big stake in the elections themselves, and why? If Wright loses the sheriff’s office, that gives them less power to control – and we all know they crave power.”

“They’re full of shit, the lot of ‘em,” Bowie grumbled. “But they’ve gone off half-cocked before. What’s different this time? I sense, Cai, that you’re holding back on the good part.” James cast his friend a disapproving look. “Out with it.”

“Ever since you left for Arkansas a month ago, Wright has been spreading a web of lies about you...he’s mad that you supported Wells, and I think he hopes by discrediting you, he’ll also bring disgrace on Samuel as

well...especially when you weren't here to defend yourself. It made you a little more vulnerable, I suppose."

Bowie's face grew red but he held his composure...for the moment.
"What kind of things was the ass saying about me?"

"He brought up the fake land grant scheme to several influential people and said you were a thief and a coward..."

"I'm gonna kill that little prick!" Bowie almost screamed.

Caiaphas held up his hand. "Then he told the local papers that you were heading to Arkansas to perpetuate more fraudulent land dealings and he tied them together with the fake grants we have pending in Louisiana and Alabama. His attempt to paint an unflattering picture of you hasn't seemed to rub off on Samuel to any noticeable degree yet, but the elections are always..."

"Where is he now? I assume you know...it wouldn't be hard to find out."

"Yeah, I know, but I was hesitant telling you...because I thought you might end up picking a fight...and I can see I was right!"

"Jim," Rezin said evenly. "We'll get Wright back by beating him in the election...let this one rest for now."

Ignoring his brother's advice, James turned his full attention on his friend. "Just tell me where he is, Cai, and let me take care of the rest," Bowie replied evenly, taking visible pains to calm himself down.

"He's at the Bailey Hotel...but..."

Bowie was already gone, running at top speed toward an enemy he intended to silence one way or another.

Chapter 3

The Bailey Hotel was located across town and it took several minutes to cover the distance on foot. The time gave James a chance to think, to make a plan...but a man whose predisposition is to fight now and talk later, did not focus on thoughts beyond what his heart was telling him to do.

The Bailey Hotel was a two story building on the outskirts of Alexandria, a family owned establishment which often included a small meal for its most important guests. Bowie knew that if the sheriff of Rapides Parish was staying there, he would be on the first floor, giving himself easy access to confront the turbulence of the street...or a quick getaway.

James sucked in the cold air as he ran, feeling it wrap around his lungs and squeeze his chest. He tried to block away the pain he felt, and focus on the one person that fueled his anger. Norris Wright, liar, slanderer, and corrupt politician. *It was one thing to attack me when I'm here – I'd have given him a black eye for his troubles if it came to that. But to start publicly accusing me of misdeeds – whether they were actually true or not – when I'm away from town, was not only cowardly but disrespectful. And I am not to be trifled with!*

He stormed through the front door of the small hotel, and past a startled, elderly man who was napping on a wooden chair, his feet falling off the cast iron stove as Bowie ran by.

There were two rooms on this floor, set apart on either side of a hall on the left, while a set of stairs directly in front of him lead to a loft area containing additional accommodations. Without slowing down, he banked toward the rooms on the first floor, finding the one on the right slightly open. Using his shoulder, he hit the oak door with solid force, causing the heavy wood to swing inward on its rusty hinges.

He stopped in the doorway, panting hard, as he quickly surveyed the room. Norris Wright was in the middle of the room talking with another man, both dressed casually given the time of day. Two men were playing cards at a table to the right, while another was taking a siesta in a bunk along the back of the wall. Five men, all of whom turned toward the unexpected intrusion with surprising agility.

“Wright, you cur! You’ve been spreading lies about me! I won’t stand for it!”

The object of his anger stood his ground, but quickly pulled a small barreled pistol from his waistband behind his back. Pointing it at the man in the doorway, Wright cocked the hammer back, letting the intruder hear the click. If James Bowie felt any fear by this action, he gave no indication.

"We've missed you, James," Wright said slowly and calmly. The other four men stood aside, allowing their leader to have his way. "Too bad for you that you came back." He took careful aim at the center of Bowie's chest.

James, as nimble on his feet as a man half his size, reached for a wooden chair that had just been vacated by one of the card players and held it in front of him, thrusting it towards Wright, stubbornly refusing to back down. Both men glared at each other for a minute or two, almost begging the other to make the first move.

But James Bowie was not a patient man, and the anger that had brought him this far could not be contained for long. His face contorted with rage, Bowie lifted the wooden chair over his head, intending to send it crashing down on his adversary. However, Wright, always looking for an edge, saw his opportunity and took it. He fired his pistol at Bowie from a distance of no more than four feet.

With his adrenaline pumping through his veins like a freight train, Bowie hardly felt the round metal shot strike him in the chest, as he sent the chair crashing down on Wright. Surprised that his pistol had failed to stop his attacker, the sheriff barely had time to raise his arm up to absorb the terrific impact from the wooden projectile.

Standing just under six feet in height, Wright was on the portly side with thinning hair and a thick blond mustache that seemed to split his round face in half. While not the most prominent man in town, he had allowed himself to indulge in the pleasure of one too many libations over the years and his body was screaming at his brain to end this frenetic attack now. He fell backwards, hitting his head on the hard wooden floorboards.

Just as quickly Bowie was on him, using his knees and right arm to pin Wright's limbs to the ground. Using his left hand, James quickly extracted his small clasp knife and tried to use his teeth to open it. *Sticking him like a pig at a roast would serve up the best justice of all.*

Wright's friends recovered faster and were on Bowie before he could strike the fatal blow he so much desired. Two men grabbed his left arm, knocking the small knife into the corner of the room. As they pulled him off Wright, Bowie tried desperately to get to him, any way he could. As Wright's left arm became free, Bowie grabbed it with his right hand and bit down hard.

Norris Wright screamed in pain, trying to yank his hand away, but Bowie held on fast. One of the men pulling him away grabbed James by the neck and tried to choke him, but the larger man refused to let go of his prize.

Another man came up with a wooden stick and swung it at Bowie's head, striking him close to his mouth. Only then did the two men finally separate from each other.

Two thugs began kicking Bowie in the ribs fiercely as the man with the stick brought it high in the air for another strike. Nonetheless, he failed to land it as the room suddenly filled up with several more people.

Rezin, John, and Caiaphas had followed Bowie, and barged into the room. Just as quickly as the fight had started, the four attackers stopped their onslaught in the face of the new challengers. Seeing James on the ground, blood seeping out of a wound to his chest, Rezin rushed over, knocking away the men holding him down. Lifting his brother up, the elder Bowie motioned to Caiaphas to help him carry James.

No words were exchanged between the parties, as James was helped from the room. The four men who just moments before had been pummeling him after witnessing a savage attack on their leader, now stood aside and watched as he left. They helped Norris to his feet, and he screamed when one of them gripped his injured hand too tightly. "Philip!" he screamed at one of them. "Why did you let them leave? Go after them you fools!"

As the four men looked at one another, Wright grimaced in pain as he carefully touched the bite mark on his hand. *Oh my God! Is that my bone?*

"Look what that fool did to me!" he screamed again, as the men ran from the room.

Then he looked at it again, and couldn't believe his eyes. It was bone all right but not from him. A tooth lay lodged in the wound, held in place by a flap of skin and small tissue. *The damn man left a tooth in me!*

As the four men approached the entrance, one of them noticed a trail of blood on the ground. But it didn't lead outside. One of them examined the red droplets and realized James Bowie and his rescuers had gone to higher ground. They had headed up the stairs, effectively trapping themselves.

"We have them now! Let's go get them!" he cried.

"Wait," another replied. "The trail of blood looks pretty heavy right here," he said, pointing to a spot on the stairs. "That shot he took from Norris must be bleeding him out. He's not gonna make it, no matter what we do. Let's collect Norris and get out of here fast!"

The other three didn't need any more prodding. After explaining the blood patterns and his adversary's likely demise to Wright, the five men quickly packed and rode their horses out of Alexandria, hoping to distance themselves from the debacle at the Bailey Hotel.

Four days later, Rezin made an unexpected appearance at the Bailey. He walked in, nodded to the elderly man sitting by the warm stove, and Mr. Francis Bailey nodded back with a smile. "Morning, Mr. Bowie" he said amicably. "How's your brother doing?"

"He's improving each day, at least according to Caiaphas. I appreciate you letting him stay here to recover."

"Least I could do, seeing how he was waylaid by that corrupt sheriff and his posse. I tell you this, Mr. Bowie, I'll never let them in here again! They left without paying! That crazy sheriff owes me two dollars!"

Rezin smiled again as he mounted the steps to the second floor. He saw some dried blood he hadn't noticed before in a crack between two boards and made a mental note to clean it before he left.

At the top of the stairs, he walked two feet and stopped in front of the only door on his level. Meant originally to be a loft, Mr. Bailey had converted it years before into a bedroom and it afforded James Bowie the privacy he needed. Rezin knocked once and entered silently.

His brother lay in the bed, his white cotton sheets pulled up halfway over his large frame. James' chest was wrapped in thick gauze, but his billowy shirt hid most of it from view. His mouth was swollen but was slowly returning to normal. The smell from the cigars that Caiaphas had brought filled the room, so Rezin walked over to the window and opened it wide. He carried a long, thin package with him and placed it on the table next to the bed.

"You need some fresh air, little brother."

James opened his mouth to speak, but it was painful to talk for too long. He kept it short. "What did you bring me?" His eyes glanced to the package as he spoke and his eyes were full of question marks.

Rezin smiled. "First off, remind me to finish washing off that blood from the stairwell. Your mouth sure bleeds a lot. You should be careful where you leave your teeth from now on!"

Both men shared a laugh, but James winced in pain slightly as his ribs ached from the effort. "You'll be up and around in no time, James. I've been thinking of what happened and have been busy the last few days making this for you. It's kinda crude but it'll do the trick when you need it."

He took the package and offered it to his brother, who glanced once again into Rezin's eyes before starting to open it. The box was long and thin, more than a foot in length and as wide as a hand. James lifted the lid and gasped.

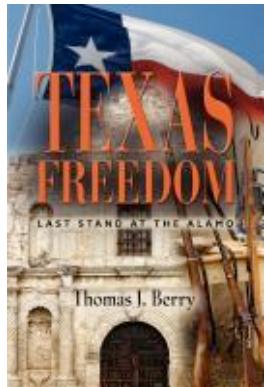
"No more little clasp knife for you. If you had had that piece of metal a few days ago, your little fight would have ended much differently, believe me!"

James Bowie wrapped his hand around the shaft of the weapon and brought it out slowly. The thick blade was a good nine inches in length, with a tapered end and a point as sharp as any he had ever seen. The handle was a simple grip, but it fit the large knife well. James twirled it in his fingers and stroked the blade in admiration.

James looked up at his brother, and smiled. Rezin was the best, he thought. They were as close as any two men could be, though as different in

temperament as two stars passing in the night. But put them together and they could manage anything.

“Thank you, brother,” James managed to say. His smile said the rest.



175 years ago in the vast fertile plains of the Texas borderland, a largely volunteer rebel army of 187 colonists stood defiantly against the hardened forces of 3000 Mexican troops for 2 weeks in the spring of 1836. The bravery and sacrifice of these men and women gave Texas new heroes and a fiercely guarded independence. Their testament and strength of character is still felt throughout this country as we remember the Alamo.

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