

## **Juana Navarro Alsbury, Survivor of the Alamo**

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

**By Katie Bender**

Juana Navarro Alsbury was one of approximately nineteen survivors of the battle of the Alamo. Of the survivors, she is the most misunderstood: there are disagreements as to her whereabouts during the battle, her ability to read, her later claims to be a widow, even the wording used to describe her situation is often stolen from eye-witness accounts of other Tejanas. This misunderstanding stems from a lack of cultural education specific to the role of well-to-do Bexareñas on the frontier. As a woman of means, in a family politically tied to both Santa Anna's central government of Mexico, and the new Anglo settlers staking a claim of independence on the frontier, Juana's loyalties were divided. Understanding who she was, how she came to seek shelter in the mission, and how she navigated the new Republic of Texas gives us a clearer understanding of the culture specific to Mexico's northern frontier.



A Canary Islander couple in traditional clothing, ca. eighteenth century. Courtesy [Canary Islands Descendants Association](#) and included in accordance with [Title 17 U.S.C. Section 107](#).

### **Sphere of Influence: Well-to-do Tejanas in Coahuila y Tejas**

San Antonio de Béxar was established in 1718 by Martín de Alarcón as a center of Spanish defense in the Spanish territories of Mexico. Located between Mexico City, the port of La Bahía, and the frontier to the north and west, San Antonio de Béxar became a strategic military key for colonizers to hold the region. The area was populated by many indigenous nations, including the Caddo, Apache, Comanche, Kickapoo, and Tonkawa. These tribes had diverse relationships with the Spanish monks and soldiers who first settled the area. For the Spanish, crucial to establishing this frontier was the immigration of families into Béxar. On March 9th,

1731, fifteen families consisting of fifty-six immigrants from the Canary Islands arrived at San Antonio de Béxar Presidio. These families became the center of the Villa San Fernando de Béxar. (1) They considered themselves culturally superior to the indigenous people and erected a private church. However, they were willing to marry their daughters to Spanish soldiers in the region. Marriage as an alliance would continue through generations and dramatically affect Juana's life. (2) The Veramendi family, in which Juana Navarro grew up, was one of these original Canary Island settlers.

Contrary to popular belief, Spanish law gave a good bit of independence to women of well-to-do families. They were allowed to retain property, claim an equal share of assets earned while married, and their husbands could not get rid of property without their consent. Women could negotiate contracts, and widows and unmarried daughters had the right to manage their own estates. Both Spanish and, later, Mexican laws protected women's property rights and awarded them inheritance rights equal to males. Women could also receive land grants in their names inherited through either marriage or family. In 1776, María Josefa Granados, a member of a Canary Islander family, married Fernando Veramendi, a merchant and public figure. By 1787, she owned San Fernando de Béxar's largest general store. By 1793, a census listed forty-five native-born Tejana widows as head of their household. (1) Furthermore, and important to keep in mind regarding Juana, women often assumed full responsibility for the business affairs of their husbands when they were away.

### **The Navarro Family**

The Navarros were a well-to-do and politically active family in the region. Juana's grandfather had immigrated from Corsica in the 1770s, and the family had sided with the revolutionaries fighting for Mexico's independence from Spain. In 1821, when Mexico gained its independence from Spain, his sons, José and Ángel Navarro, took part in the new Mexican government. However, their political views differed. Ángel took the side of Santa Anna and the centralist government. José, who had befriended Steven F. Austin, was increasingly interested in Coahuila y Texas as an independent state. (3).

Juana Navarro was christened on December 28th, 1812. She was the first daughter of Ángel Navarro and Concepción Cervantes. Her godparents were Ángel's sister, Josefa, and her husband, Juan Martín Veramendi. Her christening was a lavish celebration. Ángel and Concepción had two other daughters, Gertrudis and Josefa. Sometime during their childhood, Concepción became ill, and the three sisters were separated and sent to live with family or friends. Juana moved into the Veramendi household with her godparents, and their daughter, Ursula, became like a sister to her. For all the family's wealth and connections, Juana grew up amidst the uncertainty, chaos, and idealism that was Mexico's war for independence from Spain.



Veramendi Building on Soledad Street built in 1716. Photo from the 1860's. Digital.utsa.edu.

The Veramendi Palace served as the Governor's Palace in 1832 and 1833 when Juan Martín Veramendi became the governor of Coahuila y Tejas. Located on Calle Soledad between present-day Commerce and Houston Streets, this home was the site of any diplomatic missions to the region or governmental functions. (1) From the 1820s through the 30s, the population of Anglo settlers in Béxar expanded dramatically from around 5,000 to 20,000 (including enslaved people) while the native Mexican (Tejano) population remained around 4,000. (4)

Just as daughters of well-to-do Canary Island families were encouraged to marry Spanish soldiers in the late 1700s, alliances between Bexareña women and ambitious settlers were seen as a smart match. In 1830, Ursula Veramendi married James Bowie, who had met her when visiting the Veramendi Palace to discuss business with her father. While this marriage was convenient for both Juan Martín and James Bowie, it also seems to have been a genuine love match. Though Bowie had engaged in some questionable land speculation and slave trade in Louisiana, he was considered a gentleman in Béxar, and the Veramendi family spoke highly of him. On May 1, 1832, Juana Navarro married Alejo Perez in the San Fernando church. She was twenty years old. Alejo was from a well-to-do family in Victoria. Juana and Alejo lived in Béxar and, though political turmoil was brewing, had nothing but hope for the future.

### **Tragedy**

In the fall of 1833, while on vacation in Monclova, cholera took the lives of Juan Martín Veramendi, Josefa, Ursula, and her two children. Their tragic deaths dramatically affected the culture of Béxar. Bowie continued to make Veramendi his house, retaining his Black slaves, while a Navarro cousin used the main hall of Veramendi for the town general store (3), but the seat of government was no longer in the palace. A year later, Alejo Perez also died of cholera. On March 23rd, 1835, Juana gave birth to their son, Alejo de la Encarnación. She became a

widow and a new mother in half a year. These dramatic upheavals in her life were echoed by the socio-political changes of the time.

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 his heavy hand in the form of new taxes on imports, restrictions to settlers bringing in slaves, and an increased military presence at ports of entry and outposts. In response to Santa Anna's dictatorial style of leadership, a group of volunteers successfully reclaimed a cannon taken by the Mexican army in Gonzales. In response, Santa Anna sent General Cos to San Antonio de Béxar to "keep the peace", or take the town, depending on one's point of view. In December 1835, volunteers arrived in Béxar and attacked Cos' forces. Response to the volunteers was mixed. Some Bexareños joined the Benevides volunteer company, and José Antonio Navarro supported their cause. Others, like Juana's father Ángel, remained loyal to Santa Anna and saw the volunteers attacking the town as insurrectionists. Fighting broke out throughout the town, with volunteers and soldiers fighting house to house, finally driving Cos' troops into the Alamo mission. Cos, who found himself in an old and crumbling fort with hardly any provisions, surrendered the town. He made sure to destroy what he could of the Alamo mission before retreating.



*The Alamo*, 1849. Courtesy of The University of Texas Dolph Briscoe Center for American History.

In early January 1836, not even a month after the battle, Juana married Dr. Horatio Alexander Alsbury. Dr. Alsbury was one of the original settlers brought to Mexico's northern frontier by Stephen F. Austin. Originally from Kentucky, he had been an active participant in the movement for an independent Texas. How they originally met is unclear, but it was likely through her uncle José Navarro, who continued to play an active role in government and as a leader of the Tejanos fighting to loosen Santa Anna's control. The timing and choice seem to point to a marriage of convenience. Shortly after their marriage, Dr. Alsbury left San Antonio. Whether he was serving the volunteers on a scouting mission or looking for a safer place to move their new family is unclear. Certainly, Dr. Alsbury and Juana must have expected reprisals from Santa Anna in the town of Béxar. It was a cold winter, and no one expected Santa Anna to raise an

army and march them across the frontier before March. On February 23rd, with Dr. Alsbury still out of town, Santa Anna attacked B exar, weeks earlier than expected.



"Fandango" by Theodore Gentilz, 1860's, similar to the one Travis hosted to celebrate the birth of George Washington. Daughters of the Republic of Texas Library at the Alamo, San Antonio.

### **Gathering Forces**

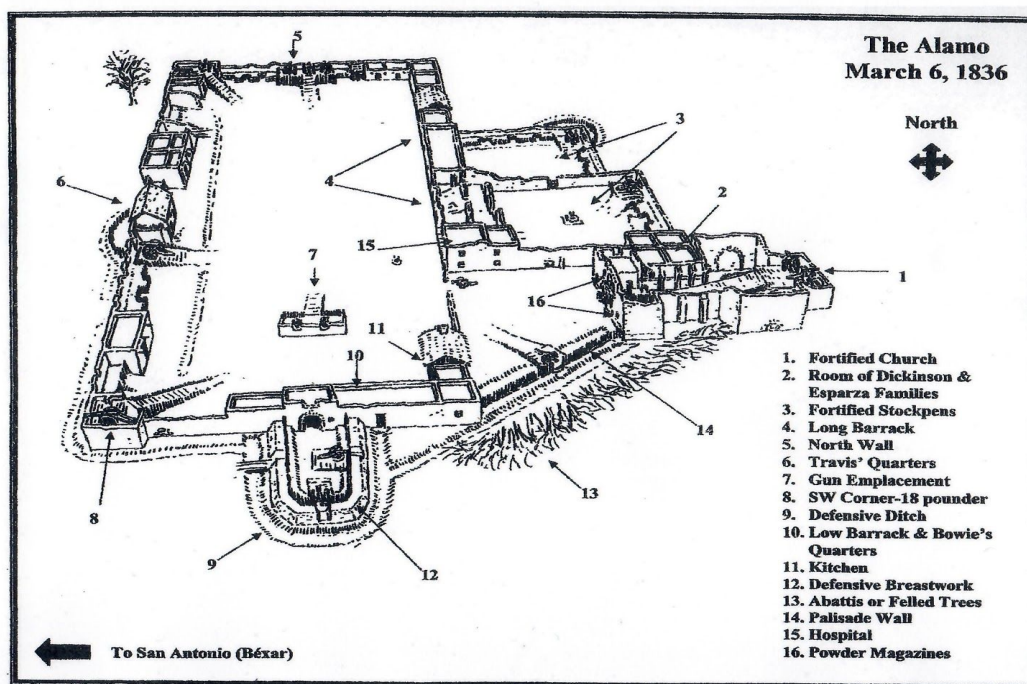
Throughout January and February of 1836, volunteers worked to restore the destroyed Alamo mission while Tejanos and Anglos fled the town. William Travis was put in charge of the mission when Commander Colonel Neill left to care for his family. Travis was not a popular leader as he had no military experience and was quite young. The volunteers voted to put Bowie in charge, resulting in Travis and Bowie struggling to share leadership. In Saltillo, Santa Anna did everything he could to gather a sizable army, even pressing criminals into service. Many of his top generals believed that bringing the army by boat into the ports of Bah a would save time and money, as the march north in the dead of winter, carrying cannons and feeding the families that came with the soldiers, would be costly and dangerous. But Santa Anna insisted on the northern march. (5)

Sometime in February, James Bowie fell ill. Juana and Gertrudis, Bowie's closest surviving relatives in the Veramendi family, cared for him. It is worth noting that Juana had lived through not just the previous siege, but several battles for Mexican Independence, in her lifetime. She had more lived experience of war than many of the volunteers. On February 22nd, Travis hosted a ball in celebration of George Washington's birthday. Unbeknownst to the volunteers, Santa Anna's army was camped just eight miles away on the banks of the Medina River. Early the next morning, scouts returned with the news of Santa Anna's approaching army, many days earlier than expected. Travis and Bowie were immediately put on the defensive and retreated to the Alamo mission. Historians often write that Juana and Gertrudis went into the mission because Bowie had been made their "protector". These sources lack a critical understanding of Bexere o culture, Juana's standing in the community, and the reality that she was caring for a

very sick Bowie. Most likely she decided to seek shelter in the mission. Having married Dr. Alsbury, she was aligned with the Anglo settlers, and she was responsible for both her one-year-old son and her little sister.

### Thirteen Days

Juana, Gertrudis, and little Alejo took a room for themselves on the northwest corner of the mission compound in apartments that had originally been used for indigenous families during the mission period. (3) From the walls and small raised windows, they would have been able to see Santa Anna's approximately three thousand troops. In the confusion of the initial retreat, Travis ordered a cannon shot fired. Bowie, more wisely, sent out a messenger to request parlay. Then, Travis sent out his messenger to request parlay. The lack of leadership was clear, and Santa Anna's response was the same. No quarter. ( )



Site of the 1836 Battle of the Alamo and Shrine to Texas Liberty [www.thealamo.org](http://www.thealamo.org)

Over the next thirteen days, the two sides exchanged fire. While the volunteers in the mission had very few supplies, their shooters were much more accurate than the Mexican armies, whose guns, having been purchased from France, were old and faulty. (5) Santa Anna could have attacked right away, but he chose to wait, hoping several more cannons and additional forces would arrive. He was seeking a decisive victory. The volunteers inside, approximately 180 men, believed that reinforcements would be sent their way, hopefully before they ran out of

food or were attacked outright. Juana and Gertrudis cared for Bowie until he was moved into the east side, in a section referred to as the hospital, out of concern for contagion.

Travis sent urgent messages calling for reinforcements. Juana, whose husband was serving, may have expected his return. Finally, on March 1st, reinforcements did arrive. Approximately twenty-nine volunteers broke through the Mexican lines and made it into the mission. (6) Their numbers were too few to make much of a difference, but they did confirm that further reinforcements were unlikely. General Peña, in his account, states that “Travis’s resistance was on the verge of being overcome; for several days his followers had been urging him to surrender, giving the lack of food and the scarcity of munitions as reasons, but he had quieted their restlessness with the hope of quick relief, something not difficult for them to believe since they had seen some reinforcements arrive. Nevertheless, they had pressed him so hard that on the 5th he promised them that if no help arrived on that day they would surrender the next day or would try to escape under cover of darkness.” Peña continues by specifying that “these facts were given to us by a lady from Bejar, a Negro who was the only male who escaped, and several women who were found inside and were rescued by Colonels Morales and Minon.” (5) Most likely this information came from Juana. The idea that Juana and Gertrudis left during the siege originated with Susanna Dickinson, an Anglo woman who was also in the mission at the time. However, Juana’s account is corroborated by Enrique Esparza, another survivor, who clearly remembers seeing Juana with the other survivors whom Santa Anna interviewed directly after the battle.



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

Early on the morning of the 6th of March, 1836, the people inside the mission were awakened by shouts of “Viva Santa Anna” and “Viva Mexico” as Mexican soldiers carrying ladders, raced into rifle range and struggled to climb the walls. From inside, soldiers were able to keep the army back for about thirty minutes. Travis was shot and died in battle, as was Gregorio Esparza, Enrique’s father. When the Mexican army breached the wall, they turned the fort’s cannons around and began firing into the mission. Volunteers hid in barracks and shot through doors, while Mexican soldiers went room to room seeking survivors. Their orders were “no quarter” and the fighting devolved into hand-to-hand combat. Bowie was shot in his bed. Enrique, hiding with his mother and brothers, recounts how soldiers came into the room demanding the women’s husbands and the Americans’ money. (3) Curiously, historians use these exact words to describe what happened to Juana and Gertrudis as well. It would seem that in this instance, Ana and Juana’s experience has been conflated. Juana, Gertrudis, and Alejo were found hiding in their room by Manuel Perez, Juana’s first husband’s brother, who was fighting for Santa Anna. All of the survivors, including Ana Esparza and her children, Susanna Dickinson and her daughter, and Joe, Travis’ enslaved man, were brought to Santa Anna. The remaining Anglo soldiers were executed.



Santa Anna in Military Uniform. Digital Image. Wikipedia. 2020, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Antonio\\_López\\_de\\_Santa\\_Anna](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Antonio_López_de_Santa_Anna)

### **The aftermath**

Santa Anna interviewed the nineteen survivors and gave each a blanket and two silver pesos. Enrique remembers that before her interview, Juana asked Ana not to tell Santa Anna that she was married to the American Alsbury. Afterward, Juana, Alejo, and Gertrudis returned to the house of Ángel Navarro. Santa Anna’s able-bodied-troops were quickly marched East in pursuit of Generals Houston and Fannin. For the next three months, with very little news of the war



raging across the frontier, Juana waited for her husband. Finally, in May, he returned with news of the victory at San Jacinto, the capture of Santa Anna, and the beginning of the Republic of Texas. Alsbury had first-hand experience, having fought in the final battle. Soon after, Juana, Gertrudis, Alejo, and Alsbury left San Antonio de Béxar and took up residence at one of the Navarro ranch houses on Calaveras Creek. While the sisters were away, their father died, having suffered from a long illness. Ángel Navarro divided up the estate evenly between his widow and four surviving daughters. Each received a fifth of his ranch, and Juana and Gertrudis had twenty-five cattle each, as well as three hundred pesos. Juana signed the receipt for both her and her sister. (3)

While Juana and Alsbury's life settled in the late 1830s, the geopolitical shifts in the region continued to impact their lives directly. The Republic quickly brought changes to the customs of Béxar. An influx of settlers to the town, looking for access to land, and imbued with a frontier culture very different from the Bexareños led to continued violence in the region. Eugenio, Juana's uncle, was murdered in the family merchandise store in 1838, by a gambler named Tinsley (3). The Republic's no-tolerance policy towards the indigenous population came to a head when, at what was supposed to be a peace meeting at the courthouse in Béxar between the Comanche and Texans, a misunderstanding over a prisoner exchange led to violence, in which Texian soldiers gunned down thirty five Comanche visitors, including women and children. During this time, Alsbury began to establish himself in the community. In 1841, he served as the City Clerk of San Fernando de Béxar. (3)

## **A Journey South**

In 1842, Santa Anna, once again president of Mexico, sent troops into San Antonio de Béxar to harass residents of the Republic of Texas, hoping to discourage immigration and support from the United States. On March 5th, 1842, General Ráfael Vásquez marched into San Antonio and seized the town. He held the town for two days before marching back to Mexico. The incursion of Mexican forces stoked Anglo resentment against Tejanos. Juan Seguin, then the mayor, and a hero and advocate for Texas independence, was forced to resign and fled into Mexico with his family for fear of Anglo reprisals. On September 11, 1842, Mexican General Adrián Woll led an army of 1400 men into San Antonio. The townspeople were taken by surprise, and while they put up a hasty defense, they quickly surrendered. Woll held the town for two weeks. On September 17th, Texas troops gathered and attacked the Mexican army. Horatio Alsbury, who had joined the troops, was captured, along with a few dozen Anglo prisoners. (6). Woll then evacuated the town and returned to Mexico. The prisoners were sent to Perote Castle Prison in Vera Cruz, Mexico. Juana traveled 846 miles south to Vera Cruz to negotiate her husband's freedom. She was in Vera Cruz for eighteen months, and finally, Horatio Alsbury was released and the two returned to San Antonio de Bexar.

## War

The election of the expansionist President Polk in the United States revived interest in the annexation of Texas into the United States. Polk was a proponent of “manifest destiny” and wanted to lay claim to territories that would become Oregon, California, and New Mexico. Polk offered to purchase these lands from Mexico but was rejected. He then moved United States troops into the area between the Rio Grande and Nueces River, which was an area recognized as part of the Mexican state of Coahuila. In doing so, Polk initiated the Mexican-American War that would last from 1846-1848. (7) Horatio Alsbury joined the United States Army, and in 1846, headed south to fight the Mexican army along the Rio Grande border. Horatio Alsbury did not return. He died somewhere in northern Mexico sometime between 1846 and 1848. (3) In 1854, 1855, and 1857, Juana petitioned the United States government seeking reparation for the loss of her husband. She wrote that she “was in the Alamo at the time of its fall. She was then the wife of Dr. (Horatio) Alexander Alsbury...during the siege of the Alamo, she was ever ready to render and did render all the services she could toward nursing and attending upon the sick and wounded...That all the property she had to wit her clothing, money, and jewels were seized and taken by the enemy-that subsequent to that time her husband the said Dr. Alsbury was taken prisoner...and confined in the Castle of Perote in Mexico over 18 months...he accompanied the American Army across the Rio Grande during the war between the United States and Mexico, and in the year 1846, was killed by the Mexicans...she is now getting old with only one son. That she is extremely poor with hardly the means of subsistence-that she, therefore, prays the honorable Legislature will...allow her some compensation for her losses...in this her time of necessity.” (8) She was granted one hundred dollars per quarter from the United States government.

## Final years

Juana lived another thirty years, long enough to see Alejo, her only son, married with many grandchildren. She did not remarry and spent her final years on the Rancho de la Laguna Redonda, near San Antonio, surrounded by family. Juana Navarro Alsbury died on July 23rd, 1888.

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