

TEXAS HISTORICAL COMMISSION

# FANNIN BATTLEGROUND

STATE HISTORIC SITE



THE BATTLE OF THE COLETO WAS FOUGHT IN PART  
ON THIS LOCATION ON MARCH 19 AND 20, 1836,  
THE CLIMAX OF WHAT HISTORIANS HAVE CALLED  
“THE GOLIAD CAMPAIGN” FOUGHT DURING THE  
TEXAS WAR FOR INDEPENDENCE.

# BACKGROUND

Various factors contributed to the circumstances that led to the Texas War for Independence. Settlers living in the Mexican Province of Tejas included groups and individuals from areas such as Europe, Ireland and the United States. These settlers were attracted by arable land and by incentives promoted by the Mexican government. Americans were also attracted by an additional incentive, which allowed them to bring slaves into the province, even though Mexico had already abolished slavery. In exchange, colonists were expected to become Mexican citizens and convert to Roman Catholicism if they did not already belong to that faith. In 1830 however, Mexico closed its borders to the United States in response to signs of unrest, due to Mexican political upheaval and change spurred in part by the abandonment of the liberal 1824 Mexican constitution. With the border closing, Mexican authorities restricted trade and imposed custom duties on import and export items, and attempted to halt the progress of American settlers into Texas. Rather than controlling unrest, these actions served to deepen antipathy towards rule by Santa Anna among many Texas residents, both Hispanic and Anglo. Many Spanish-speaking Texans hoped for a return to the 1824 constitution, while others, such as the American settlers, hoped for union with the United States.

By the summer of 1835, Santa Anna - now dictator of Mexico – grew tired of the continued agitation against his dictatorship in Texas, and began to take steps to enforce Mexican rule in Texas. General Martin Perfecto de Cos, ordered by Santa Anna to Texas in September 1835, landed at Copano with the intent of moving through Refugio and Goliad on the way to San Antonio. Cos reached Goliad, took control of Presidio La Bahia, and on October 5 continued his march to San Antonio. Within four days Texians seized the Presidio from Mexican troops in a surprise attack. Meanwhile, after reaching San Antonio Mexican troops under Cos were held under siege by Texian forces, and were captured in early December. As a result of these actions, Texian forces were able to expel all Mexican military in Texas. In response, the Mexican government enforced the Tornel Decree in late December 1835.

## THE TORNEL DECREE

The Tornel Decree was significant to the outcomes of the battles at the Alamo and at Goliad. This decree was initially issued by the Mexican government in response to depredations by pirates upon Mexican coastal towns and outposts. When it became clear that Texian insurgents were intent upon armed response to Mexican military presence, the decree was invoked. In essence, the Tornel Decree stated that all foreigners who were intent upon attacking Mexico (through action or by supplying arms to those with that intent) would

be deemed pirates and dealt with as such. The English translation of the Tornel Decree was published in New Orleans and in Texas prior to the Battle of the Alamo and the Battle of Coleto Creek.

## THE TEXIAN PLAN

During January 1836, as the provisional Texian government argued over what direction to take the revolt, a plan was devised to launch an expedition by land to capture the Mexican port of Matamoros. It was hoped that such a move would trigger support from anti-Centralist forces in the Mexican interior. Divisions in politics by Texian leaders doomed the expedition before it could be started. A large force of Texian volunteers, many of them fresh from the United States, had concentrated at Refugio. This force was reformed and retired to Goliad.

Under the command of Colonel James Walker Fannin Jr., this army began to fortify Presidio La Bahia (which Fannin renamed Fort Defiance) from possible Mexican attack.



Col. James Walker Fannin

## THE MEXICAN PLAN

While these events were going on in Texas, General Santa Anna marched north with a large army to crush the Texas revolt. The division under his direct command moved against San Antonio. The second division, under General Jose Urrea, moved north from Matamoros and headed up the Texas coast toward Goliad.

## THE ALAMO

Santa Anna's division arrived at San Antonio on February 23 and besieged the Texas garrison inside the Alamo. Their commander, Lieutenant-Colonel William Travis, called for assistance. His chief hope for aid was Colonel Fannin at Goliad. The Goliad garrison attempted a relief march, but due to poor logistics and morale, retired back to Goliad. By that time, news of Urrea's advance and the defeat of Texian forces at San Patricio had reached Fannin.

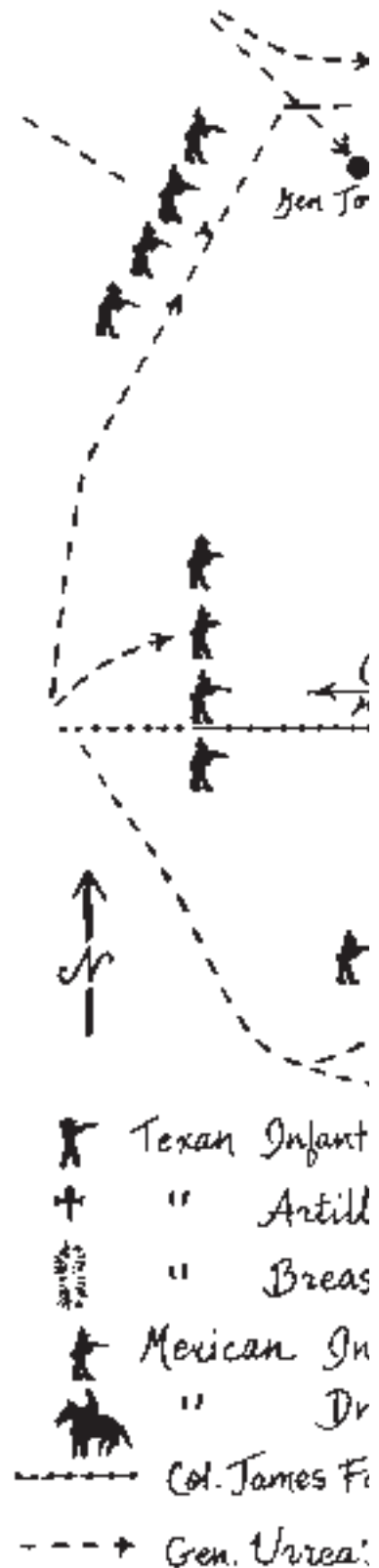
Fannin now received word that the settlers at Refugio needed assistance as they prepared to flee Urrea's advance. The Goliad commander sent Captain Amon King to their aid. Unbeknownst to Fannin, King's men were attacked by local

Tejanos, led by Carlos de la Garza, who were loyal to Mexico and Urrea's forces. The Texians were quickly overwhelmed and those taken prisoner were executed. When Fannin received no word from King, the Goliad commander dispatched Colonel William Ward and part of his Georgia Battalion to Refugio. Like King, Urrea's forces engaged Ward's command. Ward's men took refuge in the old Refugio Mission church and waited for support from Fannin.

Meanwhile, Fannin, on March 14, received word from Texas Commander and Chief Sam Houston that the Alamo had fallen (on March 6) and Texas independence had been declared. Houston ordered Fannin to destroy Presidio La Bahia and retire to Victoria. Without word from King or Ward, Fannin delayed retreating from Goliad. Eventually, news of Ward's position at Refugio arrived and Fannin ordered the Georgian to retreat and join him at Victoria. Ward's men were later captured by Mexican forces.

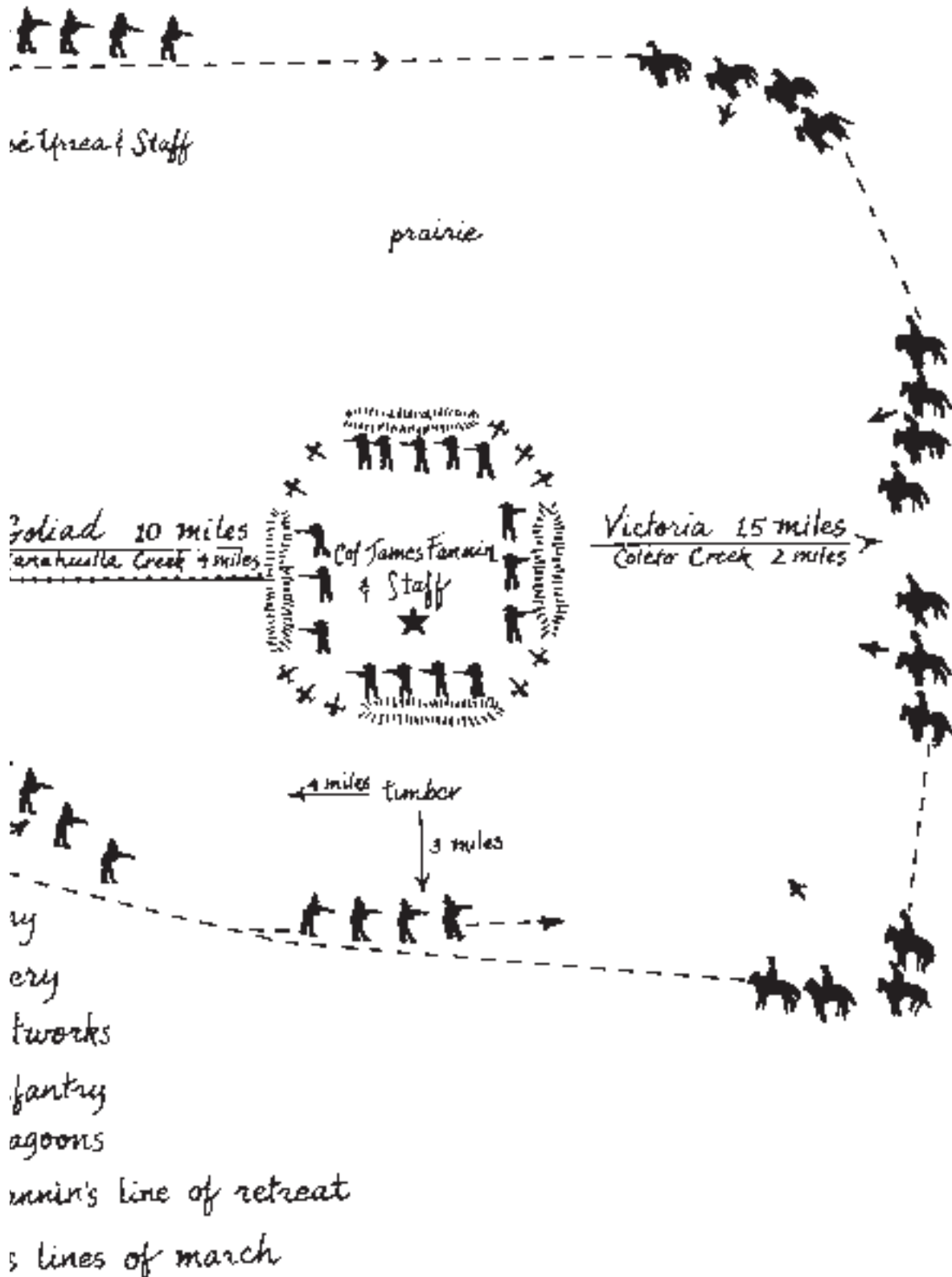
## THE BATTLE OF COLETO

By March 19, Fannin was at last ready to retreat to Victoria. After more delays that morning, he and nearly 350 men headed east under a heavy fog, leaving La Bahia in flames behind them. Urrea's forces had advanced to Goliad, and were only two hours behind the retreating Texians. Fannin's precious two-hour lead quickly began to evaporate. An hour was lost when crossing the San Antonio River, in an attempt to recover a lost cannon fallen from a broken down cart. Another hour was lost when the Texians were forced to halt, to feed and rest the oxen drawing the cannons. Somehow, unaccountably, the animals had not been fed or watered the day before while the Texians were making such hurried preparations for retreat. After resuming the march, the Texians lead-time had vanished and the Mexican cavalry were upon them. As Fannin's command entered the expanse of prairie before Coletto Creek, General Jose Urrea ordered his cavalry forward to cut off the Texian line of retreat.



# The Coleto Battlefield

March 19-20, 1836



re Uprea & Staff

prairie

Zoliad 10 miles  
Coyote Creek 4 miles

Victoria 15 miles  
Coleto Creek 2 miles

1 mile timber  
3 miles

ery  
works  
fantry  
agoons

main's line of retreat  
lines of march

Caught in the middle of an open prairie and outnumbered by Mexican soldados, Fannin's command formed a square defensive position.

For the rest of the day, the Texians were successful in fighting off repeated attacks by the Mexican soldados. Benjamin H. Holland, who later escaped the Presidio executions, wrote that under heavy use of Texian artillery, "...our cannon was loaded with canisters of musket balls, and the howitzer with grist — in this manner the action was kept up with great fury by the enemy; charge after charge being made by cavalry and infantry and always repelled with heavy loss on their part." General Jose Urrea described the battle from the Mexican perspective in his diary of the military operations of his division, and noted that despite repeated attempts to overrun the Texians, each assault was repulsed. "Though our soldiers showed resolution, the enemy was likewise unflinching. Thus, without being intimidated by our impetuous charge, it [the Texian force] maneuvered in order to meet it." By this, Urrea referred to the ease with which the cannon was moved about within the Texian fortification. In the face of withering Texian fire, the Mexican soldados repeatedly reformed under their officers for new assaults, for which Urrea commended them.

By nightfall, the Texians were completely surrounded. With seven Texians dead and nearly twenty-eight wounded, Fannin's command faced the prospect of trying to fight their way through Urrea's lines or remaining on the field. Realizing that they would have to leave their wounded, which included Fannin, the Texians reworked their defenses, dug trenches and waited for sunrise.

Dr. Joseph H. Barnard described the situation that night. "We were without water, and many, especially the wounded, were suffering from thirst...from some unaccountable oversight, we had left our provision behind." In describing the night's fortification activities, Barnard wrote: "We set to work with our spades and dug a ditch two or three feet in depth. Our carts were then drawn up and disposed of upon the breastworks so as to aid in our protection, and the carcasses of two horses, all that we had along with us and those of several oxen, were piled up for breastworks. Thus the night wore away, the enemy's patrol keeping up incessant music with their bugles to regale us... ." Meanwhile, General Urrea placed cavalry and infantry pickets to observe the Texians during the night, and reinforced the line around the Texians.

The next morning, after receiving reinforcements and artillery, the Mexican troops resumed fire. Due to a lack of water, the Texian artillery was almost unworkable. Realizing that it was virtually impossible to continue fighting, the Texian officers gathered to determine how best to deal with the situation.



## THE SURRENDER

A parley was sounded in which a delegation of Texian officers met with Urrea's staff. Realizing the hopelessness of their situation, Fannin and his officers agreed to surrender. It is believed they drafted terms, which consisted of a guarantee that they would be treated as prisoners of war, their wounded given medical attention, and all prisoners would gain eventual freedom by release to the United States. Urrea made it clear to Fannin that he could not ratify those terms as he was obligated to accept only unconditional surrender, as per his orders from Santa Anna. Urrea stated in his military diary that "In spite of the regret I felt in making such a reply, and in spite of my great desire of offering them guarantees as humanity dictated, this was beyond my authority. Had I been in a position to do so, I would have at least guaranteed them their life. Fannin was a gentleman, a man of courage, a quality which makes us soldiers esteem each other mutually. His manners captivated my affection, and if it had been in my hand to save him, together with his companions, I would have gladly done so." He did, however, tell Fannin he would use his influence with Santa Anna on the Texan's behalf. The signed document, which still exists, states the surrender was "subject to the disposition of the supreme government." Survivor accounts indicate that Fannin did not make the actual terms clear to his men. They believed their proposed terms had been accepted.

## THE AFTERMATH

The consequences of the battle were far reaching. Despite Urrea's own beliefs that the prisoners would be treated well, Santa Anna ordered that the December 29, 1835 Tornel Decree be enforced. This led to the execution of Fannin and most of his command on Palm Sunday, March 27, 1836. The execution of Fannin's command, which most Texians and Americans deemed a massacre, served to inflame the Texas cause, and when Texian forces attacked Santa Anna's division on April 21, 1836 at San Jacinto, the battle cry was "Remember the Alamo! Remember Goliad!" The Texian victory at San Jacinto helped to secure the independence of Texas.

Today part of the site of the Battle of the Coleto is preserved as a state historic site maintained by the Texas Historical Commission. It is a memorial to those soldiers who fought on this field in 1836.

Also visit Historic Goliad to see the Mission Espiritu Santo de Zuniga, the Presidio La Bahía, the Birthplace of General Ignacio Zaragoza and the Fannin Monument located off of Highway 183.



**TEXAS  
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COMMISSION**

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