4. THE GOLIAD MASSACRE

I fear La Bahia (Goliad) is in siege.
—SAM HOUSTON, COMMANDER-IN-CHIEF
GONZALES, 1836

As we passed the door an officer told me we were all to be shot.
—ANDREW BOYLE, FANNIN’S COMMAND, 1836

Don’t take on so, boys! If we have to die, let’s die like brave men!
—ROBERT FENNER, FANNIN’S COMMAND, 1836

This day, Palm Sunday, March 27, has been to me a season of most heartfelt sorrow.
—UNIDENTIFIED MEXICAN OFFICER, 1836

Gen. Houston arrived at Gonzales on March 11—the same day Col. Fannin had dispatched Amon King to Refugio—and learned that the Alamo had fallen. He hurried Capt. Francis J. Dusanque to Goliad with these tidings and ordered Fannin to fall back to Guadalupe Victoria “as soon as practicable . . . with your command, and such artillery as can be brought with expedition. The remainder will be sunk in the river.” Houston further ordered Fannin to blow up Fort Defiance, defend and help evacuate Victoria, and forward one-third of his effective force to Gonzales.

Fannin received this order either on March 13 or 14; the day is a matter of considerable historical dispute, since he has been charged with disobeying Houston’s command by dispatching Ward and the Georgia Battalion to Refugio to relieve King, then remaining at Goliad to await Ward’s return. Houston’s order to retreat to Victoria “as soon as practicable” gave Fannin some discretion, however. The more significant question is not why Fannin lingered after March 14, but why he dallied after February 25, when he learned that Santa Anna was at Béxar. Regardless, Houston himself expressed little confidence in Fannin in a letter to James Collinsworth on March 13: “I would not rely on any cooperation from him. . . . The projected expedition to Matamoros, under the agency of the council has already cost us 237 lives; and where the effects are to end, none can foresee. . . . I fear La Bahia (Goliad) is in siege.”

THE BATTLE OF COLETO

Ironically for Fannin, he now had his long-awaited order to retreat but had neither the means to perform it effectively nor an account of his dispatched personnel’s whereabouts. Nearly all his carts and teams were with King at Refugio and a third of his garrison under Ward had marched to King’s rescue. Meanwhile, at Guadalupe Victoria, a small company of Texans under Capt. Sam A. White was assembling carts and teams that had been gathered primarily from local residents by John J. Linn, alcalde of Victoria and quartermaster of the army. By so doing, Linn deprived his own citizens of a means of escape, though he directed them to Cox’s Point. The settlers of Guadalupe Victoria, particularly the De León family, supported the cause against Santa Anna and therefore were legitimately concerned about their treatment by Urrea’s approaching Mexican army.

A swift retreat to Victoria was in Fannin’s best interest not only because the Guadalupe River made for a more defensible line but because the citizens of Victoria, unlike those of Goliad, were
friendly. Also, the village afforded some provisions, and needed reinforcements were already there or nearby. In addition to White’s company, Albert C. Horton was near Victoria with more than forty men, many of them mounted. Philip Dimmitt, the former Goliad commander, recruited a company of twenty-one men there as well, though Houston called them to Gonzales; and Morehouse’s New York Battalion was reorganizing on Matagorda Bay. Other reinforcements were also in the area, including as Miller’s Nashville Battalion, which was off Aransas Pass heading for Copano. Furthermore, the critical supply stores were nearby at Dimmitt’s Landing, Cox’s Point, and Linnvillle.

On March 14, while Ward and King were fighting the battle of Refugio, Fannin dispatched successive couriers to them and to Horton and White at Victoria. The expert mounted rancheros of Carlos de la Garza and others captured all of these couriers, whose messages supplied Urrea with exact knowledge of Fannin’s situation, strength, and intentions. Fannin, by contrast, having no mounted men and watched on all sides by Mexican cavalry and rancheros, was virtually blind.

Horton (himself a Texas colonist born in Georgia) and thirty-one mounted men escorted the precious teams and carts from Victoria and joined Fannin late on March 14. These were the last reinforcements the Goliad commander received; the garrison now totaled some 350 men, excluding King’s and Ward’s commands and various unattached supernumeraries. Prudence dictated that Fannin retreat quickly to Victoria. This was what Ward expected him to do, and having first eluded Urrea after the battle of Refugio by marching toward Copano, Ward left the Copano road at Melon Creek and marched across country toward Victoria, where he believed Fannin would be. Fannin, however, spent March 15 and 16 “in vain anticipation of Ward’s return,” though he did plan for the retreat by selecting nine pieces of artillery to take with him and burying seven others. At 4:00 P.M. on March 17 he learned of King and Ward’s defeat through Hugh McDonald Frazer of the Refugio militia, who had volunteered to investigate.

Yet the overly confident commander of Fort Defiance defied prudence. Instead of retreating hastily to Victoria, Fannin spent March 18 taking “the necessary measures for a retreat in accordance with the resolution of the officers in council last evening.” He and his men had no intention of making a hurried retreat, nor any apparent concern for their situation. The men were still ready for a fight, and most did not esteem the prowess of their enemy—a perilously shortsighted attitude their colonel shared, as regimental surgeon Dr. J. H. Barnard commented in his journal: “His former experience in fighting Mexicans had led him to entertain a great contempt for them as soldiers, and led him to neglect to take such precautionary measures as were requisite, from their great numerical superiority.”

The wary Urrea, knowing Fannin’s intentions, dispatched cavalry units and rancheros to hold the Texans at Goliad, as he had done with Ward at Refugio, and was busy bringing up the remainder of his army to lay siege to Fort Defiance. He also was expecting daily the arrival of reinforcements from Béjar; Santa Anna had sent Col. Juan Morales’s Jiménez and San Luis battalions, some 500 veterans of the Alamo assault, to join Urrea’s campaign. These men occupied their assigned position on Manahulla Creek about three miles north of Goliad on March 17; Urrea reached the San Antonio River the same day and joined the troops of Morales the next. Gen. Urrea’s army now totaled at least 1,400 men, excluding the 200 rancheros.

Horton had discovered the Morales battalions during a scouting mission on March 17, at which time a council among Fannin and his officers determined to retreat the next morning. At that seemingly opportune time, however, Urrea’s advance cavalry appeared, and Horton, sent to chase them, tired his horses. Fannin, mistaking these advance units for the whole of Urrea’s army, assumed Fort Defiance would soon be put under siege and so kept the garrison on alert. He ordered the buried cannon dug up and remounted, and the village of La Bahía burned. During this delay the oxen, which were to be hitched to the carts made ready for the removal to Victoria, were left all day without being fed. No retreat was attempted even that night, a delay based on Horton’s seeing Mexican troops at the San Antonio River crossing and his concern that the night was too dark to keep to the road.
"We were by no means disposed to run," recorded Dr. Barnard. "We confidently counted on our ability to take ourselves and all our baggage, etc., in safety to Victoria."

At last the retreat was started, but only by 9:00 A.M. the next morning, March 19, under a heavy fog and much confusion. Provisions so painfully accumulated were burned; rations for the march were not saved. The unearthed cannon were spiked. Fannin insisted on taking nine cumbersome brass cannon and about 1,000 muskets, though he neglected to take enough water and food for more than a few meals. The carts were heavily loaded, the hungry oxen unruly. Progress was slow. Horton’s cavalry was dispatched to occupy a fording position across the San Antonio River and then to scout for signs of the Mexican army. Urrea, expecting to lay siege to the fort, was unaware of their departure until 11:00 A.M. But the Texans forfeited about an hour of this precious lead time while crossing the San Antonio River—a cart broke down and the largest cannon fell into the river and had to be fished out. Another valuable hour was lost when Fannin ordered the oxen detached for grazing after the column had proceeded about a mile past Manahuilla Creek. Officers John Shackelford, Burr H. Duval, and Ira Westover protested this stop, arguing the column should not rest until reaching the protection of the Coleto Creek timber. Shackelford particularly noted his commander’s contempt for the competence of the Mexican army and his disbelief that Urrea would dare follow them—an assumption reflected among Fannin’s men.

Urrea had quickly left Goliad without his artillery and the full complement of his force in order to narrow Fannin’s two-hour lead. Mexican sources indicate that he set out with 80 cavalry and 360 infantry. He discovered through his mounted scouts the location of Fannin’s column and that the rebel force was considerably smaller than supposed, which prompted him to return 100 infantrymen to Goliad to help secure Presidio La Bahia and escort the artillery ordered to join him as soon as possible. Although Horton’s cavalry served as advance guards, Fannin’s unalert rear guard failed to detect the Mexican cavalry stalking the column. Meanwhile, the Texans had scarcely resumed march after resting the oxen than another cart broke down; its contents had to be transferred to another wagon. Fannin then sent Horton to scout the Coleto Creek timber, now in sight. Suddenly, the Mexican cavalry surprised them from behind. Upon overtaking the lumbering Texan position at about 1:30 P.M., the Mexican commander ordered his cavalry to halt Fannin’s advance toward the protective woods. Fannin set up a skirmish line with artillery while the column attempted to reach the Coleto about two miles distant.

Perceiving the danger, Fannin formed his men into a moving square formation and continued toward the closer timber of Perdido Creek less than a mile away, when overtaken by Mexican cavalry. Caught in a valley some six feet below its surroundings, the Texans still tried to get to the more defensible higher ground about four to five hundred yards distant, but their ammunition cart broke down. While Fannin called a council to determine the feasibility of taking what ammunition they could and reaching the woods, Urrea, seeing his advantage, began his attack. With little water, and situated in an open prairie covered with high grass concealing their enemy situated on higher ground, Fannin’s men made ready their defense. Their hollow square was three-ranks deep, each man receiving three to four muskets and many having bayonets, rifles, and pistols. The San Antonio Greys and the Red Rovers formed the front line, Burr H. Duval’s Mustangs and others including Hugh Frazer’s Refugio militia formed the rear, with the left flank defended by Ira Westover’s regulars, and the right by the Mobile Greys. ¹ The artillery was placed in the corners (except when moved as needed), and Fannin assumed a command position in the rear of the right flank. In addition, an outpost of sharpshooters formed around Abel Morgan’s hospital wagon, which became immobilized earlier when an ox was hit by Mexican fire.

Soon after Urrea’s cavalry managed to stop Fannin’s retreat, the Mexican general amassed his troops and attacked the square. The rifle companies under Col. Juan Morales assaulted the left; the grenadiers and the first regiment of San Luis Battalion charged the right under Urrea’s direct supervision; and the Jiménez Battalion under Col. Mariano Salas attacked the front, while Col. Gabriel Núñez’s cavalry charged the rear. There is much discrepancy
among different sources regarding the numbers of men involved on March 19. Fannin defended his position with between 300 and 400 men. Urrea wrote that he had 80 cavalry and 260 infantry at the time the Texans were overtaken, a figure confirmed by Lt. Col. José Enrique de la Peña, who also stressed that most of the Mexican troops were the Alamo veterans of Col. Morales. Many Texan sources give unrealistically high numbers in Urrea’s pursuit force. Clearly, the Mexican general set out with only a small array of veteran troops—probably 300 to 500 men—to ensure catching Fannin, and left orders for a larger force, including artillery, to follow and aid in battling the Texans once engaged by the pursuit troops. Fannin continuously overestimated the true strength of both Urrea’s advance forces at Goliad and the pursuit force at the Coleto, became convinced that he was outnumbered regardless of the actuality, and remained on the defensive.

The battle of Coleto lasted until after sunset. The Texans made effective use of their bayonets, multiple muskets, and nine cannon. Despite horrendous fighting and their lack of experience, their square remained unbroken. Survivor accounts describe bullets as “singing like mad hornets” about them, the battle scene as “dreadful to behold. Killed and maimed men and horses were strewn over the plain, the wounded were rending the air with their distressing moans, while a great number of horses without riders were rushing to and fro back upon the enemy’s lines increasing the confusion.” The terrified Tejano prisoners, taken on the March 10 raid on Carlos Rancho, dug foxholes for refuge during the battle. “I for one, however, didn’t blame them,” survivor John Duval recorded, “and besides, to tell the truth...I had a great inclination to ‘hole up’ myself and draw it in after me.” Dr. Barnard recorded that seven of his comrades had been killed, sixty wounded (forty severely), Fannin among them.

The Mexican general was impressed with both the “withering fire of the enemy,” and their ability to repulse his three charges—“Though our soldiers showed resolution, the enemy was likewise unflinching.” He also esteemed Fannin for being “a gentleman and a man of courage.” Likewise did the Mexican soldiers fight with ardor, tenacity, and valor. Urrea himself abandoned his general’s post and led both infantry and cavalry charges. His casualties were heavy, perhaps some fifty killed and 140 wounded, but accounts vary widely. Ironically, Urrea retired because of ammunition depletion: “I was forced to retire—not without indignation.” Yet, Fannin did not recognize or utilize this opportunity—“The enemy seemed unaware of this, for he did not take advantage of a situation that was invaluable to him,” De la Peña recorded. At evening Urrea positioned snipers in the tall grass around the square, inflicting additional casualties before Texan sharpshooters were able to quell these attacks by firing at the flashes illuminating the darkness. Ultimately, the Texans suffered ten deaths during the March 19 battle.

Fannin’s men anxiously awaited Horton’s company with hoped-for reinforcements from Guadalupe Victoria. But Horton, unable to return through enemy lines, and having found Victoria deserted—Linn, White, and Dimmitt had already departed as Houston had ordered—continued on to Gonzales. Ironically, Ward’s evasive Georgia Battalion was close enough to hear the Coleto gunfire, but was exhausted and hungry. Urrea knew from captured couriers that Ward and Fannin would try to rendezvous at Victoria, so with the aid of De la Garza’s Victoriana Guares, kept the Georgia Battalion isolated in the Guadalupe riverbottom until they surrendered. At the Coleto battlefield, Urrea posted detachments at three points around the square to prevent escape and kept the Texans on stiff watch throughout the night with false bugle calls.

Fannin’s position became critical during the night as the lack of food and water and inability to light fires made treating the wounded impossible. Their suffering was made even more unbearable by a cold and rainy norther, and their cries demoralized everyone. The lack of water, which was required to cool and clean the cannon during fire, also guaranteed the artillery to be ineffective at best the next day, especially considering that the artillers had sustained a high number of casualties. Furthermore, ammunition was low. A council among Fannin and his officers weighing these facts concluded that they could not sustain another day’s battle. Yet, the much-debated proposition to
escape to the Perdido or Coleto Creek timber under dark and before Urrea received reinforcements was rejected—the men unanimously voted not to abandon the many wounded, as all had a friend or relative among them. They therefore began digging trenches and erecting barricades of carts and dead animals in preparation for the next day's fight. By the time this was completed, the Mexican position had been reinforced with munitions, fresh troops, and two artillery pieces from Goliad. His army now numbering between 700 and 1,000 men, Urrea placed his artillery on the slopes overlooking the Texas position and grouped for battle at 6:15 A.M., March 20.

The Mexican artillery fired one and possibly two rounds, convincing Fannin that making another stand would be futile. Another consultation among his officers produced the decision—despite protests from the San Antonio Greys and Mobile Greys—to seek honorable terms of surrender for the sake of the wounded, and hope the Mexicans would adhere to it. Fannin’s men apparently drafted terms of surrender guaranteeing their treatment as prisoners of war, care for the wounded, and ultimately their parole to the United States, but Urrea could not ratify such an agreement. The Mexican general was bound by order of El Presidente Santa Anna and by congressional decree to accept no terms other than unconditional surrender. Urrea made it clear to Fannin in person that he could only offer to intercede on the Texans’ behalf with Santa Anna and to treat them with respect until the government ruled on their fate.

The surviving document of capitulation, a version written in Spanish and signed by Fannin, shows that the Texan commander surrendered his men “subject to the disposition of the supreme government.” Fannin apparently did not make this fact clear to his men, since survivor accounts indicate the Texans were led to believe they were surrendering honorably as prisoners of war and would be returned to the United States. But as Urrea recorded in his diary, “Those who assert that I offered guarantees to those who surrendered, speak without knowledge of the facts.” De la Peña observed that Urrea’s “heart yearned to accord him [Fannin] guarantees that were not within his power to grant, so he limited himself to offering to intercede with the commanding general [Santa Anna], and he kept his word.” Although “Fannin and his comrades surrendered with the understanding that their lives would be respected,” De la Peña affirmed, “General Urrea had given them no such guarantee.”

John C. Duval, a witness who later escaped the massacre, provided further insight. “I have always believed myself that Gen. Urrea entered into the capitulation with Col. Fannin in good faith, and that the massacre of the prisoners, which took place some days afterwards, was by the express order of Santa Anna, and against the remonstrances of Gen. Urrea. If Gen. Urrea had intended to act treacherously, the massacre, in my opinion, would have taken place as soon as we had delivered up our arms, when we were upon an open prairie, surrounded by a large force of cavalry, where it would have been utterly impossible for a single soul to have escaped, and consequently he could then have given to the world his own version of the affair without fear of contradiction.”

Perhaps trying to be optimistic, Fannin was unable to bring himself to tell his men they were really surrendering at the mercy of the government and instead misleadingly assured them of fair treatment. This discrepancy is significant only in light of the ultimate fate of Fannin’s command. Although traditional Texan renditions imply some insidious conspiracy in the surrender episode, they assume deceit on Urrea’s part but fail to explore Fannin’s own unfortunate history of duplicity. For years—even after moving to Texas—Fannin had been involved in the illicit slave trade, illegally shipping and selling Africans in the American Southern states. During the controversy over his Matamoros expedition, which helped split the provisional government, Fannin also deceitfully distorted statements by Governor Henry Smith found in a private letter belonging to his second in command, William Ward, so as to tarnish the character of the governor in the fight within the provisional government. Like Houston, Smith was adamantly opposed to the Matamoros project as folly. Consequently, the libel incident embittered relations between Fannin and Ward. Furthermore, Fannin had emphasized to his allies in the provisional government that they should keep silent
on the point of independence for Texas to avoid jeopardizing
Mexican Federalist help in the expedition against Matamoros.
Additionally, long before the battle of Coleto Fannin’s command
decisions were criticized by his ranking officers, many of his men,
and by Gen. Houston; he had even lost confidence in himself.
Writing to Acting Governor Robinson on February 14, Fannin had
confessed, “I am not, practically, an experienced commander . . . I
know, if you and the Council do not, that I am incompetent . . . I
do most earnestly ask of you . . . to relieve me, and make a selec-
tion of one possessing all the requisites of a commander.”

Thus, the enigmatic Fannin enjoyed a reputation neither for
integrity nor for sound military judgment and leadership. But to
his credit, he “behaved with perfect coolness and self possession”
throughout the battle, “and evinced no lack of bravery,” according
to Dr. Barnard, who was very critical of Fannin’s “grievous error
in suffering us to stop” in the open prairie. Likewise, De la Peña
appraised him: “Although endowed with great courage, which he
demonstrated until the moment of death, Fannin also demonstrat-
ed his lack of knowledge of the principles of strategy and grand
tactics, for otherwise he would have fought while retreating [to
the woods], which would have been the best choice.”

Following the surrender, some 230 or 240 Texans able to walk
were marched back to Goliad. The physicians were made to care
for the Mexican wounded to the neglect of their own men. The
wounded Texans, including Colonel Fannin who had been hit in
the thigh, were transported to Goliad over the next two days.
Urrea, meanwhile, continued his advance to secure Guadalupe
Victoria, from where he wrote Santa Anna, as he had promised,
recommending clemency for the Goliad prisoners. Moving on, he
surrounded Ward’s men in the Guadalupe woods near “the port
known as Linn’s House” (Linnville), and accepted the surrender
of the dispirited, footsore, and hungry Georgia Battalion on March
22 on the same terms accorded to Fannin. Except for those who
escaped en route from Refugio to the Victoria area and those
Urrea detained in Victoria as laborers to build boats—which
would enable the Mexican army to cross the swollen Guadalupe

River and continue toward Brazoria as planned—Ward and about
eighty-five men were marched back to Goliad and imprisoned
with Fannin’s men in the chapel of Presidio La Bahia, ironically
the fort they had so recently commanded. About the same day
William P. Miller’s Nashville Battalion finally landed at Copano,
but was surprised unarmed and taken prisoner without resistance
by Urrea’s forces then occupying the port. On March 23 they, too,
were marched to Goliad and incarcerated, though kept apart from
Fannin’s men.

Although the battle of Coleto is usually considered meaningful
only as a prologue to the massacre, it does have separate signifi-
cance. While the ultimate story is bound up in the complexity and
controversy of the Matamoros expedition, the sequence of events
underscores the tragedy of Fannin’s inability to make timely deci-
sions crucial for success. This disadvantage was worsened by his
disrespect for the capabilities of his enemy and a reluctance, com-
mon in the Texas army, to coordinate campaigns. Urrea by con-
trast showed skill in staying alert to Fannin’s plans, keeping the
Texans within the presidio an extra day, pursuing and catching
them by taking advantage of almost every opportunity, and isolat-
ing Ward’s men near Victoria while successfully battling Fannin’s
command at the Coleto. Still, the Texans, though most being
untrained, inexperienced volunteers, obeyed their commanders
and withstood the onslaught of seasoned enemy troops. The inten-
sity of this protracted battle generated heroism as a commonplace
among both sides.

Yet the battle’s greatest significance remains fixed to its conse-
quences. Urrea’s victories gained him great esteem in the army,
but also incurred the jealousy of other generals and especially
Santa Anna, who had only recently suffered through victory at the
Alamo. These triumphs caused overconfidence among Mexican
leaders, who, like Santa Anna, now believed their campaign
against the rebellion in Texas to be nearing a successful conclu-
sion. Hence, the greatest consequence of the battle flowed ironi-
cally from the pen of the Mexican president himself in the order to
execute the Goliad prisoners.
THE GREAT INFAMY

The Goliad Massacre was not without precedent and *El Presidente* Santa Anna, who ultimately ordered the exterminations, was operating within Mexican law. Therefore, the massacre cannot be considered as isolated from the series of events and legislation preceding it. Santa Anna’s chief concern in preparing to subdue the Texas rebellion was the help expected from the United States. An attack on Tampico in November 1835 by Federalist Gen. José Antonio Mexía with men enlisted at New Orleans underscored this factor. The Mexican president ordered twenty-eight survivors of this battle to be tried as pirates; they were convicted and shot on December 14 in what Santa Anna believed would be an effective deterrent to expected help for Texas. He sought and obtained from the Mexican congress the decree of December 30, 1835, which directed that all foreigners taken in arms against the government should be treated as pirates—not prisoners of war—and shot.

In the Texas campaign Santa Anna’s main army took no captives. The execution of the murderous December 30 decree fell to Gen. Urrea, whose army took as the first prisoners the survivors of Francis W. Johnson’s party in the battle of San Patricio, February 27, 1836. Urrea, according to his esteemed contemporary, Reuben M. Potter, “was not blood thirsty and when not overruled by orders of a superior, or stirred by irritation, was disposed to treat prisoners with lenity.” When the general reported to Santa Anna that he had taken prisoners, the president-general ordered him to comply with the decree. Urrea complied to the extent of issuing an order to shoot these prisoners, along with those captured from Grant’s party in the battle of Agua Dulce Creek on March 2, but he had no stomach for such cold-blooded killing. Thus, when Father Thomas J. Malloy, priest of the Irish colonists, protested the execution, Urrea remitted the men to be imprisoned in Matamoros, asking Santa Anna’s pardon for having done so and washing his hands of their fate.

After the battle of Refugio on March 15 Urrea was again confronted with the duty of compliance, when his army captured thirty-three Texans. These included survivors of Amon B. King’s company, who had so infuriated their enemy by pursuing and killing local rancheros suspected of aiding Urrea’s army. The general satisfied his conscience by ordering King and fourteen of his men shot, while “setting at liberty all who were colonists or Mexicans.”

A more difficult situation followed Fannin’s capitulation on March 20, owing to the surrender terms, and Ward’s surrender of the Georgia Battalion on March 22. Urrea had written Santa Anna from Victoria, as he promised Fannin privately, recommending clemency—a “gesture of generosity after such a hard-fought battle is most worthy of the most singular commendation, and I can do no less than to commend it to your Excellency.” He reported nothing in this letter of March 21 about special terms of surrender. On March 23 Santa Anna quickly replied to Urrea’s letter by ordering the immediate execution of these “perfidious foreigners,” in compliance with the December 30 decree, and repeated the order in a letter on March 24. Meantime, evidently doubting Urrea’s willingness to serve as executioner, Santa Anna also sent a direct order on March 23 to the “Officer Commanding the Post of Goliad” to execute immediately the prisoners in his hands, enclosing with this letter a stinging rebuke for the attempt toward mercy and a transcription of “the said decree of the government for your guidance.” This order was received about 7:00 P.M., March 26, by Lt. Col. José Nicolás de la Portilla, whom Urrea had left in charge at Goliad. About an hour later Portilla received another order, this one from Urrea, informing him to “treat the prisoners with consideration, and particularly their leader, Fannin,” and to employ them in rebuilding Goliad. “What a cruel contrast in these opposite instructions!” Portilla wrote in his diary.

After a restless night Portilla determined that Santa Anna’s orders were superior. At sunrise on Palm Sunday, March 27, 1836, he isolated Miller’s Nashville Battalion who had been captured without arms and were thus spared. He then formed the unwounded prisoners into three divisions under heavy guard and marched one out on the San Antonio road, another on the Victoria road, and the third along the San Patricio road. The prisoners had little suspicion of their fate, for they had been told a variety of stories, such as how they were to gather wood, drive up cattle, be
marched to Matamoros, or even proceed to Copano for passage to New Orleans, as Fannin apparently believed and reported to his men. Thus, their spirits had been raised to singing “Home, Sweet Home” the night before.

At selected spots on each of the three roads, from half to three-fourths of a mile from the presidio, the three divisions were halted. Many of the Texans, as they recognized their fate, fell into despair and cried for mercy. There were some who fought the terror with brave encouragements to their comrades; Robert Fenner called out, “Don’t take on so, boys! If we have to die, let’s die like brave men!” The guards shot the prisoners at very close range, decimating them. Nearly all were killed at the first fire. Those not killed were pursued with gunfire, bayonet, or lance. The wounded prisoners, having heard the volleys and screams, were then shot to death within the presidio walls. “There was a great contrast in the feelings of the officers and the men,” Portilla recorded of his soldiers. “Silence prevailed.” Finally, Fannin was led out of the chapel-prison, limping badly from his wound and leaning on Joseph H. Spohn, a member of the Red Rovers spared as a translator. Through Spohn his executioner proclaimed: “For having come with an armed band to commit depredations and revolutionize Texas, the Mexican government is about to chastise you.” Fannin

“appeared resolute and firm,” Spohn recorded of his colonel, who was then shot in the head.

Urrea was outraged and chagrined upon receiving word from Goliad that the exterminations had been carried out, especially since, according to his diary, he had purposefully sent Ward’s men to Goliad “to increase the number of the prisoners there in the hope that their very number would save them, for I never thought that the horrible spectacle of that massacre could take place in cold blood and without immediate urgency.” De la Peña noted general outrage in the army regarding the criminal immorality of the exterminations. Despite his friendship with Portilla he condemned his “crimes against humanity,” noting as well the irony that the “sacrifice” commemorated a holy day in the Passion of Christ—Palm Sunday. De la Peña also denounced his president-general for the scandal, especially because among those
shot were colonists who should have enjoyed rights as Mexican citizens rather than being treated, like the foreigners, as pirates. But Santa Anna, in his own rendering of the December 30 decree, declared “on his own that these Mexicans participating in the war had no rights.”

Amazingly, twenty-eight men managed to escape. Perhaps the most incredible story was that of William L. Hunter, who was hit by a musket ball; a Mexican soldier, thinking he was not dead, cut his throat, but not deep enough to sever the jugular vein. He was then stabbed with a bayonet and finally beaten about the head with the breech of a musket. Like the others, he was stripped and left for dead. He revived many hours later in the night air, and dragged himself to the San Antonio River to drink and to bind up his wounds. Before daylight he managed to swim the river and eventually sought asylum among local Tejanos he had earlier befriended. His benefactor, a Mexican woman, kept him hidden, nursed, fed, and clothed in a thick coat for nearly a week, at which time she supplied him for travel. Hunter eventually made his way to Houston’s army.

Another twenty had been spared as physicians, orderlies, translators, or mechanics largely because of the brave and kindly interventions of Col. Francisco Garay and Señora Francisca (Panchita) de Alavez, called the “Angel of Goliad.” In addition, Capt. Carlos de la Garza interceded on behalf of at least six Irish colonists caught with Fannin’s men who were serving in Hugh Frazer’s Refugio militia company. Two physicians, Joseph Barnard and John Shackelford, were taken to San Antonio to treat Mexican wounded from the battle of the Alamo; they later escaped and would publish two of the best original accounts of their ordeal. Shackelford’s experience was especially tragic, for among those massacred were two nephews and his oldest son. Portilla wrote that the total number of his prisoners was 445, excluding Miller’s Nashville Battalion of 80 men who were separated from the executions. Texas sources specify the number, excluding Miller’s men, as 407. This may have been correct. Some of the prisoners taken at Refugio, but not executed with King’s men, are known to have been at Goliad, where they were again spared because they were serving the Mexican army as blacksmiths, wheelwrights, and other laborers. The exact fate of others captured at Refugio is not known. They may have been added to the prisoners at Goliad and killed with Fannin on March 27.

Urrea detained about twenty of Ward’s men to build boats at Guadalupe Victoria, and Señora de Alavez intervened with her husband, Col. Teléforo Alavez, whom Urrea left in command of the occupation force at Victoria, to spare their lives as well; they afterward escaped. About a week after the Goliad exterminations, Santa Anna ordered the execution of Miller and his men and the others who had been spared at Goliad, but he rescinded the order the next day. The men instead were marched to Matamoros after Houston’s victory in the battle of San Jacinto on April 21. Though some managed to escape en route, most remained there until the Mexican government later released them.

The impact of the Goliad Massacre was crucial. Until this episode Santa Anna’s reputation had been that of a cunning and crafty man rather than a cruel one. When Fannin’s command was finally taken prisoner, Texas had no ample army in the field and the newly created ad interim government seemed incapable of forming one. The Texas cause was dependent on the material aid and sympathy of the United States. Had Fannin’s and Miller’s men been dumped on the wharves at New Orleans, penniless, homesick, humiliated, and distressed, and each with his separate tale of mismanagement and incompetence in the independence movement, the popular Texas cause in the United States most likely would have fallen critically and with it sources of help. But Portilla’s volleys at Goliad, together with the fall of the Alamo, branded both Santa Anna and the Mexican people with a reputation for cruelty, aroused the fury of the people of Texas, the United States, and even Great Britain and France. The resulting cry, “Remember the Alamo! Remember Goliad!” contributed immeasurably to Houston’s critical victory at San Jacinto and sustaining the independence of the Republic of Texas.
 CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS vii

INTRODUCTION 1

1. THE SPANISH ERA 7

2. EMPRESARIOS 24

3. REVOLUTION! 35

4. THE GOLIAD MASSACRE 56

5. EPILOGUE: GHOSTS AND METEORS 74

SUGGESTED READING 80

NOTES 89
REMEMBER GOLIAD!

By Craig H. Roell