

Davy Crockett is Dead, But How He Died Lives On

BRENDA GUNN

WELCOME TO THE CENTER for American History on this San Jacinto Day when we commemorate the event that ended the Texas revolution and the achievement of independence from Texas's mother country, Mexico. While my presentation this morning does not directly address the Battle of San Jacinto, it is in the spirit of the day: the Battle of the Alamo is the backdrop. Out of that defeat, which led to the victory two months later at San Jacinto, came a controversy centering around a Mexican soldier and his diary.

Before I tell you more about this soldier, his diary, and the extraordinary fuss, I would like to give you a brief introduction to the Center for American History. We are a special collections library, archive, and museum comprised of four components. Three are not on this campus. Winedale is a complex of historical structures and modern facilities situated on 225 acres near Round Top, Texas. The site offers examples of early Texas architecture and decorative arts, and a variety of educational programs are conducted there. Another component is the Sam Rayburn Library and Museum in Bonham. The museum features exhibits documenting the life and career of this former Texas congressman and

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speaker of the United States House of Representatives. Rayburn's extensive congressional papers are housed here in Austin and are part of the Center's substantial political holdings. The John Nance Garner House and Museum, located in Uvalde, documents the former vice president's life and political career through newly installed exhibits featuring artifacts, documents, photographs, and ephemera original to the Garner house and an added infusion of material from the Center's political collections housed in Austin.

The fourth component is Research and Collections located here in Sid Richardson Hall on the University of Texas at Austin campus. Here we have a rare book library of 170,000 volumes; more than 70,000 linear feet of archival material; 40,000 maps; 5,500 historic newspaper titles; more than 2,000,000 photographs; and an extensive collection of records, music, and oral history interviews. These materials document our core subject areas: Texas history, southern United States history, Congressional history, western Americana, history of the University of Texas, and special collections such as the American News Media Archive, Archives of American Mathematics, and the ExxonMobil Historical Collection.

Included in this large collection is one little, modest manuscript, the subject of my remarks.

Davy Crockett once said that there was a lot of fuss being made over his name. Today, we might say that there is a lot of fuss being made *in* the name of Davy Crockett. Specifically, this is a fuss over a document that features a version of Crockett's death that differs from the popular version. The José Enrique de la Peña narrative reports that Mexican soldiers captured Crockett and executed him. Today, I want to tell you about the thirty-year-old controversy surrounding this document and its accounting of Crockett's death. It all began 120 years after the Battle of the Alamo with the 1955 publication of Peña's memoir in Mexico City. To better understand the situation, let us first look at the context for the controversy.

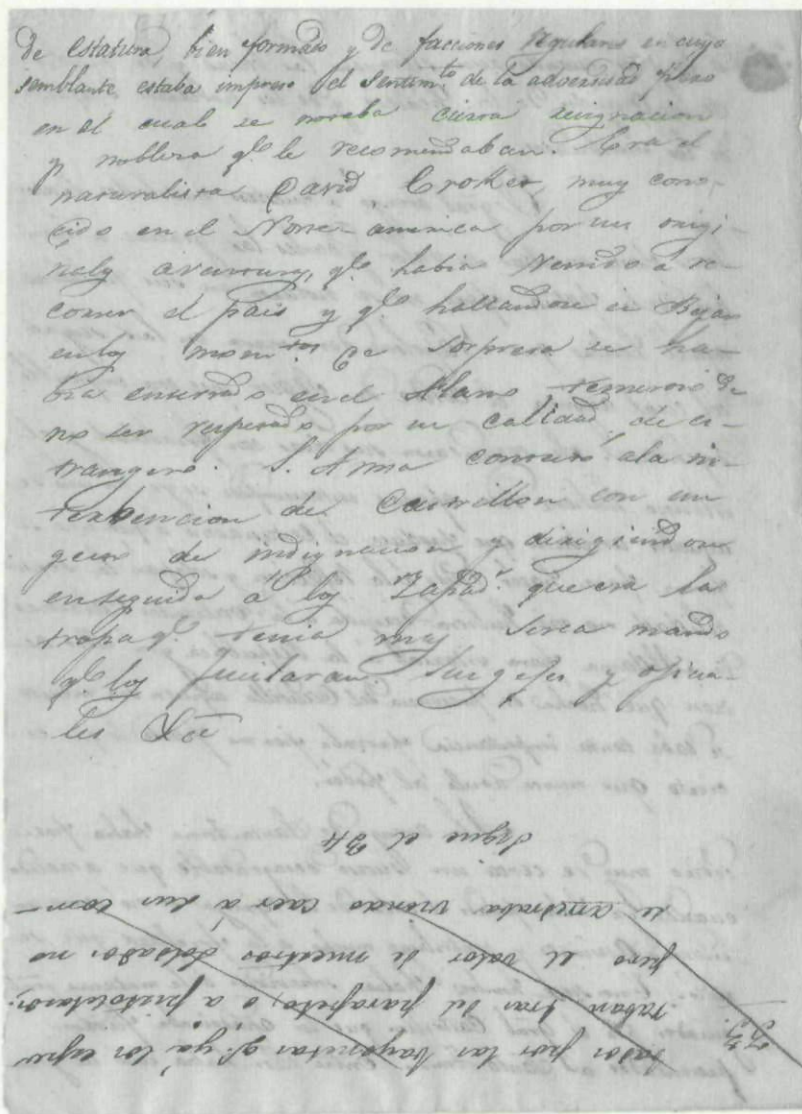


Fig. 1. The heart of the controversy is the Crockett page, folio 35 verso, in which Peña reports that David Crockett was captured and executed. Illustrations courtesy of the Center for American History, University of Texas at Austin.

Anglo American colonists began immigrating to Texas in 1821 after the Mexican government upheld Stephen F. Austin's colonization grant, first issued to his father Moses by the Spanish government. By the early 1830s, the Mexican government and the Texan colonists were at odds with each other. Texan dissatisfaction with the Mexican rule eventually led to the capture of General Cos and the overthrow of Mexican occupants in San Antonio de Bexar in December 1835. That event in particular spurred General Antonio Lopez de Santa Anna to lead, by some accounts, as many as six thousand troops across the Rio Grande into Texas to quash the growing resistance. This tremendous show of force was not enough ultimately to defeat the Texans who, having declared their independence in March 1836, won independence at the Battle of San Jacinto in April. But, before the Texans won their independence, they fought one of the most famous battles in American history, at the Alamo.

When we remember the Alamo, we are remembering not a victory, but a terrible defeat. Against overwhelming odds, defenders of the Alamo held out for thirteen days against an astoundingly large military led by Santa Anna himself, who at this time was leader of the Republic of Mexico. Paul Hutton, a history professor at the University of New Mexico, has written that there are two Alamos: one of historical fact and one of our collective imagination. Depending on which side one takes in this controversy, the Peña narrative supports one Alamo, the historical one, while tarnishing the other Alamo, of which Davy Crockett serves as the master symbol. Let me just take a minute to look at this master symbol and the legend surrounding him.

Born in Tennessee in 1786, David Crockett enjoyed a legendary status and reputation in his own time. He was widely known as a frontiersman, a hunter, a militiaman, and a teller of tall tales. Crockett entered politics at the local level and then proceeded to a national stage as a congressman from Tennessee. He served his constituents in Washington off and on from 1827 until his final defeat in 1835. He championed public lands and squatter's rights

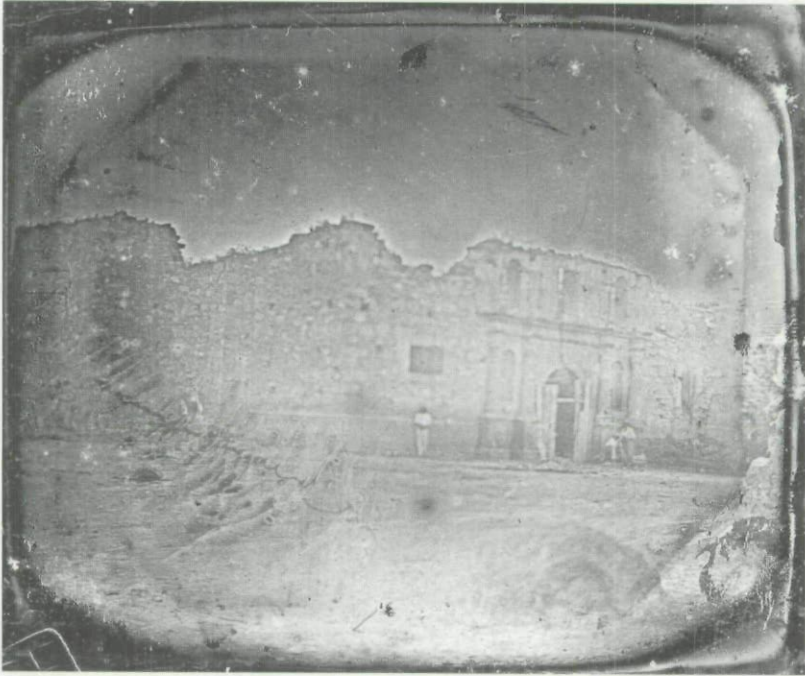


Fig. 2. The facade of the Alamo chapel. This 1849 daguerreotype is the earliest dateable photograph taken in Texas and the only extant photographic view of the Alamo taken before its reconstruction in 1850.

and most anything to advance the rights of the people on the frontier. But, after he ran afoul of Andrew Jackson and the Whig Party, his political career ended in ruins. Seeking to make a new life for himself and his family, Crockett left Tennessee for Texas in late 1835, joining other Americans who were travelling to seek new lands. He arrived in San Antonio de Bexar in February and joined the small force stationed at the Alamo mission. By all accounts, Crockett participated fully in the siege that began on February 23, 1836. Crockett died at the battle, but whether he died during the battle or was executed after is the basis for contention.

Crockett did make an impression in his lifetime. In April 1831, a play called *The Lion of the West* premiered in New York.

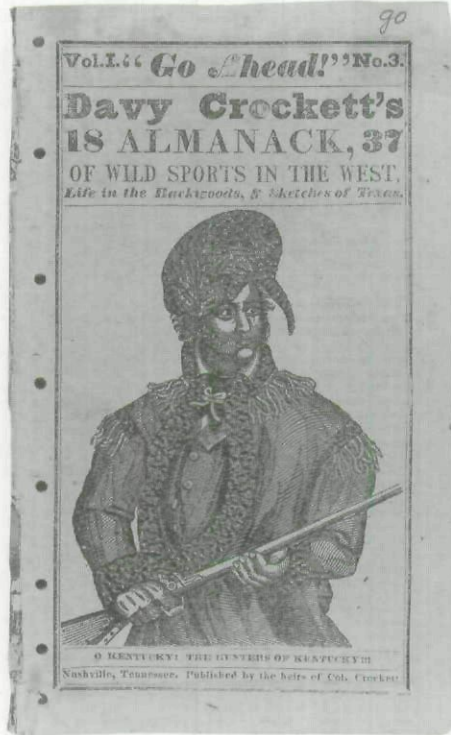


Fig. 3. After the play, *The Lion of the West*, became popular, a coonskin hat began appearing on Crockett in publications such as Crockett's *Almanack* of 1837.

The public recognized the character of Colonel Nimrod Wildfire as a caricature of Crockett. Advertisements for the play showed the character of Wildfire in a coonskin hat. Only after the play became popular and successful did images appear in print featuring Crockett sporting a coonskin hat. In Crockett's own *Almanack* of 1837, the cover drawing promoted Crockett in what was to become his trademark (fig. 3), and moreover, that image in particular struck many as similar to *The Lion of the West* advertisements.

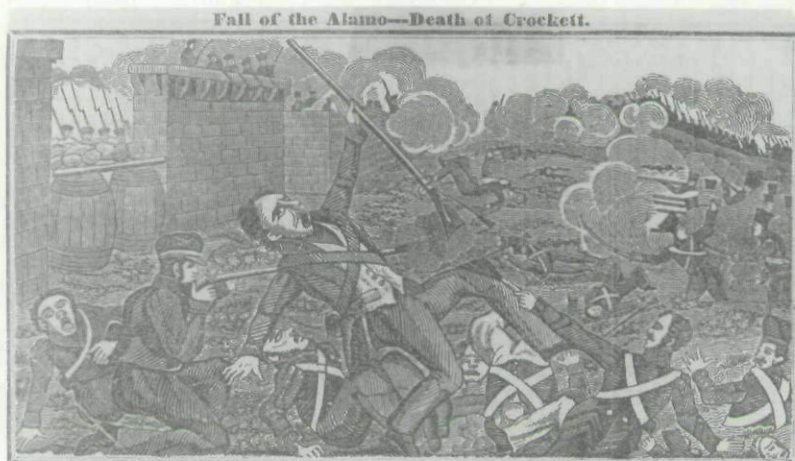


Fig. 4. In 'Fall of Alamo—Death of Crockett' from Crockett's *Almanack* Crockett emerges as a fierce soldier who died at the Alamo in the midst of battle.

Though Crockett never returned from Texas, his name, image, and legend grew almost immediately with the 1836 publication of his *Almanack* (which Crockett had begun preparing in 1835). These publications, which continued until 1856, certainly contributed to the story that Crockett died during the battle, as they reported each year on the increasingly tall exploits of the publication's namesake. Crockett always appeared in the *Almanack* as larger than life, and, in regards to the Alamo in particular, Crockett invariably emerged as a fierce soldier who met his end in the midst of battle. The image of Crockett as the rifle-swinging, fierce defender of the Alamo was to be expected within the pages of the *Almanack* (Fig. 4), but the image also made its way into other publications such as the *Book of Idle Hours*, published in 1848.

Crockett's image began to lose popularity after the Civil War, but even so, he still inspired plays and silent films after the turn of the twentieth century. Though publications continued to offer

two different views of Crockett's death, some versions of the story proved more palatable to the public than others. *Texas History Movies*, a publication distributed to Texas schoolchildren by the Magnolia Petroleum Company in the 1930s and subsequently by the Mobil Corporation, was reprinted for decades. It follows in the tradition of Crockett's *Almanack* and those subsequent images of Crockett going down in the midst of battle, undoubtedly in a blaze of glory. A different version of events at the Alamo can be found in 'Crockett Led before Santa Anna,' an image from *The Adventures of Davy Crockett*, published in 1934, in which Crockett and a group of Texan soldiers are led before Santa Anna after the battle has ended. Because it strayed from the more popular version of Crockett's death, editors omitted this image from subsequent printings of the book.

The next major contribution to the Crockett legend can be credited to Walt Disney Studios. In the 1950s, the Disneyland television program broadcast a three-part series featuring Fess Parker as Crockett. Disney followed the series with the film *Davy Crockett, King of the Wild Frontier* in the summer of 1955. In 1960 John Wayne added his charisma and mystique to the Crockett legend by directing and playing the role of Davy Crockett in *The Alamo*. The Disney shows and the Wayne film created a nation of Crockett fans and instilled in them an image of their hero's death.

But, according to Mexican Army officer José Enrique de la Peña, General Santa Anna ordered the execution of David Crockett and six other men after Mexican soldiers captured the exhausted, fight-weary group in the waning hours of the Battle of the Alamo. Nowhere in his text does Peña note that Crockett died while fighting at the Alamo. Rather, Peña says that after the battle had ended, Mexican soldiers captured and then executed Crockett. This version offers no guns ablazing as Disney and other popular versions portray the Alamo story. On this difference turns a major controversy—how Davy Crockett died at the Alamo—and at the heart of the controversy pulses Peña's narrative.

Lieutenant Colonel Peña kept a diary in the field during the Texas campaign, but he opted not to publish it immediately after the campaign's conclusion. Instead, he proceeded to verify happenings that he did not witness and to add information, based upon fellow officers' reports, with the intention of producing a publishable manuscript. Peña's narrative then, is a compilation of his field diary of 109 pages, and his extended 400-page memoir based upon the diary. Scholars believe that Peña worked on this extended memoir while in prison and employed scribes to do much of the writing. Peña himself disappeared from the historical record after 1839, and is believed to have died in 1840, without having secured the publication of his memoir.

Peña's account provides a look at the maneuverings of the Mexican Army in Texas, descriptions of disputes between Santa Anna and his officers, a recounting of the Battle of San Jacinto, and a version of Colonel James Fannin's execution at Goliad. Additionally, one of the best descriptions of the Battle of the Alamo comes from Peña's narrative. On one page, about halfway into the memoir portion of the document, Peña reports Crockett's capture and execution. The fact that Peña's version of events is mirrored in contemporaneous news reports (such as an account in the *New Orleans Post-Union* published three weeks after the battle) has not made the passage any less disputed. Contemporary accounts also reported that all involved in the battle were dead at the end of the battle. Below (and in figure 1) is the pertinent text, from folio 35 verso as translated by Carmen Perry, the former director of the Daughters of the Republic of Texas Library at the Alamo:

Some seven men had survived the general carnage and, under the protection of General Castrillón, they were brought before Santa Anna. Among them was one of great stature, well proportioned, with regular features, in whose face there was the imprint of adversity, but in whom one also noticed a degree of resignation and nobility that did him honor. He was the naturalist David Crockett, well known in North America for his unusual adventures, who had undertaken to explore the country and who, finding himself in

Bejar at the very moment of surprise, had taken refuge in the Alamo, fearing that his status as a foreigner might not be respected. Santa Anna answered Castrillón's intervention in Crockett's behalf with a gesture of indignation and, addressing himself to the sappers, the troops closest to him, ordered his execution. . . . Though tortured before they were killed, these unfortunates died without complaining and without humiliating themselves before their torturers.

The first known translation of the Peña narrative, *La Rebelión de la Texas*, was published in 1955 in Mexico City by Jesús Sánchez Garza, a coin collector and dealer. Published only in Spanish, *La Rebelión* did not garner much attention north of the Rio Grande. In 1961 Walter Lord published his book on the heroes of the Alamo: *A Time to Stand* provides a brief discussion of *La Rebelión*, but Lord offered no opinion one way or another about the Peña narrative. In 1974 Sánchez Garza's widow sold the Peña narrative to John Peace II, a San Antonio lawyer, public official, and Texana collector. The Peace family placed the document on loan at the University of Texas at San Antonio, but removed it in 1998 with the intention to sell it at auction. Following a highly publicized buildup that captured the attention of major national print and television news outlets, as well as attention from international news sources, Butterfield and Butterfield conducted the auction in California on November 18, 1998, and sold the Peña narrative to two Dallas businessmen, who then donated their new acquisition to the University of Texas at Austin's Center for American History, where it joined the largest and most extensive collection of Texana in existence.

When the narrative first arrived at the University of Texas at San Antonio, Carmen Perry translated and edited the narrative. In 1975 Texas A & M University Press published Perry's work as *With Santa Anna in Texas: A Personal Narrative of the Revolution*. For the first time, Peña's version of the Mexican Army's campaign in Texas appeared in English. Peña's reporting of Crockett's death, in particular, ignited a firestorm of controversy. To her great dismay, Perry received hate mail and late-night phone calls.

The controversy played itself out, but left embers simmering. In his 1977 presidential speech before the Texas State Historical Association, Dan Kilgore, a Corpus Christi, Texas, accountant and historian, declared that the Peña narrative was authentic. In 1978 he developed that speech into a book called 'How Did Davy Die?' in which he expanded upon his argument that there was something to Peña's version of the Alamo events. Kilgore found himself the object of vilification and, like Perry, the recipient of hate mail from defenders of the legend. One letter called Kilgore a 'mealy-mouthed intellectual' who deserved to 'have his mouth washed out with soap.' This kind of attention had made Perry uncomfortable, but Kilgore maintained his good humor about the situation. He once said that he would not have minded the attacks if they meant someone had read his book.

More than one writer has pointed out that these books published so soon after Vietnam and Watergate generated emotional reactions. At a time when Communism weighed on the minds of many Americans, these books were seen through that filter as attacks on cherished heroes. And those who were seen as attacking these legends, such as Crockett's, were very often called Communists and accused of being unpatriotic.

The debate centering on the circumstances of Crockett's death continued through the 1980s and 1990s, though not on as public nor as national a stage as Perry and Kilgore had experienced. Three individuals emerged during this period to keep the discussion lively. Thomas Lindley was an independent historian who argued against the authenticity of the narrative. James Crisp, an associate professor of history at North Carolina State University, argued for the document's authenticity and kept the issue in front of the readers of *Southwestern Historical Quarterly*, in particular. William Groneman, a New York City fireman, propelled the debate to a new level.

Groneman claimed in his book, *Defense of a Legend: Crockett and the de la Peña Diary*, published in 1994, that the Peña narrative was a forgery and that the scholarly community had accepted the

document's content as fact without any serious analysis or investigation. He charged that the provenance was speculative at best, since there was no knowledge of its whereabouts prior to 1955. He also questioned an anachronism in the text. According to the published translations of the narrative, Groneman asserted that Peña's manuscript was published in 1836, yet Peña quoted from José Urrea's diary from the Texas campaign that was published in 1838. Later, when Crisp sorted through the pieces of this particular puzzle, he found that Peña had never claimed an 1836 publication date. That date and assertion appeared in Lord's book, *A Time to Stand*. Lord, deep in research in the summer of 1957, hired Carlos Castañeda to translate some Spanish language documents, one of which was Sánchez Garza's *La Rebelión*. (There is no evidence that Lord had access to the original documents then housed in Mexico City in Sánchez Garza's possession.) Lord cited Peña as having published his work originally in 1836. But by going back to Sánchez Garza's translation, Crisp discovered that Sánchez Garza's text did not claim that Peña published his memoir in Matamoros in 1836. Knowing that Lord did not read Spanish, Crisp concluded that Castañeda made the error in translation and that subsequent scholars and writers picked up the 1836 publication date and promulgated it without ever questioning Lord's citation.

In various journals, books, and forums, Peña nonbelievers charged that supporters of the Peña account were revisionist historians, and they were not paying compliments when they made this statement. On the other side, there is a tinge of scorn when the academic scolds the amateur for not adhering to the rigors of historical inquiry. Crisp said of Groneman's scholarship: 'One can only regret that all of these arguments are more revealing of the values and assumptions of an autograph collector than a historian.'

Several months after the narrative arrived at the Center for American History the *Christian Science Monitor* published an article in which the author comments: 'The debate speaks volumes about the powerful hold that the Alamo and Texas culture have

on the imaginations of Americans. It also asks a deeper question: to whom does history belong—the victors or the victims, the academics or the amateurs?’ To me this seems to be a central question, too. It was illustrated perfectly by Thomas Lindley during a conversation in the summer of 2004, when he said, ‘They don’t want to be proven wrong by us.’ In this model, Lindley is in the role of amateur hoping to prove the academics wrong.

Groneman charged that the academic community seemed to have accepted the Peña version of events without ever seriously questioning the document, and that history had been rewritten because of a document that was in his opinion a fake. He stated in *Defense of a Legend* that universities and libraries ‘are not about to spend the time and money subjecting one of their prized possessions to tests, with the danger that it will be proven a phony.’ Specifically, Groneman questioned some physical characteristics of the narrative: loose sheets of paper with numerous watermarks and paper manufacturers, multiple handwritings, and some signs of neglect.

Wanting to address the question of forgery forthrightly, the Center’s director, Dr. Don Carleton, engaged the expertise of David B. Gracy II, director of the Center for the Cultural Record and professor of archival enterprise at the University of Texas at Austin. Dr. Gracy was to investigate not only the document’s physical characteristics, such as paper, ink, and handwriting, but also to comment on whether John Laffin could have been the person who created the document, as Groneman had suggested in 1994. Since no testing of this kind had been conducted, Gracy’s mission was to test extensively and thoroughly. Gracy assembled a team of experts for the research and developed a plan using Groneman’s charges as an outline.

Gracy and colleagues determined that the paper used by Peña was handmade of cotton and linen and displayed no evidence of wood fiber. Furthermore, inspection of the paper with a fluorescent light revealed no traces of twentieth-century paper additives used to brighten paper. Gracy’s team found fourteen different

graphic watermarks and eleven different name watermarks on the paper and compared them to watermarks on Mexican Army broadsides dating from 1832 to 1837 housed at the Center for American History. Most of the forty-four broadsides examined possessed watermarks that matched those in the Peña document's paper. The paper in Peña's document was cut from larger sheets and shows a consistency throughout: the paper patterns, watermarks, and countermarks all line up.

The paper's condition showed obvious evidence of bug infestation and of staining. Groneman alleged that the worm holes could be a signature of forgery. Under microscopic examination, Gracy's team confirmed that the holes were in fact canals formed by mature drugstore beetles. Though forgers often make stains on their creations to give an aged appearance, the stains on Peña's document were not the result of tea or coffee, common aging agents. Gracy's team asserted that water had seeped into the paper at some point and then receded, thereby creating tide lines. Furthermore, the stains penetrated the paper, through eight quartos, in such a way as to suggest some sort of water accident rather than a deliberate attempt to stain (figs. 5 and 6).

While one team worked on paper analysis, another team addressed the narrative's ink. Conservators from the Preservation and Conservation Studies Program took minute ink samples from three different pages, one of which bears the disputed Crockett passage. Initial tests confirmed that the ink contained iron. A scanning electron microscope detected elements consistent with iron gall ink, and uncovered no evidence of modern ink in the samples.

Gracy and colleagues turned their attention to Peña's handwriting. No one disputes the validity of Peña's signature on the examined documents from national archival repositories in Mexico City. Gracy's team compared Peña's handwriting in these documents, four in all, with Peña's handwriting in the narrative's pre-amble. They found all signatures to be consistent throughout the examined documents. They then compared the handwriting to that which is in the Crockett page. Again, close comparison re-

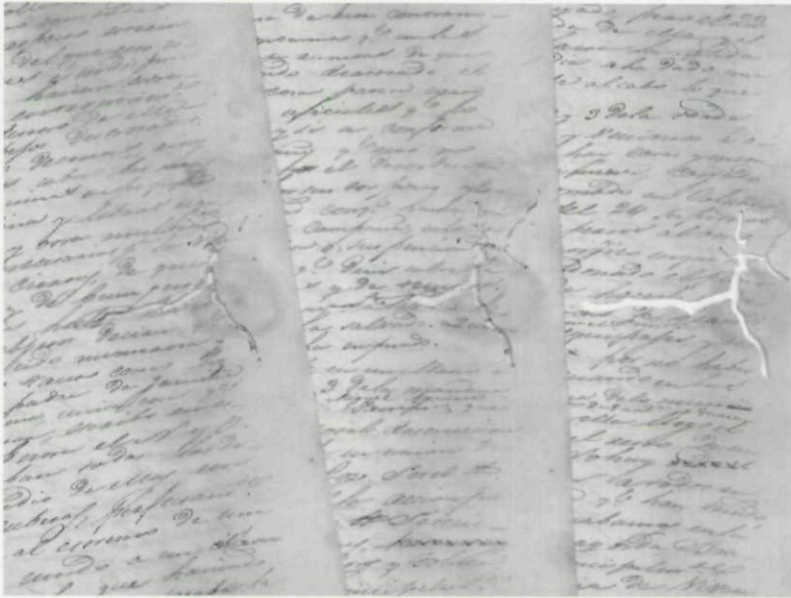


Fig. 5. Scientific analysis confirmed that these holes were the work of mature drugstore beetles and not the efforts of a forgery expert.

vealed the handwriting on the Crockett page to be consistent with the handwriting samples examined.

Continuing the handwriting analysis portion of the testing, Gracy examined and compared a letter ostensibly written by Alamo defender John Millsaps, but ultimately revealed to have been created by forger John Laffin, the man Groneman believed might have written the Peña narrative. The Millsaps document, housed at the University of Houston, appeared out of nowhere in 1964, nine years after Sánchez Garza's translation was published in Mexico. If Laffin forged the Peña narrative, he would have done so prior to 1955, before he created the Millsaps document. Gracy pointed out that the craftsmanship on the Peña document surpasses that of the Millsaps letter. He reasoned that if Laffin had forged both documents, the Millsaps letter would be of equal or better quality considering Laffin would have developed his

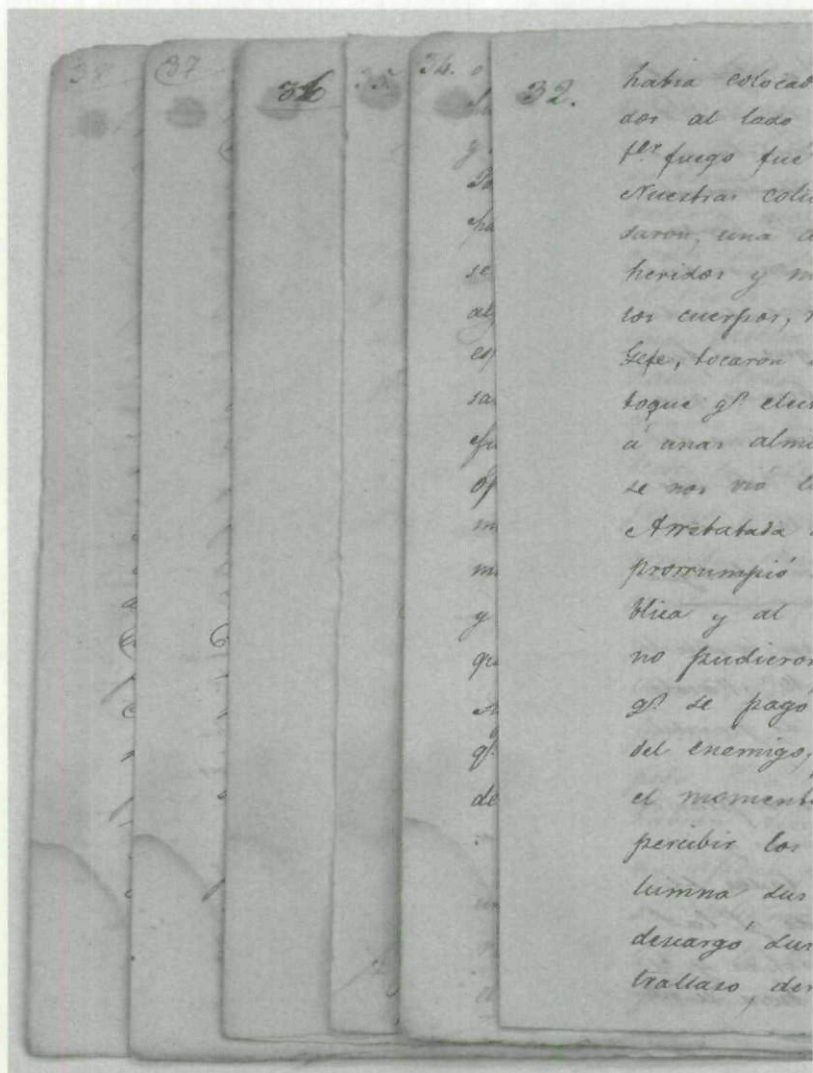


Fig. 6. At some point, a water accident caused tide lines, visible at lower left, which penetrated the paper through eight quartos, the middle of which contains the Crockett passage.

craft over the decade separating the appearances of the Peña narrative and the Millsaps letter.

Gracy published the results of his investigation in the October 2001 issue of the *Southwestern Historical Quarterly*. The results, he reported, indicate that the narrative and its account of the Texas campaign, including the Crockett passage, is the product of José Enrique de la Peña and was written after the fall of the Alamo in 1836.

A Canadian forensics document examiner provided independent verification of the handwriting analysis portion of Dr. Gracy's testing. Hired by a company producing 'The Alamo,' an episode of the Discovery Channel series *Unsolved History* that aired on November 13, 2002, Brian Lindbloom examined the document, paying close attention to the Crockett page. Lindbloom looked for signs of natural handwriting, evidence that the ink was applied in a smooth natural fashion, the characteristics of the initial and terminal strokes, and changes in pen pressure. Lindbloom announced that the Crockett page was written in a natural style and that the page showed no evidence of hesitation, tremors, or blunt starts and finishes, all of which are characteristic of forgeries.

In 2003 Thomas Lindley published his book *Alamo Traces: New Evidence, New Conclusions*. In his discussion of the Peña narrative, Lindley restated the arguments that he and William Groneman articulated in the mid-90s: that the manuscript has too many graphic and name watermarks and too many different kinds of paper; that Peña did not write the memoir portion of the manuscript; that anachronisms can be found in the text; and that the provenance is questionable. In short, Lindley, who still maintains it is a forgery, told me in the summer of 2004 that his investigation continues and that what he is investigating now will, as he says, 'blow this thing out of the water.' He is concentrating on errors he says that he has discovered in other parts of the memoir. I am sure that we will be hearing more from him on this.

And now there is another movie. The director of *The Alamo*, John Lee Hancock, says the film tried to embrace both the myth

and the knowledge that historians have brought to the Alamo story and to bring to the screen the two Alamos, as Paul Hutton calls it. Since the movie was released in April 2004, the debate over Crockett's death has come up again in interesting places. The Freedom Alliance, an organization started by Oliver North, offered a press release on April 2, 2004, in which B. Forrest Clayton, the group's visiting fellow and a former history teacher, declared that the 'movie reads more like a Disney fairy tale and promotes a politically correct revisionist agenda aimed at destroying a traditional American hero.' The release goes on to say that the film shows Davy captured and executed even though 'historical evidence shows that he was killed fighting, in the thick of combat, during battle.' Clayton does not cite his evidence for this statement. In summary, he declares: 'Heroes, such as Davy Crockett, must be vigorously defended by all patriotic Americans in the culture war. They represent Western culture. To sit back and allow them to be desecrated is an injustice to American students and a recipe for disaster for the future of the country.'

On April 5, 2004, North Carolina State University released a statement in which Crisp commented on *The Alamo* and once again restated his conviction that 'the preponderance of evidence leads him to believe that Crockett was taken captive and executed. People expecting to see Crockett die fighting like Fess Parker and John Wayne are going to be shocked and disappointed.' Crisp mentioned several eyewitness accounts as the evidence for his assertions, chief among them the Peña memoir.

Now Crisp has released a new book, *Sleuthing the Alamo: Davy Crockett's Last Stand and Other Mysteries of the Texas Revolution*, in which he reviews his study of the Texas Revolution and in particular the battle over the Peña manuscript.

Most historical documents never receive one moment of attention outside of an archives reading room. The narrative of José Enrique de la Peña is a notable exception. It has risen from obscurity to become a treasure within the holdings of the Center for

American History. While spurring debate on the Crockett issue, the narrative quietly adds an extraordinary eyewitness account to the body of Texas Revolution resources. It has been the inspiration for a symposium, the focus of two documentaries (Brian Huberman's *Davy Crockett and the de la Peña Diary* and an episode of the Discovery Channel's *Unsolved History*), the focus of an exhibit, and the subject of many, many articles and books.

I would like to close with a reflection on this observation by Paul Hutton: 'This controversy would seem ridiculously unimportant if so many people did not get regularly exercised over it.' Has the issue been settled? No, people are still flexing their muscles over this one. Despite strong evidence to the contrary, some feel as strongly as ever that Davy Crockett did not surrender at the Alamo. And some still believe, despite strong evidence to the contrary, that the Peña narrative is not authentic. These believers have convictions not easily swayed by science or historical evidence. Perhaps then the controversy is destined to become as legendary as the exploits of Davy Crockett himself.

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