

# Basic US History

## Unit 5 – The Civil War

### The Mexican-American War

**Directions: Read this handout and then answer the questions that follow.**

#### **Texas**

From the 1500s to the 1800s, Mexico controlled the land that is now Texas. In the 1802s, the non-Native American population of Texas was about 3,000 and most of these people were **Tejanos** (tay • HAH • nohs), or Mexicans who claimed Texas as their home. Wishing to increase settlement, Mexico offered land to people who would agree to bring families to settle there - and become citizens of Mexico. Stephen Austin brought 300 American families to settle in Texas and his success made him a leader among the American settlers.

Mexico encouraged Americans to settle in Texas and before long, Americans greatly outnumbered Tejanos. Tensions with Mexico developed when Americans refused to follow Mexico's rules, which included learning Spanish and becoming Catholic. Many Americans also had enslaved African Americans, which Mexico threatened to outlaw. In 1830 Mexico issued a **decree**, or official order, closing its borders to further immigration. American settlers, led by Austin and Sam Houston, tried to make peace with Mexican leaders but these efforts failed. Texans - including Americans and Tejanos - began planning to break away from Mexico.

In 1835 the conflict grew violent. Mexican General Antonio López de Santa Anna took an army into Texas to punish the rebels. In December of that year, the Texans captured the city of San Antonio from a larger Mexican force. Santa Anna was enraged. His army reached San Antonio in late February 1836 where it found a small Texan force **barricaded**, or blocked off, inside a mission called the Alamo.

#### **The Alamo**

Although the Texans only had about 180 soldiers to take on Santa Anna's army of several thousand, they had brave leaders including folk hero Davy Crockett, commander William B. Travis, and a tough Texan named Jim Bowie. For 13 long days, through several attacks, the defenders of the Alamo kept Santa Anna's army at bay with rifle fire. On March 6, 1836, Mexican cannon fire smashed the Alamo's walls and the Mexican army proved to be too large to hold back. They entered the fortress, killing all the defenders, including Travis, Crockett, Bowie, and a number of Tejanos. Only a few women and children and some servants survived to tell of the battle.

The Alamo defenders had been defeated, but they had bought the Texans time to gather troops and supplies. They had also provided the Texans with a rallying cry: "Remember the Alamo!"

#### **Texas Declares Its Independence**

During the siege at the Alamo, Texan leaders unhappy with Mexican rule held a meeting. On March 2, 1836 - four days before the fall of the Alamo - they declared independence from Mexico and established the Republic of Texas.

Texan leaders set up a temporary government that named Sam Houston commander in chief of the Texan forces. Houston gathered an army of about 900 at San Jacinto (san juh • SIHN • toh), near the site of present-day Houston. Santa Anna camped nearby with an army of more than 1,300. On April 21, the Texans launched a surprise attack, shouting, "Remember the Alamo!" They killed more than 600 soldiers and captured about 700 more - including Santa Anna. On May 14, 1836, Santa Anna signed a treaty that recognized the independence of Texas.

#### **The Lone Star Republic**

In September 1836, Texans elected Sam Houston as their president. Houston sent a delegation to Washington, D.C., to ask the United States to **annex**, or take control of, Texas. Andrew Jackson, however, refused their request. The addition of another slave state would upset the balance of slave and free states in Congress. For the moment, Texas would remain an independent country.

### **Texas Becomes a State**

Many Texans wanted to join the United States. Southerners favored Texas annexation, but Northerners opposed admitting another slave state to the Union. President Martin Van Buren did not want to inflame the slavery issue or risk war with Mexico. He put off the question of annexing Texas. John Tyler, who became president in 1841, supported Texas annexation. The Senate remained divided over the slavery issue and failed to ratify the annexation treaty.

The situation changed with the 1844 presidential campaign. The South wanted Texas while the North favored gaining all of Oregon. Candidate James K. Polk supported both actions. After Polk won, Congress passed a resolution to annex Texas and in 1845 Texas joined the Union.

### **The New Mexico Territory**

In the early 1800s, the land called New Mexico was a vast region between the Texas and California territories. It included all of the land that is now the states of New Mexico, Arizona, Nevada, and Utah and parts of Colorado and Wyoming. Native Americans had lived in the area for thousands of years and Spanish conquistadors had arrived in the late 1500s, making the region part of Spain's American colonies. In 1610 the Spanish founded the settlement of Santa Fe and Spanish missionaries moved into the area.

Before Mexican independence in 1821 the Spanish had tried to keep Americans away from Santa Fe. They feared that Americans would want to take over the area. The new Mexican government, however, welcomed American traders. Mexico hoped trade would boost the economy.

Other American settlers soon followed. The Santa Fe Trail became a busy trade route. It started near Independence, Missouri, which was then on the western edge of the United States. It crossed the prairies to the Arkansas River. It followed the river west toward the Rocky Mountains before turning south. The trail was mostly flat, and people used wagons to transport his goods. As trade with New Mexico increased, the number of Americans settling in the area increased dramatically. Some began to believe that acquiring New Mexico should be part of America.

### **Conflict Begins**

President James K. Polk was determined to get the California and New Mexico territories from Mexico. After Mexico refused to sell the lands, Polk planned to gain them through war. To justify a war, Polk hoped to get Mexico to strike first.

Relations between the two countries were not friendly. The two nations disagreed about where the Texas-Mexico border was. The United States said that the Rio Grande formed the border. Mexico claimed that the border lay along the Nueces (nu • AY • sehs) River, 150 miles farther north.

Polk sent John Slidell, to Mexico to offer \$30 million for California and New Mexico. The United States would also pay what Mexico owed to American citizens. Mexican leaders refused to discuss the offer. They announced that they intended to reclaim Texas for Mexico.

Polk ordered General Zachary Taylor to lead U.S. forces into the disputed area on the Rio Grande, which Mexican leaders saw an invasion of their country. On April 25, 1846, Mexican troops attacked Taylor's forces. President Polk told Congress that Mexico had "invaded our territory and shed American blood upon the American soil." On May 13, Congress passed a declaration of war against Mexico.

### **A War Plan**

Polk planned to defeat Mexico by accomplishing three goals. First, the United States would drive Mexican forces out of Texas. Second, it would seize New Mexico and California. Finally, American forces would advance into Mexico and capture the capital, Mexico City.

By 1847, Zachary Taylor had accomplished the first goal. His army had captured all the important towns in the border area between Mexico and Texas. General Stephen Kearney made progress toward the second goal by marching his troops down the Santa Fe Trail. They captured New Mexico's capital, Santa Fe, in 1846 after the Mexican governor fled. Kearney then turned toward California.

## California Uprising

Even before war with Mexico officially began, American settlers in northern California had begun an uprising. They were encouraged by American general John C. Frémont. The settlers had little trouble overcoming the weak official Mexican presence in the territory. On June 14, 1846, the Americans declared California independent. They renamed it the Bear Flag Republic. The name came from the flag the rebels had made for their new nation.

The Bear Flag Republic did not exist for long. Within a month, American warships arrived at the ports of San Francisco and San Diego to claim the republic for the United States.

Mexico still refused to surrender, even though it had lost New Mexico, California, and Texas. President Polk sent General Winfield Scott and his troops to attack Mexico City. They landed in the port of Veracruz and captured it after three weeks of fighting. They still needed to travel 300 miles (483 km) to Mexico City, fighting Mexican troops along the way.

Finally, in September 1847, six months after Scott's forces landed in Veracruz, they captured Mexico's capital. Polk's plan for the war had succeeded.

## Peace Terms

Defeated on February 2, 1848, Mexico's leaders signed the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo (GWAH • duh • loop he • DAHL • goh). Mexico gave the United States more than 500,000 square miles (1,295,000 sq. km) of territory—what are now the states of California, Nevada, and Utah, as well as most of Arizona and New Mexico and parts of Colorado and Wyoming. Mexico accepted the Rio Grande as its border with Texas. In return, the United States paid Mexico \$15 million and assumed \$3.25 million in debts Mexico owed American citizens.

With Oregon and the former Mexican territories under the American flag, the dream of Manifest Destiny had been realized. The question of whether the new lands should allow slavery, however, would lead the country toward another bloody conflict.

**Finish each of the following statements with the correct answer and underline the section of the text where you found your answer. Be sure to make an annotation in the margins.**

Before becoming part of the United States, Texas belonged to \_\_\_\_\_.

Texas called itself “\_\_\_\_\_” when it won its independence.

The battle cry “\_\_\_\_\_” came from a battle in Texas where all the Tejano defenders were killed by the Mexican Army.

After the Battle of \_\_\_\_\_ Mexican leader Santa Anna was forced to recognize Texas independence.

In September 1836, Texans elected \_\_\_\_\_ as the president of the Lone Star Republic.

**Use several complete sentences to answer each of the following questions. Underline the section of the text where you found your answer and be sure to make an annotation in the margins.**

Why did it take such a long time for the United States to annex Texas? \_\_\_\_\_

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Why did war break out between the United States and Mexico? \_\_\_\_\_

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What did America gain from the Mexican War? \_\_\_\_\_

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