

The Alamo: Documenting Courage High School -- American History lesson

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Objectives: Three learning objectives converge in this lesson. Students learn about the historical events that took place at the Alamo and consider their impact on American History. They also learn about the importance of primary source documents in historical research. Finally, the students are provided with an opportunity to examine and internalize the virtue of courage. The lesson is based on the Internalizing Virtue Framework.

Historical Background Information -- The following information was reprinted with the permission of the Daughters of the Republic of Texas. Access their website for additional resource materials at <http://www.thealamo.org>

Originally named Misió n San Antonio de Valero, the Alamo served as home to missionaries and their Indian converts for nearly seventy years. Construction began on the present site in 1724. In 1793, Spanish officials secularized San Antonio's five missions and distributed their lands to the remaining Indian residents. These men and women continued to farm the fields —once the mission's but now their own — and participated in the growing community of San Antonio.

In the early 1800s, the Spanish military stationed a cavalry unit at the former mission. The soldiers referred to the old mission as the Alamo (the Spanish word for "cottonwood") in honor of their hometown Alamo de Parras, Coahuila. The post's commander established the first recorded hospital in Texas in the Long Barrack. The Alamo was home to both Revolutionaries and Royalists during Mexico's ten-year struggle for independence. The military —Spanish, Rebel, and then Mexican — continued to occupy the Alamo until the Texas Revolution.

San Antonio and the Alamo played a critical role in the Texas Revolution. In December 1835, Ben Milam led Texian and Tejano volunteers against Mexican troops quartered in the city. After five days of house-to-house fighting, they forced General Marín Perfecto de Cós and his soldiers to surrender. The victorious volunteers then occupied the Alamo —already fortified prior to the battle by Cós' men —and strengthened its defenses.

On February 23, 1836, the arrival of General Antonio López de Santa Anna's army outside San Antonio nearly caught them by surprise. Undaunted, the Texians and Tejanos prepared to defend the Alamo together. The defenders held out for 13 days against Santa Anna's army. William B. Travis, the commander of the Alamo sent forth couriers carrying pleas for help to communities in Texas. On the eighth day of the siege, a band of 32 volunteers from Gonzales arrived, bringing the number of defenders to nearly two hundred. Legend holds that with the possibility of

additional help fading, Colonel Travis drew a line on the ground and asked any man willing to stay and fight to step over —all except one did. As the defenders saw it, the Alamo was the key to the defense of Texas, and they were ready to give their lives rather than surrender their position to General Santa Anna. Among the Alamo's garrison were Jim Bowie, renowned knife fighter, and David Crockett, famed frontiersman and former congressman from Tennessee.

"I am determined to sustain myself as long as possible and die like a soldier who never forgets what is due to his own honor and that of his country —VICTORY OR DEATH."

Lieutenant Colonel William Barret Travis
February 24, 1836

The final assault came before daybreak on the morning of March 6, 1836, as columns of Mexican soldiers emerged from the predawn darkness and headed for the Alamo's walls. Cannon and small arms fire from inside the Alamo beat back several attacks. Regrouping, the Mexicans scaled the walls and rushed into the compound. Once inside, they turned captured cannon on the Long Barrack and church, blasting open the barricaded doors. The desperate struggle continued until the defenders were overwhelmed. By sunrise, the battle had ended and Santa Anna entered the Alamo compound to survey the scene of his victory.

"It could well be said: With another such victory, we will all go to the devil."
Carlos Sanchez-Navarro, Mexican Officer
March 6, 1836

While the facts surrounding the siege of the Alamo continue to be debated, there is no doubt about what the battle has come to symbolize. People worldwide continue to remember the Alamo as a heroic struggle against overwhelming odds —a place where men made the ultimate sacrifice for freedom. For this reason the Alamo remains hallowed ground and the Shrine of Texas Liberty.

Understanding Courage --

- Share with students the text of William B. Travis' famous letter from the Alamo. Ask the students to consider why this document is widely regarded as an example of courage.
- Present the following definition of courage to the students: The ability to face and endure what is dangerous, difficult, or painful. The habit of overcoming fears by facing them rather than avoiding them.
- Aristotle defines courage as knowing what is to be feared and what is not to be feared. Ask the students to consider whether these definitions illustrate Travis' actions at the Battle for the Alamo.
- Share Franklin Delano Roosevelt's 1936 speech at San Antonio, which

referenced the Alamo, with the class. Ask the students to identify Roosevelt's definition of courage as exemplified through this speech. Do they agree with his definition of courage? Ask the students to define courage?

Find file by searching at <http://www.nara.gov>

Primary Source Documents --

- Distribute copies of the original letter written by Travis. Allow students to spend a few minutes comparing the handwritten original with the typewritten text.
- Discuss with students the value of examining a primary source. Why might relying on verbal information alone be problematic?
- You will find excellent resources for teaching students the importance of primary source documents on the National Archives Digital Classroom website.
- Invite students to look at some of the debates about the Alamo that cannot be resolved due to the lack of primary source information. The Alamo de Parras website contains an archive of the debates that have taken place on their website. See DiscoverySchool.com for a detailed lesson plan for examining these arguments and judging their validity.

Action --

The following activities provide students with an opportunity to examine courage as it is played out in their own lives and the lives of others.

- Identify an event in American history that offers examples of courageous action. Find a brief account of the event (the Internet or an encyclopedia might serve as a source for the account). Attempt to locate a primary source document related to the event. The National Archives Digital Classroom is a good starting point. The NARA Archival Information Locator (NAIL) allows you to search for primary source documents across several national sites. What information about the event is confirmed by the document? Does it appear that there may be "historical myths" surrounding the event? What types of primary source materials might help to prove/disprove popular notions?
- Write a speech (using the FDR speech as a model) that could be delivered at the site of a historical event that has been identified above. In the speech, be sure to reveal how you define courage and how the actions of the participants exemplify this definition. Include evidence of courageous action from primary source documents where possible. (If action activity #1 was also used, the two events might be the same. On the other hand, this activity might be simplified by asking students to write a speech to be given at the Alamo.)
- In the 1936 chronicle of her adventures, *West With the Night*, Beryl Markham, a female African Bush pilot and the first person to fly solo across the Atlantic Ocean from east to west, wrote "If a man [or a woman] has any greatness in him, it comes

to light not in one flamboyant hour, but in the ledger of his daily work." Find someone in the community who embodies this principle. Interview that person and write a profile that illustrates the "greatness in the ledger of his [or her] daily work.

- Consider how high school students might call upon courage and shape history beginning in their schools and neighborhoods. Write an op-ed for your school newspaper that contains a call to action for your peers. Take the lead yourself by setting practical goals.

Reflection --

- For Action Activity 1 -- Why did you choose this event? What definition of courage does this correspond to most closely? Why? Analyze the events chosen by the class collectively (or work in small groups). What do they all have in common? Are they representative of courage as you have defined it?
- For Action Activity 2 -- Many speakers find getting up in front of an audience to give a presentation challenging. Why do you think this is so? In what way does speaking in front a group require courage? Consider Aristotle's definition of courage -- Knowing what is to be feared and what is not to be feared -- and use it to evaluate public speaking. What is to be feared? What is not to be feared? How can we gain control over those aspects that might actually go wrong?
- For Action Activity 3 and 4 -- Beryl Markham's quote, "If a man [or a woman] has any greatness in him, it comes to light not in one flamboyant hour, but in the ledger of his daily work," prompts us to consider the role of courage in everyday life. The Battle for the Alamo and some of the other historical events you have studied required courage in extreme situations. How is everyday courage different? Similar? What are some common situations faced by high school students that require courage?

Lesson Resources --

Daughters of the Republic of Texas -- <http://www.thealamo.org>

NARA Digital Classroom -- http://www.archives.gov/digital_classroom/index.html

NARA Archival Information Locator (NAIL) --

http://www.archives.gov/research_room/nail/search_nail.html

Three Roads to the Alamo: The Lives and Fortunes of David Crockett, James Bowie, and William Barret Travis by William C. Davis, Harper Collins, 1999.

A Time to Stand by Walter Lord, University of Nebraska Press, 1978.

Duel of Eagles: The Mexican and U.S. Fight for the Alamo by Jeff Long, William Morrow & Co., 1990.

Texian Iliad: A Military History of the Texas Revolution, 1835-1836 by Stephen L. Hardin, University of Texas Press, 1996.