

## **Revolutionary War Ancestors of Alamo Hero James Butler Bonham**

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One of the greatest heroes of the Texas Revolution in early 1836 was James Butler Bonham, a soldier who fought and died at the Alamo. Captain Bonham achieved a place in history when, acting as Colonel William B. Travis' messenger, he left the old Spanish mission twice to recruit reinforcements and boldly returned despite tremendous odds—the second time through the lines of the surrounding Mexican army vanguard. The Texans and other Americans, who faced thousands of soldiers from Santa Anna's army, numbered fewer than one hundred and fifty men.

Under a sense of urgency that is unimaginable, Col. Travis dispatched Capt. Bonham on 16 February 1836 to the nearby towns of Goliad and Gonzales with written urgent request to help the undermanned garrison inside the Alamo. At Goliad, Bonham delivered the plea to Colonel James Walker Fannin, stationed at El Presidio La Bahía, on 25 February 1836. After three days of indecision, Fannin ordered 320 men, four cannon and several supply wagons to march toward the Alamo some ninety miles away. But the group, which included Mobile Grays and New Orleans Grays, was ordered to turn back not long after starting out, due to various issues.

Fannin blamed the retreat on his officers; the officers and enlisted men accused Fannin of aborting the mission. Despite his name being enshrined in several places throughout the Lone Star State, including on a busy avenue in downtown Houston, history has come down hard on him and has not completely forgiven him for suspected cowardice.

Meanwhile, in Gonzales, Bonham caught up with Robert M. Williamson, commander of the Texas Ranger Battalion, who enthusiastically supported the cause. However, circumstances prevented him from mustering immediate support. Bonham returned to the Alamo through the Mexican lines on March 3, bearing a letter to Travis from Williamson: "For God's sake hold out until we can assist you!" At the time he penned his reply, Williamson (and, for that matter, Bonham) was unaware that Fannin had already called off the reinforcements from Goliad. When Bonham reported back to Travis, he was under the impression that reinforcements would soon arrive, yet he must also have sensed that certain death awaited them all.

For that reason alone, his actions demonstrated utmost courage and are exemplary of the bravery of the veteran ancestors on both sides of his family. None of them ever failed to respond to the call of duty and honor. As if rising to the occasion, Bonham lived the legacy of his ancestors' spilled blood upon hardened battlefields of earlier times. Three days after his last return to the Mission, the captain succumbed with gallantry and dignity: he was firing a cannon from the rear wall of the Alamo when he was killed.

James Michener, who wrote the epic historical novel *Texas*, said of the men of the Alamo: "I could have been a Jim Bowie if I'd had the stature and the reflexes. I could have been certainly a Travis. But Bonham I could not have been. When I got out of the Alamo the second time, I'd have said, 'to hell with this thing.' I probably would have come back the first time, not the second time. I stand in awe of that man. I would say he's probably my favorite Texan."

### **A Fighting Tradition**

In Texas history books, there appears to be no references to Bonham's ancestors who fought in the American Revolution. Yet that link would help explain the noble blood that compelled him to do what so few others would have done.

Secondary sources indicate Bonham's paternal grandfather, Absalom Bonham, was a Lieutenant of the Fourth Battalion, New Jersey Troops, in 1777 and served to the close of the American Revolution. Even though he was a native of Maryland, he enlisted in a New Jersey regiment and became a Major of the Line on the establishment of that State. After the war, Absalom Bonham was a founding member of the Society of the Cincinnati in the State of New Jersey.

Bonham's father, Private James Bonham, served at Yorktown when he was only fifteen years old. His company's captain was just nineteen years old.

On the other side of the family was his mother, Sophia Smith, who was the daughter of James Smith and Sarah Butler. On the Smith side, Jacob Smith, Jr., a Partisan Ranger in the Revolution, was Bonham's grandfather. His son married Hester Smallwood, whose father was Prior Smallwood (1680-1734). Hester's mother was Elizabeth Stone, the daughter of John Stone, son of William Stone, Governor of Maryland. The Governor's wife, Verlinda (Graves) Stone, was the daughter of Captain Thomas Graves, who arrived with the second company at Jamestown, Virginia, in 1608.

Bonham's grandmother, Hester Smallwood, had a brother named Bayne Smallwood, who was a merchant and large planter in Virginia. In addition, he was the presiding officer of the Court of Common Pleas and a member of the House of Burgesses. His son, General William Smallwood of the Continental Line in the American Revolution, was born in Kent County, Maryland in 1732. At a young age, William was sent to England for his education and finished his studies at Eton College.

In April, 1775, back in America with the rank of Colonel, William was in command of 1,444 men, whom he led to Long Island to fight in the initial phase of the Revolutionary War. Four-hundred of his Maryland Line made six bayonet charges against Lord Cornwallis' brigade, which outnumbered Smallwood's men ten to one. With the sixth charge, the British line was scattered.

Later, in the Battle of Long Island, with a Hessian force in front and a British brigade at the rear, the Maryland Line was credited with saving the Continental Army by breaking through the British ranks. This resulted in a loss of 256 enemy officers and men. Two days later, Smallwood's men covered the withdrawal of General Washington's troops at Fort Putnam, New York. Although they did not fully stand their ground, they attacked and drove the British from their positions.

The Maryland Line under Smallwood's command appears to have been at most of the major battles of the Northern Campaign. They fought at Princeton and Trenton, New Jersey; Staten Island, New York; Brandywine and Germantown, Pennsylvania; Fort Mifflin, New York; Wilmington, Delaware; as well as at Elizabethtown, Monmouth, Scotch Plains and Camden,

New Jersey. For that distinguished service Colonel Smallwood received the recognition of Congress and later was promoted to Major General, the highest rank at that time. In 1785 General Smallwood was elected to Congress and subsequently served three terms as Governor of Maryland.

In addition to the Bonham, Smith and Smallwood traditions, the captain's maternal grandmother's maiden name—Butler—is in its own right distinguished in South Carolinian history.

### **The Butlers**

One Captain James Butler, a great uncle to Bonham, was killed in the American Revolution's infamous Cloud Creek Massacre, which occurred in Saluda County, S.C., in November 1781. The captain's son, young James Butler, also counted among the numerous Patriots' slaughtered dead.

The Patriots in that situation had been promised a dignified surrender, but the surrender was made to a force of Tories led by the notorious "Bloody Bill" Cunningham, who so "hacked the prisoners to pieces by broadswords that it was difficult to recognize them," reads one account.

Before his death, Captain Butler had also served with General Richardson in the Snow Campaign and on the Florida Expedition. Later, as a Captain, he led a company under Colonel Williamson against the Cherokee Indians. He was captured in the fall of Charleston and was imprisoned at Ninety-Six, where he was held aboard a prison ship in Charleston Harbor. After his release, he served in Captain Sterling Turner's militia company.

William Butler, the eldest son of Captain James Butler, served under General Benjamin Lincoln at the Battle of Stono and later served under Count Casimir Pulaski. His military service also included a tour of duty under General Andrew Pickens at Augusta, Georgia, and in South Carolina at the Old Ninety-Six and at Dean Swamp, where on May 24, 1782 he led a force of patriots in a sword charge against a superior force of Loyalists commanded by Maj. William Cunningham, which resulted in a Patriot victory.

In 1781 William attained the rank of Captain of the Mounted Rangers. Ten years later he was elected Sheriff of the Old Ninety-Six, where he received General George Washington. Nine years after their meeting Washington, William Butler was elected to Congress. He served in that body for ten years, retiring in 1810, in favor of John C. Calhoun. During the War of 1812 he acted as Major General of all state forces in South Carolina. His sons also had sterling careers in the War of 1812 as well as in the Mexican War.

Given the proud traditions in both families, it should come as no surprise that James Butler Bonham became involved early on in the fighting for this country's freedoms.

### **An Early Start**

Bonham's trait to take a stand against wrongs began to show in South Carolina as early as 1830, when he was but 23 years old. In that year he horsewhipped a fellow lawyer who had insulted a lady client of his. When a judge cited him for contempt, and Bonham threatened the judge, he was then sentenced to ninety days in jail. Upon his release, he determined that he had had enough of South Carolina.

As a lawyer from South Carolina, Bonham served as an aide to that state's Governor James Hamilton, Jr., during the nullification crisis in 1832, a position that brought him the rank of lieutenant colonel. At the same time he was also Captain of a Charleston artillery company,

which he had trained. This artillery background explains why he was firing cannon from the rear wall of the Alamo when he was killed.

By October 1834, he was practicing law in Montgomery, Alabama, where his childhood friend and cousin, William B. Travis, had also practiced law. But by this time Travis had already moved on to Texas, where he was an attorney and officer in the Texas Army. He wrote to Bonham with the promise of great opportunities to be had in Texas: Bonham accepted the invitation and sealed his fate.

The following year, on 17 October 1835, Bonham led a rally of support for the Texan cause at the Shakespeare Theater in Mobile, Alabama. Three days later he was elected by citizens of Mobile to carry their resolutions of support to Sam Houston. In another two weeks, he organized a volunteer company, the Mobile Grays, for service in Texas.

Before leaving for Texas, Bonham rode by horseback to South Carolina where he saw his mother. With the help of his brother, Milledge Luke Bonham, he outfitted himself for the trip to Texas and acquired the beautiful buckskin mare that later was so well remembered for having spirited her rider past the Mexican Army at the Alamo.

After arriving in Texas, the Mobile Grays were stationed at the Alamo for a short time before the majority of these men were transferred on to Goliad, where they served under Col. Fannin at El Presidio La Bahía. Just days before Bonham's death, he again saw these men when he delivered Travis' plea to Fannin. Knowing of the connection between Bonham and the Mobile Grays may help to explain why some of those men were so willing and insistent to fight at the Alamo, but were overruled. This is the first time to this writer's knowledge that the affinity between Bonham and the Grays stationed at Goliad has been documented.

One reason it did not come out much sooner is that none of them survived to tell the story. Following the thirteen-day siege at the Alamo, which ended in a brutal blaze of combat, a few short weeks later—on Palm Sunday, 27 March 1836—Fannin and nearly three-hundred and fifty men under his command were massacred by the Mexican Army in Goliad.

On the morning of Palm Sunday, the three hundred and fifty were marched out in three detachments then shot, stabbed and clubbed. Only twenty-seven escaped into the brush. That was the end of the Mobile Grays, the New Orleans Grays, the Alabama Red Rovers, the Kentucky Mustangs and all others who had offered themselves to aid in the Texas fight for liberty.

The battles that raged in Texas were inspired by revenge. Because independence-minded Texans initially ousted Mexican forces with an offensive at Gonzales, Santa Anna then charged his army up to the Alamo to seek vengeance. Following the slaughters at the Alamo and at Goliad, Texans responded with tempered retribution, and all forces were coalesced under the leadership of Sam Houston, who led them eastward from the Alamo and Goliad to the vicinity where a great city would one day rise and bear his name.

The next time the two forces met, it was during a sleepy afternoon on a grassy stretch near Buffalo Bayou and the San Jacinto River. After General Houston ordered the burning of the only bridge providing access into the area, the Texans hid amongst trees until ready to take their adversaries by complete surprise. They charged across the meadow, yelling out, "Remember the Alamo, Remember Goliad!" The Battle of San Jacinto ended nearly as quickly as it began: it was a complete rout, with most of the Mexican forces being killed or deserting.

The Battle of San Jacinto Monument contains an inscription, part of which reads:

"Measured by its results, San Jacinto was one of the decisive battles of the world. The freedom of Texas from Mexico won here led to annexation and to the Mexican-American War, resulting in the acquisition by the United States of the states of Texas, New Mexico, Arizona,

Nevada, California, Utah and parts of Colorado, Wyoming, Kansas and Oklahoma. Almost one-third of the present area of the American Nation, nearly a million square miles of territory, changed sovereignty.”

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*Editor's Note: The author is a lineal descendant of Sir George Calvert, first Lord Baltimore, and his son, Leonard Calvert, first Governor of Maryland. His son, William Calvert, Deputy Governor of Maryland, married Elizabeth Stone, daughter of William Stone, Governor of Maryland.*