

A SHORT HISTORY OF SAM HOUSTON

Virginian by birth, a Tennessean in his youth, Sam Houston was a Texan by choice the last 30 years of his life. Born March 2, 1793, to Major and Mrs. Samuel Houston, Sam was one of nine children. Young Sam endured formal education less than a year, staying closeted instead in his father's library reading the classics. After Major Houston's death in 1807, the family moved to a farm in Maryville, Tennessee, but Sam was not content behind the plow. He drifted off with the Cherokees for three years and was adopted as a member of their tribe. When he returned, the self-made scholar had memorized Homer's Iliad.

Houston taught school briefly, then joined Andrew Jackson's Tennessee Regulars and was gravely wounded in 1814 Battle of Horseshoe Bend. After leaving the military he read eighteen months of law in six and by 1828 was a practicing attorney. In rapid succession he was elected state attorney general, congressman, and then governor of Tennessee.

In 1829, Houston married an aristocratic daughter of that state, Eliza Allen, but the union lasted only 3 months. Despondently, the Governor resigned, rejoined his Cherokee friends, and drank to the point of alcoholism. In the summer of 1830, Sam married Tiana Rogers in a Cherokee Indian ceremony. A couple of years later, Sam and Tiana "divided the blanket" and were divorced Cherokee style. Also in 1832, Sam met with President Andrew Jackson, the mentor of his youth, who sent him to Texas as his personal envoy to the Indians.

Once in Texas Sam became a leader in the colonists' efforts to recover their rights guaranteed by the Mexican Constitution of 1824. Their petitions denied, the settlers formed a provisional government and named Houston Commander of the Texian forces in November 1835. Sam signed the Texas Declaration of Independence on March 2, 1836, and led his troops to victory at the Battle of San Jacinto on April 21, 1836. General Houston dictated the terms of peace with Santa Anna and determined the boundaries of Texas. Overwhelmingly elected the first President of the Republic of Texas in 1836, Sam served again as its Chief Executive from 1841-1844. Texas under his tutelage found international recognition, which moved the Republic toward Statehood.

In 1840, Sam Houston married Margaret Lea of Marion, Alabama. In 1847, they bought property in Huntsville, Texas, and shortly thereafter began building the Woodland Home. In this comfortable dogrun, or breezeway, four of his eight children were born. His marriage to Margaret, a devoutly religious woman, gave him the stability of home and family which he had not known since childhood.

With the annexation of Texas late in 1845, Sam Houston was the logical choice for one of the first U.S. Senators, an office he held until 1859. A commanding figure and orator with great personal charm and an experienced man in government, he was considered Presidential timber. Houston was also ambitious, yet in the end he sacrificed for principle all he had ever won or wanted. Two driving goals consumed him: The preservation of the Union and the welfare of Texas.

With one knowing vote-"my most unpopular, wisest and most patriotic," he said, Sam Houston lost support forever from his Democratic Party and his native South. The measure he opposed was the Kansas-Nebraska Bill in 1854, which negated earlier compromises on the issue of slavery and left no room for peaceful resolve. As Sam predicted, passage of this bill led straight to the Civil War. Surprisingly elected governor of Texas in 1859, Houston struggled to keep his state under the Stars and Stripes. However, in March of 1861, Sam Houston was deposed for refusing to take the Confederate oath.

Old and finally beaten, Sam returned to Huntsville to spend his last days. He tried to buy back the Woodland Home but it wasn't for sale. He rented the Steamboat House, a large two-story structure built to resemble a Mississippi riverboat. On July 26, 1863, Sam Houston died in his home of pneumonia.

Today both the original Woodland Home and Houston's log office remain on 18 acres of his homestead. In 1906 students of the Sam Houston Normal Institute, led by teacher Bertha Kirkley, bought the home and grounds and dedicated it as a permanent monument to the father of Texas. In 1936, as part of Texas' centennial celebration, the Steamboat house was moved to the property and a museum building was constructed to exhibit a growing collection of historic artifacts.

To most Americans, Sam Houston and Texas are almost synonymous: Houston led an army of Texans to victory at San Jacinto and thus fathered Texas independence.

"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 War, resulting in the acquisition by the United 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."