



## A Statesman Extraordinaire: Edward Burleson

by Scott Sosebee

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(Oct 17, 2022) Texas' path to a modern superstate was made possible by a number of people who made service to Texas their primary calling. Very few people served Texas in as many capacities as Edward Burleson, an early leader in Stephen F. Austin's colony, a participant in the Texas Revolution, and prominent official during the Republic. As a surveyor, he also laid out the plats of two prominent Central Texas cities, Austin and San Marcos, and other than perhaps Sam Houston—a political opponent that he despised—no man wore as many hats and was part of as many monumental events as Burleson.

Born in North Carolina in 1798 to a Revolutionary War veteran father who was a member of a politically prominent family in Buncombe County, Burleson was perhaps destined for political and military service early in his life. His father moved the family to Alabama when it became an organized territory, and during the War of 1812 the elder Burleson organized a company to fight against the Creek Indians, who had allied with the British to counter loss of land to whites in the South. Edward joined his father's company when he was but sixteen, and his experience in that war earned him the nickname of the "Old Indian Fighter."

When that war ended, like so many men of his era, Edward Burleson moved west to Madison County, Missouri Territory in late 1815, where married the former Sarah Owen in April 1816. He stayed in Missouri for a few years and then moved to Tennessee, where became a surveyor. He also continued his military career, serving in the militia in both places. The restless Burleson made another move in 1830, one that would prove to be his last. He and his family came to Texas in May of that year and settled in Stephen F. Austin's colony near San Felipe de Austin. He rose to prominence in the colony, becoming a member of the ayuntamiento in 1832, and the lieutenant colonel and second-in-command of the local militia in early 1833.

Texas had begun to move toward overt rebellion against Mexico by 1835, and Burleson once again provided service. He volunteered for the army and became a lieutenant colonel of infantry under Stephen F. Austin during the siege of Bexar. After Texas' provisional government sent Austin to Washington D.C. in early November 1835, Burleson replaced Austin as the General of the forces gathered outside San Antonio's gates, and the new Texas government officially appointed him commander of the Bexar Volunteers on December 1, 1835. Although Ben Milam made the call to enter San Antonio during the Battle of Bexar after Burleson had ordered an abandonment of the field, it was Burleson commanded the victorious Texian forces, and he received the surrender of Mexican General Martin Perfecto Cos.

The volunteer army dispersed after victory at Bexar as many soldiers believed the insurrection to be over. Burleson knew better, and he rode to Gonzales to raise another army in February 1836. He would lead those forces against Santa Anna at the Battle of San Jacinto. Burleson's troops charged the front Mexican breastworks and became one of the first units to overrun the Mexican camp. It was also at San Jacinto that Burleson developed his disdain for Sam Houston as he loudly criticized the Texas commander's tactics and commitment to the Texian cause.

After the war and during the earliest years of the Texas Republic, Burleson became a man of the frontier. He served as a colonel of the rangers in 1837, and also used his talents as a surveyor to lay out the roads to Bastrop, La Grange, and other central Texas frontier cities of the era. He entered the Texas Congress in late 1837 and would serve through May 1838, when he left to become a colonel in the Texas Army. In that capacity he led the forces who defeated the troops under Vincente Cordova of Nacogdoches in what became known as the Cordova Rebellion. He took time out from military duties to next perform what perhaps may be his most lasting legacy, to lay out the plans for the city of Waterloo, which would become the capital of Texas in 1839 and change its name to Austin. He returned to East Texas to command the Frontier Regiment in May 1839 and lead the Texan forces that defeated the Cherokee and expelled them from East Texas.

He reentered politics in 1841 to serve in the administration of his enemy Sam Houston. The Texas constitution had a curious electoral arrangement in that the president and vice-president ran for office in separate elections. So, while Texas' voters returned Houston to the president's office, it also elected Burleson vice-president. Because he so hated Houston he largely left his vice-presidential duties vacant, and spent most of his time on military affairs, twice becoming commander (although he left the actual duties to Alexander Somervell) of Texas forces charged with repelling Mexican re-invasions. When Houston's term ended, he ran for president against Anson Jones, but lost a close contest.

Burleson spent the later years of his life like he did much of his earlier ones—speculating in land, surveying, and serving in the military. During the Mexican War he became a major of volunteers and did most of his duty as a reconnaissance officer charged with gathering advance intelligence. After the war, he surveyed and laid out the city of San Marcos, and was instrumental in the organization of Hays County. Though still a relatively young man of 55, Burleson caught pneumonia in December of 1851 after exposure during a brutal winter storm. Pneumonia did what numerous weapons, arrows, and bullets could never do and killed the man who served Texas as a politician, town organizer, and soldier for the first years of its existence.

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