

The Life and Accomplishments of James Bowie

by Brandon Oto

It is certain that the early 1800s were a time of great change and upheaval within America, yet among all of its tumultuous events and legendary men, there are few names as notorious to the period as that of James Bowie. However, his notoriety is matched only by the fog of confusion surrounding his life and deeds, and indeed it has become virtually impossible, in the current age, to sift out what he *may have done* from what he certainly did – and what he may have done is far more responsible for his fame than the known facts of his life. Yet both the legend and the man are worth one's attention, the first because, as any legend will, they betray the mood of the people and times, and the second because even stripped of false glory, Bowie was a man of rare character and rarer actions.

The difficulties in piecing together the facts of Bowie's life stem from a simple lack of data. Though his name and the general information surrounding his existence have been passed down, there were in the course of his life and the times immediately following it few records that gave mention of the man, and those which existed tended to be government documents, troop manifests, or dry firsthand accounts which said little. While the basic structure of his life can be recreated with some reliability, many of the events for which he is most famous lack any background except myth and questionable human reports. Perhaps the best chance for historians to recoup some semblance of factuality was lost years ago when two trunks of family papers and records (though Bowie was hardly known to be a frequent correspondent) were destroyed due to careless handling (Davis, William 4). What is left remains to be a few seeds of probable truth surrounded by a vast shroud of legend, especially where his best-known stories are told – those of the Alamo, the Bowie knife and its duels, and his associations with David Crockett and William Barret Travis.

Consequently, any attempt to catalogue the history of Bowie's life must either be fraught with myth and outright falsehoods, mined with “may not have happened” disclaimers, or simply sparse. A combination of the last two are used here.

EARLY LIFE

James Bowie was born of Rezin and Elve Ap-Catesby Jones Bowie in the spring of 1786. Rezin had been hospitalized in the Revolution by a British saber cut, meeting Elve there (where she worked as a volunteer nurse) and marrying her in 1781;

when the war ended, he was granted a tract of 287.5 acres in Washington County for his service, where they settled (Davis 36). By 1787, with Rezin's ambitions expanding, they trekked into the land which would soon become Tennessee, near the Kentucky border. He purchased several hundred acres and they settled again, by now with a son (John) and a daughter (Sarah), to which they soon added two more daughters, Mary and Martha, and a son, Rezin Pleasant. More land was acquired, but soon sold, and the entire growing family moved north across the Kentucky border into Logan County. There they settled 200 acres on Terrapin Creek, where they flourished, and in 1786, James Bowie was born.

They prospered at Terrapin Creek, quickly acquiring a small herd of cattle, a strong string of horses, and a moderate slave holding; a mill was built on the creek, and a wagon path, and another 200 acres eventually purchased. Logan County continued to expand as well, encouraging Rezin, who loved the frontier and disliked living in well-populated areas, to cast his attention toward the new land becoming available in the Louisiana Territory west of the Mississippi, recently opened by the 1795 Treaty of San Lorenzo with Spain. In 1800, he sold the Logan County property, and with his brothers Rhesa, John, and David, and sister Elsie, and headed west. They eventually found themselves on a plot beside the *Marias de Peches* in the New Madrid District of Missouri, almost abandoned, where they built two cabins and began to plant their crops. From the commandant of the district, they received a concession of 380 *arpents*, or around 316 acres. They would live here for two years. (Davis 39)

James by now was four years old, and would be six by the time they left. His time was spent exploring the countryside, acquiring basic literacy from his mother, and learning his identity.

It was not long before their new home was again being hemmed in by new settlers, a victim once again of success, and Rezin, who had always loved being on the road (Davis 40), took the family south to the city of Natchez. Thirty miles west of there was the Bushley Bayou stream, and Rezin applied for another land grant, receiving 800 *arpents* – but had scarcely settled before he moved again, following his brother Rhesa south into the Opelousas Parish (soon renamed St. Landry), and Rezin settled on another bayou in 1809, to stay at last.

James and his older brother Rezin had become close, and spent many hours riding together and hunting, with similar interests and habits. Rezin was notably intelligent, with a

quick and keen mind, and “if James did not share his brother’s intellect, still his was an agile and inventive mind.” (Davis 42) There James learned the ways of the Louisiana land grants (a difficult and sometimes dangerous process) and of slavery, as the Bowie family was still in possession of a number of purchased field hands.

His brother Rezin moved a hundred miles away in the summer of 1812, at the same time as the seeds for a later conflict were being sewn: Louisiana became a state that year, with most Americans believing that its purchase included Texas. Spain, however, maintained that area to be Mexican property, leading to a series of attempts by Mexican officials to seize back the Texas province. A contingent of “adventurers” was roused, which included Rezin Bowie, and they marched on Nacogdoches, Texas. Commanded by Samuel Kemper, the group of “filibusters” (derived from a word for “pirate”) captured the Texas capital, San Antonio de B exar, in April of 1813. Rezin returned to Louisiana when a large portion of the force was disbanded due to leadership differences, bringing back the first stories of the Texas frontier.

In 1814 the Revolution finally came home, as the British gathered a force to strike New Orleans. Both Rezin and James (now 19) enlisted in January of 1815, marching on New Orleans with General Jackson. It was too late for Rezin and James; Jackson turned back the British attack the same day they enlisted, and literally within days a peace had been declared.

The two Bowie sons stayed in New Orleans for some time, enjoying the new sights and experiences of the big city. By this time, James was fully grown, six feet tall and 180 pounds or more (Davis 47). He had fair skin and sandy blonde hair, pale blue eyes, and most notably, a rough, rambunctious streak, encouraged by youth and pride. With his discharge pay and some help from his father, he soon made the decision to strike out on his own. He was aided by a curious fact of the Louisiana legislature: The state had been lightly settled when it became the property of America, and when it was declared a state, the government recognized all existing land claims under Spanish grants – which still left nearly 90 percent of the state as public domain. While the slow bureaucratic process of surveying the land and offering it for auction progressed, all it took for a squatter to seize hold of any as-yet unclaimed land was for him to walk onto it. Until it was officially surveyed, or until a valid claim owner materialized to demand his land, they could live on it, work on it, and ply its resources, not legally but without

molestation. Consequently, James Bowie's first land was almost certainly squatted, somewhere on the Bayou Boeuf north of Opelousas. He picked a spot and spent several years clearing its timber (the most valuable short-term resource available), making enough money to live on. Within two years, he had saved enough to purchase the land from the rightful owner, which he did in April of 1817; he also bought four slaves from his father in exchange for a \$1,700 note.

Before long, he was expanding his holdings, acquiring adjacent land parcels for their timber, paying some cash but mostly personal notes; it was the beginning of his realization that one could speculate lucratively on land purchases, trusting the yield of the land itself to pay back the purchase cost.

LATE YOUTH

Now twenty-two, Bowie was living as a man but young enough to enjoy it; his "innate love of excitement" led him many places, and the freedom of being on his own and in the world was his greatest pleasure. He hunted and fished and continued to explore the wilderness he had been born to.

No manner of backwoods sport found him reluctant to participate, and he acquired something of a local reputation for daring to the point of recklessness. In the forest he roped deer and wild horses, and occasionally on a bet or a dare even roped and rode alligators. (Davis 49)

He would travel down to Cheyneyville on Bayou Boeuf, several miles away, and trade for goods, learn the news, and frequent the taverns. Rugged as he was, he loved company and the energy of society, and was known for his charm; his unique character and appealing air drew others to him. And though slow to rile, when his temper showed, it flashed with a brimstone fury; "The displays of his anger were terrible, and frequently terminated in some tragic scene," his brother John observed (Davis 50). When enraged, he was not fearless so much as utterly blind to his own safety; this, along with his refusal to abide an insult, was probably responsible for many of the "Jim Bowie tales," both true and invented.

His first taste of war was probably in the ill-fated Natchez expedition that, recollecting Kemper's earlier battles, attempted to penetrate Texas and "liberate" it. It is very likely that, as the expedition passed nearby Bowie's home, he signed on as his brother had once done, and marched with them to Nacogdoches. They declared a government there and proposed to sell Texan land for a dollar an acre. Yet it

was not long before the force, outclassed by the Spanish and Mexican army, expelled them at gunpoint – Bowie, however, was already home, having for one reason or another lost interest in the matter.

Bowie continued to ply himself in new business enterprises, including an extended stint in slave dealing with the notorious Jean Laffite, New Orleans smuggler, ex-privateer, and slaver. At the same time, generally futile attempts continued to be made to wrest Texas back from Spain, never with more than short-term and insignificant successes.

By 1815, Bowie was already showing an interest in land ownership with a new bent – fraud. In 1820, when Congress passed an act authorizing (and requiring) all claimants to Spanish land grants in Louisiana to file evidenced claims by the end of the year, Bowie slipped in among the largely legitimate claims to file dozens of claims under false names, from ten to over sixty *arpents* apiece. It was not a particularly elegant or well-laid scheme, for the claims had a number of glaring telltales and inconsistencies, but the poorly organized administrative process gave him considerable leeway.

Bowie was known now as a courageous and loyal man, polite yet bold, clever if not unnecessarily intelligent, a consistent and excellent friend, scornful of concealment or trickery, and a terrible enemy. His “gloved fist” had matured into a highly quantized binary pattern of behavior. “When unexcited, there was a calm seriousness shadowing his countenance which gave assurance of great will power, unbending firmness of purpose, and unflinching courage. When fired by anger his face bore the semblance of an enraged tiger,” said Caiaphas Ham, a friend and neighbor (Davis 94).

No evidence currently survives of a love life, though given the boisterous social patterns he followed, one almost certainly existed.

For the next several years, Bowie continued to expedite his fraudulent land claims, pushing them through the process which would make them wholly his and, upon their sale, him one of the richest men in the region. And in 1828, astonishingly, though his land deals had been spiraling downhill for sometime and a reek of fraud seemed permanently attached to him, some were suggesting that Bowie be their next candidate for Congress, a suggestion he was not averse to.

It was at this point that Bowie would fight one of the two duels for which reliable evidence can be supplied as to suggest actually took place. Norris Wright, a banker and sheriff who had been an obstruction to Bowie’s land dealings for some

time, tossed the last straw when he was reported to make “statements derogatory to Col. Bowie’s character” in his absence, potentially causing trouble for him on several fronts, including those personal, political, and of course financial. Bowie, bearing only his travelling gear (having just arrived in Alexandria, where Wright lived) and probably carrying nothing more than a folding knife and perhaps a pistol, immediately sought out Wright in Bailey’s Hotel on the riverbank and confronted him. Wright responded by wordlessly aiming a pistol at Bowie, who seized a chair to shield himself; when he raised it to strike Wright, the pistol was fired, striking Bowie in the chest. Ignoring the wound, Bowie leapt upon him and began to beat him with his empty hands, then drew the knife from his pocket and began to open the blade with his teeth. Before he could ready it, though, Wright’s friends interjected themselves, and only by the arrival of several of Bowie’s own friends was he saved, and carried away. The bullet wound was insignificant, though Bowie had lost a tooth when he bit into one of his assailant’s fingers, and he spent several days recuperating and brooding on his revenge. Wright fled the city, and Bowie was left to mull on the fact that, but for his slowness in unclasping his knife, he would have defeated him on the spot. He resolved to acquire and carry a sheath knife, and when he next saw Wright, to kill him.

Aside

THE BOWIE KNIFE

Rezin came to visit Bowie as he lay in bed in the days following the duel, and brought with him a singularly unremarkable gift: A homemade hunting knife, probably fashioned from an old file or rasp on Rezin’s forge and grinding wheel, 1½ inches wide and nine inches long, with a straight cross-piece to separate the handle from the blade. It was wholly utilitarian and probably already worn and blemished by use. Yet this basic implement would begin one of the most fabulous and inaccurate series of legend in all of the many unsubstantiated tales that surrounded Bowie’s life.

Today, a so-called “Bowie knife” usually means one of two things: A very large, fixed blade, furnished with a substantial cross-guard, wide blade, and a single edge, but with an up-swept front which recurves back to a second, concave edge which extends several inches from the tip, to eventually meet an unsharpened straight spine; or a thinner, thrust-oriented tool with a spear point and no recurve. Many combative knife experts consider one or the other to be among the best pos-

sible designs for a fighting knife, due to its size and its equal strengths at cutting (with the large “belly”), hacking (with its heavy mass and wide blade), and thrusting (with the in-line tip and dual-edged front end). However, it is almost certain that the modern Bowie is just that, modern – a posthumous invention, with little or no relation to the original blade.

As said above, the actual knife that Bowie used in his most famous incident (yet to come) and carried for at least part of his life was nothing more than a reforged piece of iron stock, straight on all edges and generally unremarkable. “The improvement in its fabrication, and the state of perfection which it has since acquired from experienced cutlers, was not brought about through my agency,” said Rezin in a letter much after Bowie’s death. That “state of perfection” brought about by “experienced cutlers” may have been a large part of the changes now apparent in the “Bowie knife,” though more have probably been introduced in the course of time. Whatever the case, it was Bowie’s skill and ferocity more than his hardware which brought the blade to such fame.

At the time of Bowie’s life, the most common style of knife both for utility and for defensive purposes was the “Arkansas toothpick,” a long, double-edged and wickedly pointed dagger. But with the notoriety of the Bowie blade came an increasing clamor by the rough men of the frontier for a more functional blade style, and the demand for the Bowie became overwhelming. At least part of this was undoubtedly due to what we would now call hype, but it also seems likely that the Bowie was actually more useful than the Arkansas toothpick: it could cut better, last longer, and apparently, kill more efficaciously. Indeed, its popularity as a dueling weapon brought it great disrepute, to the point where by 1840 many states had banned the sale and possession of the weapon. By and large, these statutes still exist today.

The original weapon was probably used in a manner ranging from classical saber and cutlass methods to an edge-in “mountain man” style (Trahan), but then, as now, the versatility of the design lent itself to a wide variety of implementations.



Modern Bowie



Arkansas toothpick

The legends surrounding the knife continue to grow and thrive unabated. Rumors persist of original design features that included flourishes such as a strip of copper welded to the spine (with the idea that the softer copper would “catch” a parried blade, allowing a counterstrike to be dealt in the moment of hesitation), a phial of mercury or some other fluid contained in the handle (to create a flawless balance which would allow the blade to be thrown), and other claims even more mysterious. Additionally, scarcely a year goes by without another party claiming to have unearthed the “original Bowie knife,” usually accompanied by an auction of astronomical starting bids. But the most likely truth is also the dullest: The first knife was nothing more than a common tool, and its fame was breathed into the form by the man who wielded it.

THE SANDBAR

Bowie soon got his chance. Tensions between two factions in the Rapides area (born from land disputes and the aftereffects of a financial recession) had increased until violence seemed certain; Samuel and Montfort Wells, General Samuel Cuny, and Warren Hall, a friend of Bowie’s, stood on one side, while on the other was Robert Crain, Dr. Thomas Maddox, Alfred Blanchard – and Norris Wright, the object of Bowie’s sworn revenge. The reasons for the feud were deep and obscure, interwoven between the various participants, but were scarcely important and now certainly forgotten; most importantly, it gave Bowie his chance to strike out at Wright and repay his debt. It was arranged for Wells and Maddox to meet and settle the matter with a duel, and both men brought their entourages as well as small arsenals to the meeting, which had become a spectator event.

The duelists made two shots each, missing both times, and bystanders attempted to disengage the matter; but though Maddox and Wells were satisfied, a quick word soon had the accompanying men reaching for their pistols. Crain fired on Bowie, missing, and Bowie reciprocated, also making a narrow miss; Crain drew another pistol (in this age of faulty and inaccurate firearms, it was customary to carry several), firing on Cuny and hitting him in the leg, clipping an artery. Bowie fired again and missed.

Enraged, he drew his new knife and charged the party, now alone; he caught up with them quickly, and bellowing challenges, attacked. Crain bludgeoned him with his empty pistol with such force that the butt was split, and Bowie

thrown into a daze; he managed to throw off Maddox as Wright arrived with his own party, which had been standing aside. Bowie, still faltering, exchanged shots with Wright, both missing; then George McWhorter, one of Cuny's party, fired on Wright and hit him in the side. But the wound did not level him, and Wright's next round hit Bowie full in the chest, penetrating one lung.

With the pure fury he was known for, Bowie flung himself on Wright. Another shot hit him in the thigh, but he ignored it, and both Wright and Blanchard drew sword-canes to attack Bowie, proceeding to stab at him repeatedly. Bowie managed to deflect or confuse most of the blows, making a few cuts of his own, though he was wounded several times. Then Bowie, who had been on the ground, managed to draw himself to a sitting position and seize Wright, driving his knife through his chest, killing him on the spot. Wells's party came to his succor then, firing on Blanchard, and Bowie withdrew his knife to slash him in the side. Then it was over.

Cuny died within minutes and Wright was instantly killed, but Bowie, though he had been shot in the lung and in the thigh, struck heavily on the head, and stabbed seven times, survived to be given medical attention. The incident, where – in essence – Bowie had bested three or more armed men using only a knife, made his name well known and the event legend.

TO THE ALAMO

Bowie never ceased in his bids for land, both legitimate and fraudulent, and mostly centering in southern Louisiana. By 1830, though, a series of investigations and new laws had disrupted or completely demolished the vast majority of his schemes, and he was left with very few assets and a great deal of debt.

It was at this point that he began to think of Texas, and on January 1 of 1830 he left his home and travelled to Nacogdoches with a friend. By February, they had both sworn their allegiance to Mexico. Bowie was now 34.

Heading for San Antonio with another group, Bowie posed as a wealthy businessman, and eventually became a Mexican citizen on the condition that he establish a series of mills in the Coahuila area, which he made some attempt to do, despite his now extraordinarily meager funds.

In April of 1831, Bowie married Ursula de Veramendi, the daughter of the family who had sponsored him.

Bowie had become interested in legends of the "Lost

Mine of Los Almagres,” a local tale of a silver lode said to be near the rim of the Santa Cruz de San Saba Mission ruins. He took an expedition to seek it out, with his brother Rezin (who had arrived earlier) and nine men, but a large party of Native Americans (Tawakoni, Waco, and Caddo) assaulted them near the San Saba ruins. They held them off, taking cover within an oak grove, and stalling their repeated attacks by gunning down the leaders of the surrounding force every time they appeared. They fought for more than ten hours before the attackers withdrew, leaving behind nearly seventy dead and wounded. Bowie’s group was barely able to return to San Antonio, empty-handed, and greeted by friends and family who had thought them to be dead.

Their story brought a pseudo-rank of “colonel” for Bowie and a commission to rouse a larger force and crush the Tawakoni, which he endeavored to do, only to discover that they had largely quitted the area; he returned home after a futile search.

Bowie’s reputation as a leader brought to him later a request to organize a group of three hundred Texans at Nacogdoches, who had arisen and were inciting to overthrow the Mexican forces stationed there. With Bowie’s leadership and gall, he was able to provoke the Mexican force of two hundred to surrender to him, who was in fact leading no more than twenty men. His name grew.

In September of 1833, Ursula de Veramendi died of the cholera that had claimed her her and mother, and perhaps her entire family (Williamson). Bowie was not home at the time.

Bowie had acquired a reputation as a skilled leader and effective “problem-solver,” and continued to be asked to fulfill pivotal positions within the now-steadily-degenerating Texas political landscape.

In September of 1835, prompted by aggressive actions by Santa Anna, Austin roused an army of Texan volunteers, mustering them near San Antonio. Bowie joined them with a group of friends, and was again granted the unofficial title of Colonel; William Barret Travis joined them as well, and General Sam Houston arrived in command of the Texas regular army (Williamson). Skirmishes took place between the Mexicans and the volunteers, with Houston urging them not to attempt an attack with the poorly-trained and weak force. In continuing battles, the Texans succeeded in capturing the city of Bexár. Despite the difficulty in defending Bexár with the small force available to them, the Texans decided to fortify the spot, for an invasion by Santa Anna could potentially

be forestalled at that point – or, with no resistance, blow past and penetrate as deep into Texas as San Felipe in no time at all (Davis 496).

Deep within the center of the city was a compound called the Alamo.

THE FALL OF THE ALAMO

As the Texans fortified Bexár using captured guns and their own labor, word came of a force of 2,000 to 5,000 mustering within several day's travel (Davis 500). It was becoming increasingly clear, too, that in Bexár was the best hope for the Texas revolution to get off the ground; if an invasion could be stalled there, or at least dealt a heavy blow, then the rebels might have a chance for victory deeper behind the border. Bowie begged the regulars to send relief to help hold the position.

At midday of February 24, the Mexican army was sighted from the Alamo belfry. The decision was made by Travis to concentrate all of the defending forces within the Alamo compound, around 150 men.

Bowie was at this point running a high fever.

Attempts at parley failed under the merciless hand of Santa Anna, who was in personal command of the now-encircling army; they had set up in the abandoned outskirts of Bexár and by mid-afternoon had begun a bombardment on the Alamo compound. Dispatches for help by Travis had so far yielded no aid, and the defenders made the commitment to hold the fort at all costs.

By the next day, a hospital had been set up in one of the rooms built into the Alamo wall, and Bowie, who had been unequivocally diagnosed with typhoid, was sent there, now unable to exercise his command and perhaps too stricken to even sign orders. Over the next two days, as the bombardment continued, Bowie's condition steadily worsened; he was now wholly bed-bound and unable to rise, though he was carried out on his cot to greet an arrival of reinforcements from nearby Gonzales. But by March 3, he was delirious and unable to move, and on March 6, when the Mexicans made their final assault, he may not even have been aware of the battle.

Many stories are told about Bowie's last moments, but it is almost certain that he slew no horde of attackers with his knife (now probably no longer at his side), did not make himself known – in fact, he may have been taken for a deserter, hiding under blankets to escape the battle (Davis 560). As

the fort was overrun, Mexican *soldados* entered his chamber as they began to search the compound. Bayonets and bullets killed him in his bed as the battle raged outside.

The death of James Bowie may seem a cruelly ironic counterpoint to a life fraught with danger and daring. But to that man, who had dreamed big from the day of his birth until the moment of his death, it was hardly a ridiculous end; he died in as magnificent a manner befitted his character, and though he died defenseless in bed, it was only the final stroke in an already glorious endeavor. Bowie's deeds were grand no matter how they are told, and his story resonates just as well without the false ring of myth and invention. He was an immense man in all ways, and neither needs now nor needed then the ballast of fabrication to bring him into the ranks of legend.



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COLOPHON

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