



Tales of Texas



NEWSLETTER



January 2025

This issue of Tales of Texas details an influential 1837 visit between John James Audubon and Sam Houston.

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Audubon & Houston

In the spring of 1837, two iconic figures of early American history met in the burgeoning town of Houston, Texas: John James Audubon, the celebrated naturalist and painter, and Sam Houston, the President of the Republic of Texas. Their encounter provides a fascinating glimpse into the crossroads of art, politics, and the untamed natural beauty of Texas during a period of rapid change and nation-building.

Audubon, renowned for his monumental work *The Birds of America*, was on a mission to catalog the wildlife of North America. By 1837, he had turned his attention to the lesser-documented regions of the American frontier, including the newly independent Republic of Texas. Accompanied by his son, John Woodhouse Audubon, the artist-naturalist embarked on an expedition to study and sketch the avian species of this untamed wilderness. Texas, with its vast prairies, thick forests, and abundant rivers, offered Audubon a treasure trove of inspiration.

As Audubon approached Houston, the fledgling capital named after Sam Houston, he was eager not only to document the region's wildlife but also to meet the charismatic leader who had steered Texas to independence just a year earlier.

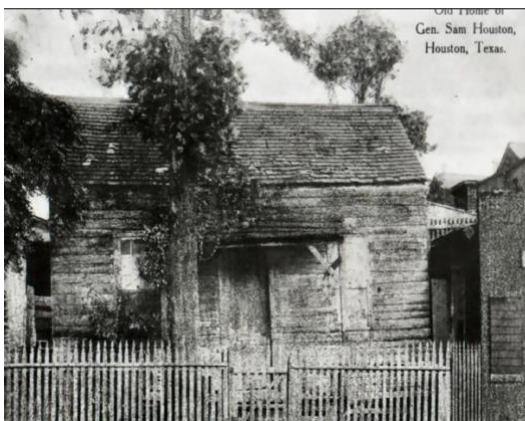
When Audubon arrived in Houston, the town was little more than a muddy settlement of log cabins and bustling activity. Nevertheless, Houston himself welcomed the naturalist warmly, reportedly offering him accommodations and lively conversation.



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J.J. Audubon
Naturalist & Painter



Presidential Mansion
Houston, Texas

The details of their meeting, recorded in Audubon's journals, reveal a rich dialogue between two men of vision. Audubon, ever the keen observer, noted Houston's towering stature, piercing blue eyes, and commanding presence. Houston, in turn, expressed admiration for Audubon's artistic endeavors and his dedication to documenting the natural heritage of the continent.

The two discussed the challenges and opportunities facing the young Republic, including its untamed landscapes, abundant wildlife, and the need to preserve Texas's natural beauty even as settlers poured in. Audubon also observed firsthand the environmental changes brought by settlement and the pressing need for conservation—a theme that would echo through his work.

Their visit was held in the Presidential Mansion in the Capital City of Houston. Audubon, as you can imagine wasn't very impressed with the house.

General Houston took the man to San Jacinto's battlefield. Houston thought the naturalist would like to see the "Surrender Oak" (painting on top of p. 1.) where Santa Anna surrendered his army to Houston. Audubon was eager to go as he knew the battlefield was at the confluence of Buffalo Bayou and the San Jacinto River.

Houston guided them to the oak. He was used to the routine as he expected contributions for political campaigns in exchange for his presidential guide service. Houston was one of those rare politicians that came from nothing and served the public honestly. Unlike today's politicians who become multimillionaires make \$100,000 a year. He actually sold Santa Anna's saddle for campaign funds.

On the battlefield, Audubon found that the mosquitos were bigger than the birds. (Well maybe not, but I know he felt that way!) Audubon's book, *Birds of America*, was illustrated with marvelous paintings of birds. Houston led him to the oak which sat on the bayou's bank.



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The Surrender Oak
Buffalo Bayou



Reenactors at San
Jacinto

Audubon got to visit under the oak, but, sadly, we cannot. The founders of Houston, the Allen Brothers, were early land speculators. In land swapping deals with Juan Seguin and others, they owned a good-sized portion of Galveston Island. Galveston was the largest city in Texas and had the port everyone craved.

As the brothers looked out on the Gulf, they saw a very vulnerable city. Therefore, they decided to take their business farther north. Buffalo Bayou emptied into Galveston Bay, so they wondered if they could build their new city in a less vulnerable place.

Captain Shreve had just invented something called a “snag boat.” He used the power of a steam engine to “snag” stumps and other debris from waterways in order to make a river navigable. This was a game changer. He cleared the Red River from the Mississippi to northern Louisiana and there is a city that bears his name at the location today.

The Allen Brothers saw the same type of thing happening on Buffalo Bayou. The bayou’s name is now the Houston Ship Channel. At the time of Houston and Audubon’s visit, all the action was still on the island. Audubon made notes about the Surrender Tree.

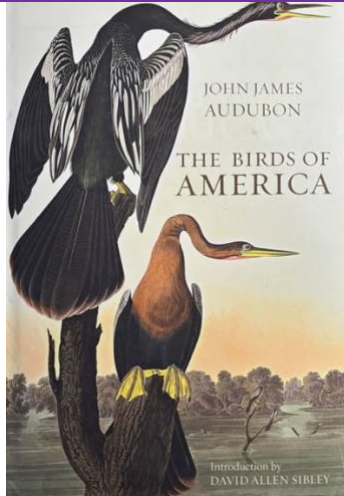
The Allens’ vision proved to be accurate. Galveston was blown away by the 1900 Storm and the steam engine allowed powerful dredging operations on Buffalo Bayou. The channel was made wider and deeper in works that continue to this day.

In 1924, the Surrender Tree and its banks washed away as a result of erosion and dredging. There was a marker near the tree. If you go to the spot today, it is located where the Texan army camp was. If you stand looking at the monument from the deZavala Cemetery and Twin Sisters cannons markers, the old tree would have been at your back on the bank.

In 1837, Audubon notes that the dead soldiers of Santa Anna’s Legion were still on the battlefield. Only one Mexican soldier got a burial, General Manuel Castrillon, who was a personal friend of Vice President de Zavala and was buried in the de Zavala Cemetery.



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Audubon's Book

Audubon collected some skulls from the ground and sent them to a colleague in Chicago for study. That's not as weird as it sounds. Medical students had no bodies to work on. And graveyards were known to have been robbed.

There were hundreds of skeletal remains strewn across the battlefield. At the time of the battle, the Texans were riled up to the point they were uncontrollable at times. He was desperately trying to keep Santa Anna alive as leverage. Houston couldn't bury the bodies, or his men would have gone berserk. Many of them were just learning what happened to their friends' remains after the Alamo and Goliad. They weren't about to allow the soldados to be buried with any kind of honors.



General Manuel
Castrillon
Only *Soldado* Buried

Audubon's journey through Texas resulted in detailed sketches and observations of its bird species, contributing significantly to his later publications. Meanwhile, his interaction with Houston underscored the importance of leaders who valued both development and preservation. Though their paths diverged after this meeting, their legacies intertwined as champions of the American frontier's spirit and its natural treasures.

The 1837 meeting between Audubon and Houston remains a powerful symbol of how art, nature, and leadership can converge to shape a nation's identity. It serves as a reminder of the shared responsibility to appreciate and protect the beauty and biodiversity of the land—a lesson as relevant today as it was nearly two centuries ago.

Capture of
Santa Anna

