

Summary Article: **Houston, Samuel**

From *The Columbia Encyclopedia*

1793–1863, American frontier hero and statesman of Texas, b. near Lexington, Va.

Early Life

He moved (c.1806) with his family to Tennessee and lived much of his youth with the Cherokee, by whom he was adopted. Serving (1814) in the Creek campaign under Andrew Jackson, he was seriously wounded (1814) while fighting bravely at the battle of Horseshoe Bend. He returned to Tennessee, was admitted (1818) to the bar, practiced law in Lebanon, Tenn., and held many state offices.

Tall, vigorous, and dramatic in speech and in action, Houston, like Jackson, captured the popular imagination. He was sent (1823, 1825) to the U.S. Congress as a Democrat. Elected (1827) governor of Tennessee, Houston seemed in 1829 to have a bright political future, with his reelection almost assured and the Democrats strengthening themselves in national politics. Suddenly, however, his wife, Eliza Allen Houston, left him, and he immediately resigned (1829) his governorship. He rejoined the Cherokee in what is now Oklahoma. There he lived with them as government post trader and as adviser, drinking heavily during much of this period.

The Texas Revolution

In 1833 Houston moved on through Arkansas to Texas. He had little to do with the preliminaries of the Texas Revolution, although he watched the struggle closely. He was a member of the convention that set up a provisional government in Texas and of the convention (1836) that declared Texas independent. He was made commander in chief of the revolutionary troops. After the surrender of the Alamo (Mar., 1836), Houston's army persistently retreated before the numerically superior forces of Santa Anna, and there was panic among Texas settlers and much criticism of Houston. He brilliantly redeemed himself at the battle of San Jacinto (Apr. 21, 1836), when by a surprise attack he decisively defeated the Mexicans and captured Santa Anna himself.

In Texas Politics

In 1836 Houston was elected the first president of the new Republic of Texas. The independence of Texas was recognized by the United States and other countries. Replaced (1838) by Mirabeau Lamar, Houston served as president again from 1841 to 1844, but during these years his government was perplexed by financial problems and by border troubles.

Texas was admitted to the Union in 1845, and Houston was one of the first to represent his state in the U.S. Senate. After serving 14 years in the Senate, he was defeated because of his uncompromising Unionism. Challenging his opponents and drawing upon his popularity, Houston was elected (1859) governor of Texas. The aged statesman preached preservation of the U.S. Constitution in the face of secession, but the tide was against him. After the people of Texas voted (Feb., 1861) to secede from the Union, Houston refused to join the Confederacy and was removed (Mar., 1861) from the governorship. He accepted the verdict, refused help from the North to defend his prerogative, and retired.

Bibliography

See Houston's writings (ed. by A. W. Williams; E. C. Barker, 8 vol., 1938-43);

biographies by M. James (1929, repr. 1971), L. Friend (1954, repr. 1969), and M. K. Wisehart (1962).

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