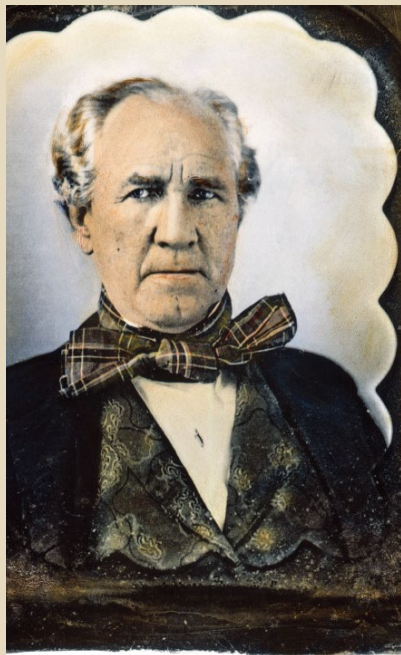




TEXAS Legends

Sam Houston



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By the time he became a Texan and led Texas to independence, Sam Houston had gone through two wives and lots of alcohol and was, in the words of Texas historian James L. Haley, “considered in respectable circles as unsavory as he was colorful.”ⁱ However, no one better reflects the reality that the greatness of Texas’s legends can be found in less-than-perfect people, as Houston guided Texas through some of its most dramatic transitions.

In his youth, Houston generally preferred sneaking away to live among the Indians to working in the family business. Houston distinguished himself during the War of 1812, serving bravely and winning the admiration of General Andrew Jackson. Houston followed Jackson, his new mentor, into politics and was sometimes mentioned as a successor to President Jackson. However, Houston’s first marriage abruptly ended in

1827 in the middle of his term as governor of Tennessee and just two months after his wedding. His marriage over and his political career in ruins, Houston went to live again among the Cherokees. During this time, he took a Cherokee wife without entering into a formal Christian marriage. Over time, Houston’s state of mind deteriorated and his Indian hosts eventually stripped him of his original Indian name (“The Raven”) and began to call him Oo-tse-tee Ar-deetah-skee (“The Big Drunk”).ⁱⁱ After abandoning his second wife and returning to public life in America, Houston narrowly avoided jail after assaulting a member of Congress who had insulted his integrity. Brought before Congress to face charges, Houston delivered an impassioned defense on his own behalf, allegedly because his lawyer, Francis Scott Key, was too hungover to speak.

During the Texas Revolution, gossips frequently attributed Houston’s disappearances to drinking binges rather than military missions. Some questioned his bravery and military leadership during the war. Many Texans wanted Houston to turn and fight the Mexican Army sooner, despite Houston’s protest that his troops were undertrained and outnumbered. While most Texans sided with Houston after his victory at San Jacinto, criticisms of his conduct of the war reappeared in political campaigns for the rest of his career.

After leading Texas through the revolution, Houston continued to play a major role in the changes in the state while serving as Texas’s first president during its years as an independent nation. Houston struggled in the years after the Texas Revolution to protect the Tejanos who had served alongside him during the war. Similarly, his years among the Cherokees and his continued fondness for them left him at odds with many Anglos who preferred to see Native Americans driven off or killed.

After playing a central role in winning Texas’s entry into the United States, Houston’s final political act was the struggle to keep Texas from seceding and joining the Confederacy. Houston disliked slavery and defied state law by freeing his own slaves. He had been one of few southern senators to speak out against slavery, a sentiment that led the Texas Legislature to vote against his return to the Senate. His final departure from politics came when he refused to support the secession of Texas in the American Civil War and, as a result, was forced by the legislature to resign his governorship. If Texans had followed Houston’s leadership, the lives of many Texas soldiers would have been saved and the state spared postwar Reconstruction.

Houston finally settled down after marrying his third wife and finding redemption, but he never denied his faults. When asked if his sins had been washed away at his river baptism, Houston joked, “I hope so. But if they were all washed away, the Lord help the fish down below.”ⁱⁱⁱ

However numerous his sins, Houston’s principles make him a much more heroic historical figure than many of his more sober peers. From the moment Houston arrived in Texas, he became a central figure in the transformation of the state, and for thirty years he guided Texas through its most turbulent times. While Houston might not be able to be elected today, he did more to shape modern Texas than any other person.

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- i. James L. Haley, *Passionate Nation: The Epic History of Texas* (New York: Free Press, 2006), 107.
 - ii. James E. Crisp, *Sleuthing the Alamo: Davy Crockett’s Last Stand and Other Mysteries of the Texas Revolution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 29.
 - iii. Haley, *Passionate Nation*, 277.