



# TEXAS Legends

## James Collinsworth

On December 16, 1836, the Congress of the Republic of Texas chose James T. Collinsworth as the republic's first chief justice of the Supreme Court of Texas. The thirty-year-old Collinworth's rise to prominence in Texas had been remarkable.

In some regards, Collinsworth was eminently qualified. In the earliest days of the Texas Revolution, he organized a company of men that captured La Bahia Presidio in the revolution's first military action against a Mexican military installation. He signed both the Texas Declaration of Independence and the republic's new constitution. After that, Collinsworth took the field and helped to ensure his new nation's freedom by serving alongside Sam Houston at the Battle of San Jacinto.

Collinsworth was well read, boasting a library of 175 books, many on the

subject of law. Before coming to Texas, he spent five years as U.S. district attorney for Tennessee's Western District. In November 1836, he was elected to the Texas Senate, only to resign two weeks later to take his place on the state's Supreme Court.

In June 1838, Collinsworth allowed himself to be nominated for president of Texas. In doing so, he stepped into the highly divisive contest to succeed Sam Houston. On one hand, Collinsworth faced the animosity of Houston's political enemies because he was seen as Houston's chosen successor. On the other hand, Houston's supporters were divided between Collinsworth and Peter Grayson.

On July 11, 1838, Collinsworth drowned in Galveston Bay. While opinions are mixed on whether he fell off his boat accidentally or jumped in a fit of despair, all sources agree

that he had been drinking heavily, with one friend noting, "I was here and had been with him...and he was under the influence of Ardent Spirits for a week before hand."<sup>i</sup> Peter Grayson had committed suicide two days earlier in Tennessee, leaving Mirabeau B. Lamar to win the presidency unopposed.

Collingsworth County (the name was misspelled in the law passed by the legislature establishing the county) was named in James Collinsworth's honor on August 21, 1876.<sup>ii</sup>

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i. James L. Haley, *The Texas Supreme Court: A Narrative History, 1836–1986* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2013), 19.

ii. Joe E. Ericson, "Collinsworth, James," *Handbook of Texas Online*, June 12, 2010, [www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/fc097](http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/fc097) (accessed August 23, 2014). Published by the Texas State Historical Association.