



Texas Navy Association

Historical Article



The Early Texian Navy

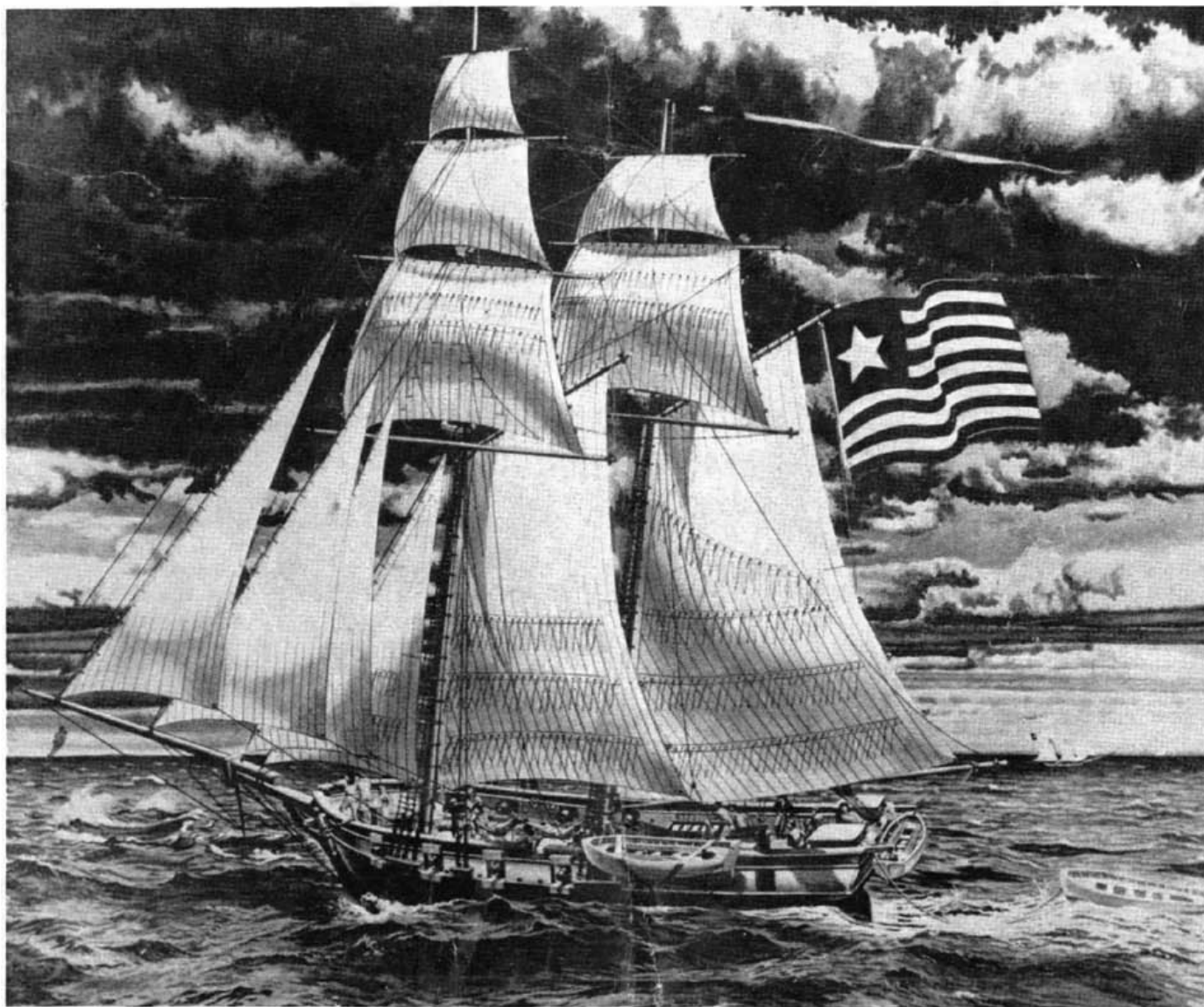
By ADMIRAL S. M. ROBINSON

Member of Battleship Texas Commission

This
Brochure
Fills
a
Gap

(Editor's Note: Admiral Samuel Murray Robinson, now retired, is one of the most distinguished sons Texas has sent to the Navy. He graduated from the U. S. Naval Academy in 1903. During World War II, he held down the vital job of chief of the office of Procurement and Material for the U. S. Navy. Admiral and Mrs. Robinson now live in Houston. Building on the Battleship Texas a fitting memorial to the early Texian Navy is now one of Admiral Robinson's big objectives.)

Navy
Helped
Win
the
War



The Gallant Texas Ship Independence

Your Contribution Is Big Help

The 25 cents you pay for this brochure will help maintain the Battleship Texas, and help to build the museums aboard this gallant ship.

It is a source of great pride to members of the Battleship Texas Commission that more than 1,500,000 have viewed the ship here at hallowed San Jacinto.

The Battleship Texas is maintained solely by admission fees.

— *Lloyd Gregory, Chairman, Battleship Texas Commission*

The initial purpose of this brochure is to fill a gap which our historians have left in the history of our state. This is the part played by our navy, especially prior to and during the Revolution.

It seems to me that it was indeed a wise and appropriate decision on the part of the chairman of the Battleship Texas Commission, Mr. Lloyd Gregory, to make a part of this ship available for a museum dedicated to the Texas Navy. It was especially appropriate because of its proximity to the San Jacinto Battlegrounds, and because it was due to the efforts of this little navy that it was possible to fight the Battle of San Jacinto. This latter fact will be developed as the history is related.

I am sure that every Texan gets a lump in his throat whenever he visits this battleground. It is indeed hallowed soil. Historians generally reckon this as one of the decisive battles of history on account of its tremendous consequences to the United States.

I am sure that the world has no similar example of such a wholly dedicated army as the one that fought this battle, and I am equally sure that its leader, General Houston, will always be acclaimed as one of the greatest men this country has produced.

Now if all this is true, why is it that the part played by our navy in making it possible to fight this battle, has been so neglected by our historians? The answer is that this is the fate of the histories of all navies. Their work is not glamorous; it is a day-to-day job of patrolling, fighting and protecting, and makes for rather dry reading.

When the Texans finally realized that they would have to fight for their lives and liberty, they proceeded to form a provisional government. This was done on November 14, 1835 when Governor Henry Smith and a council took over the

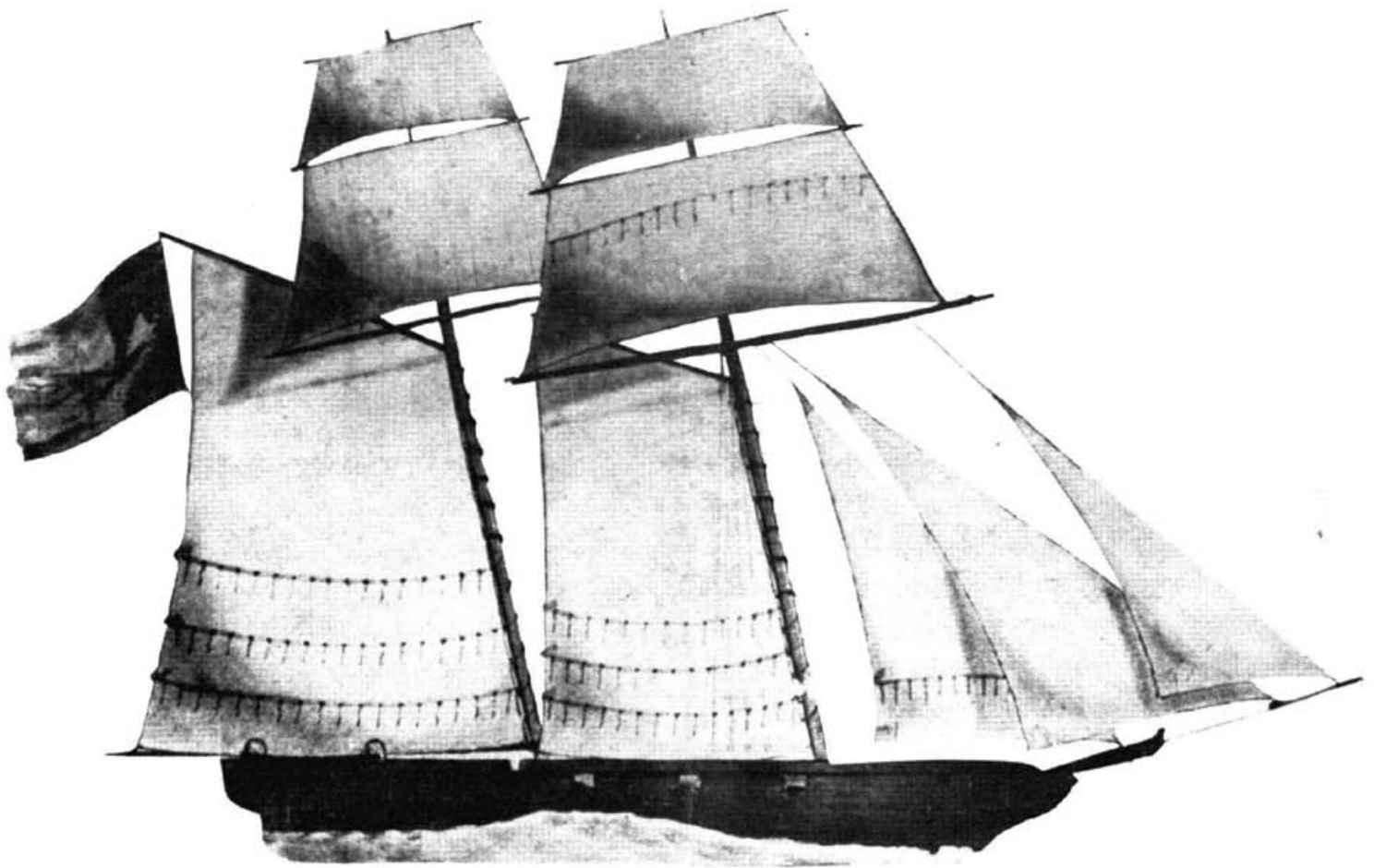
affairs of the State. These men have been given a rather low place in our history because of the squabbles between the Governor and the Council, but I think this is very unfair.

Let us examine what they accomplished. They appointed General Houston as Commander-in-chief of the Army; they appointed a commission consisting of Austin, Wharton and Archer to proceed to the United States and attempt to obtain help, money and recognition, and last, but certainly not least, they appointed a Naval Affairs Committee to supervise the purchase of a Navy and the commissioning of its officers.

Furthermore, the speed with which the Governor and Council acted undoubtedly set an all-time record for speedy action. Within 24 hours, it had been agreed to set up a Naval Affairs Committee, and 10 days later agents were on their way to New Orleans to purchase and arm ships.

The work of these agents deserves our very great admiration and gratitude. The principal work was done by Commissioner T. J. Green and Special Agent William Bryan. They practically created a Navy without money or credit, although Mr. Green spent a great deal of his own money. They purchased first the ex-revenue cutter Ingham, renamed it the Independence, placed it under the command of Commodore Charles E. Hawkins, and this ship was off the coast of Texas by January 10, 1836.

This was less than a month after the formation of the provisional government and a full six weeks before Santa Ana captured the Alamo. In rapid succession, the Commission purchased the Brutus, placed Capt. W. A. Hurd in command, and dispatched her off the coast in February; next, the William Robbins, renamed Liberty, Capt. Wm. S. Brown in command, followed shortly after; and the last ship procured was the Invincible, Capt. Jeremiah Brown in command; the last ship was off the Texas coast in the latter part of February.



Texas Schooner San Antonio

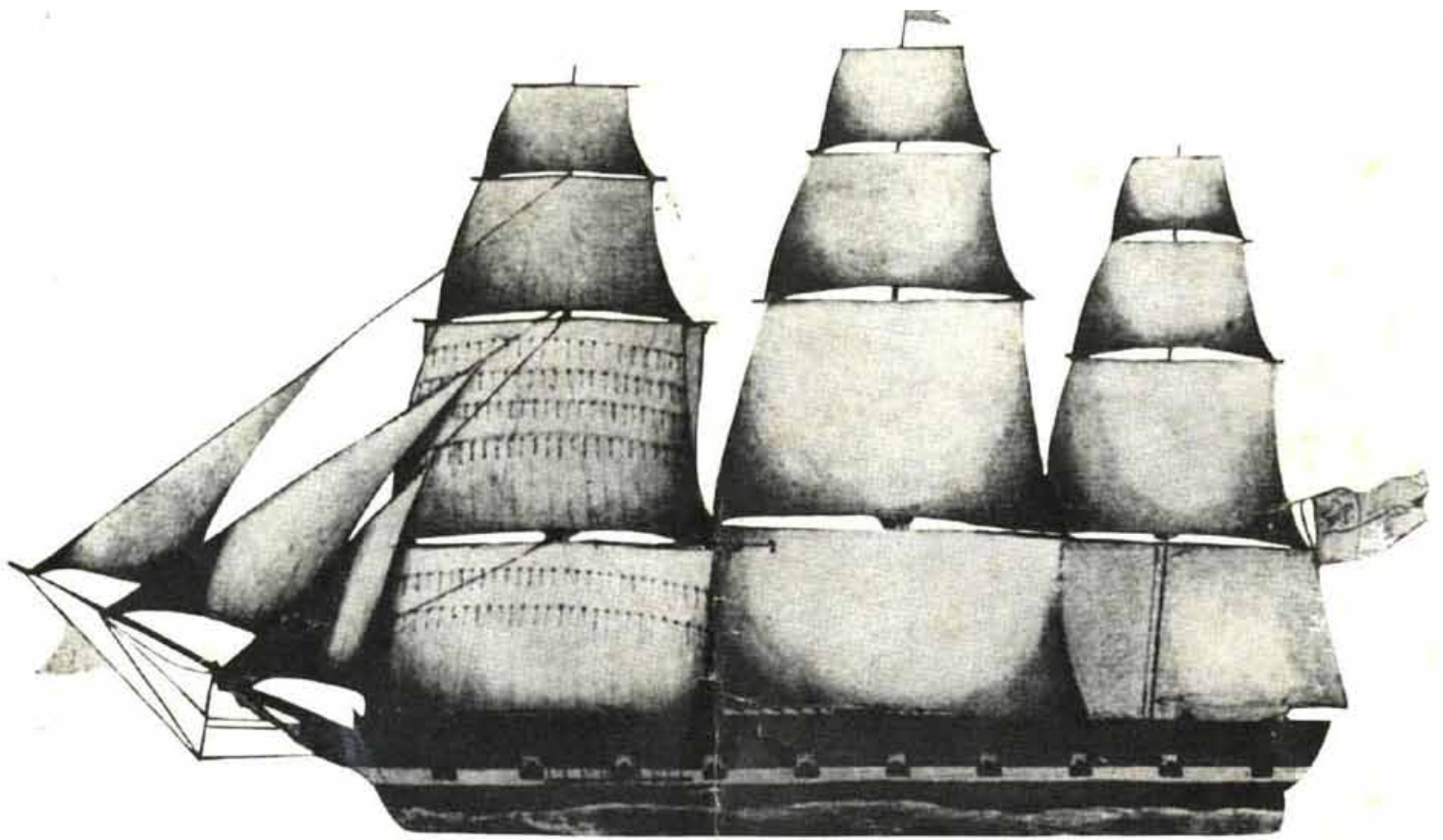
The importance of this miraculously speedy action cannot be over-emphasized. It completely upset all of the Mexican plans for conquering Texas. The Mexican Minister of War, Tornel, had warned Santa Ana against proceeding overland to Texas and had especially warned him that his army could not be supported unless Mexico had control of the Gulf Coast. There is evidence that Santa Ana was impressed by the warning but after Gen. Cos' defeat at San Antonio, his impatience to revenge this defeat overcame all caution.

Actually Texas never did have a Navy equal to that of Mexico, either in numbers or the armament of individual ships, but the boldness of the commanders completely disrupted Mexico's line of communications, captured ships with supplies and munitions intended for Santa Ana, and delivered them to Gen. Houston, and most important of all, it prevented the landing of a second army on the coast to the south of Gen. Houston's army. This latter act would have placed the little Texas army between two Mexican armies, each of them several times the size of the Texas army, and would undoubtedly have changed the whole course of the war.

In regard to captured ships, the Pelicano was probably the most important prize. Her cargo furnished Gen. Houston with badly needed powder and also food and other supplies. The effect of capturing supply ships made it necessary for Santa Ana to live off the country, and by the time of the battle of San Jacinto, this source of supply had been exhausted and it became necessary to take some definite action, and this accounts for Santa Ana's dash to the south in the hope of capturing President Burnet.

Fortunately, Gen. Houston's long retreat had made Santa Ana both reckless and over-confident, and San Jacinto was the consequence of it. Also, after San Jacinto, General Filisola had no option except to retreat with a starving army and he suffered large losses in doing so.

To visualize what would have happened if it had not been for this little navy, we have only to see what happened by the end of 1836 and early 1837. By this time, Tornel had built up his navy and the Texans had lost 2 of their ships so that control of the Gulf Coast passed to Mexico, and Galveston was blockaded for a time. Fortunately, by this time, the Texas army was large enough to make a second large scale invasion of Texas impossible.



Texas Sloop Of War Austin

Reproduced from original sketch by Edward Johns, who served on board that vessel. Original in possession of the Library of the University of Texas.
Official U. S. Photo—Reproduced courtesy Naval History Division; Office of Chief of Naval Operations.

At this point, some mention should be made of privateers which operated off the Mexican coast. While their work was not of any great importance, they did harass the Mexican coasting trade and this all contributed to the success of the Revolution.

After the loss of the four ships composing our first navy, it was decided to build a new and larger one which would guarantee the future safety of the new Republic. This was done during President Lamar's administration, and this navy had a very interesting career up to the time Texas joined the Union. This navy was especially active in aiding Yucatan during its revolt against the Mexican federal government.

Also, this navy settled for all time the question of a second general invasion by Mexico.

But to return to our first navy and the Revolution, let us see just what we had in the resources of this fleet. The total number of men probably never quite reached 200. And from January 10, 1836 to April 21, they held the Gulf Coast so tightly that it could not be penetrated. It seems that this small force anticipated by many years Mr. Churchill's remark about so much being accomplished by so few. So the least we can do to honor these men is to build up our memorial museum so that our children will keep their memory green.

I hope that all Texans who may have any material pertaining to our two navies will turn it over to this museum where it will be available to all citizens of the Texas.

Published by the Battleship Texas Museum