Let the Convention Go On...
An online exhibition of the Star of the Republic Museum
Washington-on-the-Brazos

The Reading of the Texas Declaration of Independence
Charles and Fanny Normann, 1936
Oil on Canvas
Collection of Joe Fultz Estate, Navasota, Texas
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From March 2-16, 2006, the following original documents were on loan to the Star of the Republic Museum and are the basis for this online exhibition.

Texas Declaration of Independence
Constitution of the Republic of Texas
Diary of William Fairfax Gray
Telegraph and Texas Register
Constitution of the Republic of Texas
(Spanish Version)
Journals of the Convention

The Museum gratefully acknowledges our partners and lenders for this exhibit:
The Center for American History, The University of Texas at Austin
Dallas Historical Society
Texas General Land Office
Texas State Library and Archives Commission
The University of Texas at Arlington

The Museum also wishes to thank the following sponsors:
George and Anne Butler Foundation
Rochester Armored Car Company
Washington-on-the-Brazos State Park Association
William P. Clements Foundation
This exhibit stems from the words of William Barret Travis written three days before the fall of the Alamo. In a letter to Jesse Grimes, he implored the delegates to the Constitutional Convention gathered at Washington-on-the-Brazos, to

“This Convention go on and make a declaration of independence, and we will then understand, and the world will understand, what we are fighting for. If independence is not declared, I shall lay down my arms, and so will the men under my command.”

The delegates responded with excitement, proclamation independence, organizing a government, and producing a Constitution for the Republic of Texas in 16 short days. These founding documents are brought together for the first time since their creation 170 years ago.
Why did Texas seek independence from Mexico in 1836?

For more than ten years Anglo-American settlers and Tejanos lived peacefully in the state of Coahuila y Tejas under the Mexican Constitution of 1824. Similar to the United States’ Constitution, Mexico’s constitution allowed for self-government by the states. But peace with Mexico did not last, and Anglos and Tejanos, alike, joined asTexians to fight for their rights and lands.
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Anglo-American \an-glo-e-'mer-e-ken\ n 1: inhabitant of the United States of English origin or descent

Tejano \ta-hän'-o\ n 1: descendant of the first Spanish, Mexican and indigenous families of the Texas frontier

Texian \tek'-see-en\ n 1: citizen of the Republic of Texas
Texas lands were first opened to Anglo settlement by the government of Spain in 1820. However, the Mexican revolution that ended in 1821 kept Anglos from entering Texas until allowed by the Mexican Imperial Colonization Act of 1823.

Cheap land, combined with a democratic government, quickly drew Americans to Texas. People came so rapidly that Stephen F. Austin’s colony at San Felipe grew to 1,800 citizens by 1825. The large number of American settlers concerned the Mexican government.
On April 6, 1830 a law was passed limiting the number of Americans who could enter Coahuila y Tejas. The 1830 law hurt both Tejanos, who traded with new settlers, and Anglos, upset about family members now unable to join them.

An unstable government in Mexico City concerned both Anglos and Tejanos. This encouraged their desire for change, and they began informal meetings to discuss the idea of independence from Mexico. The Convention of 1832 was the first formal meeting to address their complaints.

October 1, 1832

Citizens met for six days at San Felipe to adopt resolutions in protest of Mexican land and tax laws. Stephen F. Austin presided, but Ramón Múñquiz, political chief of the province, ruled the meeting unauthorized and illegal.
April 1, 1833

Citizens met again at San Felipe to adopt similar resolutions to the previous year. Sam Houston presided and Stephen F. Austin was asked to present the resolutions to the Mexican government. Considering Austin an insurgent, the Mexicans imprisoned him for over a year.
Conventions of 1832 and 1833

Resolutions that were adopted at San Felipe in 1832 and re-adopted by the Convention of 1833 included:

- Extending tariff exemptions to Texas for three years
- Modifying the Law of April 6, 1830, by permitting immigration from the U.S.
- Requesting separate statehood from Coahuila
- Requesting Custom Houses at the ports of Matagorda, Brazoria, and Galveston Bay
- Requesting government lands for the maintenance of primary schools
- Preventing Anglo encroachment on lands guaranteed to Indians in East Texas
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June 22, 1835
Citizens gathered again at San Felipe to list their grievances against Santa Anna and rallied to resist his growing power.

Declaration of Grievances
June 22, 1835, San Felipe de Austin
November 1, 1835

A “consultation” of delegates assembled at San Felipe to create a temporary government and declare their independence from Mexico. They elected members to a General Council, but personality conflicts and arguments made the Council ineffective in leading the new government.

Declaration of Causes
November 7, 1835, San Felipe de Austin
Courtesy, Special Collections
The University of Texas at Arlington Libraries
Arlington, Texas
Consultation of 1835

The results of this meeting included:

- A declaration defending the rights of the people of Texas
- A plan describing the powers of the provisional government of Texas
- A plan describing the powers of the military of Texas
- Passage of 58 ordinances and decrees in support of an independent Texas
- Passage of 29 resolutions
December 10, 1835

General Council called for a convention of delegates, representing the towns of Texas, to assemble at Washington-on-the-Brazos on March 1, 1836. Judges, or alcaldes, in each town were to appoint an election official to oversee the election of delegates.
January 15, 1836

Necessity compelled me to take a bold positive, & to me as an individual, hazardous stand, & I have done it, & intend to continue it. If a few necks were broken everything would settle down.... Nothing short of an unqualified declaration of Independence can save the country.

Henry Smith to Asa Hoxey

Asa Hoxey

Henry Smith
Governor of the provisional government of the Republic of Texas
Delegates were elected to the Convention of 1836. There were 17 Texas towns represented plus the settlement of Pecan Point.

February 1, 1836

Letter from Henry Smith to Asa Hoxey
Complaining about his removal as Governor of the provisional government
January 15, 1836
Monday, February 29, 1836

A warm day, threatening rain from the south. Many other members are coming in, and it is now evident that a quorum will be formed tomorrow.

William Fairfax Gray

William Fairfax Gray, a Virginia land agent who traveled to Texas in 1836 searching for land deals, recorded some of Texas’ most historic moments in a diary he was required to keep by his employers. His daily entries give a look into the tension and turmoil he witnessed at the Convention of 1836 held at Washington-on-the-Brazos.
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Diary of William Fairfax Gray
Courtesy of The Center for American History
The University of Texas at Austin
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Tuesday, March 1, 1836

Notwithstanding the cold, the members of the Convention,...met today in an unfinished house, without doors or windows. In lieu of glass, cotton cloth was stretched across the windows, which partially excluded the cold wind.

William Fairfax Gray
Wednesday, March 2, 1836

The Convention met pursuant to adjournment. Mr. Childers, from the committee, reported a Declaration of Independence, which he read in his place. It was received by the house...and unanimously adopted, in less than one hour from its first and only reading.

William Fairfax Gray
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Texas Declaration of Independence
Courtesy of the Texas State Library and Archives Commission
Austin, Texas

Broadside Texas Declaration of Independence
Courtesy of The University of Texas at Arlington
Sunday, March 6, 1836

This morning, while at breakfast, a dispatch was received from Travis, dated Alamo, March 3. The members of the Convention and the citizens all crowded to the Convention room to hear it read, after which Mr. Potter moved that the Convention organize a provisional government and adjourn and take the field.

William Fairfax Gray

“Let the Convention go on and make a declaration of independence, and we will then understand, and the world will understand, what we are fighting for. If independence is not declared, I shall lay down my arms, and so will the men under my command.”

Telegraph and Texas Register, March 24, 1836
Typescript of letter written by William Barret Travis to Jesse Grimes on March 3rd, 1836 from the Alamo
Courtesy of The Center for American History
The University of Texas at Austin
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On March 2, 1836, Robert Potter made a motion to the Constitutional Convention that a committee be appointed to write a constitution. One week later, on March 9th, Martin Parmer reported that the first copy had been completed. Many changes were made to this copy, especially concerning public lands, election of the president, and importation of slaves.

On March 13th another report was made. Believing this to be the final copy of the constitution, a committee was appointed to edit the document. Amendments continued to be made up until March 16th when it was adopted at midnight. The citizens of Texas approved the constitution in September 1836.
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Monday, March 7, 1836

The Convention proceeded to work on the Constitution. It is reported in part only. Mr. Thomas is the chairman, or organ of the committee who reported. It is awkwardly framed, arrangement and phraseology both bad.

William Fairfax Gray

Thursday, March 10, 1836

The business of the Convention moves slowly. The Constitution is on the tapis every day. It is a good one, on the whole, but clumsily put together. Indifferent in arrangement, and worse in grammar.

William Fairfax Gray
Wednesday, March 16, 1836

At supper a printed handbill was received by express from San Felipe. The house met spontaneously, and after having the express publicly read, proceeded to business. The Constitution not being quite ready, they adjourned to 10 o’clock. They met at that hour, and went to work. At 12 o’clock the Constitution was finally adopted...

...An ordinance organizing a provisional government was then adopted, consisting of President, Vice President, four Secretaries, and an Attorney General, with most of the powers conferred by the Constitution on the President and Congress.... The new officers were sworn in at 4 o’clock in the morning, and the Convention adjourned until tomorrow, 9 o’clock.

William Fairfax Gray
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Constitution of the Republic of Texas
Manuscript draft
Courtesy of the Texas General Land Office
Austin, Texas
Lorenzo de Zavala played a key role in the Constitutional Convention of 1836. He was appointed to the committee that wrote the constitution and chaired the subcommittee addressing the executive branch. He was a member of the committee that organized the militia, and he proposed a resolution that the constitution and laws of Texas be translated into the Spanish language.

Zavala was unanimously elected to serve as Vice President of the Republic of Texas. Throughout the convention, William Fairfax Gray shared lodgings with Zavala, stating that his “character and attainments interest me” and that he was a “pure statesman.”
Resolution by Lorenzo de Zavala
Submitted at the Convention of 1836
requesting a Spanish version of the Constitution
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Constitution of the Republic of Texas
Printed Spanish version
Courtesy of The Center for American History
The University of Texas at Austin
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Thursday, March 17, 1836

The members are now dispersing in all directions, with haste and in confusion.

William Fairfax Gray

Journals of the Convention of 1836
Compiled from manuscript journals written by the delegates at Washington-on-the-Brazos
Courtesy of the Dallas Historical Society
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Drawing of the Convention of 1836
Pencil
Charles Shaw, 1988
Convention of 1836
The results of the meeting at Washington-on-the-Brazos were as follows:

- Declaration of Independence signed by 59 delegates
- Constitution of the Republic of Texas written
- Election of ad interim government officials
- Sam Houston named Commander-in-Chief of the military forces
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At the Convention of 1836 a declaration of independence was written in two days, a constitution adopted in 13 days, and a government created. The disruption of the revolution caused many laws to be written as Texians struggled to establish the new Republic. One result was a 4-volume set entitled “Laws of Texas” which covers all of the enabling legislation through the last Congress of the Republic of Texas.
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Laws of the Republic of Texas
Personal copy of Anson Jones

Anson Jones
President of the Republic of Texas
1844-1845
The key event in Texas’ fight for Independence was the Constitutional Convention held in March, 1836, at Washington-on-the-Brazos. One only has to examine the words of the participants to understand the stakes at hand. Sam Houston stated that without a governing body and a constitution,

“we will be nothing but outlaws and can hope neither for sympathy nor the respect of mankind.”

However, the most decisive statement is in the letter written by Col. Travis on March 3rd, where he states;

“If independence is not declared, I shall lay down my arms, and so will the men under my command.”
It could be said that the reason Travis held the Alamo for as long as he did, was to give the delegates the time they needed to declare independence, draft and approve the constitution, and establish a governing body.

What the delegates created were more than simple documents, they established a set of values by which all Texians would fight, and if necessary, die to protect and defend. It is those values that continue to guide Texans today.