

10-1985

Italian and Irish Contributions to the Texas War for Independence

Valentine J. Belfiglio

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholarworks.sfasu.edu/ethj>



Part of the [United States History Commons](#)

Tell us how this article helped you.

Recommended Citation

Belfiglio, Valentine J. (1985) "Italian and Irish Contributions to the Texas War for Independence," *East Texas Historical Journal*: Vol. 23: Iss. 2, Article 7.

Available at: <http://scholarworks.sfasu.edu/ethj/vol23/iss2/7>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by SFA ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in East Texas Historical Journal by an authorized administrator of SFA ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact cdsscholarworks@sfasu.edu.

ITALIAN AND IRISH CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE TEXAS WAR FOR INDEPENDENCE

by Valentine J. Belfiglio

The Texas War for Independence erupted with the Battle of Gonzales on October 2, 1835.¹ Centralist forces had renounced the Mexican constitution and established a dictatorship. The Texas settlers, meanwhile, developed grievances. They desired to retain their English language and American traditions, and feared that the Mexican government would abolish slavery. Texans also resented Mexican laws which imposed duties on imported goods, suspended land contracts, and prohibited American immigration. At first the Americans were bent on restoring the constitution, but later they decided to fight for separation from Mexico. Except for research by Luciano G. Rusich (1979, 1982), about the role of the Marquis of Sant'Angelo, and research by John B. Flannery (1980), about the Irish Texans, the roles played by Italians and Irishmen in the Texas War for Independence largely have been ignored.

During the war, Italian fought against Italian, and Irishman against Irishman, since men from Italy and Ireland were in both armies. Only a few Irish favored Mexico. Captain Ira Westover's report of the capture of Fort Lipantitlan in November 1835 indicates that fourteen Irishmen from San Patricio served with the Mexican armed forces. Five of them were in the fort when it was captured.² Most of the Irish colonists supported the Texas cause. The Irish settlers sustained grievous losses in terms of lives and property, since many of the battles were fought in their colonial areas of San Patricio, Rufugio, and Victoria, which are located in southwest Texas.

The highest ranking Italian in the Mexican army was General Vicente Filisola. When General Lopez de Santa Anna came to Texas in 1836 to suppress the rebellion against Mexico, Filisola was with him as second-in-command.³ Born in Pavello, Italy, in 1789, Filisola migrated with his family to Spain, where he joined the army in 1804. He became a second lieutenant six years later. In 1811, Filisola went to Mexico where he eventually rose to the rank of general. The most notable Italian to serve with the Texas army was Prospero Bernardi. Born in Italy in 1794, Bernardi immigrated to Texas in 1836. On February 13, 1836, he enlisted with Captain Amasa Turner's New Orleans Volunteers.

During the earliest skirmishes of the war, Irishmen fought bravely for Texas. They were in the action at Goliad on October 9, 1835, at Fort Lipantitlan on November 4, 1835, and during the Siege of

Valentine J. Belfiglio is Associate Professor of History at Texas Woman's University, Denton, Texas.

San Antonio on December 10, 1835. Irish at Lippantitlan included James Power; Jeremiah Day; John Dunn; Nicholas and John Fagan; John, James, and Walter Lambert; Martin Lawlor; John, Michael, and Patrick Quinn; Charles Malone; Morgan and Thomas O'Brien; James and Thomas O'Connor; Michael McDonough; Patrick and Michael O'Reilly; Daniel O'Driscoll; William Ryan; Jeremiah O'Toole; and Peter Teal.⁴ On October 31, 1835, a detachment of thirty-five men, a majority of whom were Irish volunteers under the command of Adjutant Ira Westover, slogged through the deep mire of unimproved roads towards Fort Lipantitlan. They marched in poor formation along the lower road to San Patricio behind the Texas Irish flag, "with words and figures *CONSTITUTION of 1824*, displayed on the white, in the centre."⁵ James Reilly of San Patricio volunteered to go to the fort in an effort to persuade the twenty-two defenders to surrender. Through his efforts the fort was captured without firing a shot on November 3.⁶

The citizen soldiers left the fort on November 4. Without warning, a contingent of Mexican soldiers attempted to ambush them as they crossed the Nueces River. During the battle the Texas forces inflicted heavy losses on the Mexicans, who withdrew into the fort. On November 15, Adjutant Westover wrote to General San Houston from Goliad about the engagement:

The action lasted thirty two minutes when they retreated leaving us in possession of the ground which we reconnected and brought off eight of their Horses and one of their wounded . . .

From the best information we could obtain there were 28 killed, wounded and missing of the enemy . . . We had but one man injured Sergt. Bracken who had three fingers shot off from his right hand and the other fractured with the same ball.

The men all fought bravely and those on the opposite bank of the river were enabled to operate on the flanks of the enemy above and below the crossing which they did with fine effect.⁷

The Texans trudged to the town of San Patricio and then on to Goliad. Most of the Goliad garrison, including some Irishmen, went on to the siege of San Antonio. The Irish remaining at Goliad organized under the leadership of Captain Philip Dimitt to hold that fort. Stephen F. Austin reported on reaching San Felipe on November 30 that

. . . the post at Goliad has been taken by the volunteers and the enemy deprived of large supplies which were at the place, and of the facilities of procuring others by water, through the port of Copano, which is also closed upon them by the occupation of Goliad. The enemy has been driven from the Nueces by a detachment of the volunteers who garrison Goliad, aided by the patriotic sons of Ireland . . .⁸

Most Texans were happy to learn that General Martin Perfecto de Cos had surrendered at Bexar on December 10 as a result of the successful attack on that city by Texas volunteers under the leadership

of Ben Milam, together with Colonel Francis W. Johnson and Edward Burluson. Other participants in the assault were the Irish colonists Joseph Benjamin Dale, Jeremiah Day, Elkanah Brush, William Langenheim, Edward McCafferty, George W. Main, and Isaac Robertson of San Patricio.⁹ On December 20, ninety-one men under Captain Dimitt signed what is known as the Goliad Declaration of Independence. There were forty-two signers from the Irish colonies.¹⁰ The Declaration vowed that "the former province and department of Texas is, and of right ought to be, a free, sovereign and independent State."¹¹ The signers of the document marched out together and solemnly looked on as Nicholas Fagan raised the Irish Flag of Texas Independence.¹² This scene took place seventy-two days before the unanimous Declaration of Independence made by the delegates of the people of Texas in general convention at the town of Washington, on March 2, 1836.

The Texas army bent but did not break under the impact of Mexican onslaughts. From February 27 to March 2, 1836, units of the Mexican army killed most of Colonel F.W. Johnson's force of about 100 men in battles at San Patricio and Agua Dulce. On March 6, Texas suffered a staggering defeat at the Alamo when 183 men, commanded by Colonel W.B. Travis, died. The Mexicans massacred most of the defenders who managed to survive the assault. Known Irish-born soldiers who died at the Alamo included: Samuel E. Burns, Andrew Duvalt, Robert Evans, Joseph M. Hawkins, William D. Jackson, Edward McCafferty, James McGee, Robert McKinney, James Nowlan, Jackson J. Rusk, Burke Trammel, and William B. Ward.¹³ Then, Captain Amon King's forces were trapped by the Mexicans on their return to the Refugio Mission on March 11, and Colonel William Ward's troops were defeated as they tried to retreat to the coast on March 22.¹⁴ On March 20, the Texas army was routed at the Battle of Coleto Creek. On Palm Sunday, March 27, 1836, 330 Texas prisoners who were forced to assemble at Goliad in three groups. Each group marched down a different road leading away from the fort. Without warning these helpless victims were massacred. Forty-seven Irishmen were killed at Coleto and Goliad.¹⁵

Texans got even at the Battle of San Jacinto on April 20 and 21. The battle was fought between a military force of about 700 under the command of General Sam Houston and a Mexican army of 900 under the command of General Santa Anna. The conflict was brief but fierce. The Texas army advanced to within 200 yards of the Mexican lines. Their assault began with a cannon barrage which smashed into the center of the Mexican encampment. The cavalry stormed over the right side of the Mexican barricade, and the infantry broke into the left flank. Someone shouted, "Remember the Alamo! Remember Goliad!" Caught completely by surprise, the Mexican

troops attempted a brief rally. But the determined Texans fought with great fierceness, and in less than eighteen minutes, the Mexican army disintegrated. The battle was a massive defeat for Mexico and the final engagement of the war.

With the defeat of Santa Anna at San Jacinto, General Filisola became the commander of the Mexican army in Texas. His decision not to continue the campaign could have been the deciding factor in the outcome of the war. A military victory by Filisola over Houston after San Jacinto would have altered the course of Texas history. Had Filisola, to whom the order to withdraw was addressed, elected to ignore his captured commander and continue the fighting, the future of Texas could have been different. With Houston incapacitated by his wound and the Texas army disorganized by its amazing victory, it might not have been difficult for the Mexicans to have routed them, or at least staged a major offensive. The odds were still six or seven to one in favor of the Mexican troops.

About one hundred Irish-born soldiers participated in the Battle of San Jacinto, and they represented about one-seventh of the Texas army. Among them were Walter Lambert, Charles Malone, Thomas O'Connor, Daniel O'Driscoll, William Cassidy, James O'Connor, George Morris, and Martin O'Toole.¹⁶

The Italian, Prospero Bernardi, also fought with the Texans at the Battle of San Jacinto. Captain Amasa Turner, of the Texian army, recruited one hundred volunteers in New Orleans to fight in the Texas War for Independence. Among them was Prospero Bernardi. Bernardi arrived at Velasco, Texas, from New Orleans on the schooner *Pennsylvania*, on January 28, 1836.¹⁷ He is listed among Sam Houston Dixon's *The Heroes of San Jacinto*. Discharged from active service on January 14, 1837, at Galveston, Bernardi received both a First Class grant and a Bounty grant for his gallant efforts on behalf of the independence of Texas. The First Class grant (No. 294) was for one-third league of land located in San Patricio County, and issued by the Board of Land Commissioners of Harrisburg County on February 10, 1838. The Bounty grant (No. 3066) was issued on January 14, 1837,¹⁸ and consisted of 1,280 acres on the southwest side of Paluxy Creek, nine miles from its junction with the Brazos River. The First Class grant states that Bernardi "... served faithfully and honorably for the term of eleven months from the 13th day of Feby. 1836 under the eleventh day of Feb., 1837."¹⁹

A large bust of Prospero Bernardi stands in front of the Texas Hall of State, Fair Park, Dallas, Texas. Sculptured by the Italian artist Pompeo Coppini, the monument is five feet in height and rests upon an 18-foot base of Texas granite. Coppini portrayed Bernardi as having a well-muscled body, and dressed in a fringed, cotton and wool, frontier uniform. Bernardi's proud, erect stance and determined

look give an impression of combat readiness. His right hand holds the handle of a short-barreled pistol, and his left hand grips the hilt of a long Bowie knife. An inscription on the base of the statue reads: PROSPERO BERNARDI—ITALIAN TEXAN HERO AT THE BATTLE OF SAN JACINTO - 1836. The Bernardi monument was dedicated by Governor James V. Allred on Columbus Day, October 12, 1936, during the Texas Centennial Exposition. Dallas mayor George M. Sergeant, Commendatore Barlotomeo Migone, First Secretary to the Royal Italian Embassy in Washington, D.C., and other dignitaries attended the unveiling ceremony and the commemorative banquet held that evening. "Prospero Bernardi," Governor Allred said, "was one of the many unsung heroes, who fought and gave their blood for Texas 100 years ago. Some of them are known like Bernardi, others are unknown, but all live in the hearts of our people."²⁰

Bernardi was born in Italy in 1794, but virtually nothing is known about his early life. He was a notary by trade. The names of his parents, the region of his birth, his religious and political affiliations, and the number of his children, if any, are not known. His honorable discharge from the Texian army states that in 1837 he was 38 years of age, 5 feet 8 inches tall, with dark complexion, dark eyes, and black hair. Bernardi's service record, signed by Captain John Smith and approved by Secretary of War William L. Fisher, indicates that the Italian received a medical discharge because of a spinal injury sustained during combat.²¹ He probably died shortly thereafter.

Other Italians also struggled for the independence of Texas. One of the most noteworthy was Orazio Donato Gideon de Attellis, Marquis of Sant'Angelo. Orazio de Attellis was born in Sant'Angelo Limosani (Molise) on October 22, 1774. He arrived in America on May 20, 1824, and later taught, wrote, and founded schools in New York City and Mexico City. While in Mexico City, the Marquis began a newspaper, *El Correo Atlantico*, in which he advocated Texas independence. The Mexican government struck back immediately, and on June 25, 1835, the Italian was ordered to leave Mexico. He and his wife sailed from Vera Cruz to New Orleans, where he became openly dedicated to the cause of Texas independence.²²

Attellis continued printing his paper in New Orleans, publicizing the Texas cause in Spanish, English, Italian, and French. He lashed out fiercely at the Mexican position. *The Telegraph and Texas Register* (August 23, 1836) called him "... a devoted friend of Texas ..."²³ The Marquis also spoke at public meetings in an effort to raise money and enlist volunteers for Texas.²⁴ Finally, he tried to arouse public opinion in Europe in favor of Texas by sending files to European newspapers.²⁵ On January 9, 1839, "the Senate and House of Representatives of the Republic of Texas in Congress assembled"

donated "one league of land" to O. de A. Santangelo with the "thanks of Congress for the firm and zealous support with which he has maintained the cause of Texas independence in the periodical '*El Correo Atlantico*' in opposition to the oppression of the enemies of civil and religious liberty."²⁶

Giuseppe Cassini was another Italian who strongly advocated that Texas should be liberated from Mexico. Mexicans called him Jose Casiano. He was born in 1791 at San Remo, near Genoa (Liguria), on the Italian Riviera, the son of Geronimo Cassini and Catalina Cabassa. He procured a British passport dated November 20, 1816, from the Consul of Great Britain at Marseilles, and sailed to New Orleans. Cassini moved to San Antonio and lived there during the period of Mexican sovereignty over Texas. On April 12, 1826, he married Donna Gertrudis Perez, the widow of Don Antonio Cordero Y Bustamente, the Military and Political Governor of Texas before Mexican independence. With an inheritance from her father and the great wealth of Cordero, added to Cassini's vast possessions, they were easily the richest couple in the city of San Antonio. Giuseppe Cassini was openly sympathetic with, and very generous to, the movement for independence from Mexico.

Cassini made an important cash loan to Sam Houston that was instrumental in financing the war. In recognition of this fact, on June 21, 1836, General Thomas J. Rusk issued instructions which accorded Cassini the privilege of boarding any ship bound for New Orleans with his family, servants, and household effects. Cassini could import into the ports of Galveston, Velasco, or Matagorda any goods he chose, free of charge. This was only a small reward in comparison to the great generosity of Cassini. In the winter of 1835, he provided his home, food, arms, and other supplies for the Texas army when they entered San Antonio. The Italian also offered to give the United States Government 500 acres of land located on the Rio Grande just opposite the Presidio del Rio Grande. This contract was signed in 1849 by E.B. Babbitt, Quartermaster of the United States Government, and by Giuseppe Cassini, as witnessed by W.W. Harrison,²⁷ Cassini became a naturalized American citizen before his death on January 1, 1862.

In proportion to their numbers, Italians and Irishmen contributed significantly to the Texas War for Independence. The roles played by Father John Molloy, Giuseppe Cassini, and Prospero Bernardi are especially noteworthy. At great risk to his life, on February 27, 1836, at San Patricio, Father Molloy, intervened on behalf of Colonel F.W. Johnson and his company of Texas soldiers. The Texans were condemned to be shot on orders from General Santa Anna. Father Molloy spoke in fluent Spanish to Mexican General Jose Urrea, who was charged with carrying out the order, and persuaded him not to execute

the prisoners immediately.²⁸ Giuseppe Cassini provided critical financial assistance to the Texas army, and Prospero Bernardi received a serious, perhaps a fatal wound fighting the enemies of Texas.

NOTES

¹Miles S. Bennett, "The Battle of Gonzales, the 'Lexington' of the Texas Revolution," *Southwestern Historical Quarterly* [*Quarterly of the Texas State Historical Association*], II (1898), 313-316.

²Hobart H. Huson, *Refugio: A Comprehensive History of Refugio County from Aboriginal Times to 1953*, (Woodsboro, 1953), p. 229.

³Don Vicente Filisola, *Memorias Para La Historia De La Guerra De Tejas* (Mexico, 1849), 355-359; James M. Day, *General Vicente Filisola, Evacuation of Texas* (Qaco, 1965).

⁴Comptroller's Military Records, Archives, Texas State Library, Austin, Texas; Huson, *Refugio: A Comprehensive History*, I, 226; Hubert H. Bancroft, *History of Texas and the North Mexican States* (San Francisco, 1889), II, 224.

⁵Eugene C. Barker, *The Austin Papers*, III. Philip Dimitt to Austin, Goliad, October 31, 1835, 222; see Ira Ingram to T.R. Royal, Goliad, October 31, 1835, William C. Binkley, *Official Correspondence of the Texas Revolution, 1835-1936*, I, 34-35.

⁶Binkley, *Official Correspondence*, I, 83-84; John Brendan Flannery, *The Irish Texans* (San Antonio, 1980), 72.

⁷Binkley, *Official Correspondence*, I, 83-84; William H. Oberste, *Texas Irish Empresarios and Their Colonies* (Austin, 1953), 158-159.

⁸John Henry Brown, *History of Texas*, I, 412; Oberste, *Texas Irish Empresarios and Their Colonies*, 164.

⁹Huson, *Refugio: A Comprehensive History*, I, 38.

¹⁰These men are mentioned in: Roy Grimes, *300 Years in Victoria County* (Victoria, 1968), 119-120; Camp Ezell, *Historical Story of Bee County, Texas* (Beeville, 1973), 22; William H. Oberste, *Our Lady Comes to Refugio* (Corpus Christi, 1944), 65.

¹¹For the text of the Goliad Declaration of Independence, H.P.N. Gammell, *The Laws of Texas*, 817-820.

¹²Consult Mary Agnes Mitchell Simmons, *The First Flag of Texas Independence* which cites the reminiscences of Nicholas Fagan. See also Mamie Wynne Cox, *Romantic Flags of Texas*, 180-182.

¹³Comptroller's Military Records, Archives, Texas State Library, Austin, Texas; "The Story of the Alamo," a pamphlet published by the Daughters of the Republic of Texas, contains the names and origins of the Alamo heroes.

¹⁴For a detailed description of the Battle of Refugio, consult Oberste, *Texas Irish Empresarios and Their Colonies*, 198-217.

¹⁵Huson, *Refugio: A Comprehensive History*, Brown, *History of Texas*, I, 624-628.

¹⁶W.L. Kemp and S.H. Dixon, *The Heroes of San Jacinto* (Houston, 1932), 97, 102, 190, 222, 281, 282; Comptroller's Military Records, Archives, Texas State Library, Austin, Texas; Oberste, *Texas Irish Empresarios and Their Colonies*, 218.

¹⁷San Jacinto Notebook, Be-Bor - biographical sketch for Bernardi, Prospero, The General Libraries Office, The University of Texas at Austin, Perry-Castaneda Library, Austin, Texas.

¹⁸Kemp and Dixon, *The Heroes of San Jacinto*, 110; Audited Military Claims, and the Kemp Papers (MSS Collection), Texas State Library, State Archives and Library Building, Austin, Texas.

¹⁹Thomas Lloyd Miller, *Bounty and Donation Land Grants of Texas 1835-1888* (Austin, 1967), 105. 1st Headright Certificate, cert. #294, Kleberg County, issued Feb. 10, 1838; registered and approved March 16, 1859. Certificate #3066, Somervill County, survey no. 12 of land entitled B, by certificate issued by the Board of Land Commissioners for Harrisburg County. Survey April 20, 1838; Kemp and Dixon, *The Heroes of San Jacinto*, 110.

²⁰*Dallas Morning News*, October 12, 1936, Section II, 1, 8; October 13, 1936, 1.

²¹*Dallas Guide and History*. Written and compiled by the Dallas unit of the Texas Writers' Project of the Work Projects Administration, 1940, 630; Service Record No. 562, on file with the Dallas Historical Society, Library and Archives Research Center, Dallas, Texas.

²²Luciano G. Rusich, "Marquis of Sant'Angelo, Italian-American Patriot and Friend to Texas," *italian americana*, V, 1 (Fall/Winter, 1979), 8-17; Rusich, *Un Carbonaro Molisano Nei Due Mondi: Samnium 1981-1982* (Napoli, 1982), 122-127.

²³James E. Winston, "New Orleans Newspapers and the Texas Question, 1835-1937," *Southwestern Historical Quarterly*, XXXVI, (October 1932), 119.

²⁴Charles A. Gulick, Jr., et al., "O. de A. Santangelo Petition to the Honorable Congress of the Republic of Texas," *Lamar Papers*, (Austin, 1968), II, 143-152.

²⁵"George Fisher to Austin," *The Austin Papers*, III, 421.

²⁶Copy of the joint resolution passed by the Congress of Texas, authenticated by the U.S. Consul in Marseille on April 20, 1848, BNN:Ms V A 48/6. Part of the same authenticated document is a copy of the certificate issued by the Board of Land Commissioners of Harrisburg County and a sworn declaration by Santangelo.

²⁷Evelyn M. Carrington, *Women in Early Texas* (Austin, 1975), 56. Two interesting accounts of Giuseppe Cassiano and his family are published in the "S.A. Express," August 30, 1936; and the "Texas Pioneer" magazine, August, 1930.

²⁸Charles A. Gulick, Jr., and Winnie Allen (eds.), *The Papers of Mirabeau Bonaparte Lamar*, (Austin, 1924), V, 382; Rachel B. Hebert, *The Forgotten Colony: San Patricio de Hibernia* (Austin, 1981), 118-120.