



# TEXAS GENERAL LAND OFFICE

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## **PRESS RELEASE**

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## **Long-lost letters shed new light on Texas Navy** ***First-hand accounts of piracy, heroism archived at the General Land Office***

AUSTIN — The Texas Navy was pressed into service in January 1836 — just months before the newborn Republic declared independence from Mexico. By August 1837 all four ships were lost, as was the reputation of the ragtag flotilla of privateers and U.S. Navy veterans.

But correspondence recently culled from the more than 35 million maps and documents archived at the General Land Office casts new light on the lives of six men seen as pirates by some and heroes of the revolution by others. The letters, hand-written in a quill pen on faded and yellowed paper, were pulled from files containing testimony from men who fought in the Texas Revolution seeking land grants for their service. The letters were found after archivists began searching for files under the names of men from an old Texas Navy muster roll.

“These letters help tell the story of Texas through the personal stories of several men,” said Jerry Patterson, Commissioner of the General Land Office. “Documents like these are hidden gems, and with Texas history month upon us, I think they’re a great example of why Save Texas History has such an important mission to preserve and digitize the archives at the General Land Office.”

The short history of the first Texas Navy was marked by both success and scandal. The men who signed up to serve on the four ocean-going ships purchased by the provisional government can be credited with protecting supply lines from New Orleans and defending the Texas coast from Mexican invasion. The Texas Navy also brought in much needed revenue for the cash-strapped republic, by raiding ships and towns on the Gulf of Mexico.

But the Texas Navy also defied Sam Houston’s orders, raiding a ship belonging to the United Kingdom and causing a diplomatic row that threatened to undermine Texas’ early efforts to be recognized as an independent republic. Because of this — and Houston’s view that the Navy crews benefitted financially from their seizures — Houston denied land grants to Texas Navy veterans. They were the only men who fought for independence not to receive land for their service.

While historians still argue over the relative merits of the first Texas Navy, the letters culled from the General Land Office Archives provide details of both sacrifice and service. Captain Silas Dinsmore, Moses E. Morrell and others provided the details in fruitless attempts to be recognized for their service in the Texas Navy.

Dinsmore was a key figure in the establishment of the first Texas Navy. He was one of the first men to be issued letters of marque and reprisal, which legalized the seizure of ships on behalf of Texas (or legalized piracy as some would contend). His first order, from Secretary of the Navy Robert Potter in April 1836, was to “collect all the mules and able bodied Negroes” between Matagorda and Lynches Prairie to “assist in constructing public works” to defend the coast. Dinsmore’s last order, in June 1836, was to gather all able-bodied citizens in Matagorda and lead them against 10,000 Mexican soldiers rumored to be marching against Texas.

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Testimony from William T. Austin on behalf of Dinsmore shows the Captain was a “zealous and efficient soldier” who volunteered for the Army in 1835 and joined the Navy in 1836. “In the way of forwarding Volunteers and supplies to The Army, he was a very zealous and industrious man,” Austin said. Dinsmore didn’t get any land for his service in the Navy, but was awarded 1,280 acres for his service in the Army.

Testimony in Morrell’s file contains details about life aboard the *Invincible*, as well as the scrape he found himself in after he survived the sinking of the last ship of the first Texas Navy.

Morrell was aboard the *Invincible* as the Mexican Navy attacked it and the *Brutus*. The two ships were attempting to return to Galveston, heavily laden with Mexican booty after a two-month cruise of the Gulf raiding ships against Houston’s orders. The Mexicans sank the *Invincible*, while the *Brutus* was lost to a storm a month later, putting an end to the first Texas Navy.

“After cruising for months, living on the spoils of the enemy, green turtle, and beans we sailed for the harbor of Galveston,” Morrell testified. “On our arrival the tide being low and the *Invincible* being encumbered with plunder taken from the enemy, could not cross the bar.”

As Mexican warships bore down on the *Invincible*, Morrell tells how the *Brutus*’ crew ran her aground in their rush to aid the *Invincible*. Realizing they were on their own, Morrell writes “all hands was called in our craft and the resolution formed of resisting (though 39 in number) to the last.” Two by two, the men slipped off the boat and safely made it to shore.

Once on shore, however, Morrell wasn’t safe. A fellow Texas sailor speared him through both thighs as Morrell leaned against a tent. The attacker, drunk from liquor brought ashore from the *Brutus*, was shot dead on the spot as punishment. Morrell was left to endure primitive medical care for his wounds, which tormented him for the rest of his life.

“Having no medical aid, I was ordered to the Houston Hospital here without any nourishment, lying under a tree for a month (the Hospital being full) with shavings for a pallet and sticks for a pillow,” he writes. Morrell earned 640 acres for his service in the Texas Army, but was forced to sell the land certificate to feed himself while he was in the hospital. His application for a land grant for his service in the Navy was denied.

“Documents like these letters provide important details on how the men who created Texas thought and felt,” Patterson said. “If you’re interested in Texas history, then you should be interested in helping save these documents and Save Texas History.”

The Save Texas History program is a unique campaign that brings together private and government efforts to preserve more than 35 million documents stored at the Texas General Land Office. The maps, land grants, surveys and field notes — the very documents that trace the creation of Texas — include Stephen F. Austin’s original Spanish field notes and records bearing the signatures of Alamo defenders Jim Bowie and William Barret Travis.

The Save Texas History program not only seeks to preserve our state’s past, but also tells our state’s story to new generations of Texans through educational outreach efforts. Among these are the Save Texas History Essay Contest for fourth- and seventh-graders and *This Week in Texas History*, 60-second tales of Texas carried by radio stations across the state.

The Save Texas History program is supported entirely through the sale of high-quality map reproductions, Save Texas History calendars, *This Week in Texas History* CDs, and charitable donations.

**To purchase map reproductions and collectibles or to learn more about the program visit [www.SaveTexasHistory.org](http://www.SaveTexasHistory.org) or call 1-800-998-4GLO.**

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