

Angelina Dickinson, Babe of the Alamo

A series of introductory essays inspired by the stories told at Brush Square Museums.

By Katie Bender



Angelina Dickinson. Digital Image. Texas State Historical Association.
<https://tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/fdi36>

Like many mythical Texas women-The Yellow Rose, La Llorona, Sally Skull-Angelina Dickinson, the “Babe of the Alamo” is an enigma. What is known of her is wrapped in legend, hearsay, prejudice, and family lore. The slim paper trail of her life is recorded in her birth certificate, marriage licenses, and a questionable obituary. Yet clues of who she was and how she lived gleam from the past. These clues paint a picture of a woman vivacious, charming, troubled, and headstrong. Her life bears witness to the shifting tides of Mexico’s northern frontier, and accidents of geography and time made her an unwitting participant in Texas history. However, beyond the myths of Texas, Angelina’s life can be seen as a counterpoint to the narratives we often hear of women on the frontier. Not content with marriage and children, time and again she uprooted the life expected of her, searching for something more.

Born on the Frontier

Angelina Elizabeth Dickinson was born on December 14th, 1834, in DeWitt’s Colony in Gonzales on Mexico’s northern frontier. Her parents, Susanna and Almeron Dickinson, eloped

in Hardeman County, Tennessee, and joined a wave of immigrants settling in Mexico in 1831 in search of economic opportunities. (1) Life on the frontier was equal parts generosity and hardship. The Dickinson family was immediately welcomed into the small community in Gonzales and Susanna took on a boarder whom she fed and cared for. Almeron, a blacksmith by trade, inspected and maintained artillery, setting up a smithy. (2) But lack of infrastructure, access to basic goods, and the threat of attacks by the Comanche kept the people of Gonzales constantly on edge. Political turmoil soon affected the Dickinson family as well, and in 1835 Santa Anna sent the Mexican army into the northern territories to remove weaponry Tejanos and settlers relied on for protection. Almeron joined a group of volunteers and repelled the Mexican army from taking the cannon from Gonzales. He then went on to Bexar (present-day San Antonio) to fight the Mexican army that had taken over the Alamo mission. While he was away the town of Gonzales was attacked, not by Comanche, but by a group of settlers turned raiders. The Dickinson house was torn apart, items stolen, and Susanna attacked. (3) Susanna and Angelina left their home to join Almeron in Bexar. Angelina was not yet two years old. This pattern of violence and uncertainty would be a staple of her life.

Babe of the Alamo

Through work and a common bond as Masons, Almeron befriended Ramón and Francisca Músqiz, well-to-do San Antonio natives. The Musquíiz family let the Dickinsons rent a house from them on the town's main plaza. (2) Having successfully repelled the Mexican army from the town, Almeron and the other volunteers stayed busy preparing the Alamo mission for a possible counter-attack. Here too Susanna took in boarders, feeding guests and keeping house. On the morning of February 23rd, 1836, the church bells of San Fernando rang out, warning the town that Santa Anna's troops had been sighted, many days earlier than expected. The Dickinson family, along with approximately one hundred and fifty volunteers and eighteen non-combatants (women, children, enslaved people) all took shelter in the Alamo mission.

For the next twelve days, this rag-tag group would live together, with Santa Anna's army just on the other side of the wall. Desperate circumstances and tight quarters must have made for many strong bonds of friendship during the siege. It is said that Travis, missing his children and charmed by Angelina, tied his gold ring on a leather string and placed it around her neck. (1) Many many years later, the ring would take a strange and circuitous route back to the Alamo. On the morning of the thirteenth day, shouts from the advancing Mexican army warned of the inevitable battle. Susanna hid in the ruins of the church with Angelina. Almeron rushed in to warn her when the army had breached the walls, then he raced back to his post. It was the last time she'd see him.



Battle of the Alamo. Digital Image. Texas Escapes.
<http://www.texasescapes.com/SanAntonioTx/Alamo/Alamo.htm>

Santa Anna

It is possible that the Músquiz connection saved Susanna and Angelina once again, after the battle. General Almonte came through the Alamo calling for Susanna by name. (2) Susanna, with Angelina in her arms, made her way out following several soldiers. On the way, Susanna was shot in the leg, whether by accident or on purpose. The wound would stay with Susanna for the rest of her life. In the aftermath of the battle, Susanna and Angelina were summoned to Santa Anna. Just as Travis had been charmed by little Angelina, so too was Santa Anna. He offered to adopt the child, promising to raise her as his own in Mexico City. (1) Susanna declined, and mother and child were sent on to Sam Houston's camp in Gonzales to tell the story of the battle of the Alamo. For the journey, Susanna was given a horse and escorted by a man named Ben, a black servant of one of Santa Anna's generals. On the way out of town, they were joined by Joe, Travis' slave. Susanna returned to Gonzales having lost everything, mourning the loss of her husband, and physically wounded. Angelina's world had once again been turned upside down.



The Alamo Messengers by Bruce Marshall, painting, Susanna Dickinson Museum.

Houston

Susanna made her way east. Seeking reparations for the loss of her husband and support in raising her child, she settled near the new provisional government in Houston. Houston was a rough and tumble outpost in 1836, barely a town, barely out of the swamp. Buildings were hastily erected, and rats and mosquitoes were rampant. (4) Unfortunately, Susanna found the first Congress as inhospitable as the town. On October 18th, 1836, at the first session of the First Congress, George W. Wright presented her petition asking for \$500 to help in raising her child. The petition was denied because the new Republic barely had enough to cover its debts. (2) Susanna scraped together a living for her and Angelina as best she could but she must have felt more support was necessary because on November 27th, 1837, she married John Williams. This second marriage proved intolerable, and after four months Susanna was granted a divorce for “indignities such that rendered her life intolerable with him; cruelty and barbarity which caused Susanna an abortion; and further, he abused and beat her child beyond endurance”(2). Angelina was just three years old. In the ensuing ten years, Susanna married twice more. The first was to a man named Francis P. Herring who died of digestive fever, and then to a man named Peter Bellows. It was during these years that Susanna operated a boarding house to make ends meet. Angelina must have been used to having a different set of guests at the dinner table each night. All accounts of Angelina during this time say she was pretty and vivacious, a desert flower that had learned to bloom amidst adversity. Susanna’s great-granddaughter, Marian Willard Griffith Nitschke, said that Angelina had grown up with a great deal of attention but very little discipline and had, around this time, gotten out of Susanna’s control. Angelina was a young lady with a will of her own bent toward the “pleasure of life.”(2)



Downtown Houston 1840's. Digital Image. Houston.org. <https://www.houston.org/timeline>

Marriage

Susanna felt that Angelina needed to settle down. For a woman who eloped for love, Susanna was surprisingly quick to have Angelina settled. Susanna met John Maynard Griffith when he lodged at her boarding house in Houston. A farmer and sometimes steamboat captain, John was a religious man with very strict ideas of morality. In 1851, Susanna arranged for John and Angelina to be married. The marriage was ill-advised. Even the preacher who wed them, Dr. Rufus C. Burlison, wrote of this marriage "I shuddered to see two such uncongenial spirits united in marriage. Marriage for money, for position, for convenience, or from parental persuasion, are often fearful mistakes. Marriage should never be from anything but real love." (5) The two were married on July 8th, 1851, and Angelina moved to Griffith's farm in nearby Montgomery County. Angelina and John were married for six years, during which Angelina gave birth to three children, two boys and a girl, all of whom she named after her mother's family: Almeron, Susanna, and Joseph (after her mother's fifth husband). The naming of her children is a telling clue as to how at home Angelina felt in the Griffith family.

Drinking and Dancing

Family lore has it that after one particularly rowdy country dance, John Griffith spent the entire ride home lecturing his wife about the evils of drinking and dancing. They were divorced soon after. Angelina's oldest son, Almeron, went to live with John's brother Joshua. The two youngest, Susanna and Joseph, went to live with their maternal grandmother, Susanna. Angelina made her way to Galveston where she had a relationship with a man named Jim Britton. They were never married, and this relationship ended when he returned to Tennessee to join the Confederate army. In 1865, Angelina married a man named Oscar Holmes in New Orleans, Louisiana. (1) Little is known of how she got to New Orleans or what her life was like there. Angelina and Oscar did have a child, a daughter named Sallie, but that marriage too ended in divorce.

The Mystery of her Death

There are differing accounts of the death of Angelina Dickinson. A family letter states that Angelina died in New Orleans in 1870 and was buried there in an unmarked grave. (1) There is also an obituary written in *Flake's Daily Bulletin* published in Galveston on July 14th, 1869, announcing the "death last evening of 'Em. Britton,' a name not unfamiliar to Texans, as being that of a woman connected forever with the struggle of the Republic at the Alamo, Mrs. Robertson and her only child, a daughter, were saved. This daughter was Em. Britton...she grew up, was comely in face and person, and married a Mr. Britton. We do not know how it happened that they parted, nor is it necessary to know, but she embraced the life of a courtesan and so died last night". This obituary is suspect in more ways than just the overly florid language. Angelina never went by Em, nor was her mother Robertson, and no marriage certificate exists between Angelina and a Mr. Britton. Whether she died in New Orleans or Galveston, we'll never know. Like so much of her life, the telling of it was left to other people.

The Legend of the Travis Ring

There is, however, another story attached to Will Britton. Whatever their relationship was, Britton claimed that Angelina had given him Travis' gold ring when he left Galveston to join the army. He allegedly passed the ring on to one Lt. DeWitt Anderson, a junior officer in his company and a family friend from Tennessee. Nothing else is known of Britton and it is presumed he died in the war. Anderson wore the ring for the rest of his life, and on his death in 1902, the ring was passed on to a nephew, T.H. McGregor of Austin, Texas. McGregor, in turn, passed the ring on to his son who finally returned it to The Daughters of the Republic of Texas. The ring now sits on display in the Alamo museum, forever tying Angelina to the battle of the Alamo and the changing tides of Texas history. However, it is more fitting to remember Angelina, not in a glass case at the site of a battle, but on an open road, somewhere between Galveston and New Orleans, unencumbered, the present moment full of tumult and uncertainty, the future a lovely mystery.

1. Gale Hamilton Shiffrin, *Echoes from Women of the Alamo*, (AW Press, 1999), 7, 11, 14, 17, 18, 20. 28-32.
2. C. Richard King, *Susanna Dickinson: Messenger of the Alamo*, (Austin: Shoal Creek Publisher, Inc., 1976), 43, 55, 57, 69, 84.
3. *The Papers of the Texas Revolution, 1835-1836*, John H. Jenkins, General Editor, (Austin: Presidial Press, 1973), vol. 4, 501: Walter Lord, *A time to Stand*, (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1961), 95.
4. Stephen L. Hardin, *Texian Macabre*, (Buffalo Gap, Tx: State House Press, 2007), 16, 17.
5. Burleson, *The Life and Writings of Dr. Rufus C. Burleson*, 740.