Hubert Howe Bancroft: Behind the Façade of a Professional Historian

Hannah Joan Wilson

Abstract
Since before the Mexican-American War, ingrained notions of American superiority over Mexicans appeared in narratives of Texas. This paper argues that Hubert Howe Bancroft, although referenced as an unbiased, realistic historian of Texas history in The Works of Hubert Howe Bancroft XVI: The History of North Mexican States and Texas volume 2, actually coded his narrative with images and text of United States’ social dominance over Mexico. Using the lens of postcolonial theory, my research method performs a close reading of the eleven illustrations and the accompanying text, a comparison with primary cartographic sources, and an analysis of early historians’ tropes of Texas to examine the crafted historical narrative and function of images. It concludes that, using manifest destiny in Austin’s colony maps, and the use of empathy in maps describing emotional military losses, Bancroft’s scientific Texas narrative is coded with United States’ Anglo American moral and political superiority.

Keywords
Hubert Howe Bancroft — Texas — Mexico — Cartography

1 Department of Art Education and Art History, University of North Texas
*Faculty Mentor: Dr. Kelly Donahue-Wallace

Introduction
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In order to accomplish this goal, the paper examines the way this object, The History of North Mexican States and Texas volume 2 reflects the social and political context of the United States and its relationship with Mexico during the nineteenth century. It also aims to answer how Hubert Howe Bancroft’s historical narrative of Texas and Mexico shows the underlying position of United States’ superiority over Mexico after the Mexican-American War. Finally, utilizing the images within the text, it will examine how the maps craft the uneven power relationship between the United States and Mexico.

The following paragraphs employ an art historical object-based research method to analyze the text and images in The History of North Mexican States and Texas volume 2. My analysis uses the theoretical framework of Edward Said’s postcolonial theory and its analysis of the relationship between the powerful colonizing West and its Other, the colonized East [1, 2]. This approach is relevant for the study of Bancroft’s text, as Bancroft formulated his narrative bias on the belief that Mexicans were the weaker Other in contrast to the controlling American power in the nineteenth century, where Texas served as a proto-US state to illustrate the power difference.

1. Hubert Howe Bancroft

History of the North Mexican States and Texas volume 2 was written in San Francisco, California in 1886 [3]. The second volume of the History of the North Mexican States and Texas spans from 1801-1889 and includes fifteen illustrated maps. Hubert Howe Bancroft was an American historian and
publisher, and after moving to California, became a successful businessman in the world of publishing. After gaining a reputation as a book collector and publisher, Bancroft began writing the history of the Pacific states, starting with a twenty-eight volume collection titled Native Races. Included in this collection is a two volume set of the History of the North Mexican States and Texas, where Bancroft utilized his own experiences traveling to Mexico along with other first-hand accounts, specifically from missionaries, to add to the small body of work focusing on the Texas region.

A sequence of historical events culminated into the Mexican-American War. With the Monroe Doctrine in 1823, President James Monroe delivered his annual message to Congress in which he outlined the new basis for foreign relations between the United States, Europe, and the rest of the Western hemisphere [4]. The effect was to cast the United States as the controlling power in the Americas. Looking inward, America began a growing expansionist movement, and with the annexation of Texas, the ideals of expanding westward came to a boiling point. Manifest Destiny, officially coined by John O’Sullivan in 1845, rallied support behind Texas annexation, and solidified the divine right of the American nation to dominate the continent [5]. In 1845, fueled by notions of territorial expansion from manifest destiny and the Monroe Doctrine, President James Polk started The Mexican-American War over the territory dispute of the Texas-Mexico border. Starting on May 11, 1846, and ending with the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo on February 2, 1848, the U.S. settled that the Texas border was located at the Rio Grande, as well as giving the U.S. the land of Arizona, California, and New Mexico.

The Mexican-American War influenced societal understandings between Americans and Mexicans, as it was an aggressive move to further American ideas of expansion. After the war, Americans felt justified and proud of President Polk’s military action and territorial expansion, a right given by providence [5]. Texas served as a constant conduit between these two nations. Texan and American notions of hierarchy formed around the basis that Anglos were brave and deserving of land, and their rights came before the Mexican people [6]. The social divide, created by these historical factors, continued throughout the nineteenth century, when historians, authors, and illustrators began to describe Mexico with these ingrained notions.

Several scholars whose work directly benefits my research have addressed the History of the North Mexican States and Texas [3, 7]. Two biographic scholars, John Walton Caughey and Harry Clark, form the introduction to my assessment of Bancroft’s intentions. Caughey’s Hubert Howe Bancroft: Historian of the West, a comprehensive biography of Bancroft, provides substantive argumentation for my research about Bancroft’s motivations within his narratives of Mexico and Texas. Additionally, Harry Clark’s A Venture in History: The Production, Publication, and Sale of the Works of Hubert Howe Bancroft provided invaluable information over Bancroft’s intent for the specific, individual volumes of his work, including History of the North Mexican States and Texas. This scholarship adds to my understanding of the creation, publication and illustrations within History of the North Mexican States and Texas, as well as insight into generalized perceptions of Bancroft’s narrative.

More broadly, the History of the North Mexican States and Texas is an illustrated historical text and a noted work of a professional historian. To understand this genre, I turned to Laura Lyons McLemore in “Early Historians and the Shaping of Texas Memory,” an essay within the broader collection Lone Star Pasts: Memory and History in Texas [8]. This study benefited my research, as her analysis of the different types of early historians forms my individual assessment of Bancroft’s motivations as a post-Civil War historian. In her larger study of historiography Inventing Texas: Early Historians and the Lone Star State, she goes into further detail of Bancroft’s History of the North Mexican States and Texas. Written during the 1880s era where the historical narrative shifted from romanticism to realism, historians did not rely on moral judgements, but upon large collections of original source material and texts. In her longer discussion, McLemore argues that Bancroft represented scientific history detachment, saying that he created a history of Texas that would present readers with all the facts so they could form their own opinions.

Finally, Mapping Latin America was crucial in helping me to perform the specific analysis of my object. Unlike previously mentioned scholarship, my own argument directly relies on reading illustrated maps within Bancroft’s History of North Mexican States and Texas to gain insight into the social and political context of the United States and its relationship with Mexico during the nineteenth century. Rather than a typical reading at face value, Mapping Latin America provides a direct model for reading and comprehending nineteenth-century geographical and militaristic maps to understand deeper connotations of identity, space, and representations [9]. Overall, this study is essential in the context of reading maps to gain social interactions and understandings crafted in Bancroft’s historical narrative.

The images included in Hubert Howe Bancroft’s History of the North Mexican States and Texas volume 2 consist of eleven images in the twenty-two chapters discussing nineteenth century Texas history. I disregarded the images representing the Northern Mexican states, as they do not relate to my specific argument. Two categories emerge from the remaining images. The first section of images illustrate the colonization of Texas. The second grouping of images are battle maps that accompany text about the Texas Revolution and Mexican-American War.

My research reveals that the group of cartographic illustrations of Stephen F. Austin’s Texas colony appears in Bancroft’s text as justification for Anglo colonization due to Mexico’s inability to maintain control of the Texas region. The three images in this pattern consists of Austin’s 1835 colony, in the forms of Austin’s 1835 Map (Figure 1), and then the repetition of the image titled “Sectional Map of 1835” (Figure
2) and “Austin’s Map” (Figure 3) which is a closely cropped detail of the Gulf area.

2. Bancroft’s Cartography

The main example of this type is the first representation of Austin’s colony in the text, on page 75, titled “Austin’s Map” 1835 (Figure 1). This map shows Texas’ location in relation to the United States, where Texas lies west of the 102nd meridian from Washington, and the upper section of the map shows the bordering territories of New Mexico, Ozark District, Arkansas Territory, and Louisiana. Additionally, the map notes several Native American tribes, including the Caddo, Cherokee, Waco, Towiash, Cushatte, Alabama, and the Comanche Indians. The map also marks major cities, roads, and sectional divisions of the empresario grants from the Mexican government, labeled by their mostly Anglo names such as Cameron, Woodbury, McMullen, Power, Burnet, Austin, and William. Topographical descriptions appear as prairies, mountain regions, and high peaks. Texas rivers are included with the Red River and Rio Bravo marking the top and bottom borders of the region. There are details of the location of natural resources such as four fountains, salt lakes, salt springs, silver mines, and salt works. Also included are locations of animal resources, noting immense herds of buffalo, large droves of horse and cattle, and two droves of wild horses.

Based on my observations of nearly exact textual notations, geographic landmarks, and aesthetics, Bancroft selected and reproduced Stephen F. Austin’s map (Figure 4) to evoke Texas’ colonial possibilities. The map promotes the expansion of the United States by providing information on how the land mass is to be settled, navigated, and exploited. Stephen F. Austin’s map, first published by a Philadelphia attorney Thomas F. Leaming in 1829, advertised and promoted immigration to Texas [10]. Due to lack of exploration, Austin’s careful notation of geographic landmarks, cities, ports, and natural resources, provided information for future Texas settlers. In his narrative, Bancroft specifically reproduced and repeated an artifact of history that was a known colonial recruitment tool.

Austin’s map visually implies that Anglo settlement stretched from the Gulf of Mexico to the Red River. The empresario boundaries on the map, emphasized by bold text, indicates Anglo settlement. Actual settlement was far less widespread. Settlement north of the Old San Antonio Road, also referred to as the Camino Real, was rare, and mostly failed [11]. Additionally, the map denotes how the settlers can explore and colonize successfully. The location of Native American tribes served as a warning to settlers. To ensure a successful claim of land, avoiding conflicts with native tribes was critical. Natural resources included on the map denote the bounty of Texas, and the necessity to colonize the new land offered by Mexico due to its untapped resources and available space.

Bancroft’s text in the chapter “Colonization and the Empresario System,” supports this reading of the “Austin’s Map”
of 1835 (Figure 1) [12]. When Bancroft introduced the idea of colonial expansion into Texas, he said, “if the reader will glance back at the history of Texas, he will find that no advance in the colonization of that fertile country was made during the period of Spanish domination,” directly noting that Mexico did nothing with the land during the time they owned it. In fact, he notes that, “It remained for peaceable immigrants from the United States to accomplish a work of progress which Spain had proved herself incompetent to perform...” Bancroft, casting the ‘peaceable Anglo’ immigrants as bringers of progress, juxtaposes United States success with Mexican incompetence. Continuing this narrative, the Anglo settlers, led by Stephen F. Austin, who Bancroft described as persevering, honorable, prudent, and responsible, putting his colony above himself to make sure it succeeded. Finally, the transition between colonization and full notions of manifest destiny begin with Bancroft’s explanation of the Texas colony:

Austin’s colony was an exceptional one. No specific limits had even been assigned to his grant, and his immigrants, being of rambling disposition, had scattered themselves over a large extent of the country, each settling in the locality which most pleased him. Although this dispersion at first was attended with inconvenience...if the settlers could sustain themselves...the expansion, by affording facilities to new immigrants, would be of ultimate benefit to the country (69).

According to this textual narrative, Austin’s colonists expanded to every reachable section of the Texas area, and based on their success they ultimately benefit the country as a whole. This plays directly into notions of manifest destiny, with Anglo expansion as natural, beneficial flow of events [5]. Both Bancroft and John O’Sullivan utilized language that

Mexico was unable to exert real authority, and that American settlers, based on their ability to self-govern and sustain themselves, had the natural right to ‘public’ land. Including that, “a tide of immigration into Texas set in from the United States, which in a few years converted her wilderness and wastes into thriving farms and lucrative cattle-ranges.” This narrative text surrounds Austin’s Map of 1835 (Figure 1), ultimately enshrouding its original colonial emphasis with the language of manifest destiny into Texas.

Other period illustrations represented colonial ideals in maps, comparable to Stephen F. Austin. For example, Mathew Carey’s map “Missouri Territory Formerly Louisiana” (Figure 5), illustrates the Missouri landscape created out of the Louisiana Purchase area. This image features similar traits to “Austins Map of 1835” (Figure 1), with attention to mountain ranges, cities, Native American villages, and resources such as copper mines. The framing of the open territory through colored areas directly relates to the grant divisions in Bancroft’s map (Figure 1) and the colored areas in the original Stephen F. Austin map (Figure 4) where the linear division frames the available land for colonization. All three of these maps show ingrained ideas and notions about the American right to expand, through cartographic approval.

Battle maps make up the second pattern of images. The images within this section include two different routes of armies (Figures 6 and 7), the city of San Antonio during the Goliad massacre (Figure 8), a visual plan of the Alamo (Figure 9), battle plan of the Texas Revolution (Figure 10), the City
of Monterrey (Figure 11), and the fortress of Perote (Figure 12). Bancroft focused exclusively on images only from battles historically considered Anglo massacres, which directed the emotional weight of national memory to cast Mexico as an enemy.

The main example for this type of image is the specific image of the “Ground-Plan of the Alamo” (Figure 9), pictured on page 206 in the chapter “Alamo and Goliad Massacres.” This particular image is a cropped view of the Alamo mission, where the acequia borders the edge of the image, while a key describes what the letters A-I represent on the aerial view of the mission plan. The plan shows the specific measurements of the Square of the Mission. The letters represent architectural locations such as the entrance to the mission, the convent, the church, and the place where Travis, Crockett, and Bowie died during the battle.

Bancroft’s seemingly neutral rendering of the Alamo nevertheless shares the same pro-Anglo associations he drew upon with Austin’s map. My research reveals that Bancroft’s images of the “Ground-Plan of the Alamo” (Figure 9) and the Goliad Massacre in “San Antonio and its Environment” (Figure 8) were directly copied from Henderson Yoakum’s *History of Texas* illustrations (Figures 13 and 14). Yoakum, noted for his bias of Anglo superiority and manifest destiny, directly implies that the ‘Will of God’ contributed to the success of Texas history and annexation. Bancroft, although widely considered unbiased, has selected two out of his eleven images directly from a highly partisan source. Moreover, he even exaggerated Yoakum’s textual bias, focusing more closely on the Alamo and adding to Yoakum’s map the locations of Travis’s, Crockett’s, and Bowie’s deaths (Figure 9). This maintains that Bancroft is illustrating the Texan viewpoint rather than a scientific, unattached representation of the Alamo battle. By focusing on a closely cropped image of the interior of the Alamo, and making specific reference to where the three Texas icons of the Alamo died, Bancroft subtly skewed the narrative towards empathy for the Texan revolution from Mexico.

Bancroft’s text surrounding the image also influenced empathy for the Anglo side. Through the chapter title, “The Goliad and Alamo Massacres,” Bancroft utilized a phrase that suggests the Mexican army was using unjust and extreme violence. Bancroft clearly created opposing sides of good versus evil, constructing the Texans within the Alamo as noble ‘heroes.’ Bancroft introduced Travis as brave and complementary, who “under all the unequal circumstances with which he was beset, not for one moment did he or his heroic band think of surrender.” Bancroft then described the Texan army...
as, “The men who cast their lot with him were as dauntless as ever...Among them were such spirits as James Bowie, his second in command, David Crockett, whose fearlessness of soul was [equalled] only by his simple integrity...” Bancroft, in his narrative, created heroes out of the three men he added to the visual image of the map. Bancroft’s addition of the body locations indicated on the map are elevated in the text with emotional descriptions, such as Crockett’s death “lying mutilated on the spot indicated.” Each of these inclusions create emotional resonance with the Texans who died protecting the Alamo, rather than an unbiased, clinical approach to describing the history of the battle.

To examine how Bancroft was using the images and text to sway the reader towards the position that Texans were pure and heroic, while Santa Anna’s army massacred them, is a comparison of another viewpoint of the Alamo battle. Jose Juan Sanchez Navarro, a distinguished Mexican soldier during the Texas Revolution, kept a private record of his observations on the assault of the Alamo [14]. In this image (Figure 15), he had drawn the plan of the Alamo as a far more technical scheme of the actual battleground. In his rendition, he noted the entire battle scene, and described physical components of the Alamo mission, including the position of canons. Rather than a close look at the interior of the Alamo from the Texas perspective, Navarro had created a technical map showing the entire battleground. Bancroft, based on previous copies of historical artifacts, could have chosen to incorporate a technical image such as Navarro’s illustration. Instead of Bancroft being clinically dispassionate, as scholars have previously recorded, he purposefully illustrated moments of emotional Texas battles to create a negative view of the Mexican army.

3. Conclusion

Ultimately, through this research, I have examined how a noted, unbiased scholar such as Hubert Howe Bancroft contributed to the notion of United States’ dominance over Mexico. Bancroft, utilizing seemingly scientific cartographic images of maps, actually included coded language that reveals the uneven power relationship between the United States and Mexico through the narrative of Texas history. By examining the eleven images in comparison to the nineteenth-century primary documents and historian tropes, along with a close examination of the accompanying text, my research of History of the Northern Mexican States and Texas volume 2 strongly supports that notions of manifest destiny and moral superiority fueled negative viewpoints of Mexicans.
Author Biography

Hannah Joan Wilson graduated in 2016 as an Honors College Distinguished Scholar with a BA in Art History. After completing internships at the Kimbell Art Museum and the National Cowgirl Museum and Hall of Fame, Hannah is currently working on her Master of Arts in Museum Science at Texas Tech University.

References


Figure 11. Hubert Howe Bancroft, “City of Monterey,” 1886, metal relief print.


Figure 12. Hubert Howe Bancroft, “Fortress of Perote,” 1886, metal relief print.
Figure 13. Henderson Yoakum, “Ground Plan of the Alamo in 1836,” 1856, print.


Figure 15. José Sánchez-Navarro, “Plan of the Alamo,” 1836, drawing.