

Burial Ground Under the Alamo Stirs a Texas Feud

Native Americans built the Alamo and hundreds of converts were buried there. Descendants are now fuming because Texas has rejected efforts to protect the site.

By Simon Romero

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SAN ANTONIO — Raymond Hernandez was a boy when his grandfather would take him on walks to the Alamo, pointing at the grounds around the Spanish mission founded in the 18th century.

“He’d tell me again and again, ‘They built all this on top of our campo santo,’” said Mr. Hernandez, 73, using the Spanish term for cemetery. An elder in San Antonio’s Tăp Pălam Coahuiltecan Nation, he added, “All the tourists flocking to the Alamo are standing on the bones of our ancestors.”

On a busy day, thousands of visitors explore the Alamo, the site of a pivotal 1836 battle in the Texas Revolution where American settlers fought to secede from Mexico and forge a republic that would become part of the United States.

But long before the Alamo garrisoned secessionists, Spanish missionaries used the site, known as the Mission San Antonio de Valero, to spread Christianity among Native Americans. People from different tribes built the Alamo with their own hands, and missionaries buried many of the converts, as well as colonists from Mexico and Spain, around the mission or right under it.



The Alamo was the site of the Mission San Antonio de Valero, as well as the well-known 1836 battle in the Texas Revolution. Matthew Busch for The New York Times

Now, a new battle over the Alamo is brewing, as Native Americans and descendants of some of San Antonio's founding families seek protections for the human remains while Texas officials press ahead with a contentious \$400 million renovation plan for the site.

The feud comes at a time when political leaders in Texas are trying to bolster longstanding depictions of the state's history, restrict how teachers discuss the role of slavery in the Texas Revolution and target hundreds of books for potential removal from schools. As critics accuse leaders of political overreach, the dispute over the burial grounds has raised questions about whether the narrow focus on the 1836 battle at the Alamo comes at the expense of the site's Native American history.

Ramón Vásquez, a leader of the Tāp Pilam (pronounced TAPE PEE-lam) nation, criticized state officials who have resisted calls for the Alamo and its surroundings to be designated as a historically significant cemetery.

He likened the dispute to discussions about protecting important burial sites across the United States, such as those that surrounded the discovery in 2018 in Sugar Land, Texas, of the remains of 95 African Americans forced into plantation labor after emancipation.

"We're not against telling the story of 1836," said Mr. Vásquez, whose people filed a lawsuit in 2019 seeking to have a say in how remains found at the Alamo are treated. "All we're saying is tell the entire story of the site. We have a rare chance to course-correct."





Artifacts, including arrowheads and necklace ornaments, found with the remains of Native Americans buried at a Texas mission in the mid- to late 1700s. Members of the Tăp Pilam nation believe that similar remains and artifacts of Native Americans and early settlers are also buried under the Alamo site.
Matthew Busch for The New York Times





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In court documents filed this year, lawyers for the Texas General Land Office, the custodian of the site, and the Alamo Trust, the nonprofit overseeing the development plan, said that the Tāp Pīlam's claims of ancestral lineage do not give them a “constitutionally protected right” to have a hand in how human remains found at the Alamo should be treated.

If the Tāp Pīlam were to be granted such a role, the lawyers argued that the decision could set a precedent for other people who could trace their lineage back to someone who lived or died at the Alamo.

Courts have handed victories to the Alamo's official stewards, which the Tāp Pīlam have appealed while raising pressure on the authorities in public protests and private mediation proceedings.

Their strategy has come close to producing results, though a resolution remains elusive.

Two people involved in the mediation proceedings, who requested anonymity because they were not authorized to speak publicly about the talks, said this week that Texas state officials were preparing to yield to several demands from the Tāp Pīlam. These included their requests to regain access to the Alamo chapel for religious ceremonies, improve training for Alamo staff and have a role in discussions over how human remains found at the Alamo should be treated.



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The parties even reached a tentative settlement, according to court documents filed this week, though the settlement would need to be approved by the San Antonio City Council and other parties to take effect. But in a statement on Tuesday, the Land Office said it would go on fighting the Tāp Pīlam in the courts.

“We currently plan to walk away from the proposed agreement,” Stephen Chang, the land office’s spokesman, said. “The proposed mediation — which was not finalized — was intended to end these frivolous lawsuits.”

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While this legal battle plays out, the \$400 million renovation plan, which includes building a 100,000-square-foot museum and visitor center, is moving forward under a shroud of criticism.

Others have argued that the Alamo should keep its focus on the 1836 battle, which made folk heroes out of men like Davy Crockett, a former Tennessee lawmaker who died in the clash. Brandon Burkhart, the president of This Is Texas Freedom Force, whose members have appeared openly armed around the Alamo to protest changes at the site, said he opposed efforts to place Native Americans at the center of the Alamo story.

“They don’t want to shine the light on the Alamo defenders who fought for 13 days and died there,” Mr. Burkhart, a former fugitive recovery officer, said. “Well, I got news for them: People come from all over the world because of that battle, not because of the Native Americans that were there prior to them.”



Tourists near the Alamo Church this month. Matthew Busch for The New York Times

George P. Bush, the Texas land commissioner, seems intent on assuaging such concerns. “The plan to restore and preserve the Alamo is focused on the battle of 1836 and the defenders who gave their lives for their independence,” Mr. Bush said in a statement.

The recent tensions have shed light on crucial phases of the state’s Indigenous history. Texas was home to hundreds of tribes, such as the Anadarko and Karankawa, when Spanish missionaries arrived in the 1700s in what is now San Antonio.

The Alamo’s burial records include the names of hundreds of individuals from many different tribes. In 1745, for instance, priests said last rites for Conepunda, a Sifame Indian child. In 1748, Valentino Alphonso, an adult Mesquite Indian, and in 1755, Magdalena, an adult Ypandi Indian, were laid to rest.

After Texas seceded from Mexico in 1836, Mirabeau Lamar, who presided over the independent republic in 1838, reversed an appeasement policy toward Native Americans enacted by his predecessor, Sam Houston.



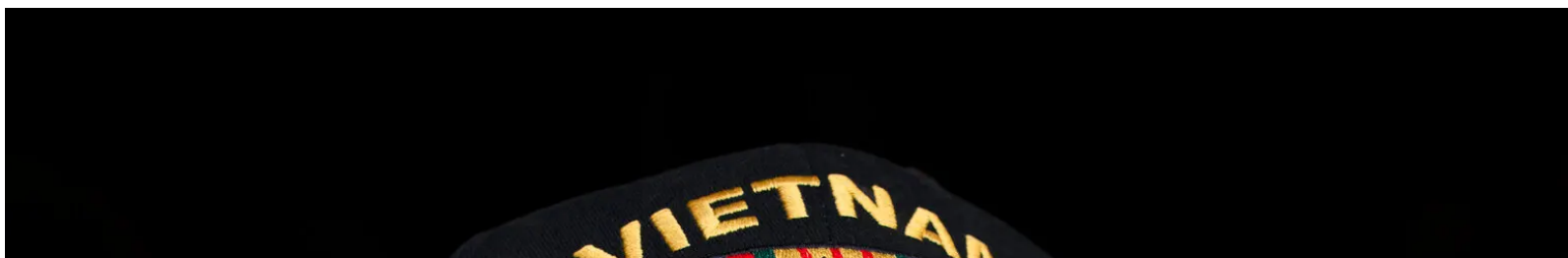
The Alamo Cenotaph monument, known as “The Spirit of Sacrifice,” features statues of Alamo defenders on the original site of the Battle of the Alamo. Matthew Busch for The New York Times

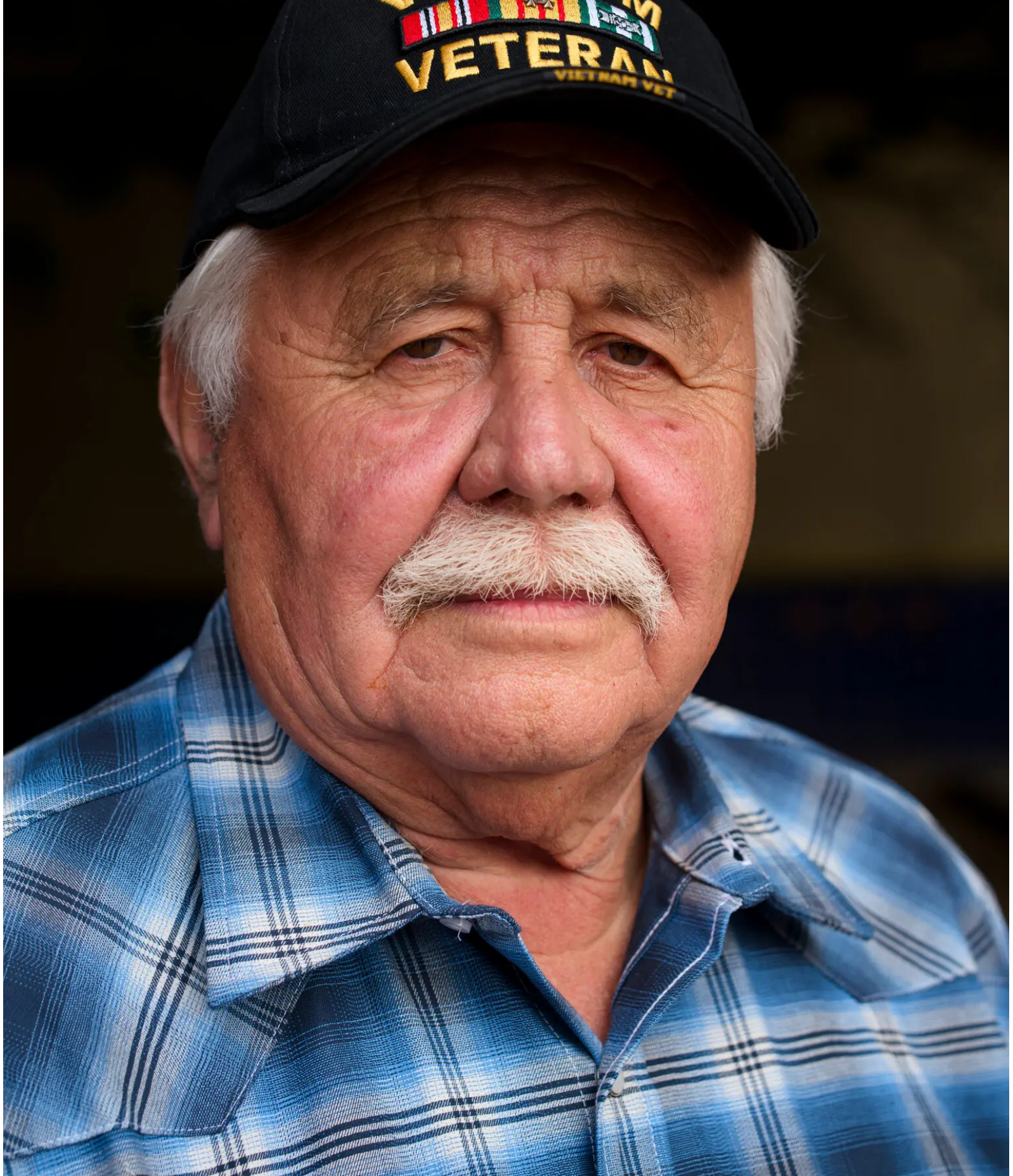
Mr. Lamar opted instead for what he explicitly called an “exterminating war” against tribes in Texas. As a result of this ethnic cleansing push, some Native peoples were annihilated outright; others were eventually forced to relocate to Indian Territory in what is largely now Oklahoma.

“There was a state-sanctioned program of genocide during the Republic of Texas period,” said Raúl Ramos, a historian at the University of Houston who has written widely on the Alamo. Texas is now home to only three federally recognized tribes, the Alabama-Coushatta, Tigua and Kickapoo.

The issue over the Alamo has also raised new questions as to who qualifies as Indigenous. Similar to other groups that have coalesced, such as Genízaros in New Mexico and Colorado, some of whom began identifying as Indigenous after learning they descended from enslaved Indians, the Tāp Pīlam have decided against seeking federal recognition, contending it is up to tribal members, not the central government, to determine whether they are Native Americans.

The Tāp Pīlam, whose religious practices blend peyote rituals with Catholic traditions, have more than 1,000 registered tribal members. Their leaders have recently created a for-profit corporation to train Native American entrepreneurs in areas like carpentry and construction. The Tāp Pīlam estimate there are more than 100,000 people in San Antonio alone who descend from the Indians who once lived at the Alamo and other Spanish missions in Texas.





"It's not up to the federal government to say whether we are or aren't a Native people," said Raymond Hernandez, a Tăp Pīlam elder and a retired police officer. Matthew Busch for The New York Times





"They don't want to shine the light on the Alamo defenders who fought for 13 days and died there," said Brandon Burkhart, a former fugitive recovery officer, of those looking to place Native Americans at the center of the Alamo story. Matthew Busch for The New York Times

Still, the lack of federal recognition has worked against the Tāp Pīlam in their lawsuit over the burial ground. They filed the suit after being barred in 2019 from using the Alamo chapel to carry out private annual services during which they asked their ancestors for forgiveness.

That same year, the Texas Historical Commission rejected a request to officially designate about 10 acres around the Alamo as a cemetery, which would have instituted more stringent handling standards for any human remains, choosing instead to narrowly designate only the mission-era church as a cemetery.

Archaeologists had in 2019 discovered the remains of three bodies in a dig at the Alamo. But instead of consulting with the Tāp Pīlam on how to proceed, the Alamo Trust relied on five federally recognized tribes, none of which are based in Texas. (The Lipan Apache, a state-recognized tribe in Texas, has signed on as ally of the Tāp Pīlam in the dispute.)

The Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act, commonly known as NAGPRA and enacted in 1990, was intended to provide more careful control over the removal of Native American human remains. But the Tāp Pīlam, who use mission birth and death records to show their genealogical descent from Indians at the Alamo stretching back to the early 18th century, are fuming at having been sidelined by the Alamo's stewards.



A statue of John William Smith, the first mayor of San Antonio in the Republic of Texas, in the Cavalry Courtyard at the Alamo. Matthew Busch for The New York Times

As the conflict drags on, more people are poring over the Alamo's burial records and finding ancestral connections. The Tāp Pīlam estimate that about 80 percent of those buried around the mission were Native Americans.

People from a variety of backgrounds make up the rest, such as Juan Blanco, a free Black man who was a Mexican soldier on the frontier before he was killed by Apache Indians in 1721. One of the last to be buried at the Alamo, in 1833, was Antonio Elozúa, the Cuban-born commander of Mexican troops in Texas.

Lisa Santos, the president of 1718 Founding Families and Descendants, a group of descendants of San Antonio's founders, said she was stunned to discover she also had ancestors buried in the Alamo cemetery.

Her ancestors, Bicente Guerra, who died in 1725, and his widow, Maria Sepeda, who died less than a year later, are thought to be buried near a federal building opposite the Alamo.

“I don’t know how to go up against the government when they continue to deny there was a burial site where our ancestors remain,” Ms. Santos said. “Sometimes I just stare at the sky and I’m like, what is keeping them from telling the truth?”