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LIPAN-WARRIOR.

COWBOYS AND INDIANS



THE PRESERVATION OF PRESIDIO'S LIPAN APACHE CEMETERY CHALLENGES A CULTURAL MYTH

BY DONNA B. JONES

Opposite: This hand-colored stone lithograph of a Lipan Apache warrior sitting astride a horse and carrying a rifle appears in *Report on the United States and Mexican Boundary Survey* by William H. Emory, completed under the direction of the Secretary of Interior in 1857. Image courtesy of University of North Texas Portal to Texas History, Star of the Republic Museum Collection.

For much of the country's modern history, clashes between White settlers and American Indians have captured the public's imagination and have become a hallmark of popular culture—childhood games of cowboys and Indians that mimic gunfights and killings, award-winning movies that portray the exploration and exploitation of the Western frontier, and best-selling novels that describe battles in disturbing detail, to name just a few examples.

Children's games and artistic expressions aside, history has documented many real-life, epic conflicts between settlers and American Indians. But the idea that the two were constantly at war is a myth. Since Spanish explorer Álvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca was shipwrecked and became the first European to set foot on Texas soil in 1528, the relationship could be better described as volatile—sometimes diplomatic and sometimes murderous. Between the two extremes lay cultural blending, with an early demonstration being Cabeza de Vaca himself. Separated from the other members of his expedition, he began a new life among the Karankawa Indians. During his travels in the New World, the explorer stayed for a time at the junction of the Rio Conchos and Rio Grande, near what is now the city of Presidio. The Lipan Apache later inhabited that same area, and the Tribe came to play a primary role in the complicated interactions between European colonists and American Indians.

The relationship between the descendants of both groups continues to evolve. Recently, at the end of 2021, in a historic development that attracted national attention, Presidio County advanced the preservation of the Lipan Apache culture by returning ownership of *El Cementerio del Barrio de los Lipanes* (Cemetery of the Lipan Neighborhood) to the Lipan Apache Tribe of Texas. The burial ground is within the city limits of Presidio, a community of 4,000 located 240 miles southeast of El Paso and home to generations of Lipan Apache. Stones, wire fencing, wooden crosses, flowers, and other decorations mark 45 graves that are the final resting places of their ancestors.



This page, bottom left: Rock cairns mark 45 burial sites in Presidio's Lipan Apache cemetery. The stones also were placed to help protect the graves from wildlife. Photograph courtesy of Big Bend Conservation Alliance. Original in color.

Opposite page: A list of Lipan Apache, led by Chief Cuelgas de Castro, who volunteered to assist the Republic of Texas military in campaigns against the Comanche in 1839. Courtesy of Republic of Texas Military Rolls, Texas Adjutant General's Department, Archives and Information Services Division, Texas State Library and Archives Commission. Original in color.

The following named Indians are those who volunteered and served with me from the 25th Jan'y 1839. until 25th Feby 1839 as given to Genl. Castro's roll of the same—

- | | | | |
|----|-----------------|----|------------|
| 1 | Capt Castro | 20 | Ganto |
| 2 | Capt Quansise | 21 | Shindial |
| 3 | Capt Manciel | 22 | Yentiska |
| 4 | Col John Castro | 23 | Joshua |
| 5 | Capt Platta | 24 | Goshy |
| 6 | Flaco | 25 | McKinna |
| 7 | Tazazanto | 26 | Uotter |
| 8 | Miscotlish | 27 | Krahauntis |
| 9 | Seisashitta | 28 | Stuchi + |
| 10 | Casa | 29 | Irchi |
| 11 | Shilcoe | 30 | Mundosi |
| 12 | Lacantik | 31 | Jack |
| 13 | Starshaf | 32 | Charcia |
| 14 | Muess | 33 | Coufah |
| 15 | Helliana | 34 | Cooshatee |
| 16 | Pear | 35 | Moccison |
| 17 | Fernando | 36 | Satella |
| 18 | Lockersiss | 37 | Hosey |
| 19 | Wheeki | 38 | Peheria |

As time passed, residential development encroached on the sacred site, and it suffered from neglect. Oscar Rodriguez, a member of the Lipan Apache Tribe of Texas and the Big Bend Conservation Alliance (BBCA), witnessed the deterioration and began a decades-long crusade to preserve the cemetery.

“I know the place by history, and I know it by childhood,” Rodriguez recalled. “It’s something that’s been in my life, for all my life.”

The activist is a city government official, former faculty member at Sul Ross State University in Alpine, and author and producer of a weekly radio show about the borderland *patois* (dialect) broadcast on Marfa Public Radio. Rodriguez spent his formative years in his native Odessa and in Ojinaga, Chihuahua, Mexico, less than five miles across the border from Presidio. His work to raise awareness of the importance of preserving the cemetery originated with appeals to local officials in 1988, a few years after Presidio’s incorporation, when the city began to improve streets, some of which crossed the site.

Local Lipan Apache families objected, and roadways were routed around the grounds, but some houses already had been built on the original site, Rodriguez said. Rock *cairns*—mounds of rough stones that mark and protect graves—also were of special interest to the preservation advocates. Many of the stones were taken by people for their own use. Appeals for their return have been only somewhat successful. Rodriguez explained that the rocks not only mark a gravesite, but also safeguard it from wildlife damage.

“If something tries to dig in, the loose rocks fall into the hole,” he said. “We call the rocks *centinelas* (sentries) in Spanish. In a spiritual way and a physical way, these stones are

watching over and protecting the graves.”

Rodriguez praised the City of Presidio’s cooperation, which was driven partly by personal relationships.

“Presidio doesn’t have a big population,” he said. “I don’t have to go too far to run into a cousin or a tribal member who is sympathetic. It’s not noticed much in these very divided days, where everything you say becomes political, but this issue never got into that theater, and we are thankful for that. We see that as a sign of what the place means. The preservation effort got 100 percent support from all sides.”

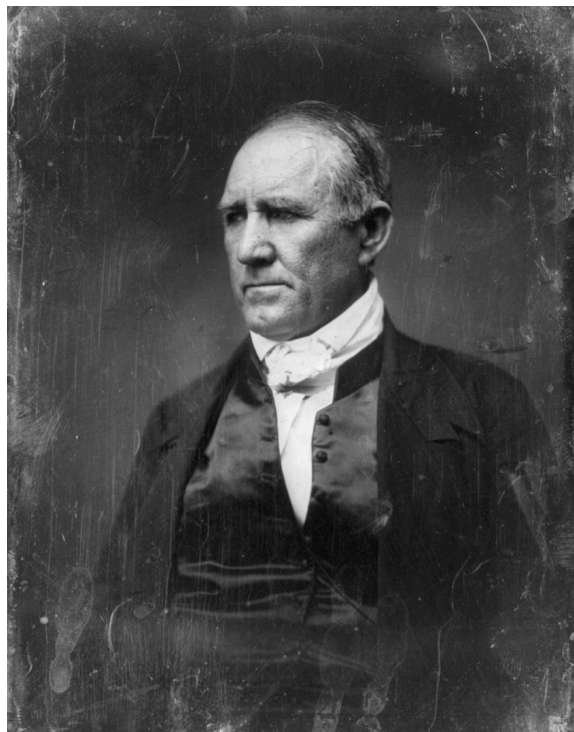
Work to shield the site reached a milestone in 2013, when the Lipan Apache petitioned for and received a Texas State Antiquities Landmark designation for the cemetery. That official recognition affords the sacred place legal protection from damage or destruction that might result from the expansion of the sur-

rounding neighborhood. In partnership with the Big Bend Conservation Alliance, the Tribe and family descendants also applied to the Texas Historical Commission for a historical marker, which was approved in June 2021.

A LOOK BACK

While the Lipan Cemetery had its beginnings in the late 18th century, the story of the Lipan Apache, who eventually reached the Presidio area, began centuries earlier. Between A.D. 1000 and 1400, the Apache migrated from Canada, with some groups settling in Arizona, New Mexico, Utah, and Mexico. The Tribe was among the first American Indians to ride horses; they lived a nomadic existence following the buffalo and also were successful farmers.

The Apache groups reconfigured several times, and the tribe known as the Lipan Apache reached the grassy plains of



Left: Republic of Texas President Sam Houston was a proponent of cultivating good relationships with American Indian tribes. His efforts brought about the Treaty Between the Republic of Texas and the Lipan Apache Indians, which was signed on January 8, 1838. The pact, however, lasted only a few short years. Half-length portrait, daguerreotype, circa 1848-1850. Courtesy of the Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division.

North Texas in the 1600s. Once there, they split into smaller bands and moved south to avoid the Comanche, their archenemies, who drove them deep into Central and South Texas.

While Texas was under Spain's rule in the early 18th century, the Apache staged raids against Spanish missions. Then in the 1790s, New Spain's colonial government named present-day Presidio an *Establecimiento de Paz* (Peace Settlement), offering goodwill to the Lipan Apache who moved there.

...[a Texas State Antiquities Landmark]... affords...legal protection from damage or destruction that might result from the expansion of the surrounding neighborhood.

The early 1800s were notable as a period of cooperation. The Tribe traded bison, venison, hides, pecans, and other staples with White settlers. When Mexico won independence from Spain in 1821, Lipan Apache Chief Cuelgas de Castro allied his people with Stephen F. Austin's colonists and later with the Republic of Texas. The chief even enlisted as a scout in the storied Texas Rangers, founded by Austin in 1823 to protect colonists. Republic of Texas President Sam Houston, a strong believer in American Indian rights, formally acknowledged a friendship with the Lipan Apache through the Treaty Between the Republic of Texas and the Lipan Apache Indians, January 8, 1838.

The accord broke down four years later, perhaps due to the unsolved murder of a Lipan Apache chief who was believed to have been killed by Whites. When Texas became a state, the relationship further deteriorated as efforts to remove the Tribe

from their land escalated. The Lipan Apache moved across the Mexican border and commenced a series of destructive raids that lasted for decades. In 1873, the U. S. Army led a force into Mexico, destroyed Apache villages, and forced the survivors onto a reservation in New Mexico.

However, some Lipan Apache resisted relocation, and by 1880, with their numbers diminished by disease, war, and food shortages, they were scattered in small groups along the lower Rio Grande. Many of them moved from Texas to Mexico and back again, sometimes dressing in non-native clothes to blend in with Tejanos and Mexicans, but they remained steadfast in protecting their cultural heritage.

EVOLUTION AND APPRECIATION

Today, the Lipan Apache Tribe of Texas number between 4,300 and 8,000, including unregistered family members. Many of the descendants whose ancestors settled in Presidio centuries ago still live in the Big Bend Region and the southern Rio Grande Valley on both sides of the U. S.-Mexico border. They are represented by a tribal government, with a constitution and bylaws, and the Tribe is a voting member of the National Congress of American Indians. Both organizations support protection of American Indian heritage, including traditions, ceremonies, language, and sacred history.

A resolution passed by the Texas Legislature in 2019 saluted that heritage, highlighting the Tribe's "strong sense of identity and community," as well as their ongoing contributions "to the culture of the Lone Star State..."

The declaration also paid tribute to the Lipan Apache who served in the United States Armed Forces during World Wars

I and II, the Korean and Vietnam Wars, and conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq. Additional recognition was given to members of the Tribe who have had careers in public service—teachers, police officers, and ministers—as well as in other important occupations.

The recent return of the cemetery to the Texas Tribe further honors those distinctions.

Going forward, the Big Bend Conservation Alliance, the Lipan Apache Tribe of Texas, and descendants of those interred at the cemetery are raising money to prevent erosion of the burial mound, limit trespassing, and teach visitors about the site's history. Projects to be funded through the efforts of this partnership will begin with topographic 3-D modeling surveys and ground-penetrating radar to help design a perimeter fence.

Rodriguez explained that this protective boundary will represent something more. "I'm calling it a monument because I don't want to call it a fence. It's not to divide property. It is just to remind people who don't know its history that this place is different..."

In the years to come, the site also will honor the cultural and familial connections that followed. "Just as any people who have been in any place for a long time, we came to be related to everybody—to the legacy Anglo families, to the Mexican and Black families that came through there 200 years ago, 100 years ago, 10 years ago," Rodriguez said. "Our family ties cross all those bounds."

He concluded, "We tell people, 'This is your burial site,' and we mean that.... We're protecting a burial site so that all human beings who will see it, even a hundred years from now, will know that this is a beautiful place, and it is to be revered."★

Donna B. Jones, of Austin, is a freelance writer and editor.