

Texas revolt also about money

“For others striving justice to obtain
he lost his life a higher prize to gain.”

This epitaph was written for William M. W. Hort, who was killed at the Battle of San Patricio on Feb. 29, 1836. Hort's death was memorialized on a family tomb I chanced upon recently in a graveyard in Charleston, S.C.

According to the epitaph, Hort sacrificed life for liberty. On another level, however, Hort's life, adventures and death in Texas reflect a much bigger force: the dependence of settlers in the westward movement on America's connection with the world trade system.

From the beginning of English settlement of North America, the Colonies were linked to a world commercial network operated by the motherland. In addition, the Colonies and the states in early America enjoyed a robust internal trade system via rivers, canals and increasingly better roads.

Attracted by this economic growth, families from Northern and Western Europe moved to North America, purchased weapons and supplies and joined others on the trek westward.

On the frontier, immigrants and native Americans planted “cash crops” that were shipped to other Colonies and states and across the seas. The merchants and middlemen in this process provided settlers with food, tools and various goods from other regions and countries.

The variety of food products added years to the lives of men and women on the frontier and reduced infant mortality, thereby increasing the productivity of the next generation.

The constant immigration, the excess in population and the links with the world trade system created a dynamism that drove Americans such as Hort westward, even at the risk of their lives.

Settlers, however, saw their achievements and their prosperity as springing only from their self-reliance and commitment to democracy. Moreover, they saw the nation's expansion westward as “Manifest Destiny” — the clear will of God.

These were the forces behind the rapid movement of Anglo-Americans into Texas. From 1821 to 1835, this group grew to about 30,000, a number that overshadowed the Tejanos, or Mexican-Texans, 6-1.

When the centralist government of then Mexican President Antonio López de Santa Anna decided in 1835 to redirect the prosperity in Texas to the Mexican heartland, Texans — and even Tejanos who were linked to American trade system — took up arms to protect their economic interests.

At first, these settlers were defending the loosely formed democratic Mexican confederacy under the Mexican Constitution of 1824 and were rebelling against the centralist trials advocated by Santa Anna.

But by themselves, Texans and Tejanos could not have won against the superior forces of the Mexican government. So Anglo-Texans appealed to their cultural cousins in the United States for help and, in the process, changed the rebellion into a fight for independence.

Help came in the form of volunteers, young men — most of them Americans, like Hort of South Carolina, and some Europeans — who already were in the population stream pushed westward by economic forces. Volunteers made up more than half of those fighting for Texas.

To Mexican authorities, these young men were interlopers — fortune-seekers, not settlers. And the settlers seemed ingrates (ungrateful) for the chance provided by Mexico for them to start anew.

The volunteers and the settlers, on the other hand, saw themselves as self-made, freedom-loving individuals, sent by God to rescue Texas from the despotism of not only Santa Anna but of Mexico itself.

These volunteers and settlers did not see the larger socioeconomic forces that ultimately brought them to Alamo, to Goliad, to San Jacinto and — tragically, for Hort, to the smaller, relatively insignificant skirmish at San Patricio.

Nor have the economic forces been understood by the many patriotic historians who have taken the motives given by Texans — “striving justice to obtain” — exclusively at face value.

But the hidden economic forces are as real and as important as the personal, political and cultural motives that drove the Texans to rebellion.