

Texas, Our Texas

Why is Texas the way it is? What is it about this place that has attracted so much attention over time and has given rise to larger-than-life legends and lore that continue to color this state's identity? There was a process that created Texas. The land surely played a part, but geography and climate merely created the backdrop. The people that were born here or came here have made Texas. What seemed like an inhospitable zone to many has proved to be a land of promise to those with fortitude and nerve. This is their story—and yours.

The original inhabitants of Texas, small bands of hunter gatherers, drifted across the land on foot for the first 14,000 years, migrating with the seasons from seashore to pecan-covered river bottoms or inland cactus groves. Armed with a knowledge of astronomy, water sources and food supplies, they accommodated to an environment which could be harsh and unforgiving, but which also provided a moderate climate during much of the year. In addition to the small wandering tribes, by the 1500s a variety of tribes known collectively as the Caddo had created farming communities who carried on extensive trade with peoples as distant as New Mexico and the Great Lakes.

In the 1520s, a small group of shipwrecked Spanish castaways—led by the first Spanish explorer—Alvar Nuñez Cabeza de Vaca, made their way across Texas and back to Mexico with the help of the many small tribes who peopled the land. It is believed that one of the Caddo tribes may have introduced themselves to the Spanish using the word “Teysha” meaning friend or allies. The Spaniards, however, found little of interest among their “Teysha” friends. There were no great civilizations but more importantly, there was neither gold nor silver to fill the coffers of Spain. For 200 years, Texas remained the domain of the native peoples.

By 1690, global rivalries among the European powers changed the Spanish attitude about their far-flung northern frontier. As a response to French incursions into Louisiana, Spain had to take a chance on this far northern *despoblado*, or wilderness. To establish control over the natives of these lands, which the Spanish called the great kingdom of the “Tejas,” the least expensive method was religious conversion. Franciscan missionaries marched north to take up missionary work among the Caddo, attempting to convert them into proper Christian Spaniards. When smallpox killed their children, the Caddo refused the advances of the missionaries, using the missions merely as stopping points on their annual migrations. But continuing Spanish and French interest in native trade and control enabled the Caddo to play the Europeans off against one another as the natives negotiated to secure the highly prized weapons.

Spanish settlers who moved into the new land to join the missionaries learned to be tough, self-reliant, and independent. By 1718, a spirit of *patria chica*, or local loyalty, developed among the settlements of Los Adaes, the first capital of Tejas, San Antonio de Bexar, the half-way point on the way to the East Texas missions, and the coastal defensive presidio at La Bahia. Following the dictates of laws from faraway Mexico and even farther away Madrid, the people of the province referred to each other as *vecinos*, neighbors, as they created a network of *compadrazgo* or godparenthood which provided support, friendship, and protection.

Fearing for their silver mines in the interior of New Spain, the Spanish opposed French settlements at New Orleans and in Louisiana. Forced by the recalcitrant Caddo to move the missions back to the San Antonio River valley, the Spanish still clung to Nacogdoches on its Eastern border as a defense against French incursions and contraband trade. Spain refused to surrender its far-flung border. In 1740, José de Escandón established half-a-dozen Spanish

settlements along the Rio Bravo (Rio Grande) in a great land rush. By mid-century, Texas could boast a population of 5,000 hardy settlers.

The indigenous tribes may not all have adopted Spanish religion, but they did adopt Spanish horse culture. The Comanche, mounted on stolen or captured Spanish horses, transformed themselves into a mighty empire. From their home base in what is now north Texas and Colorado, they swept into Tejas and deeper into Mexico to raid Spanish ranches and feed a booming trade in horses. Spanish mounted units—*presidiales*—struggled to defend Tejas against these nimble adversaries.

Everything changed in 1810. Triggered by Napoleon's invasion of Spain, Father Miguel Hidalgo led Mexico's first attempt at independence from Spain. San Antonio became a battleground as the small town split between those favoring the Royalist cause and those seeking independence from Spain. Texas' first republic and first Constitution, written by Bernardo Gutierrez de Lara, failed in 1813 when Royalist forces including a young lieutenant named Antonio Lopez de Santa Anna arrived from central Mexico. General José Joaquín de Arredondo massacred anyone opposed to the royal government. After a bloody and costly eleven-year war for independence, Mexico at last emerged as a new nation in 1821. Without Spanish investments in the mines, however, the new nation's economy was in shambles.

Threatened by the Spanish, French, Americans and the ever-present Comanche, Mexican leaders needed a protective network along their northern border. They took a chance and invited American immigrants into the undeveloped, and now nearly depopulated, Tejas. Where three hundred years of indigenous, Spanish and Mexican control had seen Tejas as a problem province, incoming Americans saw a land of boundless opportunity.

The government of Mexico used a system of contractors—much like modern day real estate developers—to transform Tejas. People like Stephen F. Austin, Martín de León and Green DeWitt agreed to help the government settle people in the region in exchange for payment in large tracts of land. The Americans, attracted by the immense offers of more than 4,000 acres of land for each family, looked to commerce, ranching, farming and plantation agriculture to create a profitable economy. The presence of enslaved people among these Americans proved a dilemma for Mexico. Many opposed the institution on moral and philosophical grounds, while others saw it as necessary to develop the region’s agricultural potential. This complication would be a constant cause of friction.

Local Tejanos had mixed feelings about the newcomers. While welcoming the energy, enthusiasm, and economics of the newcomers, the Spanish-speaking inhabitants of Texas discovered their small population of some 2,500 people had been swamped by more than 30,000 American immigrants. These new settlers, some of whom had come into Coahuila y Tejas illegally, rarely abided by their contractual obligations. They rarely spoke the Spanish language, did not practice the official Catholic religion, and asked for their own judicial and educational systems. They even changed the similar sounding “j” to an “x” creating Texas when speaking of the province. These Americans also believed in certain “inalienable rights” and were quick to defend them.

The dream of prosperity in Texas would take a lot of work and the burden would fall unevenly. By 1823 the Texas Rangers emerged to maintain armed vigilance over the project. Texas soon had a reputation. “Texas is heaven for men and dogs,” the saying went, “but hell for women and oxen.” This was doubly true for the enslaved.

With the revolt by Haden Edwards and his colonists at Nacogdoches in 1826, the Mexican government realized they might have made a mistake. The government sent an expedition to Texas under General Manuel de Mier y Terán to determine the level of loyalty of the new settlers. In his 1828 report, the General observed, “Among these foreigners are fugitives from justice, honest laborers, vagabonds and criminals.” These Americans may have been Mexicans by law, but intellectually they remained attached to the ideals of the American Revolution. “Honorable and dishonorable alike travel with their political constitution in their pockets,” Mier y Terán wrote, “demanding the privileges, authority and officers which such a constitution guarantees.”

New Spain, including Texas, had begun to fracture into those supporting the Conservative Centralist position with power controlled from Mexico City and those in favor of a Federalist State’s rights constitution in which power remained in the hands of local citizens. Most of the newly arrived Anglos favored the 1824 Federalist constitution. In 1830, the Centralist Mexican government attempted to resolve the American problem by closing the borders and inviting Irish Catholics to settle in Texas. Just two years later, under a resurgent Federalist regime, the border reopened, and Americans once again flooded into Texas.

By 1834, the Federalist faction found itself displaced by the Centralists who had created a new constitution under the leadership of General Antonio Lopez de Santa Anna. Several Mexican states revolted. Santa Anna moved quickly and harshly to crush the rebellions. When his generals were defeated by Mexican and Texian Federalists in San Antonio in December of 1835, Santa Ann turned toward Texas to halt the rebellion there.

Surprised by the Centralist advance, some 200 insurgents led by William B. Travis, James Bowie and David Crockett made a stand at the small mission known as the Alamo in San

Antonio. It took Santa Anna thirteen days to defeat the defenders and wipe out the small garrison. Meanwhile, at Goliad, a larger Texian army under General Fannin was captured and its soldiers executed. Meanwhile, this American dominated region shifted from a lukewarm loyalty to Mexico to a white-hot enthusiasm for independence.

The Texians, as they described themselves, declared their purpose. “The Mexican government, by its colonization laws, invited and induced the Anglo-American population of Texas to colonize its wilderness under the pledged faith of a written constitution, that they should continue to enjoy that constitutional liberty and republican government to which they had been habituated in the land of their birth, the United States of America,” they avowed. “In this expectation they have been cruelly disappointed.”

The men who declared Texas independent were a diverse bunch. On average, these men were about forty-years old, with the youngest in his early twenties, and the oldest in his seventies. Most of them were men entering middle age, most of them with families and obligations. By and large they were born in the South, but a handful came from Pennsylvania, New York, and Massachusetts. Others hailed from places like Ireland, England, and Canada. A few held enslaved people as property, but the overwhelming majority did not. Many were farmers, but there were as many merchants, land speculators, lawyers, and doctors as there were sodbusters. A few seemed to fit Mier y Teran’s description of *unruly*, but mostly they liked rules, they just didn’t like it when people changed them without their consent.

Three of these revolutionaries were natives of Mexico, and like their compatriots born elsewhere opposed tyranny. Francisco Ruiz and Jose Antonio Navarro were from San Antonio de Béxar, which had become a battlefield in this struggle for independence. These men understood that the promises of liberty transcended national borders and nativity. Lorenzo de Zavala, a

native of the Yucatan, agreed. He was an important national politician who had been double-crossed by the Centralists potentates in Mexico City, and Santa Anna in particular, and considered Texas as a natural base of opposition.

On March 2, 1836, this collection of risk takers announced the creation of a new nation: The Republic of Texas. The question that hung in the air that day was what kind of country would it be? In 1776, the men who declared American independence in Philadelphia two generations before had the *idea* of what their nation might be. Father Hidalgo had issued his *Grito de Dolores* in favor of Mexican independence and pronounced “death to bad government.” The signers at Washington on the Brazos, heirs to these traditions, knew exactly what they demanded. Here, in the lands stretching from the Red River to the Rio Grande, and from the Sabine to the great unknown to the west, these ideals would be tested in the field. On April 21, 1836, General Sam Houston led these bold Texians to victory on the battlefield of San Jacinto and made good on their claim.

The emerging Republic of Texas had plenty of problems as it attempted to live up to these promises. Deeply indebted to American creditors, the country claimed a wide swath of territory from the mouth of the Rio Grande to present day Wyoming. There were too few people facing too many problems. Texans hoped the United States would soon annex their republic before the new country collapsed. Mexico, meanwhile, refused to recognize the new nation and threatened war with the U.S. should they make such a move.

Annexation would not come as easily as the Texans hoped. The Republic had patterned its constitution after those of North Carolina and Tennessee where slavery was legal. This complicated annexation for the American government which could not admit Texas without upsetting the fragile balance existing between slave and free states. As a result, the new Republic

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of Texas struggled for nearly a decade while leaders like Sam Houston, Mirabeau B. Lamar and Anson Jones navigated problems ranging from Indian affairs, invasions by Mexican forces, and a ballooning national debt. Even so, Texas persisted. “Texas has yet to learn submission to any oppression, come from what source it may,” Houston declared.

Their stubbornness paid off. Skillful political maneuvering in Washington D. C. finally led to the annexation of Texas in 1845. This, as Mexico had promised, led to a war between the United States and the Republic of Mexico. The 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, ending the conflict, forced Mexico to give up one third of its territory, including Texas in exchange for \$18 million dollars, an amount worth about \$600 million today. As the United States struggled with the question of whether the newly acquired territory would be slave or free, the Compromise of 1850 resulted in Texas losing its western third (what is now New Mexico, Colorado, and Wyoming) to pay off the debt the new state brought with it.

At last, solvent and safe as part of the United States, Texas grew rapidly. Southerners, moved in, as did Germans, Poles, Czechs, and other Europeans. Their arrival, however, came at the disadvantage of the indigenous peoples and further marginalization of the Tejanos in and around San Antonio and South Texas. In this process, what had been a diverse borderland became an extension of the American South. Enslaved labor accounted for a third of Texas’s 600,000 inhabitants by 1860.

When the southern states seceded from the United States and formed the Confederate States of America in 1861, Texas joined them over the objections of legendary leaders like Sam Houston and J. W. Throckmorton. Many Tejanos and Germans and Eastern Europeans opposed slavery and the Confederacy, and often served in Union regiments. Tens of thousands of Texans fought for the South. Some served as enthusiastic volunteers, while others joined after

conscription became law and denied them the option of staying at home. Texans fought on nearly every Civil War battlefield, but especially in Louisiana. One in five Texas Confederates died in the conflict. The last battle of the Civil War—little more than a heated skirmish—was fought in Texas at Palmito Ranch a month after the surrender at Appomattox. On June 19, 1865, U. S. officials in Galveston declared the end of the war and announced the freeing of all slaves. It is a date which is still celebrated among African Americans as Juneteenth.

Through it all, the state emerged defeated but relatively untouched as no major battles occurred here. Soon U.S. occupation forces finally moved into Texas to bring it back into the United States. Some of the newcomers wondered why they bothered. One disappointed commander remarked, “If I owned Hell and Texas, I would live in Hell and rent out Texas.” Like many who came, this officer saw no promise or future in the Lone Star State.

In many ways, the American Civil War, and the decades after, helped craft modern Texas. Reconstruction introduced Texans to a constitution in which the government in Austin was dominated by a pro-Union governor and his cabinet, a constitution opposed by many of the ex-Confederates. It also gave rights to a newly freed African American population who, with the help of the northern Freedmen’s Bureau, took advantage of their chance at education and self-government.

With the end of Reconstruction in 1876, when given an opportunity to overhaul its state constitution, pro-Southern white Texans responded by creating a weakened government while defending the concept of states’ rights as expressed in the Tenth Amendment of the U.S. Constitution. As the state recovered, the Comanche Empire collapsed. Commercial hunters killed off the American bison nearly to extinction although many Texans lobbied to have the buffalo protected by law. Bold stock raisers turned long-distance cattle drives into a lucrative ranching

industry. Railroads soon spread a steel web across the state, and even the great expanse of West Texas started to fill with homesteaders as railroads sold alternating sections of land to farmers. By the end of the century, more than 3 million people called Texas home.

Texas was prosperous but was not economically different from the rest of the South. It was an agrarian state like Alabama or Mississippi. Jim Crow laws, legal segregation and ethnic bias against minority groups continued into the new century. Like elsewhere in the United States, there was some population diversity with significant areas of German, Czech, Polish, Italian and other European settlement. The Tejano population remained relatively small and concentrated mostly in San Antonio and the Lower Rio Grande Valley.

Yet, unlike the other states, Texas was huge and seemed full of promise. Promoters had always touted its great potential as a farm and ranch paradise. The idea that everything was bigger in the Lone Star State began to take root. The state government also fostered a probusiness environment. The image of the bold and daring Texan spread across the globe.

In 1901, Texas changed. The discovery of oil, especially at Spindletop near Beaumont, ushered in a period of remarkable transformation in Texas. Farm laborers and cowboys who had struggled as sharecroppers and ranch hands became roughnecks and roustabouts in the ever-spreading oil fields of the state. The state government protected the new industry with laws that favored independent operators over large national corporations. Houston blossomed as the energy capital of the world, while Dallas became a financial center where deals and fortunes were made. The “wildcatter” and the oil derrick became new Texas icons.

Problems in Mexico once again impacted Texas in 1910. The overthrow of President Porfirio Diaz led to a decade-long revolution that ravaged the country and drove thousands of

Mexicans across the border into the United States, especially Texas. New tensions, cross border violence, summary justice, and extralegal executions often at the hands of state officials marked this dark period. The United States also sent troops to Texas to guard the border, and in 1916 even launched a brief raid into Chihuahua from El Paso in search of rebel leader Pancho Villa and in 1916, but with little success.

The new immigrants fueled the booming Texas economy as its population swelled. Texas politicians took center stage in Washington D.C. Men such as Edward House, Sam Rayburn and John “Cactus Jack” Garner impacted U.S. and global affairs. Events surrounding World War I brought a new interest in things Texan as American soldiers were stationed at newly established military bases.

In 1936, Texas made news across the country. At Fair Park in Dallas, the state threw a huge centennial birthday party marking the debut of a new and improved Texas. It reconnected with its revolutionary and republic origins, its cowboy identity, and its growing energy dominance. It may have been a burst of romantic nationalism, but it did much to define the unique Texas identity and showcase the state to the nation and the world. “Texas is neither southern nor western. Texas is Texas,” wrote William A. ‘Dollar Bill’ Blakely, a successful and colorful businessman and politician. Author John Gunther of Illinois wrote in his travelogue *Inside U.S.A.* quipped, “If a man is from Texas, he’ll tell you. If he’s not, why embarrass him by asking?”

Texas was still far from perfect. The presence of racial oppressions such as the White Primary—which effectively barred African Americans from voting—and segregation laws remained vestiges that continued to shadow the Texas identity. Tejano natives and Mexican newcomers alike also faced discrimination.

World War II brought more prosperity, more recognition, and more population to the state. By 1940, there were 6 million people calling Texas home. Military bases and defense industries joined oil and agriculture as major employers. Texans did their part in the second World War as well. Names like Oveta Culp Hobby, Audie Murphy, Earl Rudder, Dorie Miller, and Samuel Dealey joined the list of national heroes. Admiral Chester Nimitz of Fredericksburg was the architect of victory in the Pacific Theater.

Texas was changing. After the war, many service members who had enjoyed their time at Texas military bases came back to Texas and stayed. Others planned for a way to return, attracted by its wide-open spaces, and promise of opportunity. One of the veterans who immigrated to Texas was Connecticut native George Herbert Walker Bush who had flown bombing missions over the Pacific Ocean from the deck of the *USS San Jacinto*. He and his family were not alone in the move—the state increased its population by another million by 1950 and added another 2.5 million a decade later for a total of 9.5 million Texans.

The Lone Star State also embraced the military as a permanent part of its landscape during the Cold War. Many of its communities hosted hundreds of thousands of newcomers in uniform from across the county. San Antonio, El Paso, Fort Worth, Abilene, and Corpus Christi and many smaller towns hosted bases and enjoyed the influence of new residents.

Texas still had plenty of detractors. Edna Ferber wrote *Giant*, which many considered an unflattering novel about the state. When the book became a movie starring Rock Hudson, James Dean, and Elizabeth Taylor, Texans embraced the over-the-top portrayal of the state. John Bainbridge, in his 1961 book *The Super Americans*, described Texas as a land of wealthy, boastful, and boorish people but conceded that many were also optimistic, friendly, and

pragmatic. To this day, the caricature of the outlandish, loud, and self-important Texan has become a staple of American popular culture.

Even so, Texas reached for the stars. With the help and influence of Vice President Lyndon B. Johnson, in 1961, the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) created the Johnson Space Center. One of the salient features of the Houston area that made it a good home to America's emerging space program was its well-trained work force and its institutions of higher learning. Rice University, although segregated at the time, and ineligible for government contracts as a result, rose to the challenge. "Rice University stands at the crossroads," attorney Tom Martis Davis argued in a suit to integrate the school. "It can go to the moon, or it can return to the nineteenth century." The school indeed opened its doors to all students. As a result of this progressive vision, the first word spoken from the moon was "Houston."

The spirit of change was also felt in Texas during the 1960s. The Civil Rights Movement swept across the country and African American Texans who had shown grit and grace in the face of adversity for more than a century became active participants. Congresswoman Barbara Jordan of Houston became instrumental in using the levers of political power to help the movement along. After the assassination of President John F. Kennedy in Dallas in 1963, Texan Lyndon Baines Johnson took over the presidency and became a tireless advocate of what he christened "The Great Society." He promised equality and opportunity for all Americans.

As the nation changed, so did its politics. The South, once solidly Democratic, shifted toward the Republic Party over the next few decades. Texas, which had long been solidly, if conservatively, Democrat since 1846, followed the defection toward the Republicans. The 1970s saw this shift gather momentum. By 1990, George H. W. Bush, a Republican, was president of

the United States. Four years later, his son, George W. Bush, was governor of Texas and he too became president of the United States in 2000.

Texas continues to grow. Its population is more than 30 million and may double again in the next decades. Houston is the fourth largest city in the nation, San Antonio is seventh, Dallas is ninth, Austin is eleventh, and Fort Worth is thirteenth. Once small towns like New Braunfels, Leander, and Frisco are now among the fastest growing in the country. Over the last two decades, Texas has led the nation in exports while producing nearly a tenth of the nation's total economy. In fact, Texas is the eighth largest economy on earth, ahead of nations like Russia and Canada. It remains a preferred place to start a business, own a business, or move a business and is attractive to investors. It also leads the country in agriculture, aerospace, energy, financial services, high tech, and tourism. People are interested in coming to Texas, and four out of five that do come will stay here for a lifetime. Texas will continue to diversify its economy as current and emerging technologies create new opportunities.

This growth brings with it several challenges. Shepherding natural resources, especially water, will become critical in this thirsty state. It will soon become the most populous state in the U.S. and as such will continue to have a huge impact on American politics, a power that must be wielded with prudence and wisdom. Demographics are of interest as well. Some eighty percent of Texans today are either White or Hispanic in about equal numbers—while African Americans compose another twelve percent. Nearly six percent are from Asia. The third most spoken language in the Lone Star State is Vietnamese, and fourth is Mandarin, the fifth is Tagalog. Can all these diverse voices find their place in this great story? This is the challenge that faces Texas today.

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“You don’t just move into Texas,” wrote journalist Manny Fernandez of the *New York Times*. “It moves into you.” This state is a mix of remembering the Alamo, watching a rodeo, dancing to conjunto, and busting a rhyme, all with a touch of tuxedo and an aria by Vivaldi. It is barbecue, *barbacoa*, chicken fry and *schnitzel*. We are a people of many places united by a shared identity. The hope is that all Texans understand what they are receiving—what they are building upon—as they put their own stamp on the story. Texas has always been a borderland, inhabited by people who now share a common story. This tale is far from perfect, like most human enterprises. Even so, it is full of optimism, energy, grit and gumption that sets a bold example for the rest of the nation and the world.

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