

NARRATIVE TEXTS

African American Texans

Many Africans who arrived in Texas before 1860 were brought in as slaves; others came as free people, indentured servants, or escaped slaves. Whatever the case, their story is linked directly to Spanish and Anglo-American settlement which largely defined Texas.

Most of the first Africans in the New World were brought by European entrepreneurs. Although the Spanish did enslave Indians in the service of agriculture, mining, and personal needs, as the natives died of overwork or disease or chose to move on, the Europeans began kidnapping Africans to fill their places. Significant numbers of Africans were soon to be found in all reaches of the Spanish empire, but few in the frontier province of Texas. Many of these were of mixed heritage, and some individuals bought or were granted freedom. Spanish law, unlike later United States law, allowed freed people all legal rights except government office employment.

At the time of the Mexican Revolution of 1821, the new government technically made slavery illegal. Anglo-Americans who chose this decade to enter Texas from the east brought in “indentured servants” around the edges of Mexican law. After the Anglo-American revolution of 1836, Texas became slave-holding territory for the next quarter century.

And in all these years, whether legally possible or not, some blacks became free, and a few came as freedmen...a very few.

Also, in all of these years, individuals of African heritage distinguished themselves as soldiers, explorers, educators, builders, and settlers.

Most African American residents of Texas today—over 12 percent of the total population—originated from blacks brought by Anglos before 1860 largely to East Texas, then an agricultural extension of the United States’ South, or they came for economic reasons in contemporary times.

The distribution of blacks in Texas reflects this story: most live in the southeast



Black cowboys on the Rio Grande Plain, c. 1900



John Dunn, Carson Wallace, Daniel Webster Wallace, and Charlie Hale preparing to ship cattle at the Silver Creek Ranch, Mitchell County

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quadrant of the state, many of these still rural, and in all metropolitan areas.

African Americans in Texas, neither a single people nor a group with definite borders, have an immensely interesting history and possess a story that has been a large part of Texas.

The villa of San Antonio de Béxar—under several names and often with nearly the rank of provincial capital—was always home to blacks who engaged in jobs from agriculture to blacksmithing, teaching to selling merchandise. The Spanish, unlike later Anglos, accepted the facts of intermarriage and individual accomplishment without denying the necessity of slavery.

Most individuals had the hard task of crossing from slavery before the Civil War to technical freedom thereafter. Many blacks found military service a logical career. In Texas, and in much of the post-Civil War West, the Buffalo Soldiers became a frontier tradition. Black soldiers of the 9th and 10th Cavalries and the 24th and 25th Infantries protected settlement areas against Indian and renegade attack until near the turn of the century, serving Texas and the western frontier with honor and distinction (earning 13 Medals of Honor).

And a single man could become a cowboy. Many did, and a few eventually owned their own ranches and herds.

Also, after the Civil War, black families proved durable enough to weather the restrictive civil laws that replaced literal slavery for the next three generations. The tradition of sharecropping provided a bridge for some African Americans to a future not imagined by earlier generations, black *or* white, while others had brought with them skills such as metalworking and pottery making or had learned a trade under slavery and could practice it with profit. After June 19, 1865, Emancipation Day in Texas and a day still celebrated, men could set themselves up as weavers, potters, blacksmiths, masons, and carpenters. Today, no field of modern human endeavor lacks the names of African Americans.



"A" Troop, 10th Cavalry, U.S. Army, c. 1890—Buffalo Soldiers



*Opera singer and actor Jules Bledsoe, when he was appearing in *Showboat* at the National Theater in Washington, D.C., February 1930—Born in Waco, Bledsoe studied music in Chicago, Paris, and Rome. After his first Broadway hit, *Showboat*, he sang in Europe and became well known. In his career he performed in operas, musicals, and motion pictures; he was also a pianist and composer. Bledsoe was just 45 years old and at the peak of his career when he died unexpectedly in Hollywood in 1943.*