

NARRATIVE TEXTS

German Texans

Texans of German birth or descent have, since the mid-19th century, made up one of the largest ethnic groups in the state. By 1850 they numbered five percent of the total population—a conservative count. Now more than 17 percent of the population claim German heritage.

Germans who chose Texas as a home were, in the migrations from 1830 to 1900, anything but a uniform group. Early emigration came from a land of provinces and duchies, not a unified Germany, and from many backgrounds.

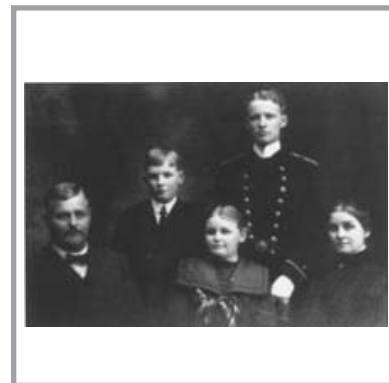
Many came. Most were peasants but not poor. This majority was laced with artisans, academicians, and professionals. Some were political refugees; a few fled religious persecution—families and individuals believing simply that their full economic and social potentials could not be realized in Europe.

But colonists they were. Typically, small groups of families living closely in Europe came to Texas, where they settled, again, as small groups living together. Most arrivals set up as farmers, the first near such places as Industry, Cat Spring, and Rockhouse.

Subsequent publicity about Texas and the republic's independence drew the attention of minor noblemen in the German states to the idea of investing in Texas. These noblemen were interested in philanthropically helping the German rural class but also wanted to find a source of raw materials. They may have hoped to develop political influence in a new country, and most certainly counted on personal profit. Their efforts, financially disastrous for them, did bring in more than 7,000 immigrants.

Many of the German colonists settled to the north and west of the Austin County Germans. Thus, a "German Belt" was created, stretching from Texas's Coastal Plain to the Hill Country, including the larger towns of New Braunfels and Fredericksburg.

German immigrants, attracted to colonial settlement in appreciable numbers and relatively isolated from others—the necessities for cultural preservation—maintained certain customs and most of the language.



Chester W. Nimitz (in his U.S. Naval Academy uniform) with his family



The German-English School on South Alamo Street in San Antonio, c. 1895

NARRATIVE TEXTS

Some, of course, dreamed of a New Germany...which did not come to pass; the Germans were not of a single culture.

For a time, the Pedernales River valley was known as the home of dancing and drinking Germans, the Lutheran and Catholic farmers who liked recreation. The upper valley of the Guadalupe was home to a good number of intellectuals and political refugees. Many of these were “free thinkers” or even, to the horror of conservative neighbors, atheists. The Llano valley was peopled by German Methodists, among other stern types, who avoided drinking and fraternal gatherings.

Professors and farmers came, the latter in the majority; Jews and Protestants and Catholics; those welcoming slave ownership and abolitionists; many who supported the Union in Civil War times and—mostly—those who sided with the Confederacy.

During the American Civil War, German immigration ceased, then doubled after the conflict. Later arrivals did not settle in the Texas Hill Country or much in the German Belt. They chose the cities. In 1880 the census declared that San Antonio’s population was one-third German.

But by 1900 German emigration slowed. Then, two world wars brought immigration to an end except postwar migration to cities. Prejudice generated by the world wars also worked against the use of spoken German in Texas, including German-language publications. More general causes—depopulation of rural areas and inevitable intermarriage—reduced German prominence.

After 1900 Texas Germans entered virtually every occupation in the state, and some names, such as rancher Robert J. Kleberg and Admiral Chester W. Nimitz, became very well known indeed.

A central part of Texas’s Hill Country is still called the “German Hill Country.” German food, family customs, and remnants of architecture and of the language remain.