

NARRATIVE TEXTS

Tejanos

European Spaniards and their descendants were the dominant peoples of Texas for more than three centuries—from the beginning of the 16th century until well into the 19th. The Spanish changed New World history, native peoples, and even the land far more than others.

The Spanish came to Mexico and Texas as conquerors, soldiers, settlers, and priests. Other than exploitation of natural resources (gold, silver, timber, fibers) and human resources (Indian slaves), the Spanish goals were to impose religious and social orders on the natives and to set up a civilization matching what had been accomplished in Europe.

Texas remained a frontier under the rule of the Spanish, but the conquerors were relatively successful, considering their small numbers.

To some degree, the Spaniards were changed by the land and the people they found. Spanish religion and temperament condoned (and even encouraged) mixed marriages. Spanish law generally extended social rights to all free or freed people, whatever the mix of European or Indian or African, although government employment of any rank was reserved to those of “pure” Spanish blood.

In the New World, the Spanish Indians, the *mestizos*, quickly became numerous and important. People in Texas were called, and called themselves, Spaniards, Mexicans, Tejanos, Texas Mexicans, and, in recent years, Hispanics, Latinos, Mexican Texans, Mexicanos, Mexican Americans, la Raza, Chicanos, and, again, Tejanos. One single name has never been accepted by those of Spanish-Mexican-Indian descent, and some names have been socially or politically rejected by nearly all of such descent.

But by whatever name, the first Spaniards, later to be Mexicans, came to change things...and did.

Into a land that was, in anthropological terms, in a Stone Age, the Spanish brought European horses and armor and firearms, the ranching and farming traditions of Spain, legal



Misión San José, San Antonio, 1860s



Activist Emma Tenayuca in front of San Antonio's City Hall leading a demonstration, c. 1937

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and religious systems of tremendous power, architecture, printing, a common language and literature, European crafts and arts, as well as cows, sheep, donkeys, goats, chickens, and pigs, and grapes, peaches, and other crops.

Things would never be the same again.

The Spanish discovery of Texas and the first good map of the coast are attributed to Alonso Álvarez de Piñeda, who skirted the Gulf in 1519. Álvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca was shipwrecked on the coast of Texas in 1528. He and three companions survived to tell and write about the Texas region.

The Spanish searched Texas for gold and silver such as they had found in Mexico and Peru, but they were profoundly disappointed by the lack of treasure in Texas. Nevertheless, they extended the mission and presidio system northward and formed colonization schemes. Few succeeded for long.

Spanish efforts resulted in only three permanent settlements in the province of Texas: San Antonio (1718), La Bahía (Goliad, 1749), and Nacogdoches (1779). Los Adaes, in present Louisiana, was the provincial capital for a time, and Laredo (1775) was originally in Coahuila. Present trans-Pecos Texas now includes early settlements near El Paso dating from 1682, but at the time, that area was in the province of Nueva Viscaya.

Thus, the Spanish government moved several thousand settlers and soldiers and missionaries to the few villas and a central ranching region stretching from San Antonio de Béxar to Goliad.

Still, the Spanish were few. Settlement in Texas was not popular, and the road from the interior of Mexico was a hard one. The missions, villas, and presidios were largely self-sufficient in terms of agricultural products but were dependent on imported manufactured goods—weapons, cloth, gunpowder, sugars, and wine.

Texas became known as a cattle-raising province. A few big ranches and the missions, the major landowners at the time, raised large and profitable herds. Trail drives were organized in the 1770s as *vaqueros* moved cattle to Mexico and east to Louisiana. The latter route was in

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support of the Spanish on the Gulf Coast, who found themselves on the unlikely side of Anglo settlers in the American War of Independence against Britain.

Frontier areas, when not very well supported by a central government months away, are ripe for revolution, and by 1800 the Spanish empire was tottering. Citizens of mixed blood were beginning to do more than just resent the rule of the “pure” Spaniard.

Conditions made Texas a battlefield. In 1811 revolution against Spain erupted as Captain Juan Bautista de las Casas convinced the presidial troops at Béxar to overthrow the local government. This effort lasted but a few weeks. The next year José Gutiérrez de Lara entered Texas with some Anglo-American backing and a small revolutionary army, and, for less than a year, Texas had an independent government. But Spain’s royalists once again took over and ruled until 1821, when Mexico itself, including Texas, threw off the leadership of the ageing empire.

As a Mexican state, Coahuila y Tejas had a short but significant life. Even as a Spanish province, most of the people in Texas were natives of Mexico, if not born in the province itself. They were the ones who had built the villas and ranches, the schools and churches. They had no more tendency to look to central Mexico than they had to Spain. They were of independent mind. Although the word was not used in colonial times, they were *Tejanos*.

Mexico and Spain had created a society of Tejanos in Texas that was adaptable and productive. Yet this frontier culture was no match for the future competition with Anglo-Americans, who came from the United States in greater numbers and possessed a better technology in terms of communications and weaponry. Within two years of Mexico’s independence from Spain, significant numbers of Anglos were allowed to enter Texas, and once the door was opened, it could not be closed.

Mexico established a congenial constitution in 1824, but a few years later Antonio López de Santa Anna rejected it in his rise to power. Some Tejanos stood with Anglo-

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Texans in opposing the dictator. (The majority of Tejanos simply tried to keep out of harm's way.) Soon, another revolution was in full cry.

As Santa Anna's armies initially overran Texas, they were often brutal in their treatment of Tejanos, even though they were their countrymen. Tejanos died at the Alamo and served at San Jacinto. But after the successful Texas Revolution, many Anglos hated everything Mexican and made no distinction between Tejanos and Mexican nationals. Many Tejano families left for Mexico after the revolution of 1836.

Exceptions there were. José Antonio Navarro served in the congress of the republic and was a senator in the first two state legislatures. Antonio Menchaca was a mayor pro tem of San Antonio. Francisco Ruiz served as the first Bexar senator to the Texas congress. Juan Seguín led a cavalry unit protecting Sam Houston's army and reentered San Antonio after the retreat of the Mexican army. He gave the funeral oration for the slain Alamo defenders.

But the political dance of the United States and the Republic of Texas called for a merger. And with the merger came new conflict. The war of 1846–1848 between Mexico and the United States, enthusiastically supported by the new State of Texas, established expanded borders for Texas that the republic could not have defended and widened the gap of hate between the people of Mexican descent and the Anglo-Americans.

Many Tejanos left for Mexico. For some 60 years, emigration from Mexico nearly ceased, and the new state became literally Anglo in influence, head count, culture, and language.

Some Tejanos stayed in spite of prejudice, theft of their land, and relegation to "second-class citizen" status. Descendants of earlier arrivals managed a life in San Antonio and El Paso, and families stayed on the South Texas ranchlands they called home. But they were few and no longer in economic control.

Yet, from the turn of the 20th century, Mexico was a land of revolution and agricultural disaster. The inability of many people, landowners and laborers alike, to make

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a decent living caused hundreds of thousands of Mexican citizens to enter the United States. In the next 60 years, because they swelled the ranks of necessary, cheap labor, they were welcome. Many Europeans came in the early part of the century for the same reasons.

And the Texas-Mexico border is easy to cross. By the mid-20th century, one out of every five Texans was of Mexican descent—the new Tejanos. By 1990 the count was one in four. And by 2030, demographers estimate that the Anglo and “Hispanic” populations will be about equal—each at some 42 percent of the total number of Texas citizens.

As in nearly every century of Texas history, the European-Spanish-Mexican-Tejano heritage is easy to see. Texas is, after all, not simply an Anglo state of the United States, but also a former state of Mexico and a former Spanish province. This shows not only in the people but in foods, dress, music, customs, laws, language, architecture, beliefs, and religions as well.

Spain brought Europe to Texas, and Mexico brought the New World—the result was the Tejano.