

History of Fort Bend County

1519 Sailing in search of a fabled passage to the Pacific Ocean, Alonso Alvarez de Pineda becomes the first known European to explore the Gulf Coast region, claiming it for Spain and creating the first map of the Texas coast.

1528 Cabeza de Vaca and survivors of the Narvaez expedition shipwreck between Galveston Island and the Brazos River. They encounter the Karankawa Indians. These nomadic natives inhabit the banks of Oyster Creek where they harvest pecans, persimmons and freshwater clams. De Vaca lives with them for several years. A century and a half will pass before a European expedition visits this ground again.

1685 In an ill-fated effort to establish a French colony in Texas, explorer René Robert Cavalier Sieur de La Salle records the Indian name for the Brazos River as Tokohono. La Salle calls it the Maligne.

1690 For the next 130 years, Spanish rulers attempt to colonize Texas with little success. Settlers, adventurers, soldiers and missionaries use an old Indian trail across a low-water point on Oyster Creek to travel from the Gulf Coast to San Antonio de Bexar, the capital of Spanish Texas. Explorers frequently confuse the Colorado and Brazos rivers.

1721 By now, the 840-mile-long Brazos de Dios River, with its three branches, has been given its lasting name by the Spanish who travel and trade here. As the longest, mightiest and most navigable river in the territory, it gives rise to many legends.

November 1820 A year after the Panic of 1819 depletes his fortune and stirs unrest in the states, entrepreneur Moses Austin, the father of Stephen Fuller Austin, travels from Missouri across the deserted wilderness to San Antonio seeking a contract to bring settlers into Spanish Texas. It is an ambitious plan to restore his lost wealth.

December 1820 The Governor of Texas refuses Moses Austin and orders him out of Texas. He has a chance meeting with a long-lost friend, the Baron de Bastrop, who is the vice mayor of San Antonio. The Baron intercedes on his behalf. The governor reconsiders and decides in favor of a contract permitting Austin to settle 300 families in Texas and establish a town at the mouth of the Colorado River. The approved contract is received one month later.

June 1821 Before Moses Austin can begin the colony, he falls ill after a perilous trip home. Two days before dying, he asks his wife Maria to write his son Stephen with his "father's last request to prosecute the enterprise." Stephen Fuller Austin is 27 years old. He has just moved to New Orleans to study law and work at a newspaper to support his family. He had only reluctantly agreed to help his father with his "Texas Venture."

July 1821 Expecting that his father has departed New Orleans with a ship of settlers, Stephen F. Austin is in Natchitoches, La., to meet Spanish officials for an overland trip to the land grant. Austin sets out on horseback for Texas. A rider overtakes the group with word of his father's

death. Writing his mother that "we must resign ourselves to the dispensations of Providence," he travels on to San Antonio seeking approval to assume his father's contract.

August 1821 Austin and his party reach the Brazos River, noting the fertile soil, abundant deer and black bear. Across the river are grassy prairies and buffalo. In San Antonio, they learn of Mexico's new independence from Spain. The governor recognizes Austin as the heir to the contract. He takes on the role of "empresario," or colonization agent. Empresarios contract with the Mexican government to bring Roman Catholic settlers to Texas in exchange for 23,000 acres for each 100 families brought.

September 1821 Austin spends a month exploring between the Lavaca and Brazos rivers for a suitable site. He chooses an area traversed by the Brazos, writing in his journal, "Land is all first rate, plenty of timber, fine water."

October 1821 Back in Louisiana, Austin receives hundreds of letters from people in Missouri, Kentucky and other states with an interest in the colony, which has been publicized in newspapers as far east as Baltimore. "I am convinced that I could take on 1,500 families as easy as 300," he writes to the Texas governor.

November 1821 In New Orleans, Austin begins recruiting, offering settlers thousands of acres apiece for pennies an acre and no money down. By comparison, the U.S. Congress has begun requiring full cash payment up front to purchase public lands, which few frontiersmen can pay. He has no trouble finding volunteers.

November 1821 Austin purchases a 30-ton schooner, the Lively, and outfits it to take the first settlers from New Orleans to the colony. Aboard are nearly 20 men carefully chosen to form the nucleus of the colony. Austin has signed special contracts with them providing free land in exchange for their labors. On November 25, they head for the mouth of the Colorado, where the men are to meet Austin, build cabins, stock supplies and plant at least five acres of corn each.

December 1821 The Lively is blown far off course and spends weeks at sea.

January 1822 In a fateful error, the crew mistakes the Brazos River for the Colorado and makes landing on New Year's Day. With William W. Little and Joseph Polley in charge, the men travel 90 miles upstream. At a clearing on the river's bend, they construct a large log house known first as the "Fort on the Bend," and later, "Fort Bend." When food grows scarce, most of the party returns to the United States, but a few stalwarts remain. In the meantime, Austin searches fruitlessly for the missing Lively party along the coast, concluding they were lost at sea. A handful of settlers have already arrived on the Colorado. Many more are on the way.

March 1822 With colonists expecting to receive their land grants, Austin rides first to San Antonio and then Mexico City to urgently affirm his contract with officials of the new Mexican government. There, political uncertainty forces him to wait for a full year until a stable government is in place to approve his empresario agreement.

April 1822 With no contact between the Lively party and the other Austin colonists, rumors persist that the passengers were drowned at sea or starved by Indians. Some of the original passengers eventually return to Texas and tell what happened.

May 1822 Before the Mexican Congress, Austin claims that there are 100 men settled along the Colorado and 50 at various points along the Brazos. Only eight have brought their families.

August 1822 Fifteen settlers arrive at Fort Bend by summer. With no sign of Austin, the few are known as the "Forlorn Fifteen." Newspapers across the western U.S. carry erroneous reports of Austin's demise by drowning, shooting, shipwreck or Indian attack. Circumstances are dire. Drought devastates crops throughout Texas, and colonists subsist on whatever wild game they can find.

April 1823 The Mexican Congress finally approves Austin's contract. He is cleared to bring the first 300 American households into Texas under Mexican rule. Austin's total charter is 15,000 square miles. It includes the finest agricultural lands in Texas, plenty of fresh water, lumber, grass and game. Along the Brazos, prospects are hopeful. "The settlers are perfectly satisfied and determined to stick," writes one observer. By fall, dry weather and hardships return.

1824 "The Old 300" original colonists begin to settle their land grants. Each married man is eligible to receive a "league," or 4,428 acres, of grazing land and a "labor," or 177 acres, of farm land. To receive the most land, a settler presents himself as both a rancher and a farmer. Most of the Old 300 are from the southern states and intend to raise corn, cotton and cattle as they had back home. Forty-one of the initial land grants are located along the Brazos River in the area called Fort Settlement. Jane Long, the "Mother of Texas" who sewed the Lone Star flag first flown in 1820, receives her league there.

1824 As compensation for his role as empresario of the colony, Austin awards himself 22 1/2 premium leagues of land, including five leagues along Oyster Creek. He will later release these leagues for reissue. Half of his land holdings will be deeded to his New Orleans lender in the venture, and none of it will have cash value for many years. "Whether rich or poor, here I expect to remain permanently," he wrote.

1825 A census of Austin's Colony counts 1,800 inhabitants, including 443 slaves.

1825 Although the best tracts along the Brazos and Colorado are taken, a large amount of unclaimed land remains in the colony. Austin is granted a second empresario contract to locate five hundred settlers on this land and is permitted to open a port of entry at Galveston. He will ultimately be granted five contracts.

1827 Austin joins with two other empresarios in negotiating a treaty with the Karankawas. The Mexican military makes peace with the Tawakonis, Wacos and Comanches. Protecting colonists from Indian raids has preoccupied Austin since 1823.

1828 Elections are held to create the first civil government in the colony under the state constitution of Coahuila y Texas.

1828 Austin gives a league of his land on Oyster Creek to his aide, Samuel May Williams, who names the property Oakland Plantation after the five species of oak trees growing there.

1828 The first recorded flood of the Brazos River erodes the banks along the river's bends and brings down enormous trees.

1829 Two local ranchers drive a herd of 60 cattle from Fort Settlement to the markets of San Antonio, where they hire a butcher and sell the beef. It is the beginning of the local cattle industry.

1830 The Mexican Congress passes the Law of April 6, 1830 prohibiting further empresario contracts and thus halting Anglo American immigration into Texas. Austin writes that it "destroys in one blow the happiness and prosperity of this colony."

April 1833 Delegates from the colony hold a convention where they draft a petition calling for separate statehood and the repeal of the April 1830 law.

June 1833 Brazos River flooding contributes to an outbreak of cholera in the area. Even with frequent flooding and variable water levels, the Brazos is the principal waterway into Texas. It is navigable for 250 miles inland. Steamboats and barges ply this course for the next three decades as travel and commerce increase.

1834 The first school in the settlement opens at Stafford's Point on Oyster Creek. Seven children attend classes in an old blacksmith shop. School adjourns in September when the boys are needed to work in the fields.

1834 Austin carries the colonists' petition for separate statehood to Mexico City where he is imprisoned, without formal charges, for treason. He spends the entire year in prison and is detained for another six months before his situation is favorably resolved. When he returns home in the fall of 1835 the colonists welcome him with a tribute dinner and dance.

1835 Despairing of the chance for security and peace, Austin hopes Mexico will sell Texas to the U.S. He is eager for immigration to increase so Texas becomes more "Americanized." Soon, it does. With the repeal of the Law of April 6, 1830, a thousand immigrants per month begin to arrive at the mouth of the Brazos.

January 1836 As revolutionary fever mounts, the provisional state government dispatches Austin to the U.S. to raise funds for a war effort. He has calling cards printed for the mission, which will take him from New Orleans to Washington, D.C. and New York City. The cards read simply, "Stephen F. Austin, of Texas."

February 1836 A courier rides through the colony bringing a letter from Colonel William B. Travis calling for reinforcements at the Alamo. At Stafford, an 11-year-old girl, Dilue Rose, melts lead and molds bullets for the volunteers going to join Texas General Sam Houston's army.

March 1836 Texas declares independence from Mexico on March 2. News reaches the colony of the March 6 fall of the Alamo. A dispatch from General Houston instructs the settlers to leave. With the Texas army in retreat, the advance of the Mexican army led by General Santa Anna sparks a panic known as the "Runaway Scrape." Families flee for 100 miles or more. Wiley Martin defends the Brazos River crossing at Fort Bend until his troops are maneuvered out of the way and Santa Anna transports part of his army across.

April 1836 Santa Anna is defeated by General Houston at San Jacinto on April 21. When the Fort Settlement colonists return, they find their homes looted, livestock scattered and fields burned.

June 1836 Austin returns to Texas. He fails in a campaign to become the first President of the Republic of Texas when the popular General Houston enters the race two weeks before the September election. Houston wins in a landslide and asks Austin to serve as secretary of state.

December 1836 Stephen F. Austin is stricken with pneumonia and dies at age 43 in the village of Columbia, the first capital of Texas. His body is carried on steamship down the Brazos for burial at his family's plantation at Peach Point. "The Father of Texas is no more! The first pioneer of the wilderness has departed," reads the official notice. All military posts in the republic fire a 23-gun salute, one volley for each county.

1837 Fort Bend County is formed. Jane Long has sold a portion of her league to Robert Handy to develop the town of Richmond, which becomes one of the first cities granted a charter by the Republic of Texas. Long opens a hotel and boarding house in town. She makes her home on Long Plantation outside the city, residing there until her death in 1880.

1838 Fort Bend County elects its first chief justice and county commissioners. Citizens vote Richmond as the county seat.

1838 Samuel Williams transfers ownership of the Oakland property to his brother Nathaniel, who pays just over \$13,000 for it. Nathaniel and a third brother, Matthew, run the plantation and grow cotton, corn and sugarcane.

1839 The first newspaper is published in the county, the weekly "Richmond Telescope." The first church is established in Richmond when a Methodist missionary arrives.

1840 Sugarcane is planted on Oakland Plantation where it flourishes. Sugar from the region is considered superior, containing more juice than the sugarcane in Louisiana. The five-county area is known as the "Sugar Bowl of Texas."

1843 The Williams brothers install a mule-powered sugar mill along Oyster Creek. Many years later, this will become the location of Imperial Sugar, making the company the oldest business in Texas still manufacturing the same products on the same site.

1845 Texas is annexed into the U.S. on December 29 and becomes the 28th state.

1849 The first Fort Bend County courthouse is completed.

1850 Fort Bend County contains 109 farms totaling nearly 11,000 improved acres. It is one of only six counties in the state with a slave majority.

1851 The second President of Texas, Mirabeau B. Lamar retires to Richmond. He builds a plantation home on land purchased from Jane Long.

1852 The Male and Female Academy opens as the first school in Richmond.

1853 The Oakland Plantation is sold to W. J. Kyle and B.F. Terry, two prospectors who earned fortunes in the California gold mines. They rename the property Sugar Land, and it becomes the social center of the area. Within five years they purchase another 8,000 adjoining acres. By 1861 Terry is one of the wealthiest men in the state.

1853 The first train arrives along the first railroad in Texas, which connects Harrisburg, near Houston, and Stafford. It will be two years before the railroad is extended to reach the east bank of the Brazos opposite Richmond.

1855 Forty raw sugar mills operate in the four-county area. Sugar cane replaces cotton as the principal crop on many plantations.

1858 Fort Bend has five ports or landings on the Brazos: Big Creek, Waters, Richmond, Gaston and Randon.

1860 Fort Bend County contains 159 farms totaling more than 20,000 improved acres.

1861 Texas secedes from the Union. B.F. Terry, co-owner of Sugar Land, recruits and leads one of the most famous regiments in the Civil War, the 8th Texas Cavalry known as Terry's Texas Rangers.

1865 At a gathering under a broad oak tree on Palmer Plantation, neighboring slaves first hear that they are freed.

1866 Fort Bend County ranks fourth in the state in cattle assessment, reaching up to 100,000 head.

1871 The Texas Legislature passes a law requiring that state convicts be leased to entrepreneurs as laborers. Sixty convicts are leased to work on Fort Bend County plantations.

1875 Brazos River flooding causes most Richmond merchants to lose their business holdings. Cotton begins to serve as currency, and a tenant-farming system evolves.

1880 After the city of Richmond refuses to give right-of-way, the Gulf, Colorado and Santa Fe Railway extends its tracks to a small community three miles west and builds the Rosenberg Junction depot, named after the president of the railroad, Henry von Rosenberg. New railroad

routes pass through productive farmlands and attract new settlers, many of whom are immigrants from Central Europe.

1883 The new owner of Sugar Land Plantation, E.H. Cunningham, and his neighbor, Littleberry Ellis, combine their acreage and build a 600-ton raw sugar mill which they name the Imperial Mill.

1889 A feud for political control of Fort Bend County culminates in "The Battle of Richmond" on August 16, a gun skirmish between the Jaybird and Woodpecker factions.

1890 Real estate investors try to promote Missouri City to buyers from St. Louis and surrounding Missouri towns, calling it a "land of genial sunshine and eternal summer." Five years later one of the worst blizzards in Gulf Coast history dumps 24 inches of snow on the city.

1894 Wells Fargo Company opens a Rosenberg office. The freight agent handles the rail shipment of all kinds of cargo, from livestock to gold and silver bullion. Local men armed with rifles and pistols are hired to guard shipments at the train depot.

1896 The state's first sugar refinery is built at Sugar Land on the site of the original raw sugar mill dating from 1843. The first white, free-flowing refined sugar is successfully introduced to Texas and the Midwest.

1899 Eleven days of rainfall produce the greatest Brazos River flood on record. Twelve thousand square miles are flooded and 284 people die. Thousands are left homeless. Property damage totals more than \$9 million.

1900 A harsh winter destroys most of the sugarcane crops. Many local farmers stop producing sugar in favor of other crops. The Sugar Land refinery begins importing raw sugar from offshore. Civilian labor is scarce, and the plantation is manned by the largest convict population in the state.

1900 Flooding from the Great Storm at Galveston claims 84 lives in Fort Bend County. Many families are left homeless and destitute.

1900 Electricity comes to Fort Bend County with the creation of the Richmond Electric Company.

1901 Rice farming is introduced in the county. John Miles Frost constructs the first rice canal by damming river waters to irrigate the crop.

1902 The county's first telephone is installed by stringing wire along a fence line between Booth's Trading Store and the Booth home nearby.

1902 The city of Rosenberg is incorporated.

1904 Sugar Land has a seasonal population of 700 people, including 400 convicts working on farms and in cane fields.

1905 Imperial Sugar Company is formed by the Kempner family of Galveston and W. T. Eldridge of Eagle Lake to acquire the properties, fields, sugar mills and refinery of the Ellis Plantation and later, the Cunningham properties at Sugar Land.

1905 Champion potato growers from Kansas and Missouri discover the prized red shell soil around Simonton. The crops they plant quickly establish Simonton as the potato capital of Texas.

1906 The building of the Sugar Land company town begins, including houses, city services, retail stores, a restaurant, lumberyard, rooming houses, a privately owned bank, feed mill, cotton gin and telephone company. These diverse businesses are operated by Sugarland Industries.

1908 A new county courthouse is completed. In 1980 it is placed on the National Register of Historic Places.

1908 The first automobile is driven into Richmond, a one-cylinder, two-seat red Ford with a top speed of 15 miles per hour.

1910 Stephen F. Austin's remains are exhumed from Peach Point and buried with the highest honors at the State Cemetery in Austin.

1913 More than eight miles of levees and 20 miles of drainage ditches are constructed to protect Sugar Land from flooding by the Brazos.

1918 Sugarland Industries sends its chief engineer to California to copy the architectural plan for what is considered the finest school in the country. Sugar Land's first school is built to match.

1918 The community church in Sugar Land divides into four denominations. The company donates corner sites in the city and within three years Catholic, Baptist, Methodist and Presbyterian churches are built.

1919 The Fort Bend County oil boom begins with a gusher at Blue Ridge Oil Field. From this and future drillings, the county will eventually produce more than 450 million barrels of oil.

1919 Bessie Urana of Guy, Texas becomes the first woman to register to vote in the county. She is a 36-year-old mother of eight children.

1920 The discovery of oil turns Rosenberg into a boom town. Its population edges past Richmond's for the first time, 1,279 to 1,273.

1926 The population of Sugar Land grows to 1,500 people living in 465 company homes.

1927 The first hard-surfaced roadway in Texas takes travelers from Houston to San Antonio via Rosenberg.

1928 The county's last sugarcane crop is harvested.

1928 Local drilling activity uncovers vast sulfur deposits. Fort Bend and other coastal counties start producing more than 90 percent of the world's supply of sulfur.

1930 More than 40 percent of Fort Bend County acreage is in farmland. Cotton, corn and sorghum are the principal crops.

1933 The annual Fort Bend County Fair is organized. A site is leased where seven exhibition buildings and a race track are constructed.

1936 The Texas Centennial Commission erects a monument to commemorate Fort Bend's role in the Texas Revolution.

1943 The original Fort Bend County Fairgrounds serves as a POW camp during World War II. The prisoners work at local farms and industries to offset the absence of men who have gone to war.

1945 Albert George and his wife Mamie, granddaughter of Old 300 colonist Henry Jones, create The George Foundation, a private charitable trust benefiting the people of Fort Bend County. The foundation generously funds health care services, education, libraries, museums, parks and recreational facilities.

1946 Richmond, Rosenberg and surrounding school districts join in forming the Lamar Consolidated Independent School District.

1947 The Fort Bend County Library is founded by 12 Rosenberg women. The first radio station begins broadcasting in the county.

1950 For the first time, homesites are offered for private ownership in Sugar Land. Lot prices begin at \$500, and a housing boom results.

1958 Construction begins on the Southwest Freeway which will open Fort Bend County to rapid growth from Houston.

1959 Dulles High School opens, the initial campus from which Fort Bend Independent School District will grow.

1959 Sugar Land, a newly incorporated city, elects its first mayor and city council.

1969 Quail Valley in Missouri City is developed as the first master-planned community in the county. Before the end of the century, Fort Bend will lead the nation with more than a dozen master-planned communities.

1972 Sugarland Industries sells 7,500 acres to Gerald Hines Interests for the development of First Colony. It is one of the largest land sales in Texas history.

1984 Brazos Bend State Park opens on 4,900 acres originally part of the Abner Harris and William Barrett land grants.

1987 The George Memorial Library opens as the first building in a countywide library system.

1990 Over the last 10 years, the population of the county has nearly doubled from 130,960 to 225,421. As the 20th century ends, Fort Bend ranks as one of the fastest growing counties in the United States.

December 2001 One hundred and eighty years after the first colonists built a fort on the bend of the Brazos, ground is broken on Sugar Land Town Square honoring Stephen F. Austin and the history of Fort Bend County.

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