

African American Texans

The lives of African people in Texas have changed dramatically from the sixteenth century to today, and the story of Texas cannot be told without appreciation of the role African Americans have played over the last 500 years. When the Spanish began colonizing the American continent, they brought their cultural and political institutions, including slavery.



In 1529, a man named Estevanico became the first African to come to Texas. He was a native of Morocco, and had been sold into slavery to a Spanish explorer. Arriving in the New World, Estevanico and the rest of his party (including Cabeza de Vaca) were shipwrecked near Galveston Island, captured by a group of Coahuiltecan American Indians, escaped, and trekked across what is now Texas and northern Mexico. He was later killed while traveling to New Mexico.

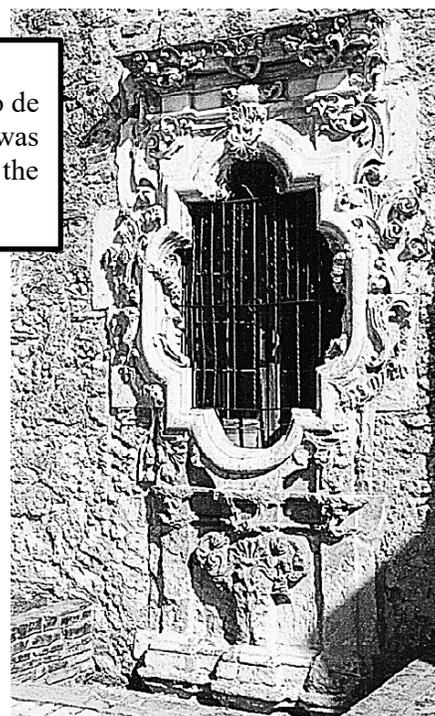
Over the following centuries, while *many* other Africans were brought to New Spain as enslaved people, many free blacks came to Spanish Texas as soldiers, settlers, and craftsmen. These African Tejanos spoke Spanish, were mostly Catholic, and had many of the same rights as Hispanic colonists. In the Spanish borderlands, the characteristics and politics of race and ethnicity were complicated. By the end of the 1700s, African-Spaniards occupied positions in every sector of colonial economic and political life across Texas.

Don Pedro Huizar (1740-1804)

Huizar was a master sculptor, surveyor, architect, farmer, and judge in San Antonio de Bexar. Holding the Spanish title *Don* (meaning “Sir” or “the Honorable”), he was influential in the San Antonio de Bexar community, but is best known for sculpting the exquisite Rose Window at the Mission San Jose Church (right).

When Mexico won independence from Spain in 1821, the new government made slavery illegal but allowed Anglo settlers from the United States to bring slaves into Texas as “indentured servants.” Then, during the Texas Revolution from Mexico in the 1830s, people of African descent joined both sides. Those who spoke Spanish and shared Hispanic culture usually favored the Mexican government. Those who had come from the United States and spoke English usually favored the Texian revolt.

However, the newly established government of the Republic of Texas quickly passed laws to expand slavery based on the racist views of the Anglo politicians. They curtailed the rights of free African Texans, and Texas became slave-holding territory for the next quarter century.

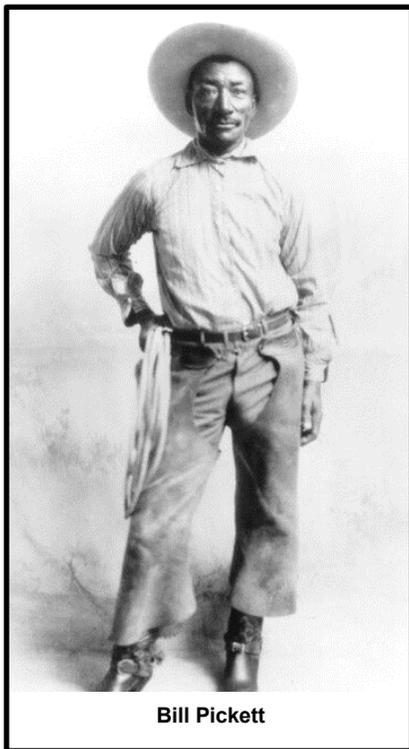


Many slaves in Texas and surrounding Confederate states attempted to escape slavery into Mexico via the Southern Underground Railroad. One of the stops along the way where former slaves could get food and shelter was the ranch of Nathaniel Jackson and Matilda Hicks. In far south Texas near McAllen, these former slaves from Alabama helped people gain safe passage to Mexico.

After the Civil War, emancipation (the end of slavery) finally came to Texas on June 19, 1865. Known as Juneteenth, Emancipation Day commemorates the day that federal troops entered Texas to ensure the freedom of roughly 180,000 people, one third of Texas' population.

Though slavery had legally ended in the 1863, segregation, racism, and violence continued under Jim Crow Laws well into the 20th century. Loopholes like Poll Taxes and literacy tests made it possible for white-supremacist groups like the Ku Klux Klan to perpetuate physical and social violence and terrorism against minority groups.

In the face of these obstacles, African Americans sought new jobs, opportunities, education, and land ownership. Many new independent towns and communities were founded, known as "freedom colonies" or "freedmen's towns." In these settlements, African Americans pursued economic independence, founded religious institutions and churches, and protected their families from the violence of Reconstruction and Jim Crow laws.



Bill Pickett

One of the most lucrative places for African Americans after the Civil War was in Texas' cattle country. Many African Americans in Texas had developed cattle ranching skills, and applied them to the growing demand for beef. These "Black Cowboys" moved large cattle herds across the country, and played a critical role in Texas and in the formation of the West as they moved across the plains with their herds.



When railroads changed the demand for cowboys at the turn of the 20th century, many men used their talents as cattlemen to perform in Wild West shows and rodeos. One of the most famous was Bill Pickett (left). Born in a small community north of Austin, he traveled the world performing with the *Miller Brothers' 101 Wild Ranch Show*. Pickett was the first African American inducted into the National Rodeo Hall of Fame in 1972.

Ranching also provided African American women a way to be independent businesswomen. The Taylor-Stevenson Ranch was established in 1875 near Houston, owned by Ann George (a former slave) and her husband, Edward Taylor. This ranch remains the only African American-owned ranch in Texas maintained by the same family for over one hundred years. Ann George's children were the first African Americans in Texas to go to college, and her granddaughters are honorees in the National Cowgirl Hall of Fame. Today, the 6440-acre ranch is still in operation, run by matriarch Mollie Stevenson, Jr. (right), and is home to the American Cowboy Museum.

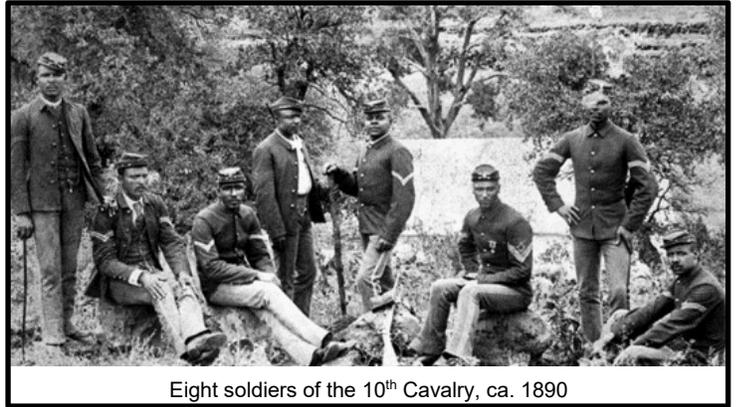


Mollie Taylor Stevenson, Jr.
Owner of Taylor-Stevenson Ranch



The military was another option for African Americans looking for a better life. In 1866, the U.S. government created new army regiments specifically for African American soldiers. In Texas these regiments were known as Buffalo Soldiers. This name likely came from the Plains Indian peoples that the soldiers were commanded to push out of West Texas. It is thought that the soldier's fierce and determined fighting style led the Native American groups to name them after the powerful buffalo.

Stationed in Texas, Buffalo Soldier regiments served in every US war until the Army was desegregated in the early 1950s. Although the Buffalo Soldiers served valiantly, their efforts and sacrifices were not always appreciated off the battlefield. Segregation continued until the Civil Rights Act of 1964, despite the number of military honors awarded to the members of the Buffalo Soldiers during their terms of service.



Eight soldiers of the 10th Cavalry, ca. 1890



Lieutenant Henry O. Flipper (1856-1940)

One of the most famous Buffalo Soldiers stationed in Texas, Lt. Flipper of the 10th Cavalry was the first African American to graduate from West Point (1877), and first non-white officer to lead the 10th Cavalry. He continued his remarkable achievements in civilian life, attaining recognition for his outstanding work in engineering, publishing, and education. Dishonorably discharged from the army for a crime he did not commit, it took more than 50 years for Flipper to be awarded an honorable military discharge and a full pardon. This story, and the many like, not only highlight the discrimination faced by these regiments, but also the resiliency and deep-rooted determination of individuals.

Civil Rights campaigns started to officially organize in the early 20th century to fight against legalized racism and violence. Increasingly living in urban areas, African Americans organized more than 30 chapters of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) across Texas between 1915 and 1930. African American leaders around Texas continue to fight to secure social, political, and economic rights for African Americans as well as other ethnic minorities.

When the Civil Rights Act passed in 1964, it signaled a huge change in Texas politics and business, allowing for more opportunities for advancement in government, employment, as well as recognition for work already being done in industry, culinary arts, sports, science, and education.

Juanita "Momma" Craft (1902-1985)

A noted Civil Rights leader, she was instrumental in organizing 182 branches of the Texas NAACP from the 1940s and early 1950s. She was the first black woman to vote in Dallas in 1944, and worked with the youth of the NAACP to desegregate lunch counters, restaurants, theaters, trade schools, public transportation, North Texas State University, and the State Fair. Her steady and nurturing guidance is credited for the very low amount of violence involved in desegregating Dallas.

"I have no natural children. I have adopted the world."

--Juanita Craft





R. C. Hickman (1922-2007)

As a soldier in World War II, Hickman learned how to take and develop photographs and became an Army photographer. After the war, Hickman documented life in Dallas's black community for 30 years. As a photographer for the NAACP, he documented unequal conditions in black and white schools during black Texans long efforts to end segregation.

"Each time the NAACP took a school district to court that called themselves 'separate but equal,' we proved through my photographs that the schools were certainly segregated, but not equal."

--R. C. Hickman

Beyond politics, African American culture has given Texas some of its most recognizable traditions. Food is a part of celebrations in all cultures. Many Texans have turkey on Thanksgiving, or black-eyed-peas on New Years, and

Juneteenth is celebrated by eating red foods – watermelon, barbecue, red velvet cake, and even some Big Red. There are many tales about why red foods are traditional for this holiday, from a representation of bloodshed during slavery to the celebratory traditions of West African peoples.

Texas Barbecue also gained many of its cuts, flavors, and sides from African American cooking traditions. Restaurants, chop-houses, and rib-shacks across the state owe their ribs, sauces, cornbread, fried okra, cream-corn, sausage, and much more to African American chefs. Barbecue is also credited with helping parts of the state integrate, as patrons of all ethnicities trekked across cities and towns to find the best pit-masters.

Etta Moten Barnett (1901-2004)

Born in Weimar, Texas, Etta Moten Barnett played an important role in the way African Americans, especially women, were portrayed in film and on stage. Famous for portraying "Bess" in Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess* on Broadway, Barnett also appeared in popular films like *Flying Down to Rio* where she defied 1940s stereotypes of black women. Barnett became one of the first African American women to perform at the White House, at the request of Eleanor and Franklin Roosevelt in 1943.

"She gave black people an opportunity to look at themselves on a big screen as something beautiful when all that was there before spoke to our degradation."

-- Harry Belafonte on Barnett



Literature and poetry have historically been use to build narratives of shared experience, community, and resistance of the African American community across the United States. Growing out the New York-based Harlem Renaissance in the 1920s, authors and poets brought the violence and discrimination that they endured to a public forum. The works of Langston Hughes, Maya Angelou, James Baldwin, and Octavia Butler brought together themes of diaspora, community, equality, and hope to the forefront of the national African American narrative. These narratives were important to Texas authors who used them as a foundation on which to discuss the various ways to live blackness in the African American communities of Texas. By drawing on personal experiences from Texas, authors like Celeste Bedford Walker, Francis Ray, Virginia Cumberbatch, and Liara Tamani, among many others, contribute to the state and national literary narrative of African American experience.