



Texas One and All

The German Texans



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

Many came. Most of the Germans attracted by Ernst's letters, and by later colonial ventures, were peasants but not poor. This majority was laced with artisans, academicians, and professionals. Some were political refugees; a few fled religious persecution. All were 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 Friedrich Ernst in 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.

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. Recent census estimates show that over two million Texans claim German descent.

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.

Johann Friedrich Ernst, even if he left the Duchy of Oldenburg just a step ahead of charges of embezzlement, was a born immigrant if anyone ever was. Learning of Stephen F. Austin's Texas colony, he had purchased a tract of land by 1831 and the next year had written letters to his homeland describing Texas as a paradise. He noted the province of Texas, then a part of Mexico, only lacked German industry and genius.



A Sunday house in Fredericksburg.



San Antonio Schützenverein (shooting club), c. 1890

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.

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 post-war migration to cities. Prejudice generated by the world wars also worked against the use of spoken German in Texas, including German-language publication. 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.



Girls in sewing class, German-English School, San Antonio, c. 1895

The Latin Settlements

Many German immigrants to Texas were called “solid peasant stock.” Many were. The first generation largely farmed, but very quickly some of the first and second arrivals sought employment in urban areas. Some settlers came with a variety of skills and quickly engaged in various trades or professions.

A few Germans, however—and they would be known as idealists rather than farmers—established the so-called “Latin Settlements” in Texas. Five settlements were founded by highly educated Germans, almost all younger men, who departed a troubled mid-19th century Europe. The 1848 revolution in Germany, an example of failure in its

power, did add to the reasons for emigration and not necessarily for farmers. Some men who did not otherwise see opportunity in frontier farming became exiles.

Latin, until three generations ago, was an academically common language necessary for higher learning and a sign of a proper and worthwhile education. But where major human goals are to bring in a crop or earn a profit, Latin is no necessity.



The Great Barn on the Wilhelm Ranch, 1904—Mrs. Wilhelm is in the buggy (left), and Clara Wilhelm is in the sidesaddle (third from right).



Rancher Johanna Wilhelm

A small number, therefore, of university students and young professionals who found Europe politically hostile tried their hands on the Texas frontier. Milheim in Austin County, Latium in Washington County, Bettina in Llano County, and Sisterdale and Tusculum in Kendall County were founded.

Bettina is one of the most interesting examples of the effort. Nearly 40 young men, calling themselves Die Vierziger (both in reference to their number and to the troubled 1840s in Europe), subcontracted settlement rights from the German immigration society that managed much land beyond New Braunfels and Fredericksburg. Nearly all of these men were—or had just been—students at Giessen and Heidelberg. Experience they had in architecture, languages, medicine, education, mathematics, and law; they had no experience in farming.

Yet their idea was to establish a communistic agricultural community on the Llano River which would soon attract 200 German families. The settlement was named Bettina after Bettina von Arnim, a German writer and an “ideal woman” to the young men.

Arriving in 1847, the group built two notable structures: a thatched storage shed and a shingled adobe house. In the next year, they managed a corn crop of nearly 200 bushels. By late summer—and with a Texas winter on the imagined horizon—the colonial effort failed.

Some of the young men apparently worked hard; some reportedly sat in the shade of oak trees philosophizing and thinking of pleasant student days. The latter were accused of trying to live according to a perilous maxim: Ede, bibe, post mortem nulla voluptas. (“Eat and drink, for after death there is no pleasure.”) As readers of Horace’s Odes, they remembered Carpe diem, quam minimum credula postero. (“Seize the day; have little trust in tomorrow.”)

Whatever was on their minds, a knowledge of Latin among certain other skills was neither sufficient nor necessary for frontier agricultural success. Almost all of the men drifted away, some to other areas of German settlement, some to urban settings. The name Bettina only remains on a few older maps.

And what was true of Bettina was nearly true of the other settlements. The little communities provided individuals—who were often successful in their academic fields—to places like Houston and San Antonio. Others stayed. Sisterdale, Latium, and Millheim still exist with populations of about 100 (including “newcomers”). Tusculum provided an impetus for present-day Boerne.

At one of the old locations, some have seen and heard a ghost who, beyond doubt, dates back to the settlement days. Ghosts are not unusual in Texas, but this one speaks fluent, academic Latin.



The Marienkirche in Fredericksburg, begun in 1860

Easter Fires

German customs, brought to Texas intentionally or intuitively, are numerous. One of the oldest, perhaps brought by settlers from Westphalia and Lower Saxony, is the custom of lighting bonfires on hilltops as part of a Spring festival.

This distant, pre-Christian custom is as delightfully “pagan” as decorated eggs and trees (later becoming “Easter” eggs and “Christmas” trees). Not only does German influence seem responsible for Christmas trees, but these settlers brought the fires of Spring.

As told in Fredericksburg, the fires date from a first Easter observance in 1847, when Comanche Indians lit signal fires around the German settlement as the colonial leader, John O. Meusebach, negotiated a treaty. In this story, the signal fires scared the children, who were assured by their parents that the flares were nothing more than fires over which the Easter rabbit was cooking eggs for decoration.

Meusebach’s treaty, however, took place a month before Easter in 1847 and the Comanche did not typically light such “signal” fires. The story is more recent.

Perhaps the Easter rabbit needed an advance start in the new land. Perhaps the Comanche did light a fire or two for a reason now unknown. Perhaps. But more than likely, settlers from southern Germany would not have known the custom of the fires and may have been scared by Westphalians out having fun. That’s the other story.

In whatever version, the story is a good one. The fires did become local tradition. In former years, Easter church bells rang Saturday evening, some town lights were darkened, and fires blazed from surrounding hills. Recently, the occasion was part of a large festival, a pageant recalling early German history.

However, largely because of cost, the observance was cancelled in 2005. As in all of Texas, the old traditions vanish.





The German Texans

Name: _____ Date: _____ Period: _____

The “push-pull” theory says that people migrate because things in their lives push them to leave, and things in a new place pull them.

Instructions: Decide what social factors push and pull people. Complete the graphic organizer below using the word bank.

 Social Push Factors	Social Pull Factors 	WORD BANK
		Religious Persecution Close to Family Religious Freedom Lack of School Education Available Far From Family

German Settlers in Texas

Texans of German descent make up one of the largest cultural groups in the state. The 1848 war in Germany caused many to leave their homeland. Some German immigrants came to Texas hoping to have better lives, while others wanted to leave behind narrow beliefs of the rulers. Many were hoping to find jobs, trying to escape overcrowding of their country, or simply seeking adventure in a new land.

John Friedrich Ernst began the German migration to Texas. He purchased land in Austin’s Colony in 1831 and then wrote glowing letters that were published in his hometown of Oldenburg, Germany. These letters made other want to come to Texas.

The largest wave of German immigration occurred in the 1840s when the Adelsverein, The Society for the Protection of German Immigrants in Texas, assisted thousands in coming to Central Texas. These immigrants established the cities of New Braunfels and Fredericksburg.

List some reasons German immigrants came to Texas.

How did John Friedrich Ernst influence German immigration to Texas?

What Texas cities were founded by Germans in the 1840s?

Digging Deeper

Using *Texans One and All: The German Texans*, answer the following questions about why German immigrants moved to Texas and what their life was like in the state.

How many Texans today claim to be of German descent?

Johann (John) Friedrich Ernst wrote letters to his homeland describing Texas. What two things did he say were lacking in Texas?

What types of people immigrated to Texas after reading Ernst’s letters?

What major world events affected German immigration to Texas? Explain why.

How did prejudice against Germans during World War I and II affect German Texans?

Geography Skills

Use your textbook to find the locations mentioned as significant to the German experience in Texas, and label them on the map below.



- Industry
- Cat Spring
- Rockhouse
- New Braunfels
- Fredericksburg
- San Antonio

What German influences do you see in Texas today?

Summarize What You Learned

Write 2 sentences to summarize what you learned about German Texans and social push and pull factors.
