

The Belgian Texans

The story of Belgians in Texas is diverse. Belgium has consistently sent priests, builders, scientists, musicians, professionals, craftspeople, and farmers out into the world. Although never in great immigrant numbers, Belgians and Belgian influence have been notable in Texas.

As part of La Salle's French colonial efforts in 1685, three priests born in Hainaut arrived: Zenobius Membre, Maximus le Clerq, and Anastasius Douay. Membre and le Clerq died in Texas during the Indian attack on Fort St. Louis, but Douay lived to tell Europe his story and the story of La Salle's death.

Juan Banul, a master blacksmith, was born in Brussels but when Belgium was under Spanish rule. Perhaps having a love of frontiers, Banul came to New Spain and moved north to San Antonio de Béxar by 1719.

Banul accompanied the Marqués de Aguayo to East Texas on an expedition to build missions and presidios and stayed until 1723. Back in San Antonio, he did much of the ironwork at the missions of San Antonio de Valero and San José. In 1730 Banul and Maria Adriana García, a Flemish widow, were married. They lived at Valero, later called the Alamo, where Banul ran the blacksmith shop and sawmill.

Much later, in the 1850s, a Belgian stonemason, Theodore Vander Straten, helped repair the Alamo walls so the building could be occupied by the U.S. Army. Army designers, not interested in restoration, added the now-famous curve to the church façade.

Some Belgians arrived with strange stories. Anton Diedrick, walking in Antwerp in the 1840s, came across a murder in progress. The killers turned on him, but instead of murdering their witness, they kidnapped him and literally sold him as an impressed seaman. A virtual prisoner once aboard ship, Diedrick finally escaped in Galveston just in time for the Mexican War.

Speaking only Flemish, he was warmly welcomed by two recruiters for the U.S. Army. They asked his name, but when he began replying in some detail, he was stopped. "Ah, he's Dutch all over," one of the recruiters said. "We'll call him that."

So it was that Anton Dutchallover served in the war, survived, and lost the "all" from the middle of his new name.

Becoming a frontier scout, Dutchover joined Big Foot Wallace as shotgun rider on the infrequent San Antonio-El Paso runs in the 1850s. West Texas was well known for hostile climates, renegade Indians, and bandits, but Dutchover liked it.



Anton (Diedrick) Dutchover and family



Bowling at the Belgian Village in San Antonio c. 1935— (from left) Maurice Verstuyft, Cyril Verstuyft, August Stevens, Frank Bache, and Rene Persyn

He operated a sheep ranch at Limpia Canyon and supplied soldiers at nearby Fort Davis with food. Dutchover remained at the fort when Federal troops departed at the start of the Civil War and was left fully in charge when the occupying Confederates decided to leave. Dutchover, his family, and four civilians hid during a successful Apache attack on the fort but did not abandon their home. In 1867, Federal troops reoccupied Fort Davis and made further Indian raids impossible. Dutchover descendants still live in the area.

A contemporary of Diedrick, but very well known, was Jean-Charles Houzeau, a famed Belgian astronomer and naturalist. The scientist came to New Orleans after being removed from the Belgian Royal Observatory for “outspoken political views.” In Texas by 1858, he first worked as a surveyor, then moved to Uvalde and organized early scientific expeditions.

But the astronomer's outspokenness remained obvious as the Civil War approached. An abolitionist, he aided the escape of notable unionists from San Antonio but soon had to flee, disguised as a Mexican laborer, into Mexico.



Octave Van de Walle's farm on Zarzamora Street, San Antonio, c. 1908.

In December of 1882, however, Houzeau could not resist a return trip to Texas. He led a scientific expedition to San Antonio to observe a locally visible transit of Venus across the face of the sun—in those days a method of measuring time and gravity.

A few Belgians moved into South Texas after 1867 and the fall of Maximilian's Mexican empire. Maximilian, anointed emperor of Mexico by the French, was an unlikely ruler. His wife, Carlota, was Belgian, and a good number of her countrymen had followed the puppet emperor to Mexico. After Maximilian's execution, many Belgians decided on Texas as home. Those from Mexico and other Belgians moved to the Rio Grande Valley, Galveston, and Houston, but San Antonio became Texas's primary area of Belgian settlement.

Although entering many fields of endeavor—Belgians were cooks and bakers, candle and soap makers, restaurateurs and musicians—most in the San Antonio settlement were farmers.

From the last of the 19th century, several Belgian families and descendants founded the famous vegetable farms in western San Antonio. Men such as Van de Walle, van Daele, Persyn, and Baeten made year-round vegetable growing a successful business. The Belgians raised common crops and introduced new ones, including cauliflower and kohlrabi. Today, harvests range from flowers to picante sauce.

And the Belgians observed the “Kermess,” a national fall harvest festival held in mid-August—and in mid-November, if the harvest was good. They also celebrated Belgian independence day on July 21. The Belgium Inn, the Belgian Village, and the Flanders Inn, among several other places, provided the settings for many a gathering, traditional or impromptu. And until recent years, the Belgian sport of bolling was played. A version of the game is still demonstrated annually at the Texas Folklife Festival.

Name: _____ Date: _____ Period: _____

What is Culture?

Take a moment to think about what you have done today. What kind of home did you wake up in? What did you have for breakfast? Did you listen to music on your way to school? If you did, what kind of music did you hear and what language was it in? Your answers to all of these questions help to identify your *culture*.

Culture is a way of understanding the world around you. It is the way of life of people who share similar beliefs and customs. You are not born with culture. You learn it!

Some aspects of your culture are obvious to others around you. Your language, including slang, music, clothing, and food help others to identify you and your culture. Other aspects of culture are less obvious and may only be understood by others once they get to know you. These less visible aspects of culture include your values, religious beliefs, family traditions, work ethic and many more. While these cultural traits may be less obvious to outsiders, they are no less important.

Culture can be a very confusing subject because there are many things that help to define our culture, and it is always changing. Through technology and movement, cultures have spread knowledge and skills from one place to another in a process called *cultural diffusion*. The population of Texas represents over 400 different cultural groups! Everyday people of different cultures interact, share and grow. In Texas there are many great examples of cultural diversity and cultural diffusion.

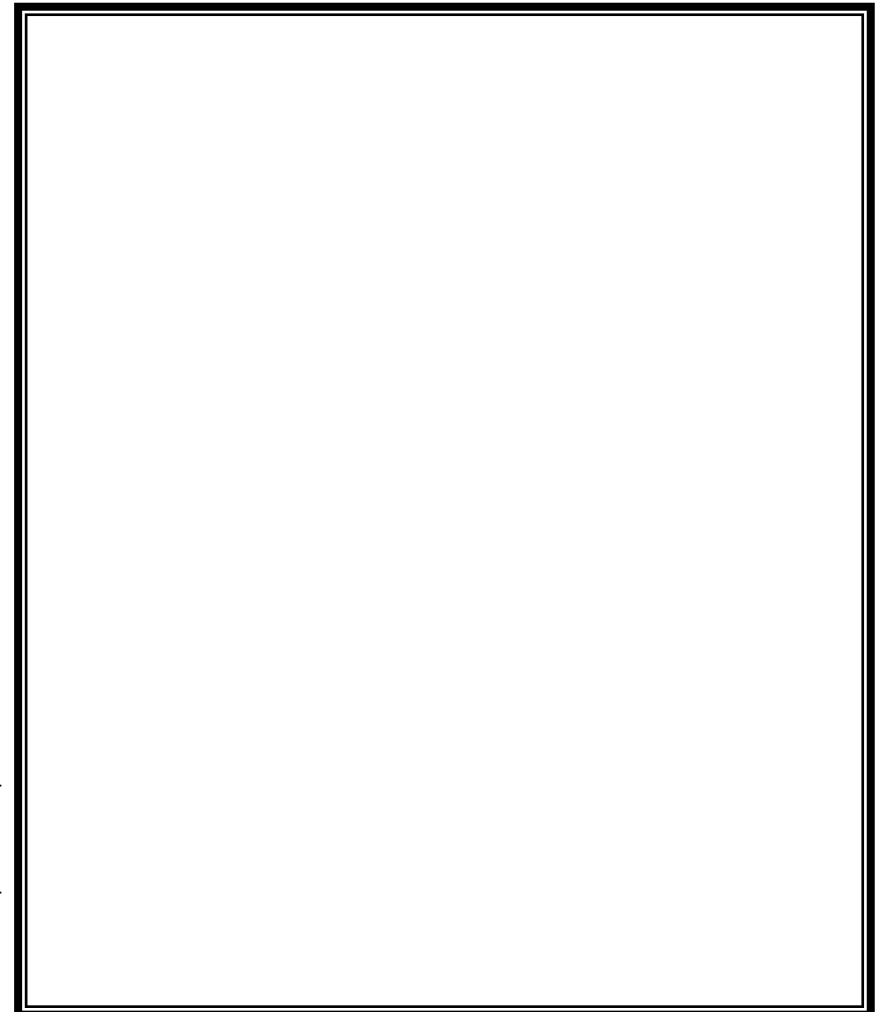
Define culture: _____

How do you learn culture: _____

Why do cultures change: _____

What is *your* culture?

After reading ***What is Culture?*** draw a self-portrait in the frame below to represent aspects of your culture. Be sure to include the parts of your culture that others may be able to see as well as what others cannot see.



Belgian Settlers in Texas

From the earliest days of Texas's independence, Belgium offered friendship to the new nation.

In 1841, the Belgian government sent a representative to explore trade options with Texas.

Later the two nations would develop a political relationship, each establishing an embassy in the other nation. Belgium had an embassy in Austin, and Texas had an embassy in Brussels.

Although Belgians were interested in establishing a colony in the new Republic of Texas, dispute over the Texas border with Mexico and the threats to Texas's independence cooled Belgium's interest.

Notable numbers of Belgian immigrants did not arrive in the state until after Texas was annexed by the United States in 1845. When Belgians arrived in Texas they brought with them their culture and made lasting impacts on the state.

*Using **Texans One and All: The Belgian Texans**, answer the following questions about why Belgians moved to Texas and how they brought their culture.*

What kinds of jobs did Belgians do when they came to Texas?

What crops did Belgians introduce in Texas?

Describe the cultural traditions that Belgians brought to Texas.

How did Belgium show their support for the Republic of Texas?

Why did the Belgians not start a colony in Texas?

When did the first large groups of Belgian immigrants begin to arrive in Texas?

Geography Skills

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



- Fort Davis
- Rio Grande Valle
- Galveston
- Houston
- San Antonio