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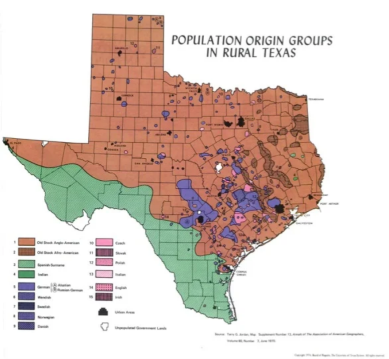
Germans

By: Terry G. Jordan

Published: 1976
Updated: November 29, 2019


POPULATION ORIGIN GROUPS IN RURAL TEXAS
1 Old Stock Anglo-American
2 Old Stock Afro-American
3 Spanish Surname
4 Indian
5 German Ⓐ Alsatian Ⓑ Russian-German
6 Wendish
7 Swedish
8 Norwegian
9 Danish
10 Czech
11 Slovak
12 Polish
13 Italian
14 English
15 Irish
Urban Areas
Unpopulated Government Lands
Source: Terry G. Jordan, Map Supplement Number 13, Annals of The Association of American Geographers, Volume 60, Number 2, June 1970.
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Map of the distribution of different ethnic groups throughout Texas; German is shown in solid purple. Image available on the Internet and included in accordance with Title 17 U.S.C. Section 107.

GERMANS. The largest ethnic group in Texas derived directly from Europe was persons of German birth or descent. As early as 1850, they constituted more than 5 percent of the total Texas population, a proportion that remained constant through the remainder of the nineteenth century. Intermarriage has blurred ethnic lines, but the 1990 United States census revealed that 1,175,888 Texans claimed pure and 1,775,838 partial German ancestry, for a total of 2,951,726, or 17½ percent of the total population. By this count, Germans rank behind Hispanics and form the third-largest national-origin group in the state. Most persons of German descent do not regard themselves as ethnic Germans, however. From their first immigration to Texas in the 1830s, the Germans tended to cluster in ethnic enclaves. A majority settled in a broad, fragmented belt across the south central

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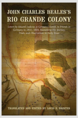


John Charles Beales' Rio

Karte des Staates Texas (aufgenommen in die Union 1846 part of the state. This belt stretched from Galveston and Houston on the east to Kerrville, Mason, and Hondo in the west; from the fertile, humid Coastal Plain to the semiarid Hill Country. This German Belt included most of the Teutonic settlements in the state, both rural and urban.

The German Belt is the product of concepts and processes well known to students of migration, particularly the concept of "dominant personality," the process called "chain migration," and the device of "America letters." Voluntary migrations generally were begun by a dominant personality, or "true pioneer." This individual was forceful and ambitious, a natural leader, who perceived emigration as a solution to economic, social, political, or religious problems in his homeland. He used his personality to convince others to follow him in migration. In the case of the Texas Germans, Friedrich Diercks, known in Texas under his alias, Johann Friedrich Ernst, was the dominant personality. Ernst had been a professional gardener in the Grand Duchy of Oldenburg in northwestern Germany. He immigrated to America intending to settle in Missouri, but in New Orleans he learned that large land grants were available to Europeans in Stephen F. Austin's colony in Texas. Ernst applied for and in 1831 received a grant of more than 4,000 acres that lay in the northwest corner of what is now Austin County. It formed the nucleus of the German Belt.

Ernst wrote lengthy letters to friends in Germany, and through these "America letters" he reached and influenced other prospective migrants. He described a land with a winterless climate like that of Sicily. It had abundant game and fish, was fertile and rich, and awaited the impress of German labor to make it produce abundantly. Taxes were virtually nil, and large tracts of land were available for only a surveyor's fee; hunting and fishing required no licenses. Texas was an earthly paradise. Like other writers of America letters, Ernst stressed the positive aspects of the new land and downplayed or omitted the negative. One of his letters appeared in a newspaper in northwestern Germany and also in an emigrant guidebook and greatly magnified his role in promoting the migration. As a result of Ernst's letters, a small, steady stream of migrants left northwestern Germany for Texas. Within ten years they had established a number of rural communities in the vicinity of Ernst's grant in south central Texas. The chain migration process was a natural result of dominant personalities and their use of emigrant letters. In the process people moved in clusters from confined districts to settle similarly confined colonial areas overseas. In this manner, people from small rural parishes in Germany settled a county or part of a county in Texas. Typically, their neighbors had been neighbors in the Fatherland. The influence of dominant personalities moved easily among people who knew each other, and the decision to emigrate spread quickly through a population by personal contact. The migration set in motion by Friedrich Ernst drew principally from districts in Oldenburg, Westphalia, and Holstein.

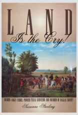
The logo for the Verein zum Schutze Deutscher Einwanderer in Texas, otherwise known as Adelsverein. Image available on the Internet. Image available on the Internet and included in accordance with Title 17 U.S.C. Section 107.

In the late 1830s German immigration to Texas was widely publicized in the Fatherland. The publicity attracted a group of petty noblemen who envisioned a project to colonize German peasants in Texas. The nobles hoped the project

Grande Colony

Karte von Texas

A Map of the Republic of Texas and the adjacent territories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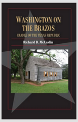
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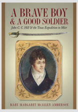
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would bring them wealth, power, and prestige. It could also, they thought, alleviate overpopulation in rural Germany. Their organization, variously called the Adelsverein, the Verein zum Schutze Deutscher Einwanderer in Texas, or the German Emigration Company, began work in the early 1840s. They chose Texas as the site for their colony, in part because of the favorable publicity surrounding the Ernst-inspired migration and perhaps because Texas was an independent republic where the princes might exercise some political control. Though the Mainzer Adelsverein was a financial disaster, it transported thousands of Germans, mostly peasants, to Texas. Between 1844 and 1847 more than 7,000 Germans reached the new land. Some of the immigrants perished in epidemics, many stayed in cities such as Galveston, Houston, and San Antonio, and others settled in the rugged Texas Hill Country to form the western end of the German Belt. The Adelsverein founded the towns of New Braunfels and Fredericksburg.

Portrait of John O. Meusebach. Image available on the Internet and included in accordance with Title 17 U.S.C. Section 107.

Most of the German immigrant clusters came from west central Germany, particularly Nassau, southern Hanover, Brunswick, Hesse, and western Thuringia. The nobles focused their advertising and recruitment on these provinces, their home districts. John O. Meusebach, for example, entered Texas as one of the leaders of the Adelsverein, and some thirty-four villages in his home county, the Dillkreis in Nassau, contributed to the migration. The chain-migration process in the Adelsverein movement drew on both the local and provincial levels. Some farm villages lost a large part of their population to the Texas project. The Hanoverian village of Gadenstedt, for instance, sent at least seventy-three people during the years 1844 to 1847. Twenty other places near Gadenstedt also contributed settlers to the Adelsverein undertaking.

Portrait of Henri Castro. Image available on the Internet. Image available on the Internet and included in accordance with Title 17 U.S.C. Section 107.

At about the same time, another colonization project was launched. The Frenchman Henri Castro directed a project that moved more than 2,000 German-speaking settlers, mainly from clusters in the Upper Rhine Plain of Alsace, to Medina County, west of San Antonio. Castroville, founded in 1844, became the nucleus of the Alsatian colony, though many of the immigrants settled in San Antonio because of better economic opportunities there. The German settlers who immigrated to Texas because of Friedrich Ernst, the Adelsverein, and Castro generally were solid middle-class peasants. They were land-owning families, artisans, and, in a few cases, university-educated professional people and intellectuals. The majority were farmers with a modest experience in trade. The Germans were ambitious farmers and artisans who believed their futures were cramped by the social and economic system at home. They were not poverty-stricken and oppressed. Indeed, they were able to afford the substantial cash investment required in overseas migration.

Portrait of John Kilian. Image available on the Internet and included in accordance with Title 17 U.S.C. Section 107.

By 1850, when the organized projects ended, the German Belt in Texas was well established. America letters and chain migration continued through the 1850s but stopped with the Union blockade of Confederate ports. During the 1850s the number of German-born persons in Texas more than doubled, surpassing 20,000. As the German Belt expanded, settlements entered the sandy post oak woods in Lee County, where some 600 Wends (or Sorbs) from Oberlausitz planted a colony centered on the community of Serbin. The Wends, many of whom spoke German and Sorbian, considered Pastor John Kilian their leader. After the Civil War ended, ships loaded with German immigrants once again unloaded at the Galveston wharves. From 1865 to the early 1890s, more Germans arrived in Texas than during the thirty years before the war. The number probably reached 40,000. Many of them settled in the rural areas and towns of the German Belt. Interestingly, the postbellum immigrants generally avoided the Hill Country.

Germans also settled elsewhere in Texas. By the 1880s German ethnic-islands dotted north central, northern, and western Texas. Ethnic islands failed to develop in East Texas, the Trans-Pecos, and the Rio Grande valley, however. As early as 1881, Germans founded the colony of Marienfeld (later Stanton) on the High Plains of West Texas. It was one of the first agricultural settlements in that part of the state. There the German settlers planted splendid vineyards, only to see them destroyed by drought. Most of the postbellum German colonies thrived, however. The families generally came from areas of the Fatherland that had supplied the prewar colonists. Chain migration, aided by America letters, clearly played a role. However, during these years, larger numbers of colonists from the eastern provinces of Germany began arriving in Texas. Also by the 1890s German immigrants who had earlier come to the midwestern states of Illinois, Minnesota, Iowa, and neighboring states moved to Texas. For example, Germans from Iowa and nearby states, sponsored by the Catholic Church and the Flusche brothers, founded a German colony at Muenster in North Texas. By the 1890s sizable German elements had appeared in Texas cities, particularly in San Antonio, Galveston, and Houston. As late as 1880 the population of San Antonio was one-third German. By then a greater percentage of Germans lived in towns and cities than was true of the Texas population at large. German immigration to Texas tapered off during the 1890s. Germans created new ethnic islands as late as the 1920s, but they were peopled from other areas in Texas, particularly the German Belt. Second and third generation German-Texans looking for cheap land flocked westward until the Great Depression halted the movement. Since 1930 the extent of the German-settled area has changed very little, though a considerable post-World War II German immigration was directed to Texas cities.

Portrait of Gustav Schleicher. Image available on the Internet and included in accordance with Title 17 U.S.C. Section 107.

Portrait of Charles A. Schreiner. Image available on the Internet and included in accordance with Title 17 U.S.C. Section 107.

Spoetzl Brewery in Shiner, Texas. Image available on the Internet and included in accordance with Title 17 U.S.C. Section 107.

The annual Easter Fire in Fredericksburg, Texas. Image available on the Internet. Image available on the Internet and included in accordance with Title 17 U.S.C. Section 107.

The Germans who settled Texas were diverse in many ways. They included peasant farmers and intellectuals; Protestants, Catholics, Jews, and atheists; Prussians, Saxons, Hessians, and Alsatians; abolitionists and slaveowners; farmers and townsfolk; frugal, honest folk and ax murderers. They differed in dialect, customs, and physical features. A majority had been farmers in Germany, and most came seeking economic opportunities. A few dissident intellectuals fleeing the 1848 revolutions sought political freedom, but few, save perhaps the Wends, came for religious freedom. The German settlements in Texas reflected their diversity. Even in the confined area of the Hill Country, each valley offered a different kind of German. The Llano valley had stern, teetotaling German Methodists, who renounced dancing and fraternal organizations; the Pedernales valley had fun-loving, hardworking Lutherans and Catholics who enjoyed drinking and dancing; and the Guadalupe valley had atheist Germans descended from intellectual political refugees. The scattered German ethnic islands were also diverse. These small enclaves included Lindsay in Cooke County, largely Westphalian Catholic; Waka in Ochiltree County, Midwestern Mennonite; Hurnville in Clay County, Russian German Baptist; and Lockett in Wilbarger County, Wendish Lutheran. Because of their diversity, Texas Germans had a varied impact in achievements and influence in the state. They distinguished themselves in many professions and activities-Chester W. Nimitz in the military, Robert J. Kleberg in ranching, Gustav Schleicher in politics, and Charles A. Schreiner in retail business. Many German settlements had distinctive architecture, foods, customs, religion, language, politics, and economy. In the Hill Country the settlers built half-timbered and stone houses, miles of rock fences, and grand Gothic churches with jagged towers reaching skyward. They spoke a distinctive German patois in the streets and stores, ate spiced sausage and sauerkraut in cafes, and drank such Texas German beers as Pearl and Shiner (*see* PEARL BREWING COMPANY, *and* SPOETZL BREWERY). They polkaed in countless dance halls, watched rifle competition at rural *Schützenfeste*, and witnessed the ancient Germanic custom of Easter Fires at Fredericksburg. Neat, prosperous farms and ranches occupied the countryside.

German cultural influence in Texas reached a peak in the 1890s. The settlers had survived the difficult years of pioneering, and their relative isolation had preserved much that was German. In the years that followed, acculturation took a heavy toll. Two world wars and the associated anti-German prejudice damaged the interest in German folkways and curtailed the use of the German language. After the early 1900s the rural German communities received no additional immigrants from German Europe, and Anglo-Texan culture increasingly penetrated the Teutonic rural world. Rural depopulation, intermarriage, and modern communications increasingly obliterated rural German Texas. In the twentieth century, German immigration was directed almost exclusively to the cities of Texas. In these urban areas, German culture declined rapidly. The older German ethnic sections in such cities as San Antonio broke up as prosperous third and fourth generation Texas Germans flocked to the suburbs. King William Street (*see* KING WILLIAM HISTORIC DISTRICT), once the most affluent German neighborhood of San Antonio, lost most of its German-American residents. German-language schools also went into decline. In the early 1950s the thriving German-language press, vital to cultural survival in a literate society, fell silent, signaling the end of an era.

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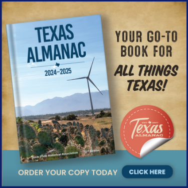

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