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Gillespie County

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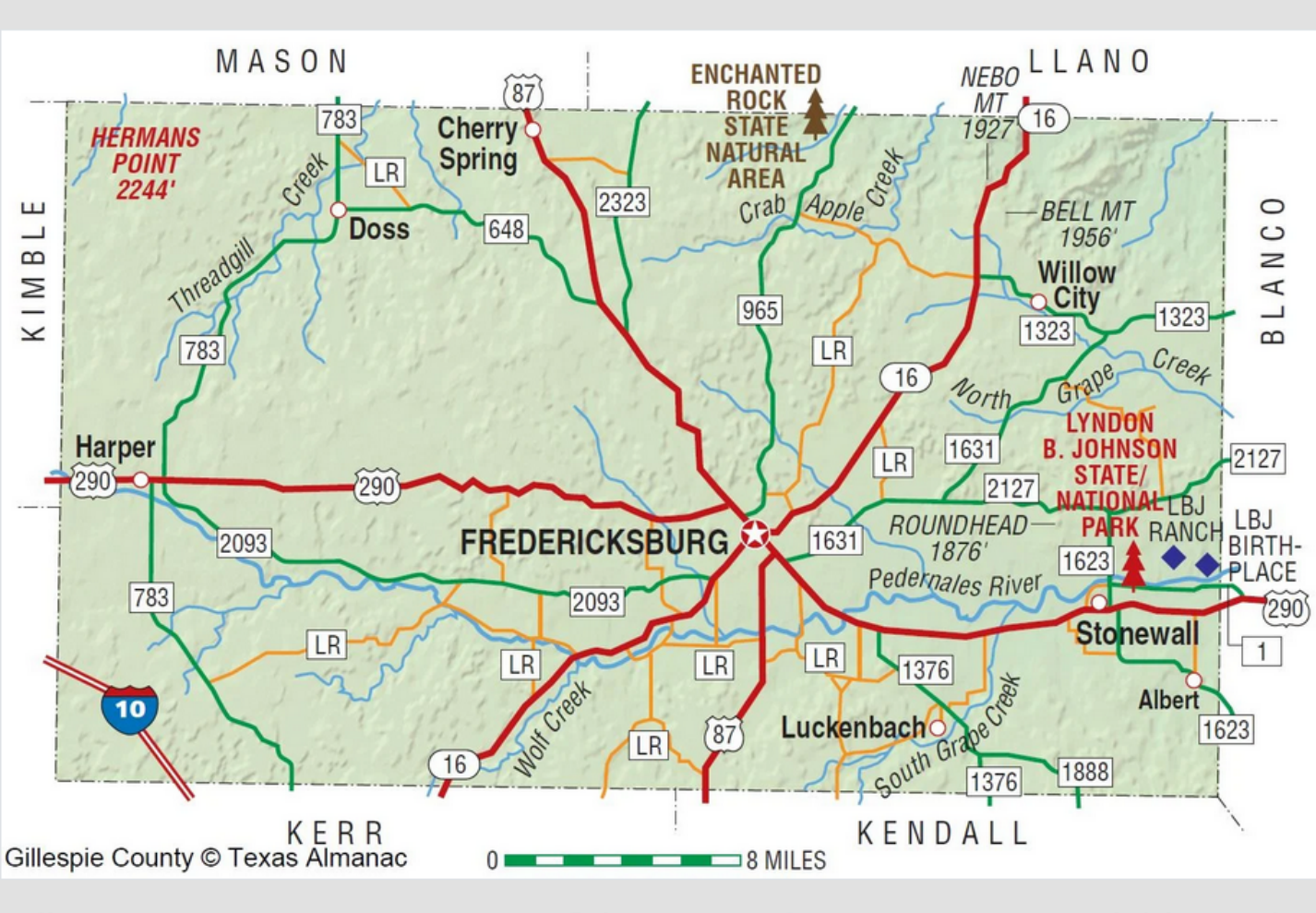

Gillespie County Map. Courtesy of the Texas Almanac. Image available on the Internet and included in accordance with Title 17 U.S.C. Section 107.

GILLESPIE COUNTY. Gillespie County is located in west central Texas. Fredericksburg, the county's largest town and county seat, is seventy miles west of Austin and sixty-five miles northwest of San Antonio. The center point of the county is at 30°18′ north latitude and 98°55′ west longitude, about two miles west of Fredericksburg. Gillespie County comprises 1,061 square miles. Most of the county is on the Edwards Plateau, except for the northeastern corner, which is in the Llano River basin. The primary soils are generally shallow and clayey and not particularly suited to intensive agriculture. The soils in the bottomlands along the Pedernales River and some major creeks are deeper and loamier and better for crops, while the soils in northeastern Gillespie County are generally shallow and loamy. The terrain features plateaus and limestone hills broken by the Pedernales River, with an elevation ranging from 1,100 to 2,250 feet above sea level and averaging 1,747 feet above sea level. The soils on Gillespie County's limestone hills support growths of live oak, shin oak, and other browse plants, as well as grasses and forbs well-suited for grazing. The deeper soils in the valleys and plains produce a true prairie of medium and tall grasses mixed with forbs and woody plants. Some 573,000 acres (85 percent of the agricultural land in the county) is rangeland, which constitutes the county's major renewable resource. The recent trend in Gillespie County has been to convert land previously used for raising crops to improved pasture and hay culture. Cattle and sheep are raised throughout Gillespie County, and Angora goats primarily in the southwest part of the county. Among the numerous wild animals are white-tailed deer, turkeys, quail, doves, foxes, ringtail cats, bobcats, coyotes, ducks, and geese. Many farm and ranch tanks are stocked with channel catfish, black bass, and sunfish. The county's principal water source is the Pedernales River, which flows from west to east across the width of southern Gillespie County. Other major water sources include Threadgill Creek in the northwest, North Grape Creek in the east, and Crabapple Creek in the north central part of the county. Mineral resources include limestone, talc, gypsum, and metallic minerals. Temperatures range from an average high of 95° F in July to an average low of 36° in January; rainfall averages 27.45 inches a year, and the growing season lasts 219 days.

The first known residents of Gillespie County were the Tonkawa Indians. By the nineteenth century, Comanches and Kiowas had also moved into the area. The future county was first settled by Europeans in 1846, when John O. Meusebach led a group of 120 Germans sponsored by the Adelsverein to the site of Fredericksburg, which became one in a series of German communities between the Texas coast and the Fisher-Miller Land Grant, originally the immigrants' ultimate destination. Fredericksburg and the surrounding rural area grew quickly, and on December 15, 1847, 150 settlers petitioned the Texas legislature to establish a new county, which they suggested be named either "Pierdenales" or Germania. The legislature formally marked the new county off from Bexar and Travis counties on February 23, 1848, named it after Capt. Robert A. Gillespie, a hero of the recent Mexican War, and made Fredericksburg the county seat. Gillespie County originally included areas that today are parts of Blanco, Burnet, Llano, and Mason counties. It underwent the first of five boundary changes in 1858, when the legislature formed Mason and Blanco counties, changed the Llano County boundary and established the present northern and eastern boundaries of Gillespie County. The last change came in 1883, when the county's boundaries were redefined and its present limits set.

In 1850, 913 of the 1,235 Whites in Gillespie County were of foreign extraction, almost all of them German. Because Gillespie County was not well suited to cotton cultivation, slaveholding was never an important part of the local economy. There were only five slaves in Gillespie County in 1850, ninety in 1858, and thirty-three in 1860. In 1860 the citizens of Gillespie County rejected secession by a vote of 400 to seventeen. Despite the county's generally pro-Union sentiment, however, some residents fought for the South. By March 1862 fifty-four Gillespie County men had joined the Confederate Army, and a total of some 300 men eventually volunteered for service in six home-defense units to avoid conscription. But Gillespie County was still regarded with suspicion and distrust by its pro-Confederate neighbors. On May 30, 1862, Gen. Philemon T. Herbert imposed martial law on Central Texas, and the notorious Confederate irregular James Duff was put in charge of Gillespie and Kerr counties. A number of Union loyalists chose to flee to Mexico rather than swear allegiance to the Confederacy, but Duff and his men caught up with them early in the morning of August 10, 1862, in Kinney County. The cruelty of Duff's men in the ensuing battle of the Nueces (they killed thirty-five of the sixty-one fleeing Germans) shocked the people of Gillespie County, a number of whom-some 2,000 in all-took to the hills to escape Duff's reign of terror. Unfortunately, a number of others, either Southern sympathizers who had not been commissioned by the Confederacy or opportunists who were taking advantage of wartime disruption, became outlaws, and during the Civil War Gillespie County was swept by a wave of robberies and murders. Because of their bitter experience during the war most Gillespie County residents offered little objection to Reconstruction measures. The county has traditionally been a Republican stronghold in an overwhelmingly Democratic state. From 1880 to 1992 the county has only voted for Democratic presidential candidates in 1888, 1892, 1932, and 1964. Gillespie County voted against a prohibition measure in 1887 by a margin of 1,186 to 59.

A sense of community and social responsibility was very important to the Germans of Gillespie County, who placed great emphasis on the traditional values of church and school. Fredericksburg's characteristic Sunday houses reflect the diligence with which the farmers practiced their religion, and the Zion Lutheran Church in Fredericksburg, built in 1853, was the first in the Hill Country. But the Germans also had a tradition of religious tolerance that persuaded the renegade Mormon leader Lyman Wight to found the Zodiac settlement near Fredericksburg in 1847. By 1945 there were nine Lutheran, three Catholic, and four Methodist churches in Gillespie County. In 1984 there were twenty-two churches in the county, and the Lutherans were still the largest communion. The Germans also valued education highly. Gillespie County's public and parochial schools were among the best in the state in the nineteenth century. The earliest was established by the Adelsverein in Fredericksburg almost immediately after the town's founding, and in 1854 a mass meeting of Germans held in San Antonio demanded that the state establish tuitionless public schools without military training or sectarianism and a tax-supported state university. When the state school law was passed later that year the Gillespie County Commissioners Court divided the county into five school districts, and by the end of 1858 there were five free public schools in Gillespie County with a total enrollment of 250. In 1875 there were 1,496 White and 26 Black students in Gillespie County; the county's one organized public school for Blacks was still operating seventy years later. In the 1980s Gillespie County had three school districts with four elementary, one middle, and two high schools. The average daily attendance in 1981–82 was 2,173. There was also one private elementary school, with 163 pupils.

Along with their emphasis on religion and education the settlers of Gillespie County brought with them a strong interest in social progress. In the latter half of the nineteenth century residents formed a number of athletic clubs, reform clubs, reading societies, farmers' associations, political unions, and fraternal organizations. These clubs and societies played an important role in the social life of the county, especially in the farming and ranching communities, where other forms of entertainment and cultural activity were often unavailable. A number of such communities were founded in Gillespie County in the late nineteenth century. Most of these were centers for either processing or transporting agricultural products. Grapetown, in southern Gillespie County, was founded around 1850 on the old Fredericksburg-San Antonio road and settled by freight drivers who carried produce from Fredericksburg to San Antonio and on to Indianola. Much later, after State Highway 87 was rerouted through Comfort in 1932, Grapetown began to decline in size and importance. Doss and Lange's Mill, in northwestern Gillespie County, grew up around saw and grist mills. Albert, founded in the late 1870s in southeastern Gillespie County, and Harper, in western Gillespie County, both owed their growth to ranchers seeking new rangeland on which to graze their cattle; the latter community, established in 1863, has usually ranked second only to Fredericksburg in size and business activity among Gillespie County towns. Later, after the Fredericksburg and Northern Railway was built into Gillespie County in 1913, railroad towns such as Bankersmith and Cain City enjoyed brief periods of prosperity. After 1917, however, when state and federal funds added to the county funds hastened highway development, the truck and automobile doomed this railroad to failure and the railroad towns to obscurity. The Fredericksburg and Northern finally folded in 1942.

Gillespie County has remained primarily a rural, agricultural area. By 1850 county farms were producing more than 15,000 bushels of Indian corn annually; in another ten years the production of wheat climbed from eighty bushels to 18,136. Agricultural production increased dramatically in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, with the corn crop reaching 476,168 bushels in 1920 and the production of oats 634,163 bushels in 1959. The number of farms in the county nearly tripled between 1860 and 1890, from 327 to 930, and has remained fairly stable throughout the twentieth century, with a low of 1,153 in 1900 and a high of 1,444 in 1930. In 1982 there were 1,285 farms in Gillespie County, with land and buildings valued at $443,203, and agriculture provided about $30 million in annual income to the county-90 percent from livestock. Gillespie County ranked first in the state in production of peaches (more than two million pounds in 1982), second in turkeys, sixth in hogs, ninth in oats, and tenth in Angora goats and mohair production. According to the 1982 census, the 13,532 human beings in Gillespie County were outnumbered about three to one by goats, six to one by sheep, and four to one by cattle; there were also about 250 more hogs than people.

Fredericksburg remained unchallenged as the most important center of population and commerce. The original settlers had been yeoman farmers, and the terms of their agreement with the Adelsverein specified that each was to receive both a town lot and a ten-acre parcel of nearby land to farm. But Fredericksburg became more than simply a farming community, due to the establishment in 1848 of nearby Fort Martin Scott, which provided a market for labor and services. Fredericksburg was also the last town before El Paso on the Emigrant or Upper El Paso Road and therefore an important retail supply center. A number of businesses, including the Nimitz Hotel, grew up in Fredericksburg to serve and supply travelers bound for the West. Fredericksburg grew steadily throughout the late nineteenth century and into the twentieth, although its citizens did not vote to incorporate the town until 1928; previously they had reasoned that the county government could administer the town as well. Today Gillespie County still attracts travelers, tourists, and hunters from across the state and caters to them with a number of historic buildings, museums, antique stores, bakeries, and restaurants. Among the notable tourist attractions in Gillespie County are the Admiral Nimitz State Historical Park and the Pioneer Museum, housed in a replica of the old Vereins-Kirche, both in Fredericksburg; the Lyndon B. Johnson State Historic Park and Lyndon B. Johnson National Historical Park, in eastern Gillespie County; and Enchanted Rock State Natural Area, on the Gillespie-Llano county line.

Despite its reliance on agriculture and tourism, however, Gillespie County has not been without other industries. At various times Fredericksburg has been the site of a granite works, a cement plant, a poultry-dressing plant, a sewing factory, a tannery, a mattress factory, a peanut and peanut-oil processing plant, a women's handbag factory and, most recently, a metal and iron works, a custom trailer manufacturer, and a saddlery. In 1986 Gillespie County had three weekly newspapers: the Fredericksburg *Standard*, established in 1888, and *Radio Post*, established in 1922, and the Harper *Herald*, also established in 1922. The people of Gillespie County have always been proud of their German heritage and pioneer history. In 1896 Robert G. Penniger, a newspaper publisher who later acquired the *Standard*, wrote a book in German entitled *Fest-Ausgabe zum 50-jaehrigen Jubilaeum der gruendung der stadt Friedrichsburg*, marking the fiftieth anniversary of the founding of Fredericksburg and, with it, Gillespie County. The people of Gillespie County marked this occasion with a gala celebration at which the fifty-five surviving original settlers were honored. The Gillespie County Historical Society, based in Fredericksburg, was founded in 1934 to help preserve local customs and history, and today a number of annual events commemorate the past. Gillespie County also lays claim to the first county fair in Texas, held at the site of Fort Martin Scott from 1881 to 1889, when it was moved to new grounds in Fredericksburg. The population of the county grew steadily from 1,240 in 1850 to 10,015 in 1920. Between 1920 and 1970 it remained fairly stable, reaching a high of 11,020 in 1930 and a low of 10,048 in 1960. The number of residents was 13,532 in 1980 and 25,520, an all-time high, in 2014. Of these, 76.9 percent were Anglo, 21.3 Hispanic, and 0.6 percent African American.

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Name: Friends of Gillespie County Country Schools, Inc. **Message:** The Gillespie County Country Schools Driving Trail, established in 2006, links 16 historic schools to the Vereins Kirche, first Gillespie County School built 1847 on Fredericksburg Market Square. The 120-mile Trail Map directs visitors into the countryside to see one, several, or all schools. See early school BBQ pits, outdoor pavilions, stages and stage curtains, teacherages, tin schools, and two Presidential Schools. No two are alike. Spend an hour or the day. Schools listed on National Register of Historic Places. Members of Country School Association of America. Today they function as community and learning centers, rentals for birthday parties, classes, meetings, receptions, reunions, rest stops for bicycle and auto group tours, other social gatherings, and unique destination weddings. Adopted by Friends of Gillespie County Country Schools, Inc. ~ www.HistoricSchools.org

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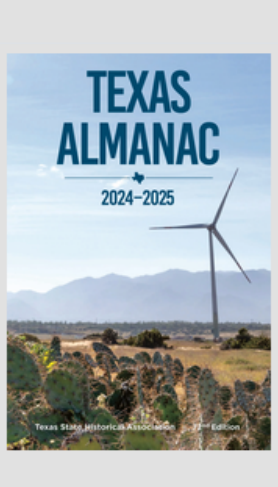
Texas Almanac 2024-2025

Karte des Staates Texas (aufgenommen in die Union 1846

Karte von Texas

Find out more about this place from our *Texas Almanac*.

Place
Gillespie County

Currently Exists
Yes

Place Type
County

Altitude Range
1040 ft – 2244 ft

Civilian Labor Counts

People	Year
12,818	2019

Land Area

Area (mi²)	Year
1,058.2	2019

Total Area Values

Area (mi²)	Year
1,061.7	2019

Per Capita Income

USD ($)	Year
60,561	2019

Property Values

USD ($)	Year
8,671,028,214	2019

Rainfall

Rainfall (inches)	Year
31.5	2019

Retail Sales

USD ($)	Year
566,248,583	2019

Temperature Ranges

Min (°F)	Max (°F)	Year
34.3	92.7	2019

Unemployment

Unemployment Percentage	Year
5.6	2019

Wages

USD ($)	Year
119,527,479	2019

Population Counts

People	Year
26,988	2019

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