



The Story of Early Anahuac

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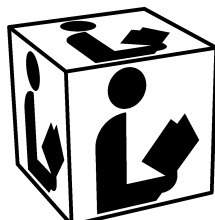
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Compiled by Peter Stines



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The Story of Early Anahuac The Beginning

Nestled along the banks of the Trinity River in present day Chambers County; lies the historic town of Anahuac. For over 150 years this small sight played a significant part in early Texas History. It has a colorful past, and is a tale worth retelling.

The earliest inhabitants of the Texas coast were members of the Karankawa Indian tribe. Made up of several bands, including the Cocos, and the Kopans, the Karankawas were a nomadic people, moving with the change in climate and the availability of food. They ranged all long the Gulf from near Galveston Bay to present day Corpus Christie. Their name is generally believed to mean “dog raisers” due to the canine like animals kept by the tribes for hunting game.

Archeological evidence from skeletal remains indicates that the Karankawa were an unusually tall race, with strong limbs and broad facial features. They were excellent runners and swimmers capable of long endurance. First hand accounts from the first Spanish explorers mention the practice of using rendered alligator grease for protection against mosquitoes and flying gnats. The smell must have been overpowering!

One of the most persistent stories regarding this tribe is the alleged practice of cannibalism. While there is actually some evidence to support these stories, most acts of cannibalism were performed on an enemy to gain their strengths, NOT out of pure hunger.

Fearing and hated by the settlers, the struggle to defeat them was ruthless. Despite coming to the aide of the Texans during the revolution, the tribes were forever treated as enemies. Numerous attempts at treaties would fail and by 1858, the few remaining members of the tribe were annihilated by Texan forces led by Juan N. Cortina.

The Spanish Arrive

With the discovery of the Bahamas by Christopher Columbus in 1492 and the conquest of Mexico in 1519 by Hernando Cortez, the floodgates to the new world had been opened to explorers, hungry for gold, silver and furs. By 1528, Cabeza de Vaca had reached present day Galveston Island. He and his men would be the first Spaniards to view the Texas coast. Met with disaster at every turn through storms, lack of food and hostile Indians, only a handful of men survived to record the first eyewitness descriptions of Texas. Other military expeditions that followed were doomed to failure.

The Spanish were impressed by the vastness of this new land. They would witness huge herds of buffalo and had narrow escapes from alligators, which they dubbed “giant lizards”. They would also encounter fierce rattlesnakes and the deadly cottonmouth or “water-moccasin”.

Once the Spaniards gained a foothold, missionaries would soon follow and bring Christianity to the tribes with varying degrees of success. Churches were built with forced Indian labor and priests were teaching the natives various skills and crafts such as blacksmithing and stone cutting. The Mission El Orcoquisac was built near present day Wallisville in 1759.

Some of the Indians would adopt the Spanish language and customs, while others rebelled. Punishment was often swift and severe! Floggings would become commonplace and many would flee from the missions to escape the rigid discipline metered out by the padres.

Trading would produce buffalo hides, deerskins and edible plants. In exchange, the Indians received metal cooking pots, knives, and trinkets. Thinking the natives were hiding a vast treasure, the Spanish explorer’s lust for gold turned into disaster. The arrows, spears and clubs of the natives were a poor match for the Spaniard’s swords, muskets and cannon.

Republic and Statehood

The Republic would get off to a shaky start. Money was always short and men argued over power. David Burnet was elected ad interim president, with Lorenzo de Zavala as vice-president. Soon to follow was Sam Houston.

Mexico would refuse to recognize the new Republic and made several invasions to retake its former lands. There were numerous scrapes between warring Indian tribes and the Texas Rangers. In December of 1845, the Republic of Texas was no more and statehood followed. A disgraceful war between the United States and Mexico lasted from 1846 to 1848 and over a million acres was added to the American west coast.

Anahuac had remained fairly stagnant in its growth, but the fertile farmlands and prime cattle grazing would soon change the town’s outlook. (I’d suggest Kevin Ladd fill in this part)

Civil War

The westward expansion saw increased friction over economics and the issue of slavery. The South was dependant on the factories of the North while the North was dependant on Southern agriculture and cotton. The addition of Texas to the United States produced a furor among abolitionists. The number of slave states was increasing!

1858 would see the founding of Chambers County, named after Thomas Jefferson Chambers, a pioneer surveyor, lawyer and judge. The election of 1860 would see Republican Abraham Lincoln chosen as the 16th president of the United States. By 1861, Democrats in the South were calling for secession.

Confederate forces would open fire on Fort Sumter, bringing the war issue front and center. President Lincoln would quickly order a blockade of Southern ports. Governor Sam Houston would resign rather than take the oath of loyalty to the Confederacy. With the capture of Galveston by Union troops in 1862, a Confederate earth-works was built to protect the coast. Dubbed Fort Chambers, this structure was built near the old Mexican barracks and two cannons were mounted.

Thomas Jefferson Chambers would make another run for governor in 1861 and was defeated. He then approached Confederate President Jefferson Davis in hopes of obtaining an officer’s commission. He would attach himself as an aide to General John Bell Hood.

The local population was not deeply impacted by the war. Local ranchers still kept cattle moving to the markets. Cotton was being exported through the blockade with some success.

News of the Emancipation Proclamation would reach Galveston, Texas on June 19th of 1863 and celebrated thereafter as “Juneteenth”. Many former slaves chose to remain on their plantations, while others fled north. African Americans would soon make significant changes and advances in agriculture as well as the horse and cattle trade. By 1864, the war had shifted in favor of the Union.

Thomas Jefferson Chambers, wounded by a shell fragment during the Seven Days Battle would return to his beloved home. On the night of March 15th he was murdered by a shotgun blast fired by an unknown assassin. Abb Wilcox was the main suspect, but was never charged.

President Lincoln would be assassinated on the night of April 14th, 1865. His successor, Andrew Johnson, was determined to punish the south and the harsh period known as Reconstruction began.

Anglo Immigration

Utilizing impresarios like Moses Austin to settle families on the frontier, Mexico initially offered rich, fertile land, no taxes and unlimited opportunity. After the death of his father, Stephen F. Austin took over the task of settling immigrants.

Anahuac was a part of Joseph Vehlein's original grant, but a lack of funds forced him to combine his contracts with David G. Burnet, and Lorenzo de Zavala. These contracts would be transferred to the Galveston Bay and Texas Land Company in New York. The Mexican Government would refuse to honor these titles.

Immigrants to Texas were required to become Catholic, to abide by the laws of Mexico and to learn the Spanish language. They had to be productive citizens and of good moral character. Hundreds of families would arrive almost daily. The floodgates had been opened.

The year 1824 would see a new Constitution put into effect. Texas would be a part of the Mexican state of Coahuila. In 1827 the territory would be divided into seven different departments, with Anahuac being part of Nacogdoches. General Manuel Mier y Teran would be the military commander of this district. The Colonists would be exempt from import taxes for seven years and from property taxes for ten years. African slavery would be prohibited in all but a few colonies.

Cotton and cattle would become a lucrative business in early Texas. James Taylor White from Louisiana would start a cattle dynasty near Anahuac that survives to this day. At one point, White owned over 5,000 head and made regular trips to the buyer's markets in New Orleans. He also pioneered the practice of burning off the prairie to clear it of brush and weeds, improving it for future cattle grazing. Some of White's descendants would inter-marry with former African slaves. Many of their descendants still live in the area and carry on the family business.

Tejano ranchers raised both cattle and sheep and broke wild mustangs. The men were exceptional craftsmen in wood, metal and leather. Tejana women were expert weavers, producing beautiful blankets and shawls. Many women ran a "cottage industry" and traded handmade pottery and containers to the Anglo population. Native Mexicans would introduce new practices to the Anglo community and greatly improved the cattle trade. Many words were added to the Texian vocabulary and are still with us today, such as "lariat" "rodeo" "chaps" and "vaquero"

The Anglo population was growing at an alarming rate and Mexican citizens would soon be outnumbered more than twenty to one. Fearing they would lose Texas to an armed insurrection, the Mexican government would have to take drastic action.

Disturbances at Anahuac

With the rise to power by the Centralists in 1830, President Anastacio Bustamente declared a halt to further immigration into Texas, which went into effect on April 6th. The seven-year tax exemption had expired and forts and customs house were built to collect duties and enforce the new laws. "Foreigners" were forbidden to settle within twenty-six miles of the coast. Many Anglos took to smuggling goods and defying the authorities.

John Davis Bradburn, a native of Virginia and a veteran of Mexico's War for Independence would command the garrison here. Arriving on October 26th, 1830 with a small company of officers and soldiers, a temporary wooden structure was built to house the men and was located near present day Beaumont and Trinity Streets. Bradburn would have a pasteboard model to use as a guide in building the permanent brick fort.

The permanent brick fort was located near the bluff bank in modern day Anahuac Park. The fort consisted of a thick outer wall and a thinner inner wall and measured roughly 100 feet long and seventy feet wide. Two diamond shaped bastions could house up to fifty men. Four heavy cannon protected the port. In all, there were some 300 soldiers at Anahuac. A clash with hotheads among the local and feathered one of the soldiers and paraded him around the village on a rail. The settlers formed an illegal militia company to resist Bradburn.

In 1832, an incident involving some runaway slaves from Louisiana created more hostility. Since importing slaves had been banned in Mexican territories, any Africans in Texas were considered free. The escaped slaves sought refuge from Bradburn at the fort. William Logan, the owner of the slaves hired Travis' legal services to deal with the matter. Travis failed to have the slaves returned legally and resorted to subterfuge for their release. A charge of sedition followed and Travis was jailed.

Angry citizens opened fire on the garrison and several soldiers were killed during the skirmishing. Local attorney and surveyor, Thomas Jefferson Chambers organized a group of German immigrants to aide Bradburn. When the Anglo militia refused to disperse, Bradburn opened fire on the town with one the fort's cannons.

Cooler heads wishing to remain loyal to Mexico withdrew from the fighting and would draft the Turtle Bayou Resolutions, declaring their support for Santa Anna and the Constitution of 1824 and their dissatisfaction with Bradburn and President Bustamente. Texian and Tejano militiamen would sail to Brazoria to secure two cannons. Rebel forces urged the commander of Fort Velasco to join them, but he refused. Threats followed and gunfire erupted. A thunderstorm would bring a temporary respite and the Texians retreated to the ship, where sporadic musketry continued throughout the night. By morning, the defenders of Fort Velasco were low on ammunition and had many casualties. Surrender would follow.

Back in Anahuac, Bradburn would call for reinforcements. A small detachment of 100 men under Colonel Jose de las Piedras marched from Nacogdoches to relieve the garrison. Outnumbered by the rebel militia, Piedras quickly agreed to the Anglo's terms. Bradburn would surrender his forces on July 1st 1832. When a Mexican naval squadron appeared with reinforcements, many of the Anglos feared retribution and quickly declared for an emerging Federalist leader, Antonio Lopez de Santa Anna.

Revolts and Republic

Political changes in Mexico in 1833 came with the rise of the conservative Centralist Party, which angered Mexicans and Texians alike. Though he ran as a Federalist, the newly elected President, Antonio Lopez de Santa Anna would show his true Centralist colors and become a dictator. The legislature would be disbanded, and public meetings were forbidden. The militia would be drastically reduced. Rumors of disarming the civilians created more friction. In 1833, Anglos colonists would hold conventions to plan a course of action. Stephen F. Austin journeyed to Mexico City to meet with Santa Anna to discuss the colonist's special needs. Disagreement over the status of Texas caused Austin to write an angry letter to his followers. The letter was intercepted and sent to Santa Anna. Austin would be charged with treason and placed under arrest.

To generate more revenue, Mexico would reactive the fort and customs house in Anahuac in January of 1835 under Captain Antonio Tenorio. The old hostilities soon boiled to the surface. Local merchants like Andrew Briscoe openly defied authority and were arrested. One confrontation resulted in the fatal shooting of an Anglo colonist. It would look like a repeat of the incidents of three years ago.

Growing hostilities in Mexico towards the ruling party saw armed clashes that would affect Texas. A Federalist rebellion in Zacatecas led to a massacre by Centralist forces under Santa Anna. At dawn on May 11th over 2,000 Mexican soldiers and civilians were killed. Prisoners were hauled away in chains. Word of this slaughter quickly reached Texas. Eight more Mexican states would join the uprisings. The seeds of revolt had been planted!

Late in June of 1835, War Party member William B. Travis and thirty or so followers boarded the sloop OHIO, with a single cannon and sailed for Anahuac. Their mission was to rescue the prisoners and to disarm the reactivated garrison as a blow against the Centralists. With only forty soldiers on hand, no cannon, a shortage of ammunition and little hope for reinforcements, Tenorio surrendered. The older settlers were outraged! Many would fear retaliation. Santa Anna would order the arrest of Travis and his followers. Letters of apology were sent to General Cos in Bexar.

July would see the release of Stephen F. Austin from his jail cell in Mexico. By September, the once pacifistic Austin was a changed man. Conventions were held and many would call for war.

Independence

Many families in Anahuac would remain loyal to Mexico and the Constitution of 1824. Others rushed to join the army. A select few, such as cattle baron James Taylor White, would remain totally neutral during the entire conflict.

In October of 1835, a clash at Gonzales over a small cannon was a small victory for the Texians. Then a series of more significant events boosted moral. Goliad and Conception were captured. Texian volunteers would draw up and sign the FIRST Declaration of Independence. In December, a large Mexican force in San Antonio under the command of General Martin Perfecto de Cos was defeated. By the end of 1835, many of the volunteers returned to their homes but the fighting had only JUST begun!

Delegates would meet in convention to plot a course of action. Appeals went out to the United States for arms and volunteers. Sam Houston asked each man to bring "a good rifle and 100 rounds of ammunition" The Texians were poorly organized and equipped and most lacked proper training. The year 1836 would almost be a disaster for Texas.

Santa Anna would lead an army of over 6,000 into Texas to put down the rebellion. Texian forces defending the Alamo were massacred at dawn of March 6th, 1836. The Taylor brothers from Liberty were among the slain. Volunteers under James Walker Fannin met defeat again at Coleto Creek. Told that they were being paroled, these men would be marched out and executed near Goliad on Palm Sunday. Defeated once more at San Patricio and Agua Dulce, despair turned to panic and produced the "Runaway Scrape". Women and children fled with their few belongings towards Louisiana. Many would die of fever and from measles.

Delegates from the Texas Government drew up and signed a formal Declaration of Independence on March 2nd. Sam Houston took command of the army of some 900 Tejano and Anglo volunteers. Men from Anahuac and Liberty would join Captain William Logan's Company. After much retreating, Houston's forced defeated 1,200 of Santa Anna's troops on the plains of San Jacinto on April 21st. In 18 minutes, a new nation was born. Casualties for the Texians were few; among them was General Houston, whose left ankle was shattered by a musket ball.

Over 700 Mexicans were killed and the remainder wounded or captured. The following day, Santa Anna was taken prisoner. Under a spreading oak tree, the leaders of two republics agreed to a treaty that saw over a million acres change hands. Santa Anna would be held as prisoner for a short time in present day Wallisville. A number of former Mexican soldiers would settle in Liberty at a site that would be called "Mexican Hill".



Image: Texas State Archeological Commission rendering of Fort layout, superimposed over existing Park. Source: Google.

The French

By the 17th Century the French would arrive in Texas as a challenge to Spanish control. Led by Rene Robert Cavilieur Seur de La Salle, the French would bring more trade to the new world as well. Their encounter with the natives turned hostile and retaliation was swift. For protection, the French would build Fort St. Louis near the Lavaca River.

Jesuit priests were soon competing with the Spanish missionaries for the salvation of the natives. Sickness and disease took a destructive toll on the Indians. Small pox reached near epidemic proportions. Trust soon turned to fear, then to betrayal. Headstrong and moody LaSalle was never a popular leader and would be murdered by his own men.

Clashes between the cultures were inevitable and more forts sprang up all long the frontier. The territory would become a virtual war zone with the Spanish, French and Indians all struggling for control. The Spaniards would emerge the victors and would dub the new land with the name "Tejas" from the Caddo Indian word for "friends" or "allies".

By the 18th century, more Spaniards would arrive, with some from as far away as the Canary Islands. To encourage immigration, the Spanish would clothe and equip whole families with needed supplies, farming tools and clothing. Streets and settlements were given traditional Spanish names.

In 1754, Frenchman Joseph Blancpain would explore the Trinity River looking for new sources of trade. Arriving in August of that same year, Blancpain and several of his followers built a trading post and several warehouses near present day Lake Miller. Greed would become their undoing and they would be caught selling guns and ammunition to the Orcoquiza Indians. The Spanish would arrest Blancpain and his men. Imprisoned for life in Mexico, Blancpain would die two years later. His men were jailed for life in Cadiz, Spain. In retaliation, the King would issue an order that any French living in Texas without a permit would be exiled to South America!

Africans slaves would be brought into the new world, primarily as laborers for the Spanish and the French, although records show a number of "free men" and "free women of color" as gaining considerable status as property owners. Mexico would be added to the territory controlled by Spain, and at first, would be a stable relationship. But political intrigue caused unrest that would blaze into revolution.

Spain & Mexico

In 1810 Father Miguel Hidalgo would issue his "Grito de Dolores" as clarion call for Independence from Spain's harsh rule. Spanish and Mexican troops met on the battlefield time and again, with American "filibusters" joining the cause. The defeat of Republican forces at the Median River brought a temporary respite. Many would flee to Louisiana to regroup. The American victory at the Battle of New Orleans was a stepping-stone for hundreds of these "soldiers of fortune". In 1816 Henry Perry and a group of filibusters would camp near here. The site would become known as "Perry's Point" and later be dubbed "Anahuac".

Further up on the Trinity River, a group of French exiles from Napoleon's army would attempt to create a colony, which they named "Champ de D'Asile". Being more suited to military life than farming (and fearing attacks from the Spanish) this land of refuge quickly dissolved.

French pirate Jean Lafitte would occupy nearby Galveston Island and create a large-scale smuggling and slave trading operation. Legends say that Lafitte buried some of this ill-gotten treasure near Anahuac. Stories abound of mysterious and swarthy looking characters searching for some of this hidden plunder. Burrill Franks and Charles Cronea were among the former Lafitte men who prowled the area. Lafitte himself would leave the coast and met an unknown fate. Stories were fabricated that this infamous buccaneer faked his own death and resumed a normal life somewhere in Illinois or Missouri.

After years of fighting, Mexico would eventually win her freedom in 1821 and quickly bolstered their treasury with European bank loans. With Independence officially recognized, Mexico could now develop the territory to the North. Wanting a buffer zone against the dreaded Comanche Indians as well as a potential source of income, the Mexicans looked to their neighbors in America.