

RESEARCH GUIDE

TEXAS

by KATHLEEN M. CRUSCO



LIKE MANY STATES, PARTICULARLY IN THE SOUTH and West, Texas has been owned and settled by different nations—in addition to initially encompassing a much larger area than it does today. Genealogists with ancestors from lands that are (or were) in Texas can find a treasure trove of different record types in the Lone Star State to aid their research.

BIG HISTORY

Indigenous tribes, including the Apache, Comanche, Hainai, Tonkawa, and Karankawa, were the first inhabitants of what is now Texas.

In 1519, the Spanish arrived in what they called Texas (or Tejas) during their explorations to find a quicker trade route to the East Indies. Spain quickly claimed the land, but did not try to colonize the territory until 1689 when they discovered that the French had tried to establish a colony there. Wanting to stake its claim, Spain sent Catholic missionaries to East Texas, though they abandoned early settlements due to conflict with local Native groups.

In 1716, Spain again moved into the territory, establishing a series of missions and a presidio to protect New Spain's western boundaries from French intrusion. San Antonio was established in 1718, but was continually raided by the Apache until a temporary peace was reached in 1749. Native groups would continue to spar with European and US settlers (as well as each other) well into Texas' statehood.

Raids took their toll on Spanish colonization. To encourage settlement of the territory, Spain began to grant permits to individuals (empresarios) who would establish colonies in Tejas. One such permit was granted to American Moses Austin and (later) his son

Stephen F. Austin, who led 300 families there in 1821. This permit was ratified by the new Mexican government, who won its decade-long war of independence from Spain that September. Austin's first settlers, called the "Old 300," were mostly in Tejas by mid-1824.

During that same year, Mexico's constitution established a federal structure and merged the province of Tejas with the province of Coahuila to create the state of Coahuila y Tejas.

In 1830, concern regarding the increasing use of slaves in Tejas prompted Mexico to pass laws forbidding slavery and prohibiting any additional immigration into the state by US citizens. This law led to the outbreak of hostilities between the (US) colonists and Mexico, including the famous Battle of the Alamo. The end result was the declaration of an independent Republic of Texas in 1836. Texas sought admission to the United States that same year, but the US government feared that adding another large slaveholding state would upset the delicate balance of pro- and anti-slavery states.

The United States also feared aggravating Mexico, who didn't recognize Texas' independence and would see the move as annexation of Mexican land. Texas was finally admitted as the 28th US state in 1845; war with Mexico followed the next year, largely over Texas. The United States ultimately prevailed after two years.

The present-day borders of Texas were established as part of the Compromise of 1850, when the state relinquished land it claimed north and west of modern Texas in exchange for \$10 million.

A slave state, Texas seceded from the Union in 1861 during the Civil War, and was largely spared the destruction of other Southern states. Galveston was the site

FAST FACTS

STATEHOOD:
1845

FIRST FEDERAL CENSUS:
1850

BIRTH AND DEATH RECORDS BEGIN:
1873 (county); 1903 (state)

MARRIAGE RECORDS BEGIN:
1837

CONTACT FOR VITAL RECORDS:
TX Dept. of State Health Services,
Vital Statistics Section

of the reading of General Order No. 3 (which announced the Emancipation Proclamation and the end of slavery in Texas), which is celebrated by the Juneteenth holiday. The state was readmitted in 1870.

Today, Texas is the largest state in the contiguous United States, second in size overall only to Alaska. Its 254 counties include 7% of the total land and water area in the United States as well as five of the largest 15 cities by population (including some of the fastest-growing).

VITAL TEXANS

Some counties began recording births and deaths as early as 1873. Birth records prior to that date are sparse, but, if they exist, can be found at the county level. Statewide registration of births and deaths was required beginning in 1903, though compliance lagged in some places.

Once statewide registration began, counties filed a copy with the state's vital statistics office. You can order birth and death records from that office online <ovra.txapps.texas.gov/ovra/order-vital-records> or by mail. Birth and death certificates more recent than 75 and 25 years, respectively, are restricted to immediate family.

Various Texas counties began recording marriages in 1837. Any marriages prior to that date can sometimes be found in Catholic church records. (The state itself didn't begin recording marriages until 1966.) You can order marriage records from 1966 to present from that same office; you'll need to contact the county where the marriage license was issued for earlier records. Texas frequently updates a public index of marriages and divorces <www.dshs.texas.gov/vs/marr-div/indexes.aspx>.

FamilySearch <www.familysearch.org> has a large repository of Texas birth, marriage and death records, some of which are unindexed. Ancestry.com <www.ancestry.com> also maintains repositories of records, which largely overlap the FamilySearch record set. Find another roundup of county death records at <www.deathindexes.com/texas>.

COUNTING (LONE) STARS

Spain required detailed reports of its lands, which included population counts of modern Texas, beginning in 1777. Likewise, the era of Mexican ownership is documented

Genealogists with ancestors from lands that are (or were) in Texas can find a treasure trove of different record types.

largely through lists of colonists. Coverage and availability widely vary, but the TXGenWeb Project has published some of these Spanish and Mexican census reports <www.usgwcensus.org/states/texas/txother.htm>.

Another unique source documenting early Texans is the *Registro*, which logs the 300 land grants given to the Austin colony. The original record, handwritten by Stephen F. Austin himself, is held at the Texas General Land Office.

Texas has been included in US federal censuses every 10 years since 1850. Except for 1890 (which was largely destroyed by a fire and subsequent water damage), censuses older than 72 years are available to the public via sites like FamilySearch.

Texas has taken no state-level censuses, nor did it enumerate its citizens during its republic years. However, some researchers have compiled state "censuses" using contemporary tax lists and other records, such as Gifford Elmore White's *1830 Citizens of Texas* (Eakin Press) and *The 1840 Census of the Republic of Texas* (Pemberton Press).

OTHER RECORDS

Given the vast size of Texas and the long time period it's been inhabited, many other records can help your genealogical research:

- **Newspapers:** Texas published newspapers as early as 1813. Learn more at <www.tshaonline.org/handbook/entries/newspapers>, and access collections of newspapers through the Portal to Texas History <texashistory.ut.

TIMELINE

1519

Alonso Álvarez de Pineda, a Spanish explorer, claims Texas for Spain

1689

Spain begins to colonize Texas

1716

Spain establishes missions and presidios in earnest

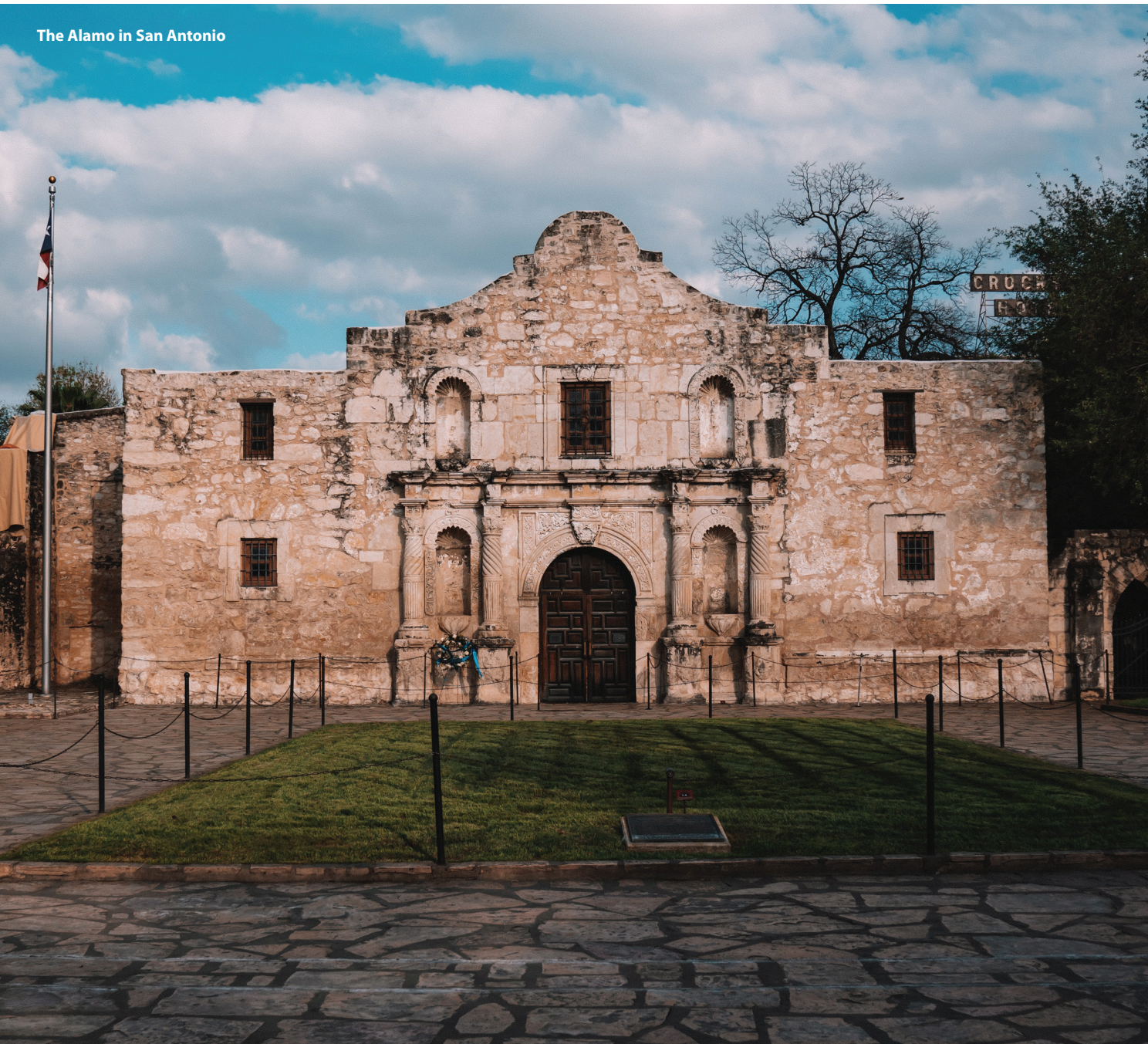
1821

Mexico wins independence from Spain

1824

Stephen F. Austin's "Old 300" settle in Texas, among the largest and most successful groups of US colonists

The Alamo in San Antonio



1836

The Republic of Texas is established

1845

Texas is admitted as the 28th state of the Union, triggering the Mexican-American War

1850

Texas cedes land to the US government, obtaining its modern borders

1861

Texas secedes from the Union during the Civil War; it's readmitted in 1870

1931

Loving County is re-established in the last major change to Texas' county boundaries

TOOLKIT

Websites

Cyndi's List: Texas <www.cyndislist.com/us/tx>

FamilySearch Research Wiki: Texas

<www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/Texas,_United_States_Genealogy>

Linkpendium: Texas <www.linkpendium.com/tx-genealogy>

Portal to Texas History <texashistory.unt.edu>

Texas USGenWeb Archives <usgwarchives.net/tx/txfiles.htm>

TXGenWeb Project <www.txgenweb.org>

Publications

Big Wonderful Thing: A History of Texas by Stephen Harrigan (University of Texas Press)

The Evolution of a State, Or, Recollections of Old Texas Days by Noah Smithwick (University of Texas Press)

Heritage Magazine <texashistory.unt.edu/explore/collections/TXHM>

Lone Star: A History of Texas and the Texans by T.R. Fehrenbach (Open Road Media)

Texas State Historical Association: Publications <www.tshaonline.org/publications>

Texian Iliad: A Military History of the Texas Revolution by Stephen L. Hardin (University of Texas Press)

Archives & Organizations

Briscoe Center for American History <www.briscoecenter.org>

National Archives at Fort Worth <www.archives.gov/fort-worth>

Texas General Land Office <www.glo.texas.gov>

Texas State Historical Association <www.tshaonline.org>

Texas State Library and Archives Commission <www.tsl.texas.gov>

edu> and the Dolph Briscoe Center <www.briscoecenter.org/research/online-reference-tools/newspapers>. Texas newspapers can also be found on subscription sites such as Newspapers.com <www.newspapers.com>, GenealogyBank <www.genealogybank.com> and NewspaperArchive <www.newspaperarchive.com>. Don't forget to look at Chronicling America <chroniclingamerica.loc.gov>, a free site run by the Library of Congress.

- **Directories:** The Portal to Texas History has 19th- and 20th-century directories, each with an index; advertisements; names, addresses and phone numbers for residents; and details about businesses. The Texas State Library and Archives also has an extensive collection of city directories that can be viewed on site with an appointment <www.tsl.texas.gov/ref/citydirectories>. The Dolph Briscoe Center for American History has a searchable finding guide for its directories <www.cah.utexas.edu/research/directories.php>, and commercial sites Ancestry.com and MyHeritage <www.myheritage.com> also carry extensive city directories for Texas.

- **Wills and probate records:** These were kept at the county level and can be found at county courthouses. Many of these records have been digitized and can be found at both FamilySearch <www.familysearch.org/search/collection/2016287> and Ancestry.com <www.ancestry.com/search/collections/2115>.

- **Land records:** Since Texas is a state-land state, land there was allocated and sold by the state (or Republic of Texas) government rather than the US federal government. As a result, the Texas General Land Office <www.glo.texas.gov> holds land grant records, including those of empresarios and their settlers. Records for the Stephen F. Austin colony, for example, contain contracts, land titles, field notes and plats that date from 1823 to 1841. The Texas State Library and Archives also has digitized records of early Republic of Texas claims <www.tsl.texas.gov/apps/arc/reclaims>.

- **Immigration and migration records:** Several immigration trails were important to Texas colonization, including the Santa Fe Trail, the Camino Real de Tierra Adentro, and the Preston Trail. Ancestry.com has a collection of index cards that cover influential people and organizations in the state, notably early colonists and those who arrived by ship at Texas ports <www.ancestry.com/search/collections/2265>. For later arrivals, look for Texas passenger lists at Ancestry.com <www.ancestry.com/search/collections/8722> and Mexican bordercrossing records at the National Archives <www.nara.gov> and the Family History Library.

Kathleen M. Crusco lives in Austin, Texas. She is a member of the Association of Professional Genealogists and has a certificate in genealogical research from Boston University.