



## Crockett, Texas, Houston County History

The first Spanish Mission was established in Houston County in May of 1690, some 20 miles east of Crockett on El Camino Real, now SH-21, and was named Mission San Francisco de los Tejas. Though this first Spanish Mission was abandoned in 1693, Christianity had made its beginning in East Texas. As a matter of fact, the "X" in Texas comes from the Tejas Indians for whom the Mission was built.

About 130 years later, around 1820, settlers moved to the area west of Nacogdoches County, along the Neches and over to the Trinity River. The Mexican Government awarded many of the pioneers to this area land grants. Others who fought in the War for Texas Independence received land as well. Those settlers of the area petitioned the Congress of the Republic of Texas on April 22, 1837, asking that a county be created. Some 110 names were signed to this petition, which was approved on June 12, 1837, and signed by President Sam Houston.

This new county was the first county created under the new Republic of Texas, and was named HOUSTON COUNTY, in honor of the first president of the Republic of Texas. The size of the county was three times larger than Houston County is today, because Trinity, Anderson, and Henderson Counties were also included.

Crockett was selected as the county seat, and incorporated by an Act of the Republic of Texas on December 29, 1837. The town was named for the Tennessee scout, David Crockett. It is said that he camped near the area enroute to the Alamo and his death in 1836. While he was camping, he learned that a former Tennessee neighbor, Elijah Gossett and his family, had a homestead nearby. Elijah Gossett's son, Andrew Edwards Gossett, donated the land for the town site of Crockett, so he and his father were given the honor of naming the town and county. The town was named for Elijah's long time friend - Davy Crockett, and the county they named after their former commander at the Battle of San Jacinto - Sam Houston.

Indians were very much in evidence in the county during the 1830's through 1850. Several massacres of families have been recorded. Forts and block houses were build for protection. The best known presently is "o Block House near the community of Austonio, built for the protection of families on Mustang Prairie. It was from this stockade that Elisha Clapp and Major John Wortham directed an independent company of Rangers commissioned by President Sam Houston.

The first courthouse on the square was a big fort and settlers fled to it for shelter. There was also Fort Brown in the northeast area of Houston County, between Augusta and Grapeland; San Pedro Creek; Fort Houston, where Palestine is today, and Box and Hallmark Forts for the settlers located in the east and western part of the county.

The Neches and Trinity Rivers contributed much to the county's development, providing natural boundaries, a means of transportation and business. Ferries were established along both rivers. Hall's Bluff, Alabama Crossing, Hyde's and Robbins' Ferries and Calhoun's Landing were some of the Trinity stops. Kennedy, Bates and Anderson's Ferries on the Neches served the eastern area along with Bodenheimer's Landing and Shook's Bluff.

The famous link between the rivers, which joined the east and west was El Camino Real, the King's Highway, which transverses the county. Stage stops were common along this route, with the best

known as the residence of Jacob Masters and Joseph Redmond Rice. This road was the freeway of the 1800's, providing movement for pioneers, soldiers, supplies, mail and the output of raw materials.

Cotton was the main crop of the 1840's through 1900. Farmers would move their crops to the river and flatboat it down the Trinity to Galveston for sale and export to New Orleans. The cotton was grown with slave labor. With the Civil War, this was changed, and the virgin pine timberlands of eastern Houston County gained recognition.

One of the largest sawmilling operations for all the, the Four C Mill, was established in the Ratcliff area during the 1900's and ran for nearly 20 years or until the 120,000 acres of virgin pine timber were cut over. Following the Civil War, the county's economy changed more to lumbering and cattle, production of hay and small grains. The economy remains basically agricultural, lumbering and ranching today.

Churches and schools came with the pioneers who established them as one structure. Sometimes the church-school was also fort and home. The first college of the Republic of Texas was Trinity College at Old Alabama on the banks of the Trinity River in Houston County. The college was chartered in 1841. There was also an Academy at Augusta in 1850, and Steel's Academy near the present community of Pennington was known for its scholars.

Since the first colonization efforts of Houston County was that of a Mission San Francisco de los Tejas, the church truly initiated the development of Houston County. This is commemorated each year with an annual Pilgrimage the first Sunday in October to the mission replica located in the Mission State Park.

The coming of the railroad in 1872 brought community development. Up and down the tracks, every 5-6 miles, small communities were built. Three of them, Grapeland, Latexo, and Lovelady, celebrated centennials in 1972. The county seat of Crockett and Houston County celebrated a 135th anniversary, having celebrated a joint centennial in 1937. A county birthday celebration is held annually on June 12 with a year-long 150th celebration in 1987, the county and city's sesquicentennial year.

Further impact of the railroad is being recognized with the transformation of the 1909 Crockett depot into a Visitors Center / Museum. That depot was given to the Historical Commission on December 13, 1983, by Missouri Pacific Railroad Company. Ownership has been transferred to a non-profit, tax-exempt corporation, Historical Projects of Houston County, Texas Inc. (Hi Pro), effective December 12, 1988. The Historical Commission will be continuing the advancement of the Visitor's Center / Museum through programs and exhibits in cooperation with Hi Pro.

(excerpts from "Mini History of Houston County, Texas," written by Eliza h. Bishop)