

ZAPATA COUNTY TEXAS

HISTORY AND LOCATION

Zapata County has a long history, going as far back as 8,000 B.C. when reportedly the first people to live in the America's crossed over from Asia. The first exploration along the Rio Grande River was conducted in 1520, but only along the mouth of the river. At that time many different groups were found living along the river, speaking diverse languages. However, by the 1700's, settlement of the coastal areas had forced many Native Americans from their lands onto neighboring tribal lands, causing conflict and spreading diseases contracted from the Europeans, resulting in the death and loss of many of the native inhabitants.

In 1746 the area was named Nuevo Santander by Spain, and plans for colonization were set in motion with the naming of Don Jose de Escandon as Governor. By 1747 Captain Miguel de la Garza Falcon arrived in the area as leader of one of the seven expeditionary groups sent to explore the Nuevo Santander lands led by Don Jose de Escandon and Elguera. Captain Falcon was the first to thoroughly explore the region including what is now Zapata County. He started in what is present day Eagle Pass, and followed the river to the mouth of the Rio Grande. His report was not very favorable, due to concerns for adequate water. However, Escandon went forward with his plan to establish settlements on both sides of the Rio Grande River.

Escandon focused on establishing ranch settlements for the Nuevo Santander region. He offered special incentives to draw families to the region. The first Spanish families arrived in December of 1748. About 3,000 settlers and almost 800 soldiers came with furniture, farming equipment, and livestock. They brought with them the knowledge and traditions of ranching learned in Spain and adapted for the American climate.

Escandon established villas (towns) in south Nuevo Santander, in which most of the first colonists stayed. However, there were those families who went farther north in Nuevo Santander and established such villages as Camargo and Reynosa, along the southern banks of the Rio Grande. They joined with other families that had come into the area to ranch from Nuevo Leon around the 1730's, sharing personal knowledge and experience about ranching in this area.

The colonists looked for good soil, abundance of fire wood, trees and water. They sought out high ground to protect themselves from flood and attack by Native Americans. They often moved into sites previously occupied by Native Americans, periodically relocating due to flooding. The people did not follow the strict Spanish government laws for settlement. Rather, they placed their homes across broad areas. They did not arrange the towns solely around central squares. Local governments were not lead by the local priest or military officer. Instead, Escandon placed wealthy ranchers in charge to oversee the governing and protection of the colonists. One such villa established by Escandon in 1750 was Revilla, later known as Guerrero Viejo.

The first official Spanish settlement was established in 1750 as well, named Nuestra Senora de los Dolores within what is today known as Zapata County. Jose Vasquez Borrego made arrangements with Escandon to include his ranch north of the Rio Grande into the colonies. Borrego was given plots of land for pasture, and allowed to take advantage of land grants and tax relief for new settlers through this arrangement. Borrego also maintained a ferry to cross the Rio Grande, bringing the major traffic through Dolores. In 1753 Borrego requested an additional 50 plots of land, possibly for operating the ferry at no cost. As well, Borrego was allowed to begin charging for the ferry service.

This incorporation of lands north of the Rio Grande began an expansion of ranches into lands between the Rio Grande and the Nueces Rivers. People began living and working on both sides of the Rio Grande River. Crossing the Rio Grande once a year, the priest from Revilla would travel to Dolores, staying for one month tending to the spiritual needs of the people. Included in the families brought in to establish Dolores were 27 Native American families. However, by 1757 only 2 older Native Americans remained in Dolores. Borrego was supposed to

provide food, clothing, religious, and social education to these Native American families, but the families did not remain in the settlement.

Nuevo Santander boasted 23 settlements in 1757, with four along the south side of the Rio Grande (including Camargo, Reynosa, Revilla, and Mier) and two along the north side of the Rio Grande (Laredo and Nuestra Senora de los Dolores).

By 1767 the Spanish monarchy issued land grants to the colonists. Officials were sent to survey the lands surrounding the villas, identifying the boundaries in order to issue the land grants. Land allotments were then assigned to individuals based on the years of residence in the area. Today descendants of the colonizing families still hold the original land grant documents, passed down through the generations in Zapata County.

By 1818, following a series of Native American raids, Nuestra Senora de los Dolores was abandoned. At the same time, the Native American groups living in Nuevo Santander continued to decrease in number. Throughout the 17th and 18th centuries less and less Native American groups could be found in the region, until in 1840 many groups were virtually extinct.

Today the town site of Zapata is the largest in the county and considered the county seat. Both Zapata county and the town of Zapata carry the name of Colonel Jose Antonio Zapata. Antonio Zapata was a native of Guerrero, Mexico. He was a highly respected individual, rancher, and well-known fighter against raiding Native Americans. He was an honorable military soldier who gave his life for the cause of personal liberties during the short lived and ill fated attempt to establish the Republic of the Rio Grande. Colonists created a settlement at Carrizo which later became Zapata in approximately 1770.

Texas proudly relates its history as having been under six flags: France, Spain, Mexico, the Republic of Texas, the Confederacy, and the United States. However, Zapata County and the surrounding area can add a seventh flag to our history, that of the Republic of the Rio Grande.

Until 1821, the area of present day Zapata County was part of the Spanish province of Nuevo Santander. From 1821 to 1836, this area was part of Mexico and the Mexican state of Tamaulipas. From 1836 to 1848, this vast area was claimed by Texas as well as by Mexico. From March 1840 until November 6, 1840, Zapata County was part of The Republic of the Rio Grande. The Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo, signed in 1848, settled the boundary of Mexico and Texas. All land north of the Rio Grande River became part of the United States, and all land south of the river remained as part of Mexico.

From 1851 to 1853 military posts were temporarily maintained in the area to combat border disturbances and lingering Native American attacks. However, small Native American incursions continued well into the later part of the 19th century.

Then in 1858, the county of Zapata came into existence, when the bill creating the county was signed by Texas Governor Peter Hanborough. This places the County of Zapata at 150 years of age in 2008.

During the Civil War, Zapata County was mainly ranch lands with a population of 1248. Because of its isolation and the fact that there were few white residents and no slaves, the county remained largely unaffected by the war. The area's Mexican elite had to band together to protect the area from renegades such as Juan N. Cortina, who, because of the absence of federal and state troops, seized the opportunity to instigate hostilities between the wealthy landowners and the poor laborers. Despite the threat of violence, the population continued to grow. By 1879 it reached 1488 and by 1880 the population was 3636.

In 1913, due to the Mexican Revolution, the population of the town of Zapata increased by about 500 people. The people of Guerrero Viejo fled across the river to Zapata to seek safety from the horrors of war. Many of these people already owned property on the American side of the river, and life was not much different than it had been in Guerrero.

During the years of 1915-1919, cotton began to be grown in commercial quantities. The county's farmers were producing 2,000 bales annually. The population by now was up to 4760.

In 1919, petroleum had been discovered in the county and some oil and gas activity began. A toll bridge between Zapata, Texas and Guerrero, Tamaulipas was completed in 1931. Another improvement occurred in approximately 1935 when U.S. Highway 83 was completed from Brownsville to Laredo. This connected Zapata to markets of both the north and the south for

the first time. Due to this new highway, agriculture became even more important to the county. Within a period of about 10 years, Zapata County developed over 12,000 acres through cultivation and irrigation from the Rio Grande. The cattle, goat and sheep industries prospered also, as it was now no longer necessary to drive cattle by land to shipping points. With the new highway, cattle could be shipped to San Antonio by truck, with little or no loss of animal lives or weight of the animals. Two other significant accomplishments of the 1930's included the establishment of a water system in the town of Zapata, and the construction of an international bridge across the Rio Grande connecting Guerrero Viejo, Mexico to Zapata County.

The economy of Zapata County continued to improve. Highway 83 was paved in the early 1940's. Falcon Dam was completed in 1954, and within several months, residents and businesses of Zapata, Ramireno, Falcon and Lopeno had to relocate farther east of the river on higher ground. Back to back hurricanes shortly after the completion of the Dam filled the lake three years before the projected date, and expedited the relocation plans. The reservoir nevertheless was an economic boon to the county, bringing in tourism.

Between 1980 & 1990, the area grew rapidly, as retirees and others attracted by the reservoir came to take advantage of the low cost of living.

The Spanish-Mexican culture of Zapata County is very strong, as this land has been dominated by the Spanish and Mexican people and their descendants for over 300 years. The language, religion, and social traditions have been passed down from generation to generation.