



Waco History

We are pleased to present a brief history of Waco from the Handbook of Texas Online. We have added subheads for clarity.

Beginnings

The city of Waco is built on the site of an ancient agricultural village of Waco Indians. About 1830 a group of Cherokee Indians moved into the area and drove the Wacos from the village. Fort Fisher, a Texas Rangers outpost and the first white settlement in the area, was established in 1837, but was abandoned after only a few months. In 1844 George Barnard began operating Torrey's Trading Post No. 2 on a small tributary of Tehuacana Creek, eight miles south of the old Waco village. A year later Neil McLennan moved onto land nearby on the South Bosque River. A log smithy was erected at the present site of East Waco in 1846 by Jesse Sutton, a blacksmith. In 1848 Gen. Thomas J. Chambers sold a two-league grant of land, including the old Waco village site, to John S. Sydnor of Galveston. Sydnor struck a deal with land agent Jacob De Cordova to divide the property and dispose of it at a dollar an acre. George B. Erath, who had first visited the area as one of the rangers stationed at the old 1837 outpost, was one of De Cordova's surveyors, and he urged that the new townsite be placed at the former Indian village. In 1848 the tract was sold to Nathaniel A. Ware and Jonas Butler of Galveston; they became De Cordova's partners in the venture.

On March 1, 1849, Erath laid out the first block of the new town and divided it into numbered lots that were sold for five dollars each, with "farming lots" selling for two to three dollars each. The property owners had earlier chosen Lamartine as the name of the new town, but Erath was successful in persuading them to call it Waco Village. When McLennan County was organized in 1850, Waco Village was selected as the county seat after De Cordova and his partners in the Waco town site donated free lots in the town for public purposes. The first courthouse was built later that year. De Cordova induced a number of important citizens to move to the new town site, including Capt. Shapley P. Ross, a ranger and Indian fighter, who established and operated a ferry across the Brazos. Ross also owned the town's first hotel and served as its first postmaster, frequently carrying the letters around inside his beaver hat. By 1852 the town had Methodist and Baptist churches, and in 1854, when the town was growing rapidly, George Lambdin began publishing the *Waco Era*, the town's first newspaper. In 1856 Waco Village was incorporated as the town of Waco, and a new county courthouse was built that year. The town continued to grow as cotton culture spread along the Brazos, and by 1859 there were 749 people living there.

Civil War

Situated in the midst of a flourishing plantation economy, many of the town's most prominent citizens sympathized with the Southern secessionist cause during the Civil War. Seventeen companies of Confederate soldiers were raised from Waco and the surrounding countryside, and six Confederate generals were from the town. Soldiers from the area participated in a

number of the great battles of the war, including the fight at Gettysburg. The Confederacy produced cotton cloth in Waco at Barron's Mill, part of the Waco Manufacturing Company, but the war enervated the local economy as the area's manpower was drained by the Confederate military. Postwar emancipation of the many slaves in the area caused additional dislocations and led to conflicts and animosities in Waco during the era of Reconstruction. Lt. A.F. Manning, the Freedmen's Bureau agent assigned to the town, complained in 1867 that a local grand jury refused to indict a white man accused of killing a freedman. Later that year Manning's black ward was castrated by two local physicians and a white accomplice; when one of the doctors was arrested, the local populace became so agitated that soldiers were detached to guard the jail. Local citizens complained when the federal government confiscated the Waco Manufacturing Company, which the government claimed had been a Confederate enterprise during the war. The town's peace was also marred by a race riot during the late 1860s.

Post-Civil War

Waco's economy recovered rapidly in the years just after the Civil War. After 1868 the town was on a spur of the Chisholm Trail used by cattlemen to drive steers to market, and cattlemen and their employees often stopped in the town to buy supplies and for recreation. By 1871 between 600,000 and 700,000 cattle had been driven through the town. Waco's economy especially began to boom after 1870, when the Waco Bridge Company opened a suspension bridge spanning the Brazos. Upon completion of the bridge, Waco was quickly reincorporated as the "City of Waco." In 1871, when the Waco and Northwestern Railroad was built into the city, Waco became an important debarkation point for thousands of prospective settlers headed west and the primary shipping point for a broad area. The town had many saloons and gaming houses during the 1870s, attracting cowhands, drifters, and others who helped earn the town the nickname of "Six Shooter Junction." A red light district called the "Reservation" also grew during this period, and prostitution was legally recognized, licensed, and regulated by the city until the early twentieth century.

Economic Growth, 1880-1900

When two other railroads, the St. Louis and Southwestern and the Missouri-Kansas-Texas lines, built into Waco in the early 1880s, the city became the hub of a transportation network linking the area's cotton farmers and nascent industries with factories and consumers across Texas and the nation. By 1884 there were about 12,000 people living in Waco, and an estimated 50,000 bales of cotton, 900,000 pounds of wool, and 500,000 pounds of hides were being shipped through the city annually. Industries in the city that year included a cotton factory producing yarns and socks, a woolens factory, two cottonseed oil mills, and two planing mills. By the 1890s Waco had become one of the most important cotton markets in the south, and many cotton agents had moved into offices around the town square. In 1893, according to one estimate, farmers from surrounding cotton fields took about 40,000 bales of cotton into Waco by wagon, and another 80,000 bales were shipped to the city by rail from small towns without their own compresses. By 1898 Waco's Kirksey Woolen Mills was among the largest in the south, and the city had ice plants, grain elevators, flour mills, foundries, boiler plants, and bottling works. During the late nineteenth century artesian wells were drilled, two natatoriums were built, and the city was widely advertised as a health resort. By 1900 the city had 163 factories and six banks and was continuing to expand; about 1,300 new houses were built that year. Waco's population grew from 3,008 in 1870 to 7,295

by 1880; by 1900 there were 20,686 people living in the city, making it the sixth largest population center in Texas.

"Athens of Texas"

Even as Waco became an increasingly important commercial center, during the late nineteenth century the city also attracted a number of educational institutions and in some circles was known as the "Athens of Texas." Waco Classical School, established in 1860, became Waco University in 1861 and in 1887 merged with Baylor University, which moved to Waco at that time. In 1872 the African Methodist Episcopal church opened Paul Quinn College. Sacred Heart Academy, a Catholic school, was founded by the Sisters of St. Mary of Namur in 1873. Other private or sectarian schools, including Waco Academy, Waco Select School, and Leland Seminary, were also operating in the city at that time. Waco Female College was first established in 1856; it closed its doors in 1893, but by 1895 Add-Ran College occupied the buildings. Add-Ran became Texas Christian University in 1902.

1900-1917

The city's first gas plant began operation in the 1880s, and by 1890 streetcars pulled by mules ran regular routes through the town. In 1891 some of the mule-drawn cars were replaced by electric cars operated by the Waco Railway and Electric Light company; by 1901 the Citizen Railway company was operating twenty electric trolleys on city streets. In the early 1890s the town began to build a system of city parks, often with land donated by private citizens. A street-paving program began in 1905. In 1909 the city's elaborate Cotton Palace was built, and its Fall Exposition soon became one of the most popular fairs in the south; in 1913 an estimated 500,000 people visited the site. An electric interurban railway opened in 1913 connected the city with Dallas. By 1914 Waco had grown to about 35,000 residents and was becoming an important center of the state's insurance industry. The Amicable Insurance Building, a twenty-two-story structure completed in 1911, was deliberately designed to be the tallest building in Texas at the time.

1917 - 1930

During World War I Waco was selected as the site for Camp MacArthur, an infantry training base covering more than 10,000 acres of what is now the northwestern part of the city. The 35,000 troops assigned to the camp between 1917 and 1919 virtually doubled Waco's population for the duration of the war, and the city's economy boomed as its hotels were filled with soldiers' families. Encouraged by the United States Army's attempts to eliminate temptations for the soldiers, the city's ministers and others waged an anti-prostitution campaign in 1917, and the "Reservation" was shut down.

Between 1900 and 1930 the racial composition of the city changed as rural blacks moved to Waco in search of better jobs and educational opportunities. By the 1920s a black middle class had begun to appear in the city. Perhaps partially in response to this development, Waco became a center of Ku Klux Klan activity and influence during the 1920s. Lynchings had occurred in Waco in 1905, 1915, and 1916, and on at least one occasion the black victim was publicly burned in the town square; in the 1920s mobs of white citizens hanged or

burned other blacks as well. In 1923 more than 2,000 Klansmen paraded through the city, and the organization boycotted businesses of people unsympathetic with its agenda. Many of Waco's business and political leaders at least implicitly supported the Klan during this period, and one member claimed that the Klan "controlled every office in the city of Waco" during the 1920s.

1930 - 1942

By 1930 Waco had grown to a population of 53,848, but the onset of the Great Depression undercut the city's momentum. As prices for cotton and other agricultural products fell and farmers reduced their spending, businesses in Waco were forced to lay off employees. Ultimately, many businesses closed their doors and unemployment rose. The Cotton Palace fair, long a symbol and source of the city's prosperity, was shut down. Federal New Deal programs helped to create employment opportunities and infused money into the city. A National Youth Administration training program was set up at Baylor University. The Works Progress Administration also established an office in the city and paid for the construction of University High School and other local projects. During the depression Waco also became a distribution center for the government's surplus commodities program. The 1930s saw the demise of the city's electric trolleys, which were replaced by buses in an attempt to keep up with a "progressive" trend being established in other cities around the country. Waco's population grew slightly during the 1930s, and by 1940 there were 55,982 people living there.

1942 - 1950

World War II revived demand for cotton and cotton products, and Waco's economy was invigorated by the construction of war plants and military bases in or around the city. Mattress and canvas industries grew in the city, and by 1942 Waco was the armed forces' leading manufacturer of cots, tents, mattresses and barracks bags. The war also brought the Waco Army Flying School, established eight miles north of the city, and the Blackland Army Air Field, set up at nearby China Spring. Meanwhile, the Bluebonnet Ordnance Plant was built in MacGregor. The area's new defense industries opened many new employment opportunities for local residents, especially women; according to one estimate, in 1942 about three out of five workers in Waco's nine defense plants were women. A housing shortage was created as workers and military families moved into Waco by the thousands. In November 1943 the War Manpower Commission estimated that only four apartments were vacant in Waco and that high housing prices were causing hardships for the area's poorer residents. Near the end of the war the city was chosen to be the site of a new General Tire and Rubber plant, the first major tire factory in the southwest.

1950 - 1970

Though the area's military installations were closed after the war, in 1948 Waco Army Air Field was reactivated as Connally Air Force Base and Waco continued to grow during the 1940s and early 1950s. By 1952 about 84,300 people were living there, and the city was the sixth largest industrial center in Texas, with more than 250 factories producing cotton goods, tires, glass, furniture, sporting goods, caskets, dry-cleaning equipment, and other products.

On May 11, 1953, however, Waco was ravaged by a destructive tornado that tore through the heart of the city. The storm killed 114 people and seriously injured another 145; 196 business buildings were completely destroyed and 396 were damaged so badly that they had to be torn down. After the tornado many shoppers began to frequent suburban shopping centers, contributing to the decline of the city's downtown business district. "White flight" also contributed to urban decay, especially after the city's schools were integrated in the late 1960s. Connally Air Force Base was closed in 1966, dealing a blow to the city. By 1970 the population had declined to 95,326.

The Waco Urban Renewal Project was begun in 1958 to deal with the problem of inner-city blight, and in 1967 the city was chosen for the federal government's "Model Cities" program.

1970 - 1995

By 1978 the Urban Renewal Project had helped to channel more than \$125 million into renovating the city's urban core. Slums were cleared and a number of new buildings were constructed, including new apartment complexes, a shopping center near Baylor University, and a convention center. The Texas Ranger Hall of Fame and Museum was dedicated in 1976. Though Waco's economy suffered a downturn in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the city worked to bring tourist dollars into the area by building a zoo at Cameron Park and attracting the Texas Sports Hall of Fame. The city's population rose slightly to reach 101,216 by 1980 and 103,216 by 1990. The Waco area received worldwide attention in 1993 during a confrontation between federal officers and the Davidians led by David Koresh.

Information courtesy of: Handbook of Texas Online, Roger N. Conger, "Waco, TX," accessed February 23, 2017,

2000 - Present*

In 2000, Texas Gov. George W. Bush, whose ranch is in Crawford outside of Waco, became the 34th president of the United States. He was re-elected in 2004. During his presidency, Waco was the home to the White House Press Center. The press center provided briefing and office facilities for the press corps whenever Bush visited his "Western White House" Prairie Chapel Ranch near Crawford, about 25 miles (40 km) southwest of Waco.

In 2009, the Waco Mammoth Site was opened to the public. The five-acre site is the nation's first and only recorded discovery of a nursery herd of Pleistocene mammoths. In 2015, the site was admitted to the National Park Service and renamed Waco Mammoth National Monument.

2014 saw the completion of a new \$266 million football stadium called McLane Stadium opened at the Baylor University campus. The stadium is built on the Brazos River, allowing "sailgating" along with traditional tailgating activities and events.

Also in 2014, the "Branding the Brazos" cattle drive sculpture grouping was finished. This \$1.65 million project, funded largely by Waco businessman Clifton Robinson, harkens back to Waco's days as a stop on the Chisholm Trail. The grouping features three cowboys-one white, one Hispanic, and one black-driving 25 longhorns toward the Suspension Bridge.

In 2015, Chip and Joanna Gaines, TV stars of the "Fixer Upper" home renovation show, opened a two-acre complex to the public in downtown Waco. The complex contains shops, food trucks, and a bakery. In its first year of operation, over 1.9 million visitors from all over the world came to the complex.

2016 saw the start of a new Waco Downtown Cultural District, an official designation from the Texas Commission on the Arts. This designation recognized Waco's growth in the area of arts and culture.

In 2017, Waco was officially named a "Film Friendly" community by the Texas Film Commission. A new film festival began the same year.

The US Census estimates Waco's population at 132,356 as of 2015.

**Courtesy of the Waco Convention & Visitors Bureau*