

The Polish Texans



*Immaculate Conception of the Blessed
Virgin Mary Church, Panna Maria*

Polish Texans were, for many years, one of the most isolated, tradition-preserving, conservative, and rural ethnic groups in the state.

Individuals were in Texas as early as 1818, when several Polish soldiers who had served in Napoleon's defeated armies joined the French settlement of Champ d'Asile on Texas's Trinity River. The Spanish saw the colony as an incursion, and the settlement was shortly disbanded.

But Champ d'Asile was somewhat typical of Polish fortune. From the end of the 18th century until World War I, Poland was conquered, overrun, partitioned between stronger neighbors, and suppressed as far as national autonomy was concerned. The country endured typhoid and cholera epidemics and floods, such as a combined disaster in 1854 which wiped out food production. In many years, Poland was not a desirable place to be.

At first, individuals, mostly men, left the country as soldiers of fortune or simply wanderers. After the mid-1850s, emigration of Polish families greatly increased. Emigration to Texas, as a group movement, started largely through the efforts of Father Leopold Moczygemba, a Polish Franciscan missionary, who was working in the San Antonio area. He was quickly involved in bringing 100 families from Upper Silesia to Texas.

This group founded the town of Panna Maria in Karnes County on December 24, 1854; the group's first mass was held Christmas morning. The settlement is the oldest permanent Polish colony in the United States and is the location of the first Polish Catholic church and school.

In one year 700 others joined the colony, although most of these people settled at a distance. Later arrivals started or helped settle such towns as Cestohowa, Kosciusko, Polonia, Chappel Hill, and Bryan. Panna Maria itself became a "mother colony," sending people to such centers as White Deer in the Panhandle, San Antonio, Banderita, and McCook in the Rio Grande Valley. New Waverly in Walker County was the first Polish settlement to the east.

The first and part of the second generation of Polish Texans generally remained somewhat isolated in their communities. Their lives centered around the church and rural life. Education—after establishment of St. Joseph's school at Panna Maria—and contact with other communities were considered of secondary importance.

The natural result of this isolation was a preservation of community feeling. A number of fraternal groups and organizations were established in the state, but until the later part of the 20th century, and with the exception of identifiable groups in Bryan, Houston, and San Antonio, Poles lived in rural groups.



Reverend Leopold Moczygemba

Many families spoke Polish at home, but publishing in Polish was not established in Texas, and the language was not generally taught. Only one Polish-language newspaper, *Nowiny Texaskie* (Texas News), was published in San Antonio from 1913 to 1920.

Today, a quarter of a million individuals in Texas claim Polish descent, and statewide organizations and festivals mark the fact. Urbanization has caught up with most of these people as it has for nearly all Texans. Today, individuals of Polish descent have entered occupations from the state legislature to banking, from ranching to the priesthood, from engineering to art, from writing to medicine.



Wedding of Pauline Tudyk and Thomas Katzmarek in St. Hedwig, 1894



The John Gawlik House in Panna Maria, built in 1858, in a good example of Upper Silesian folk architecture in Texas

Soldiers from Poland

Coming from a partitioned country, Polish men often entered military service in other countries such as France or Spain as a way of making a living and perhaps a fortune. From time to time, Texas was appropriate.

At Champ d'Asile, the camp of "asylum" after French defeats in Europe at the end of the Napoleonic wars, the artilleryman Constantin Malczewski helped plan the fortifications that were never used except in later French fiction. He became a general of artillery in the Mexican army. Captain Joseph Alexander Czyczeryn was a member of Dr. Long's filibustering expedition, which entered Spanish Texas with revolutionary forces in 1821.

After their unsuccessful uprising against Russia in 1830, many Poles left for anywhere. Some of these found the Texas Revolution timely and sufficiently dangerous. Michael Debricki, a major in Poland, was an engineer at Goliad. Also with Fannin's artillery were the brothers Francis and Adolph Petruszewicz and John Kornicky. The artillery commander killed at Coleto was Francis Petruszewicz. All others were executed with Fannin.

Felix Wardzinski was a San Jacinto survivor who became a landowner in Harris County and a veteran of the Mexican War. An enlistee, he fought with Texas volunteers at the Battle of Monterrey.

Private Kaminski, losing his first name to bad record keeping, was in the Texan army in 1840. He died opposing Comanches during the Council House fight in San Antonio.

And the presence of military men and women of Polish descent extends into contemporary times in great numbers.

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Name: _____ Date: _____ Period: _____

The “push-pull” theory says that people migrate because things in their lives push them to leave, and things in a new place pull them.
 Instructions: Decide what political factors push and pull people. Complete the graphic organizer below using the word bank.

Polish Settlers in Texas

Many people from Poland left in search of better living conditions. Between the late 1700s and the beginning of World War I in 1914, Poland was conquered and taken over by powerful neighboring countries. The land was divided and the people of Poland had little political freedom. In 1854, sickness and flooding caused many people to look for new places to call home.

The first Polish colony in the United States was in Texas. Polish immigrants settled at a place they called Panna Maria in 1854. Panna Maria is on the San Antonio River, about 50 miles from San Antonio. Although some Polish individuals came to Texas as early as 1818, it was not until the 1850s that Polish families began to come in large numbers.

A Catholic missionary named Father Leopold Moczygemba lived in the San Antonio area and encouraged families to move to Texas. He helped to start the town of Panna Maria and within one year, the colony was home to over 800 Polish families. From Panna Maria, some Polish families moved to other parts of Texas and helped to settle towns such as Chappel Hill, Polonia and Bryan.

Why did many people from Poland look for new places to live between the late 1700s and early 1900s?

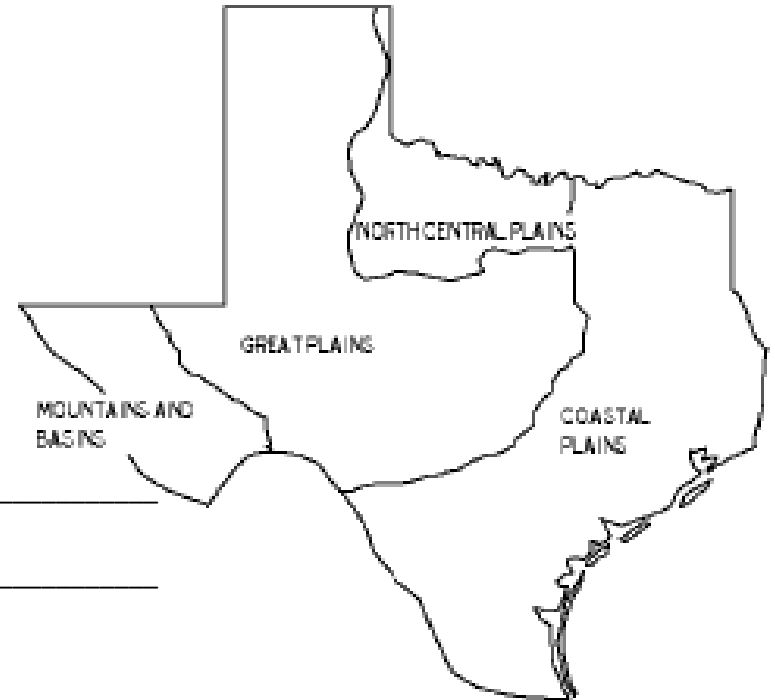
Where was the first Polish colony in the United States?

People from Poland helped to settle what Texas towns?

Practicing Geography Skills

Using your textbook, atlas, or online map, locate and label the following centers of Polish settlements on the map of Texas.

- Panna Maria (Karnes County)
- Chappel Hill (Washington County)
- Bryan (Brazos County)
- San Antonio (Bexar County)
- White Deer (Carson County)
- Bandera (Bandera County)
- McCook (Hidalgo County)
- New Waverly (Walker County)



In what regions of Texas are these towns located?

Why do you think the Polish chose to establish communities in these parts of Texas?

Digging Deeper

Using **Texans One and All: The Polish Texans**, answer the following questions about why Polish immigrants moved to Texas and what their life was like in the state.

Read Soldiers from Poland. Why did some Polish men join the military service?

Would you fight for another country in order to make a living? Why or why not?

How did some Polish families maintain their cultural traditions?

Summarize What You Learned

Write 2 sentences to summarize what you learned about Polish Texas and political push and pull factors.