

History Of Montgomery

County 1837-1954

By WILLIAM HARDY GANDY
GEOGRAPHY NOMENCLATURE
AND EARLY INHABITANTS
I GEOPHYSICAL AND
GEOGRAPHICAL STRUCTURE

Montgomery County, Texas, lies in the southeastern central part of Texas, with its latitudinal and longitudinal directions being ninety-five degrees and thirty minutes latitude, and thirty degrees and seventeen and one-half minutes longitude. Montgomery County is bordered on the north by Walker County, on the northeast by San Jacinto County, on the east by Liberty County, on the south by Harris County, on the southwest by Waller County, and on the west by Grimes County. Its geographical center is located thirteen and one-half miles southeast of the town of Montgomery and approximately four miles southwest of the city of Conroe; the center is located on the survey line between the L. M. H. Washington and John Bricker surveys. The boundary line bordering on Harris County is a natural boundary, formed by Spring Creek; the line between San Jacinto and Montgomery Counties also is a natural boundary formed by Peach Creek. The other boundary lines of Montgomery County, i. e., those boundaries running between Waller, Grimes, Walker, Liberty and the northeastern part of Harris Counties, are surveyed boundaries.

Montgomery County has a land surface area of 1,917 square miles which encompasses three major soil types in the Lufkin-Susquehanna formation. These three are differentiated, with many local variations, as black waxy prairies, post oak, and pine lands. A tongue of the Houston and Wilson soils, which are dark, calcareous soils, splits the Lufkin-Susquehanna formation in the north central part of the county. The northwest and north-central section of the county with rolling prairie lands, which consist of the black waxy soil, is situated in what is known as the astern tongue of the "Washington prairie." The eastern part of the county, except for the alluvial valleys, has a sandy surface soil and is known as the Magnolia soil belt. This belt is called the "Flatwoods" region and is comprised of the characteristic soils of the Caddo-Segno soil group. The extreme eastern portion is in the famous pine belt, and the no less famous "Big Thicket" occupies a part of this and the adjoining soil region.

The altitude of the county ranges from 150 to 300 feet above sea level, with an annual rainfall of 49.17 inches and an average temperature of fifty degrees in January and eighty-three degrees in July.

The county is well drained by the San Jacinto River, due to the stream's central location and its numerous tributaries. Some of the main tributaries are Peach Creek and Caney Creek on its eastern banks, and Spring Creek and Lake Creek on its western bank. Montgomery County also has many natural and man made lakes, of which the largest is a natural lake some two miles in length, known as Grand Lake.

This county is bountifully supplied with a good variety of both softwood and hardwood timber, and various classes of pine of the softwood variety, mainly the shortleaf and loblolly pine; and oak, gum, elm, ash, holly, hickory, magnolia, black walnut, and various others of the hardwood variety are found in the river bottoms and semi-swamps of the lowlands, palmetto grows abundantly, while oak and hickory grow on the ridges at the other extreme. The northwest and northeast portions of the county are in part of the government forest reserve, and these sections are being administered under the name of the Sam Houston National Forest.

Various types of wild edible fruits and nuts exist profusely in their natural environment, mainly the dewberry, blackberry, mayberry, mulberry, May haw, black haw, plums, mustang grape, muscadine, persimmon, pecan, hickory nut, chinquapin, and many others.

Montgomery County is a natural habitat for wild flowers which attain their greatest profusion and largest size in the moist lands of the county. Some of these are the bluebonnet, bluebell, Indian paintbrush, magnolia, dogwood, redbud, and the yellow jasmine.

Wild animals of many types and various species of poisonous and nonpoisonous snakes, fox, bobcat, deer, squirrel, rabbit, raccoon, opossum, armadillo, and numerous other undomesticated animals. Many birds and larger fowl maintain their home in the county throughout the seasons.

The various lakes and streams afford the county with an abundance of fish, such as catfish, trout, bass, crappie, various species of perch, buffalo, shad, and gar.

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II INDIANS

The first presence of homo sapiens in Montgomery County is not known today, but with all probability some prehistoric men dwelt

there, roamed its forests, and preyed upon its game. The earliest man who left any record of his inhabitation in the county was the American Indian.

The Orcoquisac (Arkokisas or Orcoquiza) tribe roamed through the county in the early eighteenth century and established several camps along the banks of Spring Creek and the San Jacinto River. They used those camps as the center of their tribal activities for the outlying camps they had along the Trinity and lower San Jacinto Rivers. A good account given of their location and whereabouts is as follows:

The center of headquarters of the tribe seems to have been located on a western branch of the San Jacinto River called at this time Arroyo de Santa Rosa de Alcazar. This stream has been identified on good authority as Spring Creek. A short distance below the junction of the San Jacinto and Santa Rosa about a gunshot from the banks of the latter, was a village ruled by Chief Canos. This chief was a close friend of the French, whom the Indians generally designated as Canos; hence the name. Some twenty miles above was the village of Chief El Gordo (Fatty) . . .

Another account which more definitely clarifies the location of the village of Chief El Gordo is given in the following account.

. . . El Gordo's village was located at the junction of two small branches joining the Santa Rosa, about ten leagues or perhaps twenty miles west of the San Jacinto . . . evidently Mill Creek and Spring Creek . . .

Little is known about the habits and mores of the Orcoquisac tribes of early Montgomery County; however, some small details were learned from the early traders, explorers, soldiers, and missionaries when they corresponded with their government after having spent sometime in or passed through the county. From the few accounts that were left, enough information was gathered to learn the associate tribes of the Orcoquisac and a little information about the tribal life. These facts are recorded in the following passage:

. . . On the north the neighbors of the Orcoquiza (Orcoquisac) were the Bidai, and apparently, the Deadose (Agdocas, Dexas); on the west, the Coco; on the west and southwest, the Karankawa.

Although they went periodically back and forth, with the changes of seasons, between the coast and interior the Orcoquiza lived in relatively fixed villages. If they were like the Bidai, they remained inland during the winter. They practiced agriculture to some extent, raising what was called maize.

They lived to a large extent on a fish diet, supplemented by sylvan fruits and game, among which deer and bear were prominent . . .

The Orcoquisacs seem to have neighboring tribes, with the exception of the cannibalistic Karankawa, been on friendly terms with the was. Racially they seem to have been closely related to the Attapapa, with whom they intermarried freely. The number of the tribe has been estimated between ten and fifteen hundred souls.

No archaeological remains have been uncovered of the Orcoquisac Indians in the county. Their annihilation was probably due to some white man's disease, such as smallpox or typhoid; or perhaps when the larger Indian nations of the southeastern United States were forced to migrate across the Mississippi River they amalgamated with them, or were driven by them into other sections of the country.

The Bidai and Kickapoo tribes ranged north of the Orcoquisac in the locality of the present day Bidai Lake. These two tribes, the Bidai and Kickapoo, left their mark in the vicinity when the early settlers bestowed their names on several of the creeks and lakes of this region. At the time when the first settlers came to Montgomery they encountered several of the tribes, made friends, and traded with them. An account of their location and fraternization with the settlers is as follows:

. . . About six miles west of Montgomery on Caney Creek, the Bedai Indians had a village and burying ground. The Kickapoo Indians sometimes camped near the town. Arrowheads are still found where these old camps were. These were friendly tribes, and there was much trading between them and the settlers. They made baskets, wooden bowls, chairs of rattan and hickory, and covers for bottles, also of rattan. The white boys bought bows and arrows from the Indians themselves. When the Indians carried their baskets to sell, they filled the baskets with whatever they wanted to buy, then emptied the contents into their laps and left the baskets in exchange. Indians from the Bedai village sometimes went to the Shannon home at milking time with wooden bowls. They sat on the fence until the Negroes finished milking, and when their bowls were filled, and they had drunk the milk, they walked off leaving the bowls as payment.

The Bedai village was almost wiped out by typhoid fever. The Indians treated this by putting the patients on high scaffolds and making a smoke under them. . .

The Bedai and Kickapoo stock quickly vanished after the white man's pestilence thinned their ranks almost into oblivion.

Other Indian tribes, besides the Orcoquisac, Bedai, and Kickapoo, visited Montgomery County. The Ceniz, known as the Tejas to the Spaniards, whose main pueblos were along the central part of the Trinity River, occasionally roamed through the county.

III EXPLORERS AND MISSIONARIES

Robert Caveller, Sieur de La Salle, a French explorer, who perhaps and miscalculated his bearing, had bypassed the mouth of the Mississippi River where he had intended to land and establish a colony. He was forced to land near Matagorda Bay, and it was here that he built his fort of Saint Louis and used this fort as a base for his treks into the interior of Texas, looking for the Mississippi River. It was on one of these excursions, beginning on the twelfth day of January 1686, that La Salle is believed to have crossed through the northwest corner of Montgomery County. Upon leaving his fort of Saint Louis, an account of this trek is as follows:

. . . On the 21st they crossed the river of Canes, (Colorado, above Eagle Lake). Heavy rains delayed them, and they crossed the river of San Banks, (San Bernard) on the 26th. On Joutel's (La Salle's geographer) map are laid down successively, though under French names, Skull Creek, New Year's Creek, the Maligne, or Brazos River, the Eure (San Jacinto), River of Canoes, so called because in his former voyage, La Salle had to procure canoes to cross it (the Trinity), the Neches, the Angelina and the Sabine . . .

Another account which more clearly records La Salle's trip after he got to the Brazos River and Montgomery County is as follows:

. . . La Salle altered his course and following a more easterly direction, soon reached a thickly populated country, where the natives welcomed him with evident pleasure. This was probably in the vicinity of the Brazos River. Here they were delayed for a few days, awaiting the recovery of Naka, the faithful Shawanoe Indian hunter of La Salle, who had been bitten by a rattlesnake. Continuing the journey eastward, they found their path intercepted by a river which Father Douay called "La Riviere de Malheurs," the River of Misfortunes. This was a very swift stream in which La Salle and some of his companions who attempted to cross on a raft, were almost drowned. It is difficult to tell just what stream this was, as there are no swift rivers between the Brazos and the Trinity. There are, however, numerous creeks and small streams, which during the rainy season often assume the proportions of regular torrents, any of which

might in the description. After crossing this stream with much difficulty, La Salle and his companions continued their march eastward and shortly thereafter, came to the rancherías of the Cenís . . . along the Trinity.

This expedition into Texas by the French soon became known in Mexico, and measures to dislodge the colony were taken by the Spanish officials.

The viceroy of Mexico appointed Alonso de Leon Governor of Coahuila and gave him explicit instructions to seek out La Salle's colony, destroy the fort, and check on other French activities in East Texas. With this done, and upon the recommendations of the viceroy to establish missions in East Texas, de Leon set out with the missionary priest, Father Massanet, to fulfill his obligations in keeping the French out of Texas. After the East Texas missions were established in the Tejas Indian territory De Leon laid out a route from the mission of La Bahia (Goliad) to the mission of Nacogdoches. This route became known as the La Bahia Road and according to Casteneda's map it intercepts the southwestern corner of Montgomery County and runs through the county in a northeasterly direction. According to this map it was blazed by Alonso de Leon in the year 1690. It is believed by the author that this was the trail used by the old Houston, Montgomery, and Cincinnati stage line.

The viceroy on December 7, 1716, proceeded to appoint Don Martin de Alarcon, Knight of the Order of Santiago and Governor of Coahuila, Captain General and Governor of the Province of the Tejas and such other lands as might be conquered to found missions in the San Antonio area and to check on and send supplies to the East Texas missions. After establishing a mission and settlement on the San Antonio River he proceeded by the way of La Bahia, through Montgomery County, and on into East Texas. Alarcon was welcomed with much joy on his arrival at the East Texas Mission, as the following shows:

. . . The governor at last departed for the Presidio de los Tejas . . . With bells ringing, the missionaries and Indians of the Mission of Nuestro padre San Francisco de los Tejas welcomed the new governor with undisguised joy, on October 14, 1718, when he at last arrived in East Texas . . .

The viceroy appointed Pedro de Rivera as Inspector General of the presidios and missions of Texas, and when he was appointed he was given instructions to make a tour of inspection of all Spanish presidios, to check against fraud, and to make recommendations concerning their necessity. In the spring of 1727 the tireless and ever watchful inspector arrived at last in East Texas. Rivera arrived at the Nacogdoches mission first; inspected the Tejas missions, then proceeded on the La Bahia Road through Montgomery County to the Presidio de Nuestra Senora de Loreto de la Bahia del Espiritu Santo at Goliad.

In 1745 Captain Joaquin Orobioy Bastera of La Bahia heard that rumors of the presence of French traders from Louisiana had penetrated into the Trinity region. In the same year he reported these rumors to the viceroy in Mexico. The viceroy became suddenly apprehensive and immediately ordered an investigation to determine if

the French had established a settlement, the number and character of the Indians in the vicinity, and to request any Frenchmen found already settled to leave at once. Upon receipt of the orders, Orobioy Bastera, with a group of men, set out to make a preliminary reconnaissance. Orobio's investigation is represented in the following passage:

On March 6, 1746 he arrived at a place which he called Santa Rosa de Viterbo, where he found a settlement of Bidai Indians near the Trinity . . .

. . . After a few days rest and a long interview with the chief of those Indians he again set out, accompanied by a Bidai guide, crossed the Trinity River, and went thirty leagues west-southwest from Santa Rosa de Viterbo to a place which he called San Rafael, and which appears to have been on Spring Creek, west of the San Jacinto River. Here he found two Orcoquisac villages . . .

Both the Bidais and the Orcoquisacs explained that the French visited them frequently. For six years traders, who lived in a place they called Pachina, near the Mississippi, had been coming by land . . . No permanent settlement had been made, but last summer a party, who had come by sea, had chosen a site and told the Orcoquisacs to notify the Bidais, the Deadoses, and the Tejas to bring their bearskins, buckskins, and buffalo hides to this place to trade. The site chosen appears to have been on the San Jacinto, some distance from its mouth. The Indians explained it was on a stream between the Trinity and the Brazos which was a tributary of neither. The Orcoquisacs told Orobio that some Frenchmen had been recently lost among the Cujanes, who lived to the southwest. . . .

Curious to see the site chosen for the proposed settlement, Orobio went towards the coast some fifteen leagues and was shown the place where the French said they would establish themselves. This was on a stream which Orobio named Aranzau and which was in all probability the San Jacinto. There was no sign of habitation and in the opinion of Orobio no permanent settlement. . . .

This visit of Orobio to the Orcoquisac Indians on Spring Creek was the beginning of a quarter of a century of Spanish activity in Montgomery County and its vicinity.

Due to Orobio finding French activity around the Spring Creek area, in January, 1757 the viceroy ordered the missionaries of the Nuestra Senora de la Luz mission in the neighborhood of San Augustine to move to Spring Creek, and to reduce there, at El Gordo's village, all the Orcoquisac bands and the Bidai tribe as well. The Orcoquisacs were at first very tractable and friendly. They professed anxiety to enter upon mission life, built a house for the missionaries, and the first spring planted for them three acres of corn. A more detailed description and location of this mission is as follows:

The church, reported by Jacinto de Barrois y Jauregui (Governor of Texas) as already completed in June, was evidently a very temporary structure which was substituted afterwards by a somewhat better one, itself miserable enough. A complaint made two years later by Fr. Abad de Jesus Maria, who

was then head minister at the place, to the effect that he could not get help from the soldiers to complete the mission, reveals to us the site and the nature of the newer buildings. He writes: "Fearful of what might result, I had to set about the mentioned material establishment . . . The two ministers having explored and examined the territory with all care and exactitude, we did not find any place more suitable or nearer the presidio than a hill, something less than fourth of a league's distance to the east from the latter and on the same bank of the lagoon. This place, Excellent Sir, because of its elevation, commands a view of the whole site of the presidio and of a circumference to the west and south . . . as far as the eye can reach. Toward the east the land is a little less elevated. At a distance of a league enough corn might be planted to supply a large population. . . . All these advantages

being seen, the mission was erected on this site. It is made of wood, all hewn, and beaten clay mixed with moss, and has four arched portals. This building, because of its strength and arrangement, is the most pleasing in all those lands of the Spaniards and the French — or it would be if your Excellency should be pleased to have completed its construction, which for the present has been suspended."

To select the site for the colony, the governor commissioned two surveyors, and each was to make an independent survey of the Spring Creek region, which they did in August 1756; and in October they both reported favorably upon three sites, but most favorably on the one near El Gordo's village at the junction of two small branches joining Spring Creek, about ten leagues or perhaps twenty miles west of the San Jacinto — evidently Mill Creek and Spring Creek. Governor Jacinto de Barrios y Jauregui, happy about the reports made by the surveyors, reported to the viceroy in favor of Spring Creek, recommending three missions instead of one, and on January 7, 1756 this site was approved by the government and shortly afterward the viceroy ordered the presidio to be built. To this point prospects seemed good for the beginning of a new civil settlement in Montgomery County, but due to inefficiency of the government and the changing of officials the project was abandoned.

EMPRESARIOS AND SETTLEMENT

During the latter part of the Spanish regime the missions and presidios of the vast province of Coahuila and Texas had almost fallen into decadence, because the corruptness of Spain's mercantile system had virtually sapped out the life blood of her colonies. Spain found it necessary to look for new lands from which to get new raw materials; therefore, she again expressed a desire for colonization in her undeveloped province of Texas.

Moses Austin of Missouri, had formerly been a Spanish citizen of Louisiana during the Napoleonic Wars when Spain had acquired Louisiana from France. He heard of Spain's desire for her frontiers to be colonized and in accordance took it upon himself in the year 1820 to

visit the Spanish provincial government of Texas, which at that time was located at the town of Bexar (San Antonio). At the time Moses Austin left, Texas was in that administrative division of Mexico known as the Eastern Interior Province, as the following quotation explains:

. . . Texas, Coahuila, Nuevo Leon, and Santander or Tamaulipas constituted the Eastern Interior Provinces. The commandant was both civil and military head of the province. Each province had its own governor and military commandant and was subdivided, or could be divided, into departments, districts (partidos), and municipalities. Texas constituted one department, and in 1820 contained but two organized municipalities, Bexar and La Bahia, the present Goliad. The government of a municipality, which included not only the town but much of the surrounding country, was an ayuntamiento.

The municipality of Bexar included the territory of what today is Montgomery County, and extended into East Texas. This division remained this way until January 31, 1831, when due to the influx of so many immigrants, the Legislature of Coahuila and Texas passed a decree creating another division, that of Nacogdoches. This new division also took in a part of Montgomery County. The decree read as follows:

The Congress of the State of

Coahuila and Texas, considering the evils experienced in the political and financial administration of the department of Texas for the reason that the extensive territory thereof is comprised in one sole district, and populated mostly by foreign colonists, thinly settled therein; exercising the power conferred by article 8 of the constitution, decrees:

ART. 1. The department of Bexar shall be divided into two districts, and the following shall be the dividing line — commencing at Bolivar Point on Galveston Bay, thence running northwesterly to strike between the San Jacinto and Trinity rivers, following the dividing ridge between the said rivers to the Brazos and Trinity to the head waters of the latter, and terminating north of the source of the said Trinity upon Red River.

ART. 2. The territory situated east of said line shall be called the District of Nacogdoches, and the town of the same name shall be the capital.

While at Bexar, Moses Austin, with the help of his old friend Baron de Bastrop, acquired permission from the Spanish government to settle three hundred families in the province of Texas.

Moses Austin died before his plans for settlement could be completed, and his son, Stephen F. Austin, took charge of his father's unfinished work. In August, 1821 after the death of his father, Stephen F. Austin was recognized by the government as his father's successor and was authorized to explore the country and select a site which he wished to colonize. When Austin had explored the land, he selected in the municipality of Bexar his reservation, and outlined its west boundary as the Lavaca River up to the Bexar-Nacogdoches road, and its east boundary the San Jacinto River up to the Bexar-Nacogdoches road.

The Western half of present day Montgomery County falls within the site which Austin selected at that time.

Before Austin could bring his colonists from the United States, his plan of Iguala. Practically all of Augustin de Iturbide, the Mexican patriot, issued on February 24, 1821 Mexico rallied to his aid to help him throw off the tyrannical yoke of the Spanish who had governed Mexico and her province since their triumphal capture by that illustrious conquistador, Hernando Cortes.

Due to these events, Austin had to wait until new colonization laws could be passed by the new government. They were passed, and after Iturbide's short rule, other colonization laws followed in rapid suit owing to the many coup d'etats in forming the Mexican government. An explanation of Mexico's colonization laws is as follows:

. . . Mexico passed her first colonization law in January, 1823, while Iturbide was emperor. With his overthrow in March, 1823, and the repeal of the colonization law of 1823, it was then necessary for the Mexican Republic to formulate its colonization policy. On August 18, 1823, the central government passed the national colonization law. This laid down a few general regulations with reference to colonization within the nation, but left the undertaking largely to the state. In the first place each state was to pass a colonization law for the settlement of the unoccupied territory within its limits. However, only the federal government could grant permission to establish settlements within twenty leagues of the boundary of any foreign nation or within ten leagues of the coast.

(In the law of 1824 Mexico reserved the right to repeal the law when enough colonists had arrived, and) . . . Mexico took advantage of the provision and passed the law of April 6, 1830, by which she forbade the further entrance of citizens of the United States into Texas.

With the national law of August 18, 1824 giving the state authority to pass their own colonization laws, the Legislature of Coahuila and Texas on March 24, 1825 passed a colonization law of more detailed nature, as the following paragraphs show:

The state colonization law granted to each married man who wanted to farm one labor, an equivalent of 177 acres. If labors of pasture land or 4,251 acres. The total of farming and pasture land made one sitio or league, consisting of 4,428 acres. An unmarried man received one-fourth of this amount. If the colonist's occupation or capital was such that it would benefit the colony, he would obtain additional land.

The new settler was required within six years to pay a nominal

sum to the state for this land. For each sitio of pasture land he paid \$30; for each labor of unirrigable land \$2.50; and for each labor which was irrigable he paid \$3.50. The government required no part of it to be paid until the end of four years. At the close of the fourth year one-third of the amount was due; at the end of the fifth year, another third; and when the sixth year closed, the last payment was to be made to the state. To acquire a title to his land the colonist had to occupy or cultivate it.