

A Brief History of Nacogdoches

It was the Caddo Indians who have given us the legend of the founding of Nacogdoches.

It is said that an old Caddo chief who lived near the Sabine River had twin sons. One son had dark hair and dark skin and the other had blond hair and light skin. When the sons grew to manhood and were ready to become leaders of their own tribes, the father sent one brother three days eastward toward the rising sun. The other brother was sent three days westward toward the setting sun.

The twin who settled three days toward the setting sun was the blond-haired brother, Nacogdoches. Natchitoches, the dark-haired twin, settled three days to the east in Louisiana. The two brothers remained friendly and the road between the two communities was well traveled. This road became a trade route and the eastern end of the El Camino Real or Old San Antonio Road.

Around 1700, the Spanish began establishing missions in and around Nacogdoches. The purpose of the missions was to have a presence in the area and to bring Christianity to Native Americans. However, these first attempts were abandoned because of trouble with the French whose settlement was a short distance to the east.

After the region was ceded to Spain in 1762, the Mexican government ordered all settlers in East Texas to move to San Antonio. The settlers were unhappy with this decision and complained. As a result, they were allowed to stop at a site on the Trinity River near present Houston. The group was later attacked by Comanche Indians and forced out of the area.

In 1779, Gil Y'Barbo gained permission to lead a group back to East Texas. Y'Barbo returned to Nacogdoches with a group of settlers and established a local government. He built a stone house, known today as the Old Stone Fort, to serve as seat of local government. The original structure was located on the corner of Fredonia and Main streets. A replica of the building is located on the Stephen F. Austin State University campus and serves as a museum.

In 1812 the Old Stone Fort served as the headquarters during the first attempt to create a Texas Republic. Augustus Magee, a former lieutenant in the U.S. Army, joined forces with Barnardo Guitierrez and attempted to take Texas. The men recruited 3,000 men to their cause and printed the first newspaper in Texas, called "Gaceta de Tejas," to gather support for their cause. Some major battles were fought with Mexican forces, but the group was defeated. Texas was declared a province of Mexico, which by this time had declared its independence from Spain.

Many assumed that Texas had been included in the Louisiana Purchase. Because of this, in 1819, Dr. James Long led an expedition to claim Texas for the United States. Long made his headquarters at the Old Stone Fort, but his group was wiped out while he was on Galveston Island trying to obtain the assistance of the famous pirate and privateer, Jean Lafitte.

Long also made a second attempt to claim Texas for the U.S., however it met with no success.

In 1820, Mexico gave settlers from the U.S. permission to settle in Texas territory. The impresario who was given the contract to settle Nacogdoches was Haden Edwards. He was given permission to bring in 800 families. When he traveled to Nacogdoches, he found that the land for which he had bargained was already settled by Native Americans and descendants of early Mexican settlers. He complained to the Mexican government and his contract was cancelled.

Edwards gathered men together at the Old Stone Fort and their red and white flag, declaring "Independence, Liberty and Justice," was raised over the Old Stone Fort. In the group was Adolphus Sterne, a local businessman who would later become instrumental in the war for Texas independence. The group called themselves the Fredonians.

The Fredonians had little support from local residents, and they lowered the flag and scattered before Mexican soldiers arrived to arrest them.

In 1832, a group of Nacogdoches citizens, led by Adolphus Sterne, attacked the town's Mexican garrison and successfully drove the Mexican troops out of East Texas. The encounter, known as the Battle of Nacogdoches, cleared the way for the Texas fight for independence.

Thomas J. Rusk of Nacogdoches was named Secretary of War and served as a general in the Army of Texas. He was with Sam Houston at the Battle of San Jacinto. Rusk would later be the first Chief Justice of the Republic's Supreme Court and when Texas became a state, Rusk would serve as a U.S. Senator.

In 1835, the residents of Nacogdoches helped outfit a volunteer force, the New Orleans Greys, to fight in the Texas War for Independence. When William Travis, Jim Bowie, Davy Crockett and more than 190 other fighting men marched to the Alamo in San Antonio to confront Santa Anna, they traveled through Nacogdoches. They were honored with a "Feast of Liberty" in the orchard in front of Adolphus Sterne's home. The Greys had walked into Nacogdoches, however, they left on horseback and with arms provided by local residents.

The first Baptist church service in Texas was held under an oak tree in Nacogdoches in 1838. The group organized Old North Church which is located about 4 miles North of town. The oak tree stands in front of the church building.

Education was one of the major issues faced by the Republic of Texas after it gained its independence in 1836. In 1844, the citizens of Nacogdoches petitioned the new government for a charter to establish Nacogdoches University. The charter was granted in February 1845.

The University operated in a temporary home until January 1858 when it moved into a building on Washington Square. The University Building is one of the finest architectural structures in Texas and is the only building from a university chartered by the Republic still standing. It has been in continuous use for school purposes except for two years during and after the Civil War.

In 1845, Texas voters overwhelmingly approved a United States annexation proposal and Texas was admitted into the Union as the 28th state.

When states began leaving the union to form the Confederacy, Governor Sam Houston fought to keep Texas in the Union. He lost this battle, however, and Texas seceded from the Union in 1861.

Nacogdoches had both Confederate and Union soldiers on her soil during and after the war. In fact, Nacogdoches University served as a hospital for two years during this period.

The town suffered with the rest of the South in the Reconstruction years that followed the war. However, by 1880 there were brick buildings and the town's first bank had been established. In 1882, the Houston East and West railroad came to Nacogdoches.

After the turn of the century, local citizens began to lobby the State to establish a teachers college in Nacogdoches. This dream became a reality in 1923 when Stephen F. Austin Teachers College was opened. The institution went on to become a university offering a broad range of academic studies.

Nacogdoches, is considered one of the most historic towns in Texas, and its rich heritage attracts visitors from around the world.