# Texas Women

## *Their Histories, Their Lives*

EDITED BY ELIZABETH HAYES TURNER, STEPHANIE COLE, AND REBECCA SHARPLESS

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*We dedicate this volume to those*
*who pioneered and promoted the field of Texas women's history:*

*To Annie Doom Pickrell, who wrote* Pioneer Women in Texas *(1929)*

*To Ruthe Winegarten and Governor Ann Richards,*
*who spearheaded the first expansion of Texas women's history*

*To Nancy Grayson, who brought Texas into the series,*
*Southern Women: Their Lives and Times,*
*at the University of Georgia Press*

# Preface

ELIZABETH HAYES TURNER, STEPHANIE COLE,

AND REBECCA SHARPLESS

*Texas Women: Their Histories, Their Lives* offers a collection of biographies and composite essays of Texas women, contextualized to include subjects that reflect the enormous racial, class, and religious diversity of the state. Taken as a whole, this volume offers significant insights into the complex ways that Texas's position on the margins of the United States has shaped a particular kind of gendered experience there. These essays also demonstrate how the larger questions in U.S. women's history are answered or reconceived in the Lone Star State. The book yokes Texas to its neighbor states to the east, placing it firmly in the South as well as the Southwest. As members of the Southern Association for Women Historians, we freely acknowledge the ongoing debate over whether Texas is southern or western and believe that the answer is simply that Texas is both. At times, it is also midwestern, Mexican, western, and American. The essays in this volume show the complexity of Texas women's experiences, heavily influenced by Spanish law as well as by the immigration of Anglo and African American people, mostly from the southern United States.

Beginning with the Spanish colonial era, the essays examine the ways that women used the contours of their time and place and the relationships they established to stretch the boundaries of their lives. Colonial Texas established the region's multicultural character, as European and African women joined Native Americans in populating the northern reaches of the Spanish empire. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, shifts in government provided opportunities for some (but not all) women to resist oppression yet caused others, especially Indian and slave women, to lose ground. As the twentieth century brought greater access to education and civil rights, the number of women who claimed access to power grew, even as membership in the influential group diversified.

In uncovering Texas women's histories, many of the essays make creative use of the sources to explore topics for which there are few records. Others probe issues that have received scant attention in the past, such as businesswomen at the turn of the century or female rodeo contestants who used gender stereotypes to shape their roles as cowgirls. Still other essays offer new insights into oft-studied topics in women's history but include divergent approaches: the origins of the women's rights movement; the ambiguous messages that elite nineteenth-century women received in college; the courageous ambitions of those who at the turn of the twentieth century found paths to politics, medicine, literature, art, and history. Early twentieth-century topics receive fresh interpretations and new histories, including the struggle by women to control the implementation of the Sheppard-Towner Act or the influence of Latinas in communities such as Laredo, San Antonio, and Dallas. Mid- to late-twentieth-century subjects include well-known figures such as Oveta Culp Hobby, Casey Hayden, Barbara Jordan, Hermine Tobolowsky, and Mae Jemison, but the biographies offered here provide unique analyses. The volume closes with a personal reminiscence by noted historian Paula Mitchell Marks, whose views of the changing history of Texas women offer a retrospective as well as an invitation toward future explorations.

This collection had its intellectual beginnings in 2006 at the Southern Conference on Women's History sponsored by the Southern Association for Women Historians at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County. The intellectual atmosphere of that meeting sharpened our senses and honed our desire to create a volume of essays on Texas women. Over breakfast in the cafeteria, the three of us put our heads together and realized that well-known historians of the Lone Star State had produced enough new scholarship to create a substantial volume. Moreover, graduate students and independent scholars were working on additional projects detailing the lives of Texas women. It seemed a propitious time to approach the University of Georgia Press to suggest a volume for what would become their series on Southern Women: Their Lives and Times. We spoke at length with Professor Elizabeth Anne Payne of the University of Mississippi, who along with her coeditors, Martha Swain and Marjorie Julian Spruill, had shepherded to completion the press's two volumes on Mississippi women. Payne encouraged us to pursue a Texas volume and urged us to speak with editor in chief Nancy Grayson, who heartily agreed that it would be a welcome addition to the growing collection of women's histories in the southern states.

With that endorsement, we sallied forth in pursuit of a collection of essays on Texas women's history. In February 2009, Rebecca Sharpless organized our conference, Texas Women/American Women, at Texas Christian University.

A wide array of scholars attended, including many of the contributors to this volume. Elizabeth Hayes Turner gave the keynote address, and Juliana Barr of the University of Florida, Laura Edwards of Duke University, and Marjorie Julian Spruill of the University of South Carolina discussed historiographic trends, contextualizing Texas women's history in the larger scope of southern and American history. Under the guidance of Stephanie Cole, conferees then divided into working groups to brainstorm topics and develop large working lists that ultimately shaped this book. The essays here are designed to speak to those trends while spanning time, space, and ethnicity.

From this wide-angled beginning, we sought contributions that were mostly biographical in nature, at least in the era after women's activism made such biographies possible. We prioritized an analytical approach. Grounded in primary sources, these essays look at individual women not only for what they did but also to explain why their actions mattered to the larger society. In some cases, groups of women acted in concert rather than as individuals, and those essays focus on the larger gatherings. Although not every group could be represented as extensively as one might hope, the women herein comprise a cross-section of Texas society. The essays are arranged chronologically in three sections, with breaks at 1880 and 1925.

As historians, we owe a large debt to previous scholarship. But because of that scholarship, this volume differs from others in the Southern Women: Their Lives and Times series that sought to recover a women's past that had long been ignored. Some volumes in the series stand as the first published collections of essays on women's history for their states. Such was not the case here: Texans' long-standing enthusiasm for their history meant that the state found early supporters for women's history, and the first academic collection of essays on Texas women's history was published more than two decades ago. At the same time, theoretical changes in U.S. women's history have stimulated historians of Texas women to expand their arguments, sources, and perspectives. Dozens of books and articles, on subjects as wide-ranging as early Indian diplomatic relations and the politics of the Equal Rights Amendment, reflect that influence. As a result of both threads—the state's appetite for its own history and the dramatic developments in professional women's history—Texas women's history now stands at an important threshold. Although much remains to be done, there is a need to acknowledge the research and writing that Texas women's historians have produced as well as how much the written record owes to national scholarship on women and gender and to Texas's distinctive history.

A unique context thus shapes this volume. On one hand, the authors have uncovered or reinterpreted the lives of some of the most important Texas women

and some of the women least well-known in the Lone Star State—until now. On the other hand, some of the state's better-known women do not appear. Readers should not construe the absence of Emma Tenayuca, Ann Richards, and Lady Bird Johnson as either a political statement or a lapse in knowledge on the part of the editors. Rather, the focus on current scholarship meant that when desirable subjects had solid interpretations published elsewhere, those subjects were omitted on the grounds that there was no need for repetitive portrayals. The goal was to offer a useful source for those readers seeking the roots of women's history in the Southwest. We hope that both the content and the silences in this volume will provide an imaginative impetus for scholars embarking on future research in Texas women's history.

# Acknowledgments

Texas Christian University generously provided facilities and underwriting for our conference, and Erma and Ralph Lowe Professor of History Gregg Cantrell was instrumental in getting it off the ground. TCU and the Department of History at the University of Texas at Arlington underwrote printing and mailing expenses. The Department of History at the University of North Texas provided release time to enable us to work on the book. At the University of Georgia Press, former editor in chief Nancy Grayson; her successor, Mick Gusinde-Duffy; director Lisa Bayer; and assistant acquisitions editor Beth Snead guided the book through the travails of editing and proofreading. Two anonymous readers reviewed the entire manuscript and saved us from multiple infelicities. To all of these editorial midwives, we give thanks. Last, we thank Gregg Cantrell, Tom Charlton, and Al Turner for their indulgence and understanding while we spent hours emailing, editing, correcting, proofreading, and indexing—in other words, birthing this collaborative endeavor. To all, we give our heartiest appreciation.


Amarillo
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6. Harris
7. Harrison
8. Lavaca
9. Liberty
10. Rusk
11. Tyler
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Victoria
Levi Jordan Plantation
Indianola
Rio Grande
Corpus Christi
Laredo
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# Texas Women

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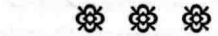
# Part One

## *1600–1880*

STEPHANIE COLE



In 1690, an expedition of Spanish soldiers and Franciscan missionaries crossed the Rio Grande for the first time, intent on establishing a settlement. Over the course of the next three centuries in the territory that would eventually become known as Texas, thousands followed them, sometimes on military quests to subdue the territory or plunder its assets but increasingly often to settle. The shifts in governing authority that accompanied these migrations, along with economic development and an unsettled social order, occasionally brought women in Texas a measure of autonomy uncommon in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. But such opportunities were unevenly distributed and declined over time. Once Anglo-American control supplanted Mexican hegemony and most Indians were pushed out or killed, signs of women's independence were harder to find, even for those of wealth and privilege. Frontier conditions prompted the exploitation of all women's labor and especially that of enslaved women. Whereas once women in Texas enjoyed a measure of independence, by the late antebellum period, most lived lives as circumscribed as those of other southern women, and the Civil War and emancipation did little to change that. Some women continued to play important economic roles throughout the nineteenth century, but their influence in the public sphere narrowed.

Women who lived in Texas during the initial years of Spanish colonization enjoyed perhaps higher status than at any later period. Between 1690 and 1780, Spain's footprint in Texas was light, both because of its own hedged commitment—other parts of the empire commanded more resources than did its northernmost province—and as a consequence of the powerful and persistent resistance of the native inhabitants. As one governor put it in the late 1770s, in an "immense desert country," there were only San Antonio, a "villa without

order," and "two presidios, seven missions and an errant population of scarcely 4,000 of both sexes." Indians were far more numerous, including Caddos in the eastern part of the territory, Apaches in the western half, and newly arrived Comanches and Wichitas in the north. Though no native group in Texas offered women a political voice, native military dominance meant that Indian women who did not live in missions had more freedom of movement than did women in Spanish settlements and were recognized for both economic and diplomatic contributions. For women within the confines of San Antonio, however, the Spanish legal code, Las Sieta Partidas, offered significant protection. Unlike their English counterparts, courts in New Spain guarded free women's property rights and helped enslaved women purchase their freedom.

The multiple shifts in political and military power that marked the region between 1820 and 1865 were seldom good for women regardless of race or status, though a few found maneuvering room in the frequent periods of uncertainty. In the 1820s, having recognized the shortcomings of the mission system for securing control of the region and fearing American encroachment, the Spanish contracted with several *empresarios* to organize settlers from the United States and Europe. These settlers found themselves with a new government after Mexico won its independence from Spain in 1821, and their numbers grew steadily, reaching 21,000 by 1834. After Texans had their own revolution and created the Republic of Texas in 1836, the number of American residents increased to 30,000 Anglos and 5,000 slaves. Annexation to the United States in 1845 brought a veritable onslaught of settlers, and the white population reached 102,000, with an additional 38,000 slaves by 1847. Not surprisingly, men dominated among those who came by choice, as the appeal of new economic opportunities or of the escape from a bad marriage were often irresistible. The resulting shortage of women offered less advantage than we might assume, however, as women needed men to survive, and abandonment and abuse were a fact of many women's lives. Still, both the republic and state constitutions retained much of the Spanish civil law that governed property rights. In South Texas, women played an important role in bridging the divide between Mexican and Anglo cultures. As the ranching economy expanded there, so, too, did women's influence.

For African American women, these shifts in power were less positive. Though southern migrants to Texas had initially promised the Mexican government that they would convert to Catholicism and obey Mexican laws restricting slavery, they repudiated such promises in favor of pursuing cotton profits. As early as 1820, enslaved women—including Tivi, a runaway who believed that crossing the Sabine River into Spanish Texas rendered her free—eventually secured freedom by escaping into Mexico. But the vast majority of enslaved

women could not run away and thus found themselves the reproductive building blocks of a cotton empire. For this group, statehood—and its corollary, increased migration—only made matters worse. When Texas seceded in 1861, one-third of Texans were enslaved, half of them women.

The economic expansion financed by enslaved women's labor benefited women in slaveholding families, though not as much as slaveholding men. Antebellum Texas law mirrored that of other southern states, with only vestiges of Spanish property rights remaining in the protection of wives' claim to community property. Wealthy white women may have experienced less abandonment and more comfort, but their lives were something of a gilded cage. A strict patriarchal social order dictated marriage, children, and a decorative life that gave witness to elite men's honor and virility. Extraordinary wealth and a secure social position meant that Sallie McNeill, granddaughter of Levi Jordan, one of the largest slaveholders in the state, could circumvent part but not all of that equation. Still, elite privilege and white supremacy benefited slaveholding women, and thus most women upheld the gender roles that underwrote class and racial hierarchies. Although secession led directly to a long and costly war, they did not repudiate Texas's decision to leave the Union, perhaps because they acknowledged that the reason given publicly—defense of the institution of slavery—served them as well. In any event, white women in antebellum Texas seldom denied men's right to make such decisions. Harriet Perry, whose husband joined the Confederate Army in 1862, sought to leave decisions in his hands even as his absence and the necessities of war forced her to expand her sphere of action. She was not alone, as perhaps half of Texas men of military age served in either the Confederate Army or state militia troops, and the war made "widows by the thousands."

When the reality of Confederate defeat finally reached Texas in June 1865, enslaved women were freed, but they then confronted a sometimes indifferent, sometimes hostile government in charge of the process of establishing just what that meant. Women were excluded from the turbulent politics of the era, and disorder and lawlessness throughout the state further limited women's public participation. Until 1875, Comanches controlled the western part of the state. But with the final defeat of Indians, women, especially in more settled parts of the state, once again became important economic actors. As capitalists, producers, and boosters in towns such as Waco, women both black and white sought to restore family fortunes as they worked to expand the local economy. In this capacity, they helped to promote the process of urbanization, which ultimately created yet another new role for women in Texas, one that for the first time brought with it a public voice.