

# History & Background



## SECTION 2 – HISTORY & BACKGROUND

### The History of Grimes County

Evidence suggests that human habitation in what is now Grimes County began around 5000 B.C. The Bidai Indians were the earliest residents of this area. Due to disease and European influences, the Bidai population declined in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The surviving Bidais were finally sent to reservations by the United States government's general removal program in 1854.

The Spanish and the French explored the area during the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries. Important personalities such as explorer Rene Robert Cavalier de LaSalle, Alonso De Leon governor of Coahuila, the Marques de Rubi, and Pedro Vial among others were the first ones to travel through the area opening new routes. LaSalle is believed to have been killed by his own men in 1687 near the Navasota River. De Leon was probably the first Spaniard to reach the area. De Leon traveled northeast



LaSalle Statue

from Goliad to the vicinity of Navasota and continued past the future sites of Anderson and Prairie Plains toward the Neches River. His route, originally a crude Indian trace through southern Texas, soon became known as La Bahia road or trail and served as an important Spanish thoroughfare.

English settlement started with the founding of Stephen F. Austin's colony between the lower Brazos and Colorado rivers. By 1824 colonists immigrating with Austin began claiming land within what is now Grimes County, including such noble residents as Andrew Millican. By 1824 Colonists immigrating with Austin began claiming land within what is now Grimes County. The colonists were attracted to the rich farmland along the waterways and prairies. Early residents included the families of Francis Holland, Isaac Jackson, James Whiteside, Jesse Grimes, Caleb

Wallace, Jared E. Groce, and Anthony Kennard. A total of sixty-four land grants were issued by the Mexican government prior to the Texas Revolution of 1836.

The territory became part of the City of Washington in 1835. In 1835 the first post office was opened at the Fanthorp Inn. After the creation of the Republic of Texas, the territory became part of Montgomery County. Grimes County was created on April 6, 1846. The county was named in honor of Jesse Grimes. Grimes was a signator of the Texas Declaration of Independence.

Cotton and corn became the most important cash crops in the county. This agricultural production was accompanied by stock raising which included large herds of cattle, hogs, and sheep.

On the eve of the Civil War the county's agriculture activity had grown considerably. Cities within the county grew substantially during this same period. By 1856 there were six well established communities in Grimes County. They included Anderson, Bedias, Grimesville, Retreat, Prairie Plains, and Navasota. The location of Kellum Springs and Piedmont Springs in the county prompted the development of two spas in 1850. In 1859 the Houston and Texas Central railroad extended its line to Navasota bypassing Anderson whose residents had opposed the establishment of the railroad in their city.

A majority of the residents of Grimes County supported the Confederacy. During the Civil War a munitions factory specializing in small armaments was developed near Anderson.

Grimes County's recovery from the Civil War was slow. Agricultural production was enhanced through the emigration of people from several southern states including Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana and Mississippi. This process was further supported by an influx of foreign-born immigrants from Germany and Poland. After World War I, the labor force increased with the arrival of Mexican migrant workers. Between World War I and World War II people of Mexican ancestry became the

largest cultural group within the county. African Americans began to leave the county after the Civil War and this process continued unabated. By 1990, just under 4,000 African Americans remained.

Grimes County's population declined by more than 31% during the 1940's. Apparently, employment opportunities in Houston were primarily responsible for this phenomenon. The Great Depression triggered a significant decline in cotton farming, however, cattle production actually increased during this same period. Agricultural activity began to diversify, and by the 1970's this diversity reflected the production of cane sorghum, small grains, watermelons, pecans, Christmas trees, and vegetables such as potato, sweet potato, and soybean. Beekeeping has been of commercial significance since the 1980's.

The development of industrial activities in Grimes County began with lumbering. Petroleum was discovered in 1952, but until the late 1970s only small quantities were recovered. During the 1980's the production of crude oil and natural gas



Navasota Industry – 1900's

increased significantly. During this same period lignite coal was also heavily mined in the area. Manufacturing increased between 1967 and 1982 and most of the plants were located in the City of Navasota.

## **The History of Navasota**

### ***Pioneer Settlement***

In 1822, Francis Holland purchased land located on a bend of the Navasota River in southeastern Grimes County. The site of present day Navasota was named Hollandale in honor of its original settler. More settlers followed Holland to the area. In 1831, Daniel Arnold, a Georgia planter, applied for and received a land

grant along the Navasota River. Soon after, Daniel Tyler received a land grant in the same vicinity. Navasota was built on sections of these two Montgomery County land grants. The county was divided in 1846, and Navasota became part of Grimes County.

James Nolan, another important figure, moved to the area from Mississippi in 1848. Nolan did not have a land grant, so he chose a suitable place to live and “squatted” on the land. In 1855, he was financially able to begin to purchase the surrounding property. He built his first home at the back of the land that later became the first stage stop in the region. The stage stop was ideally located at the crossroads between Anderson and Washington-On-The-Brazos, in close proximity to the crossing of La Bahia Trail and the Navasota River. Growth in the area began quickly, and four more stage lines were established in the area by the mid 1850’s. In 1854, the settlement changed its name from Hollandale to Navasota when a post office was established.

Due to the ideal location of the stage stop, Nolan deeded the property to the Houston and Texas Central (H&TC) Railroad in 1859. The settlement’s population increased significantly, making it one of the more prominent shipping and marketing centers in the area. Timber, agriculture products, and livestock were constantly being driven to Navasota for shipment across Texas. However, a set of disasters during the mid 1860’s caused the City to lose much of its population.



Railroad Avenue – late 1800’s, early 1900’s

### ***Civil War Era***

During the Civil War, the population and business in Navasota decreased as able men left the City to fight in the war. In 1862, the first telegraph lines in the area were strung through Navasota to benefit the railroad and the Confederate

government. Due to the City's important location, the Confederate Army stored cotton, gunpowder, and guns in a downtown warehouse during the war. Disgruntled Confederate veterans set fire to the warehouse in 1865, exploding the building and damaging or destroying the surrounding commercial district of Navasota.

### ***Post Civil War***

Navasota residents were hit with a harsh cholera outbreak in 1866. In the midst of this turmoil, Navasota was incorporated on October 27, 1866; 10 years before the Texas Agricultural and Mechanical College was founded and 6 years before the City of Bryan was incorporated. The City boundaries extended one mile in every direction from the train depot. William E. Jones was then elected the first mayor of Navasota. The following year an even more deadly epidemic of yellow fever spread across the area. Many of the residents including Mayor Jones fled the City to avoid the disease, which resulted in a decrease of the population by half. The events of 1867 left the City's government in turmoil until 1868 when the panic was over and the City began to rebuild.

### ***Turn of the Century***

By 1880, Navasota had one of the first cottonseed oil mills built in Texas. Besides the mill, the City was also prosperous with two flourmills, several steam-powered cotton gins, five churches, a bank, a newspaper, and an opera house. By the end of 1884, Navasota's population reached 2,500. A year later, a telephone company began operating in Navasota and the City acquired a second railroad connection. Electric lights and a water system also appeared in Navasota in the late 1880's, and by 1896 the City's population had grown to 3,500. A third railroad, the International-Great Northern



Downtown Navasota – late 1800's, early 1900's

(I&GN) was built through Navasota in 1900, heading from the City of Spring to Fort Worth. The new railroad helped to further the City's prosperity in the shipping and marketing of livestock, lumber, and agricultural products. In 1902, another I&GN line was built to travel from Navasota to Madisonville. These prosperous times caused the population to increase to 5,128 by 1930. Navasota further benefited in the 1930's, when major thoroughfares throughout Grimes County were blacktopped, beginning with the construction of State Highway 90 from Navasota to Madisonville.

During the Great Depression, Navasota lost several of its businesses, but by 1940 its population had grown to 6,138. Unfortunately the consolidation and mechanization of the agriculture industry forced many farmers to reduce the number of their employees, thus causing a decrease in the City's population. By 1950, only 4,976 residents remained.

### ***Post Depression***

In 1952, Navasota businesses joined together to combat the decline in growth, and organized the Navasota Industrial Foundation. The foundation's primary duty was to search for new industries to bring them to the area. The number of manufacturing establishments and jobs increased within Grimes County between 1967 and 1982, and Navasota gained manufacturing producers in the mobile home, furniture, cheese, steel tubing, and oilfield machinery industries. Navasota began to exercise a dominant influence over the economic, social, and political life of Grimes County, and consequently, the population grew from 4,937 in 1960 to 5,971 by 1980.

The residents of Navasota organized their efforts to revitalize the Downtown area. This renewal of Downtown began in 1980, when Navasota was chosen for the National Main Street program sponsored by the National Trust for Historic



Downtown Navasota late 1800's, early 1900's

Preservation. This revitalization spurred other economic opportunities within Navasota such as the development of the Wallace Pack minimum-security prison outside of the City limits in the early 1980's. This new facility brought new economic diversity to the area and helped ease jobs lost from the collapse of the oil industry in the 1980's. In 1990, Navasota's population was 6,296, and the City had established itself as an agribusiness center for the surrounding counties.

### ***Nearby Attractions***

Navasota is considered to be the gateway to Washington-On-The-Brazos State Park, located only 7 miles from the City. The 71-acre state park is located on the site where the Texas Declaration of Independence was signed on March 2, 1836, creating the Republic of Texas. Facilities at the state park include: Independence Hall, a replica of the building where the Declaration was signed; the home of Anson Jones, the final president of the Republic of Texas; the Star of the Republic Museum, which commemorates the history of the Republic of Texas from 1836-1846; the Barrington Living History Farm, which recreates daily cotton farm life. Located in Navasota is the Horlock History Center, a home that was originally built in 1892 by Colonel R.A. Horlock, and is used today as a museum exhibiting historical artifacts from Grimes County.



Horlock Center

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