

Brazos & Colorado Rivers

As you catch a glimpse of a wide river in east-central Texas, imagine the things that old river has seen throughout time. People have relied on the Brazos and Colorado rivers for transportation, irrigation and other uses, and we continue to enjoy them today. The Brazos River, called “Los Brazos de Dios” by the Spanish, meaning “arms of God,” was allegedly named by Coronado, or perhaps a Spanish miner, who was dying of thirst when he stumbled upon this water source. At 1050 miles in length, the Brazos is the longest river within Texas. It was once used by steamboats traveling from Freeport on the Gulf Coast to Washington-on-the-Brazos, approximately 200 miles inland. In 1858, the first train bridge was built just above water level at the same point the train crosses the Brazos today, but didn’t last long – the first high water washed it away. This is a persistent problem due to the enormous size of the watershed – the Brazos river drains an area of 4,620 square miles, so when heavy rains hit any part of the watershed, the river rises all along its course.

Due to frequent flooding, the Brazos River Authority, established in 1929, has built numerous dams on the river and its tributaries. While the river was important for shipping and human travel up until the American Civil War, it is primarily important today as a source of water for power and irrigation.

At 600 miles long and with a drainage area of 39,000 square miles, the Colorado River is the second longest in Texas. Colorado means “red” in Spanish but, as you might notice, it is not really red even during floods. In contrast, the Brazos is usually reddish in color due to the clay it carries. It’s believed that the names of the Brazos and Colorado Rivers were accidentally switched by cartographers sometime during the Spanish era. Steamboats were also used on the Colorado river for trade, and advanced as far up the river as Columbus, Texas, approximately 120 miles inland. The first railroad bridge in this location was built in 1867 and the current bridge you are crossing is thought to have been erected in the 1890’s. In the 1940’s, the flood prone area upstream of Austin was dammed to create seven lakes that today are used for recreation.

Since early exploration, these two rivers have played important roles in transportation and peoples’ livelihoods. Today people still use these rivers’ waters for irrigation, but have also dammed the once free-flowing rivers into lakes for recreational use such as fishing and water-sports.

Source(s):

Hoffman, Eva J. "A Guidebook to Amtrak's Sunset Limited." Flashing Yellow Guidebooks, Golden, CO, 2009.

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