

Colorado River Impact on Texas History

Starting its path in Lubbock, Texas and winding its way through the Texas Hill Country, the Colorado River is a gently flowing river that has played a big part in shaping our history. Though today Texans enjoy the slow moving waters of the Colorado River for recreation and hydropower, it hasn't always been such a tranquil and relaxing environment.

Not to be confused with the river of the same name which flows through the Grand Canyon, the Colorado River in Texas is the 18th largest river in the United States, and is the longest river that starts and ends its journey completely within Texas' state lines. Over the years, the river has been given many names and has often been confused with the nearby Brazos River. The names of the two rivers may have been accidentally switched by early map-makers. Colorado is the Spanish word for "red" and aptly describes the waters of the Brazos River due to the riverbed's reddish clay, while the Colorado River has a blue-green color. Though Spanish explorers gave the river its current name, it has been an important resource by those who inhabited the area throughout history.

During the early years of the European settlement of Texas, the river was used as an inland water route, and became one of the sites for the settlement of the Old Three Hundred - individuals that received land grants in Stephen F. Austin's first colony. About a decade after the Old Three Hundred settled along the banks of the Colorado River, Texans fought to gain their independence from Mexico and become an independent country. During the Texans' war against Mexico the river was used as a means of transportation for settlers trying to escape the violence or for the armies of Texas and Mexico to swiftly pursue one another. In 1844, during the time when the British and French were working to ensure that Texas would not be annexed by the United States, the Colorado River was declared by Antonio Lopez de Santa Anna as the boundary between Texas and Mexico.

In 1839, a few years after Texas was declared an independent country, Waterloo, a small city along the banks of the Colorado River was declared the seat of government of Texas. The location along the river was chosen because of its beautiful natural surroundings and convenient waterways that facilitated trade. Waterloo's name was eventually changed to Austin and the city remains an important cultural and economic center.

In the mid-1900s the river was put to use for irrigation and to provide energy for rapidly growing Texas towns and industries. Dams and reservoirs were created along the river, which led to the creation of Lake Buchanan and Lake Travis. Numerous lakes north of Austin, referred to as the Highland Lakes, were constructed to provide recreation and generate hydroelectric power for the surrounding areas, while the dams could simultaneously be used to control the flooding that often plagued the Hill Country.

Running through the heart of Texas, the Colorado River has been the stage for many historical events that have shaped the development of Texas. The river has provided everything from transportation to food and energy for generations of Texans. Today the river is less used for transportation than it was by early Texans, but it has gained importance for its clean energy and great recreation opportunities.

Source(s):

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