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Jewish Immigration to Texas

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JEWISH IMMIGRATION TO TEXAS
By Peter D. Williamson

I. CRYPTO-JEWS COME TO TEXAS

The Spanish Inquisition began in 1480.

It is not an accident that the Spanish Inquisition reached its zenith in 1492. The Moors had been kicked out of the Iberian Peninsula, and the “Catholic Kings” – Ferdinand and Isabella united Spain. In 1492, Spanish Jews and Muslims were given the option of baptism or exile. Many of those Jews who converted secretly continued to practice Judaism, and were known as crypto-Jews, but if they were denounced or discovered, they faced being burned at the stake.

Torquemada, the Grand Inquisitor, died in 1498, and was replaced by a system of inquisitors general. Fortunately for many, the inquisitor generals were a corrupt lot. Muslims with money were able to bribe themselves out of prison or death sentences, and go to North Africa or Portugal. Jews who had money were also able to bribe their way out. Many went to Turkey, which welcomed them. Others bought their way to the new world, to Peru, to Mexico. They became miners, farmers, merchants, cowboys and ranchers, even provincial governors. The inquisition continued in both in Spain and the New World. I read that it was as recently as 1826 that the last person was hanged for heresy in Spain. By and large, Napoleon put a stop to most of it.

For purposes of this presentation, it appears that the first Jews into the New World, and into the area now known as Mexico, Texas, Colorado, even Wyoming, were escapees from the

Spanish Inquisition. They came with Columbus and with the conquistadores. They remained crypto-Jews, even as they became Catholics, Protestants, even priests. Why do their descendants even today close the drapes and light candles on Friday nights? Because their mothers did. Why do they have six-pointed stars on their tombstones? Because their mothers did. They are only now, in the past 30 – 40 years, trying to understand whether they do indeed have Sephardic roots, referring to the branch of Judaism that originated in Spain; and who, when they left Spain, took some of their customs and language with them.

Yet, one can hardly call these crypto-Jews a “wave” of Judaism into Texas. It is for now simply a recognition that refugees have been coming to Texas and Mexico from Spain, since the very beginning of European emigration to the New World. Those Jews who trace their history to Spain are from a tradition known as “Sephardic.” Their religious services are still in the 16th century Ladino language. No one knows how many came to Texas, but it isn’t believed to be many. After all, the 1790 U.S. census listed only 3,000 Jews in the U.S. The 1840 census listed 15,000. These did not include Jews in Texas, which not part of the U.S. then but one gets the idea they were few.

II. EARLY JEWISH SETTLERS

The first person into Texas who is known to have identified himself as Jewish was the settler Samuel Isaacs, who came from the United States to Texas in 1821. He was with Steven F. Austin’s first colony, called “The Old 300.” Austin had obtained a land grant from Spain in 1820, about a year before Mexico achieved independence from Spain. This land grant, and the settlement of The Old 300 was in the area around San Antonio-Goliad, but it was large, extending to what is now Brazoria County and part of Fort Bend County. Mexico also made

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