

History of Corsicana

Corsicana, county seat and largest city of Navarro County, is in the central portion of the county fifty-eight miles southeast of Dallas at the junction of Interstate 45, U.S. highways 75 and 287, and State highways 22 and 31. It was established in 1848 to serve as the county seat of newly-established Navarro County. [José Antonio Navarro](#), a hero of the [Texas Revolution](#) after whom the county was named, was given the honor of naming the new town; he suggested Corsicana after the island of Corsica, the birthplace of his parents. David R. Mitchell, an early area settler, donated 100 acres for a townsite, and with the assistance of Thomas I. Smith, platted the land and began selling lots. The new town was centered near a log tavern built in 1847 and owned and operated by Rev. Hampton McKinney. The first courthouse, a two-room log structure, was constructed in 1849, and served as a church, meeting hall and civic center until a new frame building was constructed in 1853. The first school, taught by Mack Elliot and a man named Lafoon, opened in the old courthouse in 1847, and a short time later the [Corsicana Female Literary Institute](#) began operating. Within a few years of the town's founding, a large number of mercantile establishments opened on and around the courthouse square, and new brick courthouse—a symbol of the town's growing prosperity—was erected in 1858. The first newspaper, the *Prairie Blade*, was founded in 1855; it was replaced by the *Express* in 1857, which in turn was replaced by the *Observer* on the eve of the [Civil War](#).

By 1850 Corsicana's population had already grown to some 1,200, 300 of whom were reportedly black slaves. Not surprisingly given the town's large number of slaveholders, Corsicanans supported Breckinridge over the Fusionist slate of candidates in the presidential election of 1860; and in February 1861, when had the election was held on the secession issue, the vote was almost unanimous, 213 in favor and only three opposed. At outbreak of the war in April 1861 townspeople held a mass demonstration on the courthouse square in favor of the Confederacy, and appeals were made for volunteers to serve in the Confederate Army in Virginia. The first company, the "Navarro Rifles" commanded by Capt. [Clinton M. Winkler](#), was organized in August 1861; four additional companies were organized in the town by 1863. After the war Union soldiers, commanded by Capt. R. A. Chaffee, occupied the town. Corsicana, however, witnessed little of the bitter strife experienced by many Texas towns during [Reconstruction](#): Chaffee enlisted a number of former slaves as policeman, but avoided provoking the townspeople, and at one juncture even came out in support of former Confederate officer C. M. Winkler who had caned a Union soldier after the man had insulted him. The town's economy suffered a serious setback during the war and the early Reconstruction years, but by the beginning of 1870s business had begun to recover. In 1871 the town's first bank opened, operated by two men named Adams and Leonard, and in 1874 Union troops finally were withdrawn.

The greatest spur to the town's development, however, came in November 1871 with the completion of the Houston and Texas Central Railroad. The coming of the railroad brought numerous settlers and new merchants, among them the [Sanger Brothers](#), the Padgitts and others, who established stores near the new depot on East Collin Street. The construction of the Texas and St. Louis Railway (later the Cotton Belt) in 1880 prompted further commercial development and by the mid-1880s Corsicana had become the leading trading and shipping center for a large area of the northern blacklands. In 1872 the town was incorporated with a mayoral form of

government, and in 1880 a public school system was organized. The decade of the eighties also saw the establishment of a city fire department, a municipal water works, the installation of the first telephone system, and the construction of the State Orphans Home and the Odd Fellows Orphans Home. By 1885 Corsicana had a population of approximately 5,000, three Presbyterian, a Catholic, a Baptist, and three Methodist churches, as well as three black churches, an oil factory, a gristmill, two banks, and four weekly newspapers—the *Courier*, the *Observer*, the *Messenger*, and the *Journal*; principal products included cotton, grain, wool, and hides.

By the early 1890s the rapidly expanding city had outgrown its water supply, and the following year civic leaders formed the Corsicana Water Development Company with the aim of tapping a shallow artesian well in the area. Drilling began in the spring of 1894; but instead of water, the company hit a large pocket of oil and gas. The find—the first significant discovery of oil west of the Mississippi River—led to Texas's first oil boom: within a short time nearly every lot in the town and in the surrounding area was under lease, and wells were being drilled within the city limits: five in 1896, and fifty-seven the following year. The first oil refinery in the state was built in 1897, and by 1898 there were 287 producing wells in the [Corsicana field](#). The oil find attracted numerous oil men from the East, among them [Edwy R. Brown](#), H. C. Folger, W. C. Proctor, C. N. Payne, and [J. S. Cullinan](#), founder of the Cullinan Oil Company, which later evolved into the Magnolia Oil Company. The discovery of oil transformed Corsicana from a regional agricultural shipping town to an important oil and industrial center, spawning a number of allied businesses, including the Johnston-Akins-Rittersbacher shops (later known as American Well Prospecting Company), producer of the newly-invented rotary drilling bits. In 1900 Corsicana had grown to 9,313 inhabitants, with three banks, twelve newspapers, eight hotels, forty-nine retail stores, a cotton mill, thirty-two doctors, and thirty-five saloons. The presence of the latter was a cause of great concern to many Corsicanans and led to a growing temperance movement in the city that culminated in the passage of prohibition law in November 1904. The closing of the saloons had some short-term benefits, but bootleggers rapidly filled the gap, serving the needs of the legions of oilfield workers.

The oil boom brought a new wave of prosperity to the town. A new courthouse—the one still in use in 1990—was completed in 1905, and in 1917 the Corsicana Chamber of Commerce was founded. The decades after 1900 also saw significant improvements in transportation. The Corsicana Transit Company converted from mule-drawn cars to electric trolleys in 1902; in 1912 the Trinity and Brazos completed a line between Corsicana and Houston; and in 1913 the Texas Electric Railroad instituted hourly service to and from Dallas. In 1923 a second, even larger oil deposit, the Powell oilfield, was discovered, unleashing a new oil boom. Within a few months Corsicana's population swelled to unprecedented heights; some estimates placed the number of residents as high as 28,000 during the peak months of the oil frenzy. New construction transformed the face of the city, and street lights were installed for the first time to control the increased traffic. During the height of the Powell field boom 550 wells in and around the city produced an estimated 354,000 barrels per day. As the boom subsided, the population dropped—to 11,300 in 1925—but it rebounded at the end of the decade, reaching 15,202 in 1930. With the onset of the Great Depression in the early 1930s many Corsicanans found themselves out of work. The number of rated businesses declined from a high of 780 in 1931 to 500 in 1936. Particularly hard hit was the cotton wholesale and processing industry, which suffered from the combined effects of falling prices and the [boll weevil](#). The oil industry helped to mitigate the

worst effects of the depression, however, and by the end of the decade the Corsicana economy was already beginning to show signs of a rebound. On the eve of [World War II](#) Corsicana had five banks, a daily newspaper (the *Daily Sun*), three movie theaters, three hospitals, three hotels, a cotton mill, a refinery, and two oil pumping stations. The reported population in 1940 was 17,500, of whom 77 percent were white and 23 percent black. Corsicana grew again during the war. In 1942 Air Activities of Texas opened a large flight training center where thousands of pilots received basic training, and in 1942 Bethlehem Steel took over the American Well Prospecting Plant, expanding the production of rotary drills.

Corsicana's leading industries during the 1950s included the Texas-Miller Products Company, a leading producer of hats; the Oil City Iron Works; the Wolfe Brand Company, producer of chili and tamales; several textile plants; the Bethlehem Supply Company; and the Collin Street Bakery, a leading producer of fruitcakes. The latter, founded at the end of the nineteenth century by German immigrant August Weidmann and William Thomas McElwee, developed into one of Corsicana's best known industries, shipping their DeLuxe fruitcakes to all fifty states and 195 countries around the world. The oil business, however, continued to form the mainstay of the town's economy. Huge oil profits fostered great wealth in Corsicana, and during the early 1950s there were said to be at least twenty-one millionaires in the town; the per capita income—\$1,222 in 1953—was claimed to be the highest of any Texas city. In 1956 a new oilfield was discovered in East Corsicana, and within months 500 wells—nearly one in every backyard—had been drilled.

Since that time Corsicana has experienced steady, if not spectacular, growth. The population reached 20,750 in 1965 and 25,189 in 1991. The number of businesses saw a sharp drop, from 550 in 1965 to 394 in the mid-1970s, but the number rebounded, and in 1991 the town reported 485 businesses. The leading industries in 1991 included oil and gas extraction, meat packing, fruit and vegetable canning, the printing of business forms, and manufacture of prepared foods, furniture, chemical and rubber products, and oil field machinery. The population was 24,485 in 2000, with 1,219 businesses.

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Published by the Texas State Historical Association.