

# LITERACY IN SAN ANTONIO, TEXAS, 1850–1860

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This research note is based on data collected from nineteenth-century manuscript census returns for San Antonio, Texas. It is part of a larger project to study the urban family history of four Southwestern towns: Los Angeles, California; Tucson, Arizona; Sante Fe, New Mexico; and San Antonio, Texas. Founded as Spanish pueblos, they were the largest Mexican settlements in the borderlands before the Anglo-American conquest, and they developed into important trading and commercial centers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Moreover, these towns have become important urban magnets for the Spanish-speaking people of the Southwest. Since World War II the barrios of Los Angeles and San Antonio have been especially influential in the cultural and political development of the Chicano movement, yet little is known about the early social history of these ethnic enclaves.<sup>1</sup>

The topic chosen here for preliminary analysis is a comparison between Mexican-American and Anglo-American literacy and school attendance in San Antonio during the period 1850–60. Literacy and schooling have been assumed to be related to upward socioeconomic mobility. A comparison of changes in these social indicators can provide a point of departure for studying Mexican-American economic development in South Texas.

A systematic sample of every fourth household was taken from the 1850 and 1860 San Antonio census returns. The result was a group of 714 individuals in 1850, of whom 424 were identified as being "Mexican American." The criteria used to identify Mexican Americans were place of birth and Spanish surname. Two hundred and ninety people were identified as being "Anglo American," a category that included European immigrants as well as native-born settlers of European ancestry. For 1860, the sample size was 1,003 of whom 492 were Mexican Americans and 511 Anglo Americans. Social data for both groups was keypunched into IBM cards and analyzed, using SPSS programs.<sup>2</sup> The technique of cross tabulating significant variables relating to literacy and schooling was used, and an analysis of Chi Square statistics enabled the determination of degrees of association between these variables; other procedures generated descriptive statistics for further analysis. Several methodological problems emerged that indicated the need for further computer program developments to answer significant questions. Because of sampling methods, it was impractical to investigate fully the social characteristics of residents who continued to live in San Antonio during 1850–60. Tracing socioeconomic patterns of persisting indi-

viduals is difficult when working with large census populations. It is hoped that the future use of city directories in conjunction with censuses will remedy this problem.

Nineteenth-century Anglo-American immigration to Texas changed the socioeconomic environment and influenced the literacy and schooling of the Spanish speaking. Although starting far behind the Anglo Americans during the decade 1850–60, Mexican Americans improved in both literacy and school attendance. During the ten years, Mexican-American literacy doubled, raising from 26.1 percent to 56.4 percent; during the same period, Anglo-American literacy, while high, declined from 98.9 percent to 96.6 percent, due probably to increased immigration from rural areas (see table 1). The schooling of Spanish-speaking children increased from 9.3 percent to 21.6 percent in the course of the decade; during the same period, Anglo-American school attendance also rose from 19 to 24 percent (see table 3). For Mexican Americans in San Antonio, increased literacy may have been related to formal instruction. In the ten years, the percentage of Spanish-speaking children attending school almost tripled. But, of those counted as literate in 1860, it is difficult to determine whether or not they had received formal education locally. A large number of Spanish-speaking people who were able to read and write in 1860 may have been recent migrants into the city.

Despite improvement relative to the Anglo Americans, San Antonio's Mexican Americans still lagged far behind in the ability to read and write. An explanation for this can be sought in two areas: census errors and historical sociocultural differences. Although the census takers were instructed to list those persons over twenty years of age who could read and write in any language, in practice they may have discounted Spanish language literacy.<sup>3</sup> Added to this was the possibility of mistranslation and misinterpretation of questions

TABLE 1 Literacy in San Antonio, 1850–1860 (Age Group over 20)

	<i>Mexican American</i>	<i>Anglo American</i>
<i>1850</i>		
N over 20	188	185
N Illiterate	139	2
Percent Illiterate	73.9%	1.1%
Percent Literate	26.1%	98.9%
<i>1860</i>		
N over 20	234	261
N Illiterate	102	9
Percent Illiterate	43.6%	3.4%
Percent Literate	56.4%	96.6%

1850: Corrected Chi Square 207.4, 1 degree of freedom, sig. level = .000

1860: Corrected Chi Square 111.99, 1 degree of freedom, sig. level = .000

and responses by English-speaking officials. Finally, the long history of ethnic conflict between Anglos and Mexicans in South Texas made objective census reporting difficult at best.

The literacy gap can also be attributed to the historical underdevelopment of educational institutions in Mexico's far northern frontier, especially in Texas prior to 1836. Historically, the Catholic Church monopolized the Mexican educational system. For financial and policy reasons, Church officials did not send enough priests to the Northern borderlands; as a result, basic education was neglected. Texas' history during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was that of a precarious frontier outpost; Indian raids and filibusters disrupted the pattern of life so often that the towns had little chance to promote education. Finally, the lack of a dynamic commercial economy tended to discourage individual literacy. The clerical and landed aristocracies who controlled South Texas did not encourage literacy among the people.

Indications are that increased literacy among the Mexican Americans of San Antonio may have been caused by Mexican immigration. Mexicanos improved their literacy rate faster than did Tejanos (see table 2). In 1850 Mexicanos were, on an average, nine years younger than Tejanos. The Mexicanos may have been better able to learn basic reading and writing skills than were the older Tejano residents, or they may have been more motivated to attempt assimilation. A similar pattern has been noted among contemporary Chicanos and Mexican immigrants.<sup>4</sup>

Part of the increase in Mexican-American literacy in the period 1850–60 may have been related to increased male involvement in the economy. The proportion of literate males born in Mexico increased by 10 percent while the proportion of literate females declined by the same percentage. This same trend was also apparent among the Tejanos. The steady growth of the San Antonio economy meant that Mexican-American men had more opportunities to contact

TABLE 2 Literacy and Place of Birth of Mexican-American Population

	Mexico	Texas
1850		
N over 20	76	111
N Illiterate	68	70
Percent Illiterate	89.4	63.0
Percent Literate	10.6	37.0
1860		
N over 20	122	104
N Illiterate	71	28
Percent Illiterate	58.2	26.9
Percent Literate	41.8	73.1

1850: Corrected Chi Square 47.78, 3 degree of freedom, sig. level = .000

1860: Corrected Chi Square 63.10, 7 degree of freedom, sig. level = .000

a wider social world. Few women worked outside the home, thus, men had a better chance than women of becoming literate.

During the Mexican era and the period of the Texas Republic (1836–45), education had been a privilege of the wealthier classes. Public education was not given high priority; by 1860, regardless of ethnic group, only about one child in four attended school (see table 3). Mexican Americans seemed to give more encouragement to boys to attend school than to girls; the reverse was true for the Anglo-American population. A breakdown of school attendance statistics for the Mexican-American population seems to support the hypotheses that increased literacy was due to Mexican immigration. In 1850 only one Spanish-speaking school child out of twenty was Mexican born. By 1860 this ratio had changed to about one out of two (see table 4).

The Anglo Americans of San Antonio were highly literate, yet, if the school attendance statistics are accurate, they did not seem to place much value on formal education. Evidently, the relation of literacy to formal education should be reexamined. A large number of Anglos must have learned to read and write outside the school system—at home, as children, or at work, as adults. Still another factor to take into account is the meaning of literacy in the nineteenth century. In many cases a person was listed as being literate when in fact his skills were limited to writing his name and reading elementary words. The census takers made no distinction between individuals who were highly literate and those who would be functionally illiterate by today's standards. Indeed, literacy was not as essential for economic success in the nineteenth century as it has become in the twentieth.

Thus the differences in literacy between the Mexican-American and Anglo-American residents of San Antonio in the period 1850–60 may not have

TABLE 3 School Attendance, 1850–1860

	<i>Mexican American</i>	<i>Anglo American</i>
<i>1850</i>		
N under 20	236	105
N Attending	22	20
Percent Attending	9.3%	19.0%
Average Age	11.1	10.9
Male	44.1	52.4
Female	55.9	47.6
<i>1860</i>		
N under 20	250	258
N Attending	59	62
Percent Attending	21.6%	24.0%
Average Age	11.7	12.6
Male	46.5	51.2
Female	53.1	48.8

TABLE 4 Schooling by Place of Birth, 1850–1860

	N Attending	N School Age	Percent Attending
1850			
Mexican American			
Mexico	1	48	2.1
Texas	21	284	11.4
Anglo American			
Texas	4	25	16.0
Southern States	6	19	31.6
North Eastern States	1	8	12.5
Europe	8	50	16.0
Other	1	2	50.0
1860			
Mexican American			
Mexico	18	68	26.5
Texas	40	180	22.2
Anglo American			
Texas	33	157	21.0
North Eastern States	1	4	25.0
Southern States	8	25	32.0
Europe	11	57	19.3
Unknown	1	5	20.0

been as dramatic as the census statistics seem to indicate, and factors other than illiteracy or educational deprivation may have been important in the socioeconomic subordination of the Mexican American in San Antonio.

NOTES

1. The major published works in Mexican-American urban history can be found listed in Luis Lobardo Arroyo, ed., *A Bibliography of Recent Chicano History Writings, 1970–1975* (Los Angeles: Chicano Studies Center, UCLA, 1975). See also articles and books listed in section 12, E, F in Juan Gomez Quiñones and Albert Camarillo, eds., *Selected Bibliography for Chicano Studies* (Los Angeles: Chicano Studies Center, UCLA, 1975). More recent publications in this field have been Ricardo Romo, "Work and Restlessness: Occupational and Spatial Mobility among Mexicans in Los Angeles, 1918–1928," *Pacific Historical Review* 46, no. 2 (1977): 157–81; Pedro Castillo, "Urbanization, Migration and the Chicanos, 1900–1920," *Aztlan: historia contemporanea del pueblo chicano*, eds. David Maciel and Patricia Bueno (México D.F.: Sepsetentas, 1976).
2. Norman H. Nie et al., *SPSS: Statistical Package for the Social Sciences* (New York: McGraw Hill Inc., 1975).
3. ". . . If the person can read and write a foreign language, he is to be considered as able to read and write." "Instructions to Marshalls and Assistants," U.S. House of Representatives, House Miscellaneous Documents, 2nd session, 32nd Congress, 7th

Census 1850, "An Appendix Embracing Notes on the Tables of Each of the States" (Washington, D.C.: Robert Armstrong, Public Printer, 1853), p. xxii.

4. See Leo Grebler et al., *The Mexican American People: The Nation's Second Largest Minority* (New York: The Free Press, 1970), pp. 165, 191–93, 219 *passim*. Generally Grebler's study concludes that factors other than country of birth play a large role in socioeconomic mobility and acculturation.