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Town of El Paso Grew from Pioneer Settlements

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Juan Maria Ponce de León. From "Twelve Travelers Through the Pass of the North".

Courtesy of Tom Lea

Ponce's Rancho, Franklin, Smithville, Concordia, Magoffinsville - all names of early El Paso settlements in the 1800s. None of the names would stick. However, several pioneers influenced the development of El Paso, among them Juan Maria Ponce de León, Benjamin Franklin Coons, Hugh Stephenson and William T. Smith.

In 1827, Juan Maria Ponce de León petitioned the ayuntamiento of El Paso Del Norte (Juárez town council) for a land grant on the northern side of the Rio Grande. Ponce de León received two caballerias of territory, the equivalent of about 211 acres.

Clearing the land, he planted corn and wheat fields and grapevines and cultivated cottonwoods. His house was no more than a two-story shack. Leon Metz tells us the original house was located near the corner of Paisano and El Paso Streets.

Two years later, Ponce de León acquired 400 more acres for a total of 600 acres of land which came to be known as "Ponce's Rancho" and the beginning of what we know as El Paso. In 1830, his house was washed away by the flooding Rio Grande. His second house was located where the Plaza Theater stands, and modern downtown El Paso grew out of his "rancho."

In December 1846, Colonel Alexander Doniphan's "Missouri Volunteers" rested near the Rio Grande on Ponce de León's ranch. The forces stayed about a month and a half and helped fix a grain mill there. c

In 1849, Ponce de León leased his land to newcomer Benjamin Franklin Coons but took the land back in 1850 when Coons suffered financial reversals. Coons had in turn leased the land and buildings to the U.S. military for the "Post Opposite El Paso," referring to modern Juárez. Major Jefferson Van Horne and several companies of the 3rd Infantry established this post. It would eventually become Fort Bliss.

Ponce de León continued to manage the land until his death in July 1852. During the years on his "rancho," Ponce de León acquired political power and controlled the salt market in the El Paso area. His wife, Dolores Zosaya Ponce de León and his daughter, Josefa Ponce de Leon Varela, inherited the ranch. His son-in-law, Mariano Varela, took the family business.

While Ponce's Rancho was growing, trader and trapper Hugh Stephenson established the community of Stephensonville in 1849. He subsequently called this settlement Concordia after the town by the same name in Missouri where he had lived with relatives after being orphaned. First seeing the Pass of the North in 1824, Kentucky native Stephenson later married Juana Ascarate, daughter of a wealthy family in El Paso, Chihuahua.

Stephenson's trading post was located in the heart of what is now known as the "spaghetti bowl," on I-10, and part of his land would become the [Concordia Cemetery](#). Stephenson operated a silver mine and a small smelting operation

in the Organ Mountains. He and his wife entertained soldiers, businessmen and statesmen from the U.S. and Mexico who were traveling through the Pass of the North.

Soon after the Mexican War, Juana arranged for the construction of what was considered the first church in El Paso: the Chapel of San Jose de Concordia de Alto. Concordia also served from 1868 to 1877 as one of several sites of Fort Bliss.

While the great trader James Magoffin was establishing Magoffinsville, Benjamin Franklin Coons used inside information regarding the American recognition of Ponce de León's grant as a strategic location for a military base and purchased the land for \$18,000. Changing the name of Ponce's Rancho to "Franklin," Coons leased part of the ranch to the military and on the rest built a trading house, blacksmith shop and a ferry.

The California gold rush and the Butterfield Overland Mail was in part responsible for turning the small ranch of Franklin into a community. Franklin became a mail station, and Coons was named the area's first postmaster. However, the land and the building went back to Ponce de León in 1850 when Coons went bankrupt, although it is said he paid off his debts.

After Ponce de León's death, his heirs sold the land to William T. Smith. Once again, the name of the area changed - from Franklin to Smithsville, although residents still referred to it as Franklin.

After the Ponce de León land grant was upheld by the state of Texas, Smith began leasing land but eventually sold the tract to John S. Gillet, Henry S. Gillet, Josiah F. Crosby, William J. Morton and Vincent St. Vrain, retaining a one-eighth interest for himself. This group formed a syndicate called The El Paso Company, whose purpose it was to develop the land in and around the town of Franklin (Smithsville).

The El Paso Company hired a well-known surveyor and inventor named Anson Mills to survey the land, and a new chapter in the changing of names began. It was Mills who would officially name the town "El Paso" in 1859. El Paso del Norte, the settlement south of the Rio Grande in Chihuahua, Mexico, became Ciudad Juárez in 1888 in honor of Benito Juárez.

And so the land Europeans had first set eyes on in the 1500s would grow, first slowly, then rapidly into the city we know today. It changed its name as it grew, much like it changed countries (Mexico and the U.S.) and even states (New Mexico and Texas).

In his book "Turning Points," Leon Metz writes of this western outpost, "El Paso is neither Old Mexican, New Mexican, nor completely Texan. It is a survivor, adopting the best of each."

Related Sources:

Account of life in the El Paso/Las Cruces area from 1857 in [El Gringo: New Mexico and her People](#) by William Watts Hart Davis.

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Cite: Jallad, Manuela et al. "Town grew from pioneer settlements." *Borderlands* 18 (1999-2000): 4. *Borderlands*. EPCC Libraries. <<http://www.epcc.edu/nwlibrary/borderlands>>

Page last updated: 07 Jan 2009

Borderlands is published annually by [El Paso Community College](#), P.O. Box 20500, El Paso, TX 79998.

It is a collection of student written articles on the history & culture of the El Paso, Juárez, Las Cruces border region, comprising the states of Texas, New Mexico, and the Mexican state of Chihuahua. This site was

created with seed money from the Integrating Technical Contexts into Academic Courses (ITAC) Project, and maintained by the [Northwest Community Library](#) staff.

Funds for the program were provided by the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board under the auspices of the federal Carl D. Perkins Vocational and Technical Education Act of 1998.

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