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BELTON, TEXAS. Belton, the county seat of Bell County, is on Nolan Creek at the junction of Interstate 35 and U.S. highways 81 and 190, near the geographic center of the county. The area was first settled in the late 1840s. When Bell County was established in 1850 the small settlement of Nolan Springs, named for adventurer Philip Nolan,^{qv} was chosen as county seat and renamed Nolanville. Col. Henry B. Elliot surveyed the area, and E. Lawrence Stickney made a plat of the town. The town was laid out on the Shelbyville plan, with a large courthouse square as its focus. The first sale of town lots was held on August 26, 1850. Joe Townsend and A. T. McCorcle were among the first merchants to build stores. W. H. Tichenal is reported to have sold goods from his wagon on the square, and John C. Henry, with a barrel of whiskey and a tin cup, is supposed to have operated a saloon under a tree just east of the

site of the later Main Street bridge. The post office was established as Nolanville in October 1850. In December 1851 the Texas legislature incorporated the town and changed the name to Belton, after Bell County. A small log courthouse was erected on the courthouse square in 1852. Weekly stagecoach service began the same year, and the town became an stop on the mail route from Little Rock, Arkansas, to San Antonio.

By the mid-1850s numerous merchants had opened stores on or near the courthouse square, and Belton emerged as a regional trading center. The original log courthouse was sold at auction in 1855, and a new two-story limestone building was constructed in 1859. In 1860 Belton, with a population of 300, was the largest town in the county.

During the secession^{qv} crisis there was some pro-Union sentiment in Belton. A Whig newspaper, the *Independent*, was published there, and in the election of 1859 Bell County residents voted overwhelmingly for Sam Houston.^{qv} Nonetheless, in 1861 the county voted for secession by a wide margin. A large number of men from Belton served in the Confederate forces, and local residents established several small industries to support the war effort, including a complex of stock pens and slaughterhouses to process dried beef.

After the war Belton experienced a protracted period of violence and lawlessness. Federal troops were stationed in the town to protect federal judge Hiram Christian but were unable to stop a series of political murders and lynchings. Several pro-Union sympathizers being held prisoner for political murders were lynched by a Belton mob in 1866, and by the late 1860s the Ku Klux Klan^{qv} and several other similar organizations had grown up. The Republicans proved powerless to stop the growing tide, and by the early 1870s conservative Democrats were once again firmly in control.

After Reconstruction^{qv} the town continued to grow as a business center for the surrounding agricultural area. One of the main feeder routes of the Chisholm Trail^{qv} ran along the eastern edge of the town, and numerous cattle drives originated in or passed through the area during the 1870s and 1880s. In 1867 the town's first bank was organized by Josephus Zacharias Miller and others, and Belton soon developed into a regional banking center. The late 1860s and 1870s also witnessed the beginning of a religious and social experiment, the Belton Woman's Commonwealth^{qv} or Belton Sanctificationist movement. Led by Martha White McWhirter^{qv} and several other prominent Belton women, the Sanctificationists broke

away from the town's established Protestant churches and formed an economic cooperative. In 1887 they opened the three-story Central Hotel, for many years the town's largest and most modern, and in later years operated a steam laundry and several nearby farms. The group also founded the town's first library in a room in the hotel.

In 1879 a fire destroyed much of the town's central business district, but the stores were quickly rebuilt. A new Renaissance Revival courthouse, designed by architect Jasper N. Preston,^{qv} was constructed in the late 1870s, and by the mid-1880s Belton had a population of 4,000, daily mail and stagecoach service, three newspapers, an opera house, five schools, steam grist and flour mills, two hotels, thirteen grocery stores, and three banks. During this period Belton also developed into a processing and shipping center for the region's growing cotton crops. The first cottonseed oil mill was built in the town in 1879, and a number of cotton gins began operating.

In the early 1880s the first railroad, the Gulf, Colorado and Santa Fe, reached the town, and the Missouri, Kansas and Texas was built through in 1882. Nevertheless, Temple, established by the Santa Fe eight miles to the northeast in 1881 and aggressively promoted by the railroad, quickly surpassed

Belton as the county's largest town. Some Belton businesses moved to Temple, but Belton's importance as a county seat and cotton center ensured its survival. An electric interurban line was constructed linking the two towns in 1905, and commerce developed between them. The late nineteenth century also saw other important developments: a public water system was built in the mid-1880s, a fire department was organized in 1884, and the town received electricity in 1889. In 1885 Baylor Female College, later the University of Mary Hardin-Baylor, was moved to Belton. Belton Academy, founded in 1886, operated until 1911. A large cotton yarn factory opened in 1901, and by 1904 the town reported a population of 3,700. In December 1913 much of the downtown was flooded when Nolan Creek overflowed its banks, but the town continued to prosper until the early 1930s, when falling cotton prices and the onset of the Great Depression^{qv} forced many businesses to close. The population, which reached a peak of 6,500 in 1928, fell to 3,779 in 1931. The economy only began to recover in the early 1940s with the development of nearby Fort Hood.^{qv}

After World War II^{qv} the population grew steadily. In 1950 Belton reported a population of 6,246 and 180 business establishments. By 1990 the town had a population of 12,476; about 67 percent of the inhabitants were white, 17 percent were

black, and 12 percent were Hispanic. The largest employers were the city of Belton, Bell County, and the University of Mary Hardin-Baylor.

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