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Rice Culture

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RICE CULTURE. The Texas rice industry owes its origins to the introduction of rice (*Oryza sativa*) seed from Madagascar to the Carolina colonies about 1685. Production, milling, and marketing flourished in South Carolina and Georgia for the next 200 years. Although there was early domestic cultivation of rice in Louisiana and Texas, commercial rice production began in Louisiana shortly before the **Civil War** (</handbook/entries/civil-war>) and in the 1880s spread rapidly through the coastal prairies of southwest Louisiana into southeast Texas. Arkansas, California, Louisiana, and Texas now produce 90 percent of the American rice crop, with lesser production along the Mississippi River in Mississippi, Missouri, and Tennessee. The earliest form of rice cultivation in Texas involved essentially pioneering agriculture. Farmers plowed small plots with oxen, planted seed by hand, depended on rainfall for cultivation, and harvested with hand sickles. Milling was with a crude mortar and pestle. Consumption was strictly local. Considerable acreages of rice were grown in southeast Texas as early as 1853 by **William Goyens** (</handbook/entries/goyens-william>) and in Beaumont in 1863 by David French. The latter is often considered the first major rice farmer in Texas. Modern commercial production in Texas derived largely from the completion of the southern transcontinental railroad in 1883 and its acquisition by the Southern Pacific Railroad in 1885, coupled with the availability of cheap land on the coastal prairies, the introduction of modern rice mills, and an influx of immigrants from Louisiana and from the grain producing areas of the Midwest. The latter brought with them combines and mechanized agriculture. Pumps, canals, modern irrigation systems, and improved varieties contributed to expanded production. Edgar Carruthers, Louis Bordages, and Dan Wingate produced the state's first large commercial crop of rice on a 200-acre farm near Beaumont in 1886. They shipped their crop by rail to New Orleans for milling. In 1891 **Joseph E. Broussard** (</handbook/entries/broussard-joseph-eloi>) established the first rice irrigation and canal system in the state, and the following year he added rice milling machinery to an existing gristmill, thus initiating rice milling in Texas and paving the way for the rapid expansion of production. Texas farmers planted 234,000 acres of rice in 1903 compared to Louisiana's 376,000 acres. The two states then produced 99 percent of the total rice crop, with production having virtually ceased in South Carolina and Georgia. An important event in the development of the Texas Gulf Coast rice industry was the introduction of seed imported from Japan in 1904. Seed rice had previously come from Honduras or the Carolinas. At the invitation of the Houston Chamber of Commerce and the Southern Pacific Railroad, **Japanese** (</handbook/entries/japanese>) farmers were brought to Texas to advise local farmers on rice production, bringing with them seed as a gift from the emperor of Japan. The first three years' harvest, which produced an average of thirty-four barrels an acre compared with an average of eighteen to twenty barrels from native rice seed, was sold as seed to Louisiana and Texas farmers. C. J. Knapp, founder of the United States agricultural agent system, helped to overcome government regulation to bring seed rice into the country. Japanese rice production began at Webster in Harris County under the direction of **Seito Saibara** (</handbook/entries/saibara-seito>), his family, and thirty original colonists. The Saibara family has been credited with establishing the Gulf Coast rice industry. Arkansas became a major rice producer after 1900, eventually surpassing Texas and Louisiana production. In 1915 Louisiana and Arkansas produced 12 million hundredweight of rice on 740,000 acres of land, and production was beginning to develop in California. In Texas rice mills operated in Port Arthur, Beaumont, Orange, and Houston.

Texas-milled rice went to world markets by rail and through the ports of Houston and Galveston. The Beaumont Cooperative Rice Experiment Station began operation in 1912, under the cooperative management of Texas A&M University and the United States Department of Agriculture. Rice prices, like the price of other agricultural commodities, collapsed after [World War I \(/handbook/entries/world-war-i\)](#), bringing hard times to rice farmers. This was followed by the even more difficult years of the [Great Depression \(/handbook/entries/great-depression\)](#). Various agricultural credit acts and finally the Agricultural Adjustment Act of the New Deal established the precedent for price, production, and marketing controls that generally characterize the industry to the present. Rice farming in the United States has historically been a large-scale, capital-intensive enterprise, heavily dependent upon international markets. The United States markets annually 15–30 percent of the total world rice exports, although it accounts for only 2 percent of world production. Texas growers annually produce 20 million hundredweight of rice on 350,000 acres of land. In various years between 1974 and 1990 Texas rice farms averaged from 250 to 450 acres in size. The number of rice farms remained generally stable with 1,200 to 1,500 units in production. The value of the crop in the field in 1990 was \$200 million. Rising domestic consumption and the opening of new international markets are expected to sustain the United States and Texas rice industry.

Henry C. Dethloff, *A History of the American Rice Industry, 1685–1985* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1988). John Norman Efferson, *The Production and Marketing of Rice* (New Orleans: Simmons Press, 1952). Houston Metropolitan Research Center Files, Houston Public Library. Edward Hake Phillips, "The Gulf Coast Rice Industry," *Journal of Agricultural History* 25 (April 1954). Randell K. Smith, Eric J. Wailes, and Gail L. Cramer, *The Market Structure of the U.S. Rice Industry* (Arkansas Agricultural Experiment Station, February 1990). Vertical Files, Dolph Briscoe Center for American History, University of Texas at Austin.

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