

**Heinrich T. Mordhorst**  
**1864 - 1928**

## **I. CONTEXT**

New Braunfels, Texas, the seat of Comal County, is a historically German-American city. Since its founding in 1845, immigrants culturally and economically influenced the town with skills, trades, and traditions brought with them from their homelands. By 1920, the city was a manufacturing center that supplied and assisted immigrants settling in the surrounding hill country (Greene 2010). Heinrich (Henry) Theodor Mordhorst settled in New Braunfels just after the turn of the twentieth century, a significant era of growth in the history of the county. Originally from Germany, he immigrated with his family first to Ohio and eventually settled in Texas, bringing skills that the developing city of New Braunfels and the surrounding region required in the modern, industrial age ("New Enterprise" 1905). The establishment of his Comal Earthenware Company and the craftsman techniques he brought with him also contributed to the expanding trade skills found in the New Braunfels area in the early twentieth century. His desire to create unique and meaningful grave covers influenced the regional culture and later folk artists (Clark 1972, 40-42). With these ornate sea shell and cement grave decorations, Mordhorst contributed to the cultural life of the region, providing a sense of tradition and craftsmanship in an increasingly modern, industrial world.

## **II. OVERVIEW**

Born in Rostock, Germany, on February 4, 1864, Heinrich (Henry) Theodore Mordhorst was the son of Heinrich and Louise Mordhorst. While in Germany, Mordhorst learned the earthenware trade in his father's factory. In 1881, at the age of eighteen, he immigrated to the United States with his parents and sisters, Dora and Emma, and settled in the river city of Pomeroy, Ohio. The family established an earthenware company and Henry honed his skills in

this trade. The Mordhorst business was successful until high waters washed it out in 1899 ("New Enterprise" 1905).

Henry Mordhorst moved to the Forth Worth area in about 1901, where he worked at the Banner Brick Works at Kennedale, gaining a new skill and craft and working his way up through the company until he was a superintendent (Comal Earthenware announcement 1905; 1906). Other sources state that Heinrich Mordhorst was living in New Braunfels as early as 1900 (Clark, 1972). In 1905 he began displaying interest in establishing his own business in the New Braunfels area. His interest in the area arose when a friend brought him clay from the Comal River ("New Enterprise" 1905). Between 1905 and 1906, Mordhorst settled in the New Braunfels area with his mother and sisters (his father having previously passed away) and established the Comal Earthenware Company with a partner, Mr. Emil Heinen of New Braunfels ("New Enterprise" 1905).

Although his original focus was earthenware, Mordhorst was also skilled at creating and manipulating concrete and cement. A new building material at the time, cement became Mordhorst's focus ("New Enterprise" 1905). His work in New Braunfels included sidewalks, cisterns, cellars, wells, curbing, fireplaces, water troughs, and houses (Clark, 37). The first home built of Mordhorst's new cement block was constructed for Miss Margarethe Preiss at the corner of Zink and Pecan Streets (Newspaper clipping n.d.). As a testament to Mordhorst's skill, the home still stands at that location today, one of three Mordhorst cement block houses that survive. The cement blocks were also used for the construction of the International & Great Northern Railway station in New Braunfels in 1907.

Mordhorst is widely recognized for his ornate cement and sea shell funerary designs. His grave covers, seen throughout the region have a rectangular base with a domed top and a rectangular base. Large Atlantic cockleshells, obtained from Rockport and Galveston, adorn these grave covers and display Mordhorst's attention to detail and individual style (Clark 1972).

On the domed covers, rows of shells form almost perfect lines, running from the head to the foot of the grave, and follow a distinct pattern attributed to Mordhorst (Jordan 1982). The color of the shells is another distinction which sets his work apart from others. Mordhorst painted the shells either black or white, and many are still visible on the graves today (Jordan 1982). Through trial and error, Mordhorst perfected his technique of adhering shells to the concrete by stringing wire through the inside of the shell, then placing the shell on the wet concrete mold (Clark, 37).

Headstones constructed by Mordhorst contain unique attributes as well; small shells near an individual's name and date of death distinguish the grave as Mordhorst's design. Circular holes are also present, which allow visitors to place flowers in honor of those who have passed. The headstone is not the only place the flower holders are located; some graves have them in the middle of the grave cover or on the footstone. The footstones are often inscribed "Rest in Peace" or "*Ruhe In Frieden*," the German translation, both appropriate for a German-American community.

Mordhorst continued to create these works of art, from his arrival in 1905 until 1921, seven years before his death. In 1910 Mordhorst created what is determined to be his first funerary decoration, for the Preiss family of New Braunfels, Texas. Although a resident of New Braunfels, his seashell funerary designs exist in cemeteries throughout Central Texas. Cemeteries in Comal County include Sattler, Fischer's Store, Smithson Valley, New Braunfels and Comal Cemetery, which also includes the Mordhorst family gravesite. The locations outside Comal County include Comfort, Boerne, Blanco, Twin Sisters and Orange Grove. The latest dated works attributed to Mordhorst are dated 1921: a family cemetery for the Heimer family near Canyon Lake, Texas, which displays the large Atlantic cockleshell designs; a family grave for the Boenig family of New Braunfels, Texas, which also highlights the signature Mordhorst techniques; and a grave curbing design for Wenzel & Marquardt in the Comal Cemetery. Many

of Mordhorst's grave decorations and curbings boast his stamp, which reads "H.T. Mordhorst, New Braunfels, Tex." However, the graves attributed to Mordhorst rarely display the stamp.

Henry Mordhorst died February 6, 1928, and buried at the Comal Cemetery in New Braunfels. He was survived by his wife, Hulda Dierks Mordhorst, who he married in Comal County in 1907, daughters Emma Mordhorst Waldschmidt and Dora Mordhorst Schriewer, step-daughter Linda Kloepper Nolte, four grandchildren, one sister, and numerous other relatives (FamilySearch n.d.).

### **III. SIGNIFICANCE**

Heinrich (Henry) T. Mordhorst represents the great contributions of German immigrants to Texas. After arriving in New Braunfels in 1906, Mordhorst established a successful building materials business, Comal Earthenware. He obtained the American Dream and helped a burgeoning city and region become a modern manufacturing center in the process. Between 1906 and 1928, Mordhorst literally helped build New Braunfels with his cement works, such as sidewalks and houses. As an artisan-craftsman, he created cement and sea shell grave decorations for mostly German and German-American citizens throughout the hill country. Many carried on the Mordhorst tradition of grave decoration for many years after his death. Mordhorst's legacy is his contribution to the economic development of New Braunfels and to the rich cultural heritage of central Texas.



Domed grave covers, Comal Cemetery  
Photos courtesy Sara Birdsong



Mordhorst footstone, Comal County  
Photo courtesy Michael Krause



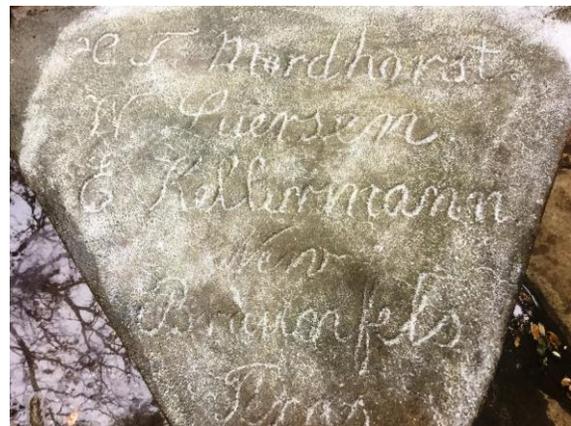
Mordhorst stamp, Comal County  
Photo courtesy Michael Krause



Mordhorst headstone designs, Comal Cemetery  
Photo courtesy Sara Birdsong



Fischer Cemetery  
Photo courtesy Michael Krause



Watering trough  
Photo courtesy San Antonio Conservation  
Society Farm & Ranch Group.