

CULTURAL HISTORY

The Old Three Hundred

by Neal McLain

Just who were "The Old Three Hundred," and why are they significant?

Before we can answer that question, we have to review some history.

Before the year 1821, what is now Texas was part of the *Viceroyalty of New Spain*, a vast Spanish territory extending from the Yucatan Peninsula into present-day United States as far north as Idaho. The area now known as Brazoria County was located in the *Province of Texas*, an internal province of the Viceroyalty.



The Viceroyalty of New Spain, 1786-1821

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Inset: Flag of New Spain, 1519-1821

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In 1821, by the end of Spain's 300-year rule over New Spain, most of the population lived in present-day Mexico and Central America; few persons of Spanish descent were interested in occupying lands along the northern frontier. In Texas in 1821, there were only about 5,000 Spaniards, and only three significant settlements: San Antonio (five missions), Goliad (La Bahía), and Nacogdoches.^[3]

Many reasons have been cited for this, but the primary reasons seem to have been persistent attacks by native Indians and the lack of metal ore deposits. Over the years, the Spanish Crown had grown rich from the silver mines of Mesoamerica, but no such mines existed in Texas.

The Spanish did, however, recognize the value of the land for grazing. To encourage settlement, it granted as much as 5000 acres to each family willing to engage in cattle ranching in Texas. Many Spaniards accepted this offer, but because of the size of the ranches, the population density remained low.

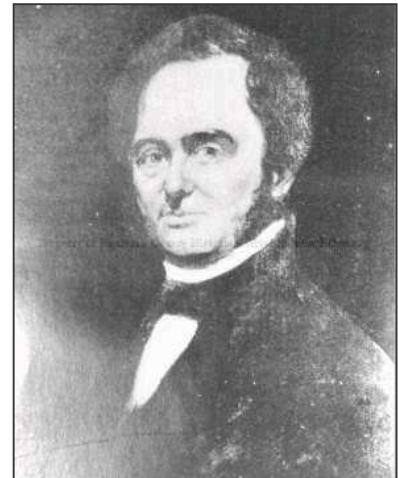
In 1803, the United States purchased the Louisiana Territory from France, bringing United States' jurisdiction to the very borders of Spanish Texas. With so few residents near the border, Spain was ill-equipped to prevent U.S. residents from illegally occupying land in Texas.

In an attempt to establish a buffer along the frontier, Spain began granting land to U.S. citizens, and in September 1820, it formally opened Texas to any foreigners who would "respect the laws and constitution of Spain."^[4]

Now it may seem strange that Spain would encourage foreign immigration into its territory in order to prevent illegal immigration. But at the time, Spain had other concerns:

- Back in Europe, it was still recovering from the devastation of The Peninsular War (1808-1814), in which Spain, with its allies Portugal and the United Kingdom, had finally driven Napoleon Bonaparte's *Grande Armée* out of the Iberian peninsula.^[5]
- Here in the New World, Spain was engaged in an ongoing effort to repel Mexico's demands for independence (Mexican War of Independence, 1810-1821).^[6]

Moses Austin, a United States citizen, was quick to take advantage of the situation. In a famous story, he rode a gray horse to San Antonio de Bexar to visit the Spanish governor, from whom he requested an "Empresario Grant" to settle 300 families in Texas. The governor refused. But as Austin was leaving the governor's palace, he met an old friend, the Baron de Bastrop, who went with him again to see the governor. This time the answer was favorable. Austin's grant was formally approved in January 1821.^[7]



Portrait of Moses Austin
Image courtesy of the Brazoria
County Historical Museum.

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Unfortunately, the famous ride on the gray horse proved to be too much for Austin's health, and he died the following June, leaving his grant to his son Stephen F. Austin.



Portrait of Stephen F. Austin
painted by C B Norman
Image courtesy of the Brazoria
County Historical Museum.

The younger Austin succeeded in having his father's grant recognized by the Spanish governor. He advertised his venture in New Orleans newspapers, and several families agreed to move. He then procured a ship, the *Lively*, and instructed the captain to take the colonists to the mouth of the Colorado River in Matagorda Bay, while he traveled overland to meet them.

The captain never made it to Matagorda Bay. He landed at the mouth of the Brazos River, at present-day Surfside, an event commemorated by a monument at the Surfside Beach City Hall.

By the time Austin got back to the Brazos to meet the colonists, another complication had arisen: Mexico had finally won its independence from Spain, and had established its capital in Mexico City. Austin's grant was no longer valid.

So off he went to Mexico City to have the grant confirmed. But he soon discovered that the new government was in a state of disarray, and could not act on his request immediately. Austin was forced to remain in Mexico City for another year, waiting for the new government to enact the necessary legislation to confirm his grant.

Finally, early in 1823, Austin received an Empresario Grant authorizing him to establish a colony and settle 300 families in Texas. Austin himself was named Empresario, a title that combined the duties of land agent, land surveyor and — in Austin's words — "Civil Chief, the sole judicial officer, and the commandant of the militia of the new Colony." [8]



THE LIVELY - FIRST VESSEL
WITH EMIGRANTS TO
AUSTIN'S COLONY
LANDED HERE
DECEMBER 23, 1821

THE BATTLE OF VELASCO
WAS FOUGHT HERE
JUNE 26, 1832

PUBLIC AND SECRET
TREATIES OF PEACE
BETWEEN
THE REPUBLIC OF TEXAS
AND
GENERAL SANTA ANNA
WERE SIGNED HERE
MAY 14, 1836

DEDICATED MAY 14, 1936



The *Lively* Monument at Surfside Beach City Hall

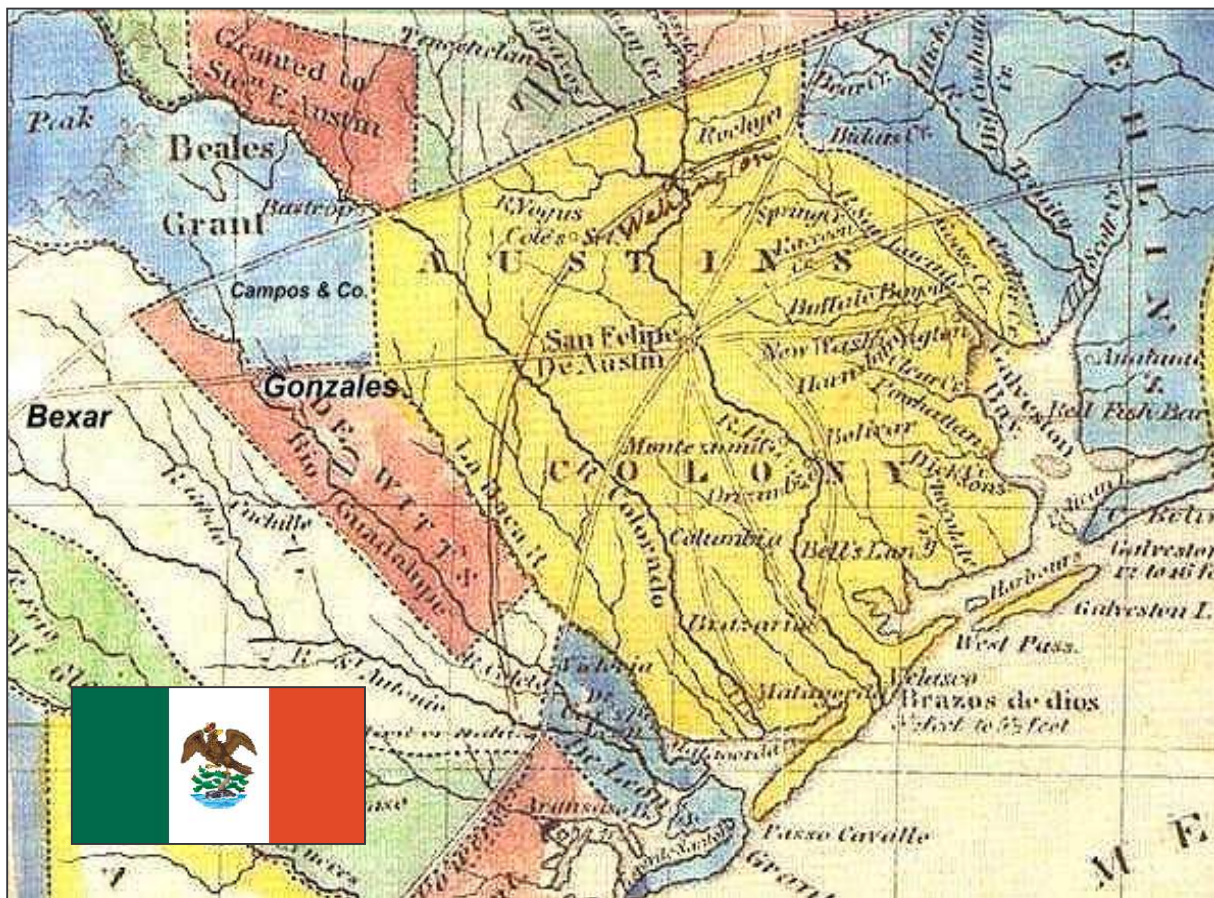
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Under the terms of the Empresario Grant:

- Austin was authorized to recruit immigrant families of "good character" from the United States with the promise of a grant of land. Each immigrant family would receive one league of land (4,428.4 acres) for grazing and one labor of land (177.1) acres for farming. In exchange for his services as Empresario, Austin would receive land for his own account.
- Immigrants were required to declare allegiance to the Government of Mexico and to profess the Catholic religion.
- The government would guarantee liberty, civil rights, secure land titles, and immunity from taxation for six years.

Upon his return to Texas, Austin began the process of issuing land titles to immigrants. To assist with this effort, the governor of Texas, Don Luciano García, appointed Baron de Bastrop as land commissioner to record the titles. By 1825, all 300 titles had been issued. During the next several years, Austin obtained three more Empresario Grants, for an additional 900 families.^[9] By 1836, the colony had grown to include land extending from Matagorda Bay to Galveston Bay and as far north as present-day Bryan.

The following map shows the extent of the Austin Colony in 1836:



Austin Colony and Surroundings Coahuila y Tejas 1836

Used by permission of Sons of DeWitt Colony Texas [10]

Inset: National Flag of Mexico, 1821-1823

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Several other individuals also obtained Empresario Grants during this period.

But Moses Austin's Empresario Grant of 1821, issued by the government of Spain and finally carried through by Stephen F. Austin after the *Mexican War of Independence*, stands today as the first Empresario Grant in Texas. The 300 families that took up land under this grant are known today as The Old Three Hundred.

Next month: The Old Three Hundred in Brazoria County.

- [1] "**The Viceroyalty of New Spain 1786-1821.**" Atlas of Mexico. University of Texas at Austin Bureau of Business Research, Perry-Castañeda Library, Map Collection. Copyright 1975 Board of Regents, The University of Texas System. Used by permission. Accessed 27 May 2009. <http://www.lib.utexas.edu/maps/atlas_mexico/new_spain_viceroyalty.jpg>
- [2] "**Viceroyalty of New Spain.**" Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia. 24 May 2009. Accessed 27 May 2009. <http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Viceroyalty_of_New_Spain&oldid=291965167>.
- [3] **The Public Lands of Texas 1519-1970** by Thomas Lloyd Miller. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1972. 7-12
- [4] Miller. 13
- [5] "**Peninsular War.**" Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia. 17 May 2009. Accessed 27 May 2009. <http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Peninsular_War&oldid=290552241>
- [6] "**Mexican War of Independence.**" Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia. 26 May 2009. Accessed 27 May 2009. <http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Mexican_War_of_Independence&oldid=292517118>
- [7] "**Moses Austin.**" by David B. Gracy II. The Handbook of Texas Online. n.d. Accessed 27 May 2009 <<http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/AA/fau12.html>>
- [8] "**Powers and Duties of An Empresario.**" by Stephen F. Austin. Sons of Dewitt Colony Texas. © 1997-2007, Wallace L. McKeehan. Used by permission. Accessed 27 May 2009. <<http://www.tamu.edu/ccbn/dewitt/Coahuila.htm>>
- [9] "**The Mexican Revolution.**" Kerr County Historical Commission. 2009. Accessed 27 May 2009. <<http://www.co.kerr.tx.us/historical/mexico.htm>>
- [10] "**Austin Colony and Surroundings Coahuila y Tejas 1836.**" Sons of Dewitt Colony Texas. © 1997-2007, Wallace L. McKeehan. Used by permission. Accessed 27 May 2009. <<http://www.tamu.edu/ccbn/dewitt/co&texmaps.htm>>
- [11] "**Flag of Mexico.**" Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia. 30 May 2009. Accessed 30 May 2009 <http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Flag_of_Mexico&oldid=293268210>.