

# CULTURAL HISTORY

## Land Subdivisions in Texas

### Part 1: New Spain

By Neal McLain

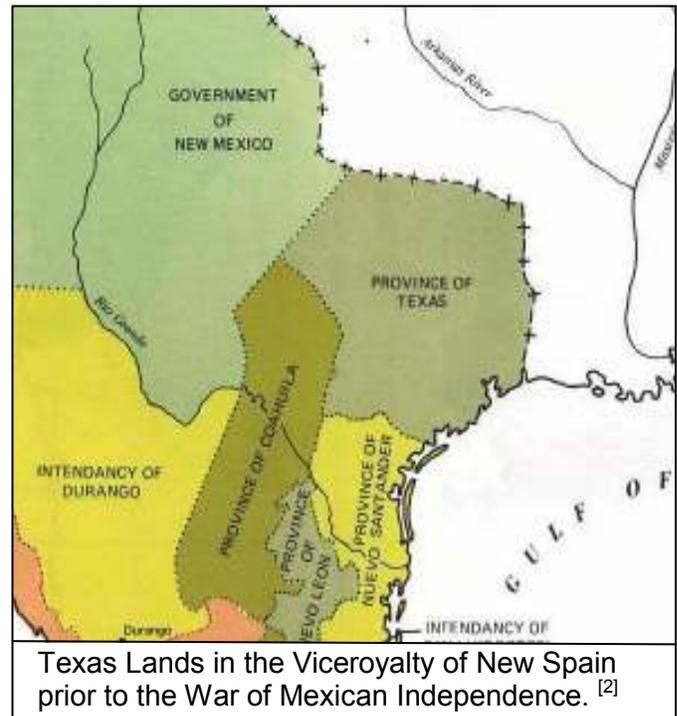
The story of land subdivision policies in Texas began long before Texas became a state. What is now Texas has been subject to several governments over the years, each with its own land subdivision policies.

For more than 300 years, prior to the War of Mexican Independence, Texas had been part of the Viceroyalty of New Spain, a vast Spanish colonial empire extending from the Yucatan Peninsula into present-day United States as far north as Idaho. Lands now in Texas were scattered among four provinces of New Spain: Province of Coahuila, Province of Nuevo Santander, Province of Texas, and the Government of New Mexico.

### MISSIONS

Among the first Spanish settlers to arrive in Texas were missionaries — Catholic Dominicans, Jesuits, and Franciscans sent to spread Christianity among Native Americans. During the 17th and 18th centuries, twenty-six Spanish missions were established within the future boundaries of Texas.<sup>[1]</sup>

Spanish soldiers arrived more or less simultaneously to establish *presidios* (forts). *Presidios* were usually located near missions to protect the missions. *Pueblos* (towns) often grew up in the vicinity, under the protection of the *presidio*.



Texas Lands in the Viceroyalty of New Spain prior to the War of Mexican Independence.<sup>[2]</sup>



Spanish Missions in Texas 1659-1785<sup>[3]</sup>

Missions flourished until the 1780s, but they were clearly in decline before that. Inadequate military protection left the missions vulnerable to attack by Apache and Comanche Indian bands. Disease reduced the native population, hastening the missions' decline.

As remotely-located missions declined, some of them were moved to safer communities. Three of the five missions in San Antonio were originally located elsewhere.<sup>[4]</sup>

By 1790, the surviving missions had been *secularized*, a process in which communal properties were privatized and the mission churches were transferred from the missionary religious orders to the local Catholic diocese.<sup>[5]</sup>

Land Subdivisions in Texas

Virtually no records exist to show the boundaries of the original presidio and mission lands. We can guess that whatever surveys may have been made at the time were rough approximations — perhaps simple hand sketches. In any case, the boundaries of mission lands must have changed frequently as the Indian population changed from year to year, and as new fields were established and older ones abandoned.

Following secularization, pasture and agricultural lands owned by the missions would have passed to private parties. We can find evidence of these parcels in aerial photographs today. Their boundaries stand out as fencelines, treelines, roadways, and watercourses.

An example can be found in San Antonio:



Longlots, San Antonio Missions National Historical Park, San Antonio, Texas <sup>[6]</sup>

This photo shows long, narrow parcels ("longlots") on both sides of the San Antonio River. These parcels are located near two former missions (Mission San Juan Capistrano and Mission Espada) in what is now San Antonio Missions National Historical Park. These parcels were once associated with the nearby missions; the National Park Service identifies them as "Labóres de San Juan" and "Labóres de Espada."

Note the use of the Spanish word *labóres*, the plural form of *labór*. In a general sense, *labór* can refer to any parcel of land of used for irrigated agriculture and homesteading — hence, the location near a source of water.

Depending on context, *labór* can refer to a specific geographic area equal to about 177.1 acres (as in "a league and a labor," a common settler's grant during the Texas Empresario period) or about 160 acres (one quarter section, or 0.25 square mile), a common settler's grant in the Public Land states of the United States and, several years later, in western Texas.



Land Subdivisions in Texas

To encourage settlement in its northern provinces, the provincial governors of New Spain held authority to grant lands to parties willing to settle on the land and establish ranching and farming operations. Typical grants included large tracts for ranching, smaller tracts for irrigated farms and homesteads, and access to water.

In the absence of any colonial, or even provincial, laws governing such grants, provincial governors were free to grant lands of any size and shape. Many of the early grants were *longlots* similar to the *labóres* of San Antonio. Longlots were indeed *long lots* — long, narrow parcels abutting a source of water at one end, or, in some cases, both ends.

With one notable exception, the provincial governors' efforts to settle the northern provinces were largely unsuccessful. The lone exception: the floodplains of the Rio Grande and its tributaries. We can see evidence of these longlots in aerial photographs today.



Riverine longlots along the Rio Grande near Fort Hancock, Hudspeth County, Texas and El Porvenir, Chihuahua, Mexico. <sup>[8]</sup>

Land Subdivisions in Texas

Spanish control over Texas lasted until 1821, when Mexico gained independence from Spain in the War of Mexican Independence (1810-1821). Under the new government of Mexico, Texas became part of the State of Coahuila y Tehas.

By 1821, there were only about 5,000 Spaniards living in Texas, and only three significant communities: San Antonio, Goliad, and Nacogdoches. Like most settlements along El Camino Real, these communities had grown up around missions. But most of the other communities had faded to oblivion due to secularization of the missions or persistent Indian attacks.

The year 1821 was significant for another reason: it was the year in which Moses Austin obtained the first Empresario Grant — the first in Texas history. A few months later, Moses Austin died, and his son, Stephen Foster Austin, went on to fulfill his father's dream.

Next month: Texas under Mexico and beyond.

[1] Wikipedia contributors. *Spanish missions in Texas*. Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia. Accessed 28 June 2010. <[http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Spanish\\_missions\\_in\\_Texas](http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Spanish_missions_in_Texas)>

[2] *Viceroyalty of New Spain, 1786-1821*. Atlas of Mexico. Perry-Castañeda Library Map Collection. Used by permission of the University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin. Accessed 28 June 2010. <[http://www.lib.utexas.edu/maps/atlas\\_mexico/new\\_spain\\_viceroyalty.jpg](http://www.lib.utexas.edu/maps/atlas_mexico/new_spain_viceroyalty.jpg)>

[3] Wikipedia commons: US National Park Service. *Spanish Missions in Texas 1659-1785*. Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia,. Accessed 28 Jun. 2010. <[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Spanish\\_Missions\\_in\\_Texas.JPG](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Spanish_Missions_in_Texas.JPG)>

[4] In 1731, three missions were moved to San Antonio from other locations: Mission Concepción, Mission Espada, and Mission San Juan Capistrano. Mission San José and Mission San Antonio de Valero (the Alamo) we constructed on their current sites. Wikipedia contributors. *San Antonio Missions National Historical Park*. Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia. Accessed 3 July 2010. <[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/San\\_Antonio\\_Missions\\_National\\_Historical\\_Park](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/San_Antonio_Missions_National_Historical_Park)>

[5] Wikipedia contributors. *Spanish missions in Texas*.

[6] *Longlots at San Antonio Missions National Historical Park, San Antonio, Texas*. Aerial photograph at latitude 29.3293222, longitude -98.4569407. Google/Wikimapia. Accessed 29 June 2010. <<http://wikimapia.org/#lat=29.3293222&lon=-98.4569407&z=15&l=0&m=b>>

[7] United States Department of the Interior. National Historic Trail Feasibility Study and Environmental Assessment. *El Camino Real de los Tejas and Old San Antonio Road*. April 1998. Scanned by Perry-Castañeda Library Map Collection, University of Texas at Austin. Accessed 28 June 2010. <[http://www.lib.utexas.edu/maps/texas/camino\\_real\\_de\\_los\\_tejas.jpg](http://www.lib.utexas.edu/maps/texas/camino_real_de_los_tejas.jpg)>

[8] *Longlots near Fort Hancock, Texas*. Aerial photograph at latitude 31.3029017, longitude -105.8930969. Google/Wikimapia. Accessed 29 June 2010. <<http://wikimapia.org/#lat=31.3029017&lon=-105.8930969&z=13&l=0&m=h>>