

Colonizing Texas, 1820-1830

BY: ANDREW J. TORGET

Two days before Christmas in 1820, an old man named Moses Austin rode into San Antonio. Moses was from the United States, and he had come to Texas (which was Spanish territory at the time) with a proposal for the governor. Moses wanted permission to bring American families into Texas. As Moses explained to the governor, there were many farmers in the southern United States searching for cheap land where they could grow cotton (which had recently become the most valuable crop in the world), and they would be willing to leave the U.S. if they could get that land in Texas. At the same time, Moses knew the Spanish needed more loyal settlers in Texas in order to secure their claims to the region. So Moses offered a deal: if the governor would grant him permission, Moses promised to bring Americans into Texas who would then become loyal Spanish subjects, opening the land for American farmers while also providing the Spanish a larger – and therefore more stable -- population in Texas.

It was a risky offer. No one knew, for example, if Moses or his settlers could be trusted. But the governor recognized that saying no would also be risky. The truth was that Spain did not really control Texas in 1820. Most of the territory was controlled, instead, by 20,000 or more Native Americans living in the region (including Caddos, Karankawas, Tonkawas, Apaches, Comanches, and Wichitas) who

greatly outnumbered the 3,000 or 4,000 Spaniards in Texas. Comanches and Apaches, in fact, dominated the lands surrounding San Antonio, launching so many raids against the village during the 1810s that some Spaniards abandoned Texas. Making things worse, Spain had so few soldiers stationed in Texas that there was little they could do to prevent groups of American raiders (often called “filibusters”) from crossing the border into Texas several times during the late 1810s. Unless they secured the region with a larger population of loyal settlers, the governor feared that Spain might lose Texas entirely.

And so, reluctantly, the governor decided that Moses’s idea was worth the risk. Thrilled, Moses returned to the United States as quickly as possible to recruit settlers. But during his trip he became very sick and soon died. His son, Stephen F. Austin, became the new leader of his father’s project, and immediately set out to start a colony of Americans in Texas.

But when Stephen got to Texas during the summer of 1821, he learned that Mexico had just won its independence from Spain. The news made the Mexicans in Texas (usually called “Tejanos,” which is Spanish for “Texans”) very happy, but it worried Stephen because his father had received permission from Spain -- not Mexico -- to start the colony. To his great relief, the Tejanos in San Antonio quickly endorsed Stephen’s project. Exhausted after decades

of Native American raids against San Antonio, and fearing that Mexico City would never send enough soldiers to secure the region, many Tejanos believed that bringing new settlers into Texas was the only way to stabilize the region. Tejano leaders also hoped these new American colonists could help connect Texas to important trade centers like New Orleans, which might bring new wealth and prosperity into the territory. With the strong support of Tejano leaders like Erasmo Seguín and José Antonio Navarro, Stephen Austin set to work.

Austin established his colony between the Brazos and Colorado rivers, where the rich soil was perfect for farming. He then placed advertisements in U.S. newspapers. Any man who came to Austin's colony would receive an incredible amount of land: 4,428 acres, or about seven square miles. Settlers just had to pay the small costs of surveying that land (about 12.5 cents per acre) and filing the official paperwork. The only requirements were that each colonist had to be Catholic and needed to bring letters proving their good character. Most Americans at the time were not Catholic, so that discouraged some people from coming (even though, as it turned out, this requirement was never enforced). But for thousands more Americans, the prospect of being able to own so much land – far more than they could ever hope to own in the United States – proved irresistible, and a rush of Americans poured into Texas.

Austin's colony expanded rapidly. Within a few years, Austin had settled three hundred families (which meant approximately 3,000 people) and he quickly received permission to settle several hundred more. Ships from New Orleans began regular deliveries of American-made goods to Austin's colony. Newly established roads connected older towns, like San Antonio and Nacogdoches, with the recently built village of San Felipe de Austin that served as Austin's headquarters. By the late 1820s, several

other Americans – such as Green Dewitt and Haden Edwards – began setting up even more colonies in Texas. Tejano leaders in San Antonio were thrilled with the success of Austin's colony, and especially with the wealth and prosperity that seemed to be coming into Texas with the colonists.

Other people were not so happy. Austin had set up his colony where the Karankawa and Tonkawa peoples lived, and both tribes soon found themselves pushed out of their traditional territories, usually through violence. (Austin, in fact, led a mob of armed colonists that forced the Karankawas to abandon their homes along the coast.) Some leaders in Mexico City also worried that many of the Americans coming into Mexico might not prove to be loyal and dependable citizens of their new country.

One of the greatest sources of tension was the issue of slavery. Almost all of Austin's colonists came from the southern United States, where growing cotton in states like Mississippi and Alabama had created tremendous wealth. The most profitable plantations in Mississippi and Alabama used enslaved men, women, and children to do the backbreaking labor that cotton demanded. Because most of Austin's colonists wanted the land in Texas for cotton farming, most of them also endorsed slavery. Austin himself believed that slavery was crucial to the success of his colony. As a result, enslaved African Americans were brought to Texas with the earliest of Austin's colonists. By 1825, enslaved people made up nearly 25 percent of the colony's population.

Although Austin's colonists endorsed slavery, not all Mexicans agreed. Tejano leaders in San Antonio tended to support slavery in Mexico, largely because they wanted Austin's colony to grow. But other Mexicans, often living in places far from Texas, argued that slavery should be outlawed throughout the entire Mexican nation.

In order to deal with such contentious issues, Mexico had established the Constitution of 1824, which divided power between the national government in Mexico City and the country's many states. The constitution gave the national government authority to deal with issues of national importance, such as declaring war, maintaining the army, and negotiating with other countries. Yet the constitution also reserved a great deal of power for the individual states, allowing each of them to set their own policies on almost all other issues. Known as "federalism," this division of power ensured that each Mexican state could pass whatever laws it believed were necessary to support the people of their state, and had become very popular among Texans. Texas, however, had too few people to qualify for statehood, so Mexico connected it with Coahuila (a more populated region to the southwest) to make the new state of Coahuila-Texas.

Even with the Constitution of 1824, tensions began to rise between Texans and various levels of the Mexican government. When Mexican authorities ordered a misbehaving American named Haden Edwards to leave Texas in 1826, Edwards responded by attempting to launch a rebellion against Mexico. Although the rebellion quickly failed, it still alarmed Mexican officials. When the state legislature of Coahuila-Texas attempted to outlaw slavery in 1827, both Austin's colonists and many Tejanos openly resisted. When Mexico's president, Vicente Guerrero, then tried to outlaw slavery again in 1829, Texans refused to obey (and eventually got the law repealed). While all of this was going on, Americans continued to pour into Austin's colony, prompting many leaders in Mexico City to worry that the situation in Texas might soon spin out of control.

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To prevent that from happening, Mexico sent one of its leading generals – a man named Manuel de Mier y Terán – on an inspection tour of Texas in 1828. Officially, Terán was being sent just to inspect Texas's border with the United States. But his real (and secret) mission was to gather intelligence on the American settlements in Texas and write a report about them for Mexico City. What Terán found both impressed and terrified him. Austin's colony, he reported, was thriving and producing a tremendous amount of wealth through cotton. But Americans now badly outnumbered native Mexicans in the region and many of those Americans seemed to have little regard for Mexican laws or authority. Terán believed there was only one way to save Texas for Mexico: outlaw any further American immigration.

When Terán's report reached Mexico City, Mexico's national congress quickly passed the Law of April 6, 1830, which officially forbid any new Americans from migrating into Texas. In so doing, leaders in Mexico City hoped to reassert their control over Texas before it was too late.