

Austin's Colony is The Cradle of Texas  
Compiled by Carl M Wiggins, 21 Feb 2017

In the 1820s visitors and immigrants to Texas from the United States traveled either by land or by sea. The overland route was the El Camino Real (see Figure 1). This historic trail across Texas began in Natchitoches, LA and ended at Coahuila, Mexico after passing through the Texas cities of San Augustine, Nacogdoches, San Marcos and San Antonio. (Houston and Austin, TX did not exist at that time.) Branches off the main trail connected with the cities of Bastrop, Cuero, Goliad and Laredo, TX. If traveling by sea, one left New Orleans by schooner and landed either at Galveston, TX or at the mouths of one of the major rivers such as the Brazos or Colorado Rivers which offered ready access inland (see Figures 1, 2 and 3).

The first legal authorization to settle families in Texas was granted to Moses Austin of Missouri when in January 1821 Joaquin de Arredondo, Commandant General of the Eastern Division of the Provincias Internas (internal provinces which included Coahuila, Texas, and several other Spanish provinces), approved his colonization plan. Unfortunately Moses died of pneumonia in Missouri June 10, 1821. On June 8 his wife, Maria, wrote a letter to their son, Stephen F. Austin, informing him of his father's deteriorating health, and begging him to take up the challenge of establishing the Texas colony. Stephen Austin received the news of his father's death on July 10, 1821 in Natchitoches, LA while travelling to San Antonio to request permission to assume his father's role. Austin's journal shows that he was accompanied by about eight men, including: William Little; Edward Lovelace; Henry Holstein; Dr. Hewiston; and William Smithers (or Smeathers), a hunter. (Note: William Smeathers was a patriot who fought both in the American Revolution and in the War of 1812. He is buried in a grave, now lost, along the banks of the Brazos in Brazoria County near what is now East Columbia. See our Patriots page for his biography.) Upon arrival in San Antonio, Stephen F. Austin met with the Spanish governor Antonio María Martínez who recognized him as the rightful heir to his father's grant and issued him an empresario contract to settle three hundred families in Spanish Texas. Terms of the Spanish contract required that the colonists be loyal to the official government and religion of Spain and recognized the necessity of having colonists of reputable character.

Within days Austin began searching for land for his colony. Presumably, some or all of the eight men previously mentioned accompanied him. After canvassing the land between what is now Port Lavaca on the west to the San Jacinto River on the east, he decided on the rich river bottom land in between including the Brazos and Colorado Rivers, south of the El Camino Real extending from the vicinity of present-day Brenham, Navasota, and La Grange to the mouths of these two rivers on the Gulf of Mexico. The 862-mile long Colorado River (Figure 2), entirely contained within the boundaries of present-day Texas, and the 1280-mile long Brazos River

(Figure 3) originating in what is now Curry County, New Mexico, had transported fertile soil from their upper stretches and deposited it in successive layers on the land along their lower courses for millennia slowly increasing its fertility. The 1820s Texas map of the El Camino Real, major towns, the great rivers and the area selected for Austin's Colony is shown in Figure 1.



Figure 1. Early 1820s map of Texas showing major points and location of Austin’s Colony which was The Cradle of Texas

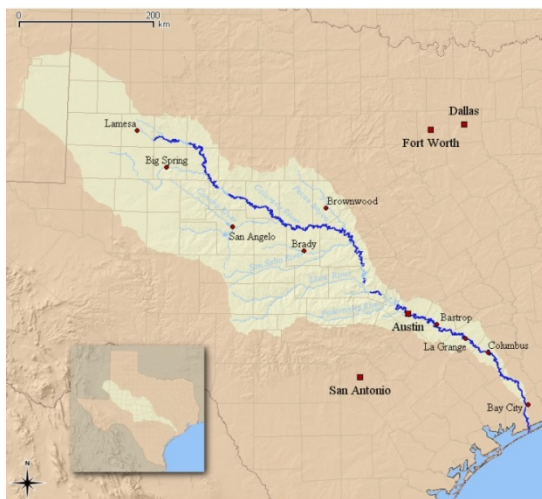


Figure 2. Colorado River (TX)



Figure 3. Brazos River

The capital of this new colony was named San Felipe de Austin and was located along the west bank of the Brazos River at what is now the town of San Felipe in Austin County.

According to the terms of Austin's colonization agreement, each family engaged in farming was to receive one "labor" (about 177 acres) and each ranching family one "sitio" (about 4,428 acres, same as a league). Because of the obvious advantages, a sizeable number of the colonists classified themselves as stock raisers, though they were technically planters. Each family's sitio was to have a frontage on the river equal to about one-fourth of its length; thus the east bank of the Brazos was soon completely occupied from the Gulf to what is now Brazos County. Most of the labors were arranged in three groups around San Felipe de Austin, which formed the nucleus of the colony.

Austin received a great deal of interest when advertising his colony and was able to be selective in his choice of colonists. Austin chose settlers based on whether he believed they would be appropriately industrious. Overall, they belonged to a higher economic scale than most immigrants, and all brought some property with them. One-quarter of the families brought slaves with them. All but four of the men could read and write. This relatively high level of literacy marked his colony as different from most others of the time. According to historian William C. Davis, because they were literate, the colonists "absorbed and spread the knowledge and news always essential to uniting people to a common purpose".

Austin advertised in newspapers along the American western frontier publicizing that abundant land was available for 12 1/2 cents per acre, one-tenth the cost of public land in the United States. Inexpensive land was a very attractive reason for emigrating from the United States in the early 1820s. The greatest numbers of Colonists came from Louisiana, followed by Alabama, Arkansas, Tennessee, and Missouri, and many had substantial means before they arrived. An indication of the financial stature of the Colonists was the large number of slaveholders among them. Essentially all were originally of British ancestry. Many had been born east of the Appalachians and were part of the large westward migration of the early years of the nineteenth century. Most were farmers. Some came overland by horse, wagon, or foot, while many others sailed from New Orleans and Mobile to the Texas port cities of Velasco (now Freeport) at the mouth of the Brazos River and what is now Matagorda at the mouth of the Colorado River. The trip by either means was dangerous.

Joseph H. Hawkins was a friend of Stephen F. Austin who helped finance Austin's colonization project. Hawkins had been a member of the Kentucky legislature from 1810 until 1813 and a United States congressman from 1813 until 1815. He moved to New Orleans, Louisiana in 1819, where early in January 1821 he met and befriended Austin, who had been in school in

Kentucky with Hawkins' brother. Joseph Hawkins was practicing law and engaged in the mercantile business in New Orleans. He offered to board Austin, teach him law, and lend him money for books and clothing until he could establish himself in practice. Austin had accepted the offer before he became involved in his father's Texas colonization project in July, 1821.

At almost the same exact time, after 11 years of war, on July 3, 1821 Mexico won its independence from Spain. So now a new question arose: would the newly-formed Mexican government honor Austin's father's original contract with the Spanish government to settle Texas with 300 families from the United States? As we shall see, Stephen Austin's colonization contract was re-affirmed by Mexico, but not until April 1823.

On November 14, 1821, Hawkins and Austin signed a contract in which Austin acknowledged the receipt of \$4,000 for which he agreed to make Hawkins his partner in the Texas colonization venture, entitled to one-half the lands and profits realized in the project. Although Hawkins probably did not give Austin the whole sum, he did exhaust his resources in supporting Texas colonization. He purchased and outfitted the *Lively*. (Note: There is some debate among historians as to whether Lively was the actual name of the ship or rather was the name for a class of schooners known for their speed and agility in outmaneuvering slower, more heavily-armed, British ships.) He also made arrangements with other schooners, paid seamen, purchased provisions, and made numerous personal loans to colonists. Hawkins died bankrupt in the fall of 1823. He had not kept accounts, but from his notes and papers it was estimated that he had spent about \$30,000 in sending and outfitting Texas colonists.

The *Lively* was fitted out with supplies for a colony of 300 families by Austin and Hawkins. In late 1821 the ship sailed from New Orleans with approximately twenty colonists aboard, including William W. Little, who was in charge of the group, and W. S. Lewis, who later left an account of the voyage. Others in the group included: Edward and Jackey Lovelace; Stephen Holstein; James A. E. Phelps; a man named Harrison who had a Negro servant; Beddinger; Nelson; James Beard; Willis; Thompson; O'Neal; and Mattigan. Only Little, the Lovelaces and Beard had been in Texas before. Bad weather blew the ship off course, and it took some four weeks to reach its destination. The *Lively's* colonists had arranged to meet Austin, who had traveled overland from New Orleans, at the mouth of the Colorado River (now Matagorda) but they landed at the Brazos River (at Velasco) by mistake. On December 23, 1821 the schooner *Lively* lay anchored off the mouth of the Brazos. Nobody was sure where they were and there was no one on land to greet them. No Austin. They thought this river might be the Colorado. So they made an initial camp and waited a number of days for Austin to appear. When he didn't, the group moved a short distance up the Brazos and spent a few weeks building boats to take them and their supplies more conveniently upriver. The men eventually made their way

up the Brazos to higher ground and built a large log house, or fort, near a small waterfall. This place is now Richmond, TX. With their food virtually exhausted, they planted a corn crop, but, failing to meet up with the other Austin colonists, they grew discouraged, and all but two or three eventually made their way back to the United States. The only colonists from the original *Lively* group to actually establish their claim as part of Austin's Three Hundred were William Little, James Beard, James A. E. Phelps, William Morton and David Fitzgerald.

Meanwhile, Austin traveled overland from New Orleans with a second group of colonists and arrived, probably in the vicinity of what is now LaGrange, TX, in December, 1821. Austin then proceeded on to the mouth of the Colorado (Matagorda) to await the arrival of the *Lively*, its group of colonists and the much needed supplies and implements aboard.

Austin waited for the ship at the mouth of the Colorado for some number of days, and when it failed to appear, assumed it had been lost. The lack of contact between the *Lively* and the other Austin colonists gave rise to a variety of rumors, ranging from the idea that all had been lost when the ship went down to tales that the passengers and crew had been starved by Indians. Some of the passengers eventually made their way back to Texas and told what had really happened. The loss of supplies and farm implements aboard the *Lively* stressed the colonists waiting near LaGrange(?) who needed this equipment for farming.

After dropping off its passengers and supplies at the mouth of the Brazos, the *Lively* sailed back to New Orleans. There it took on new supplies and immigrants and sailed for the Texas coast in May or June 1822. This time it was wrecked, on the western end of Galveston Island. Because of the widespread rumors concerning the first voyage, it was again assumed that the passengers were lost, but according to Thomas Marshall Duke, who was on board during the second voyage, they were rescued by the schooner *John Motely*, which landed them near the Colorado River.

After the *Lively* failed to appear at the mouth of the Colorado River, Austin left for San Antonio to determine whether the new Mexican government would honor his father's contract with the previous Spanish government. Governor Martinez immediately suggested that Austin go to Mexico City to receive confirmation of the grant. Martinez issued Austin a passport and Austin left San Antonio on March 13, 1822 on his 1,200 mile journey to the Mexican capital. Before leaving, Austin appointed Josiah H. Bell to direct the affairs of the colonization in his absence. It would not be until August 1823, a year and a half later, before Austin returned to the colony. Conflicts within the Mexican congress delayed the passage of a general colonization law, but eventually they agreed to the same terms used previously by the Spanish: 1 "labor" (177 acres) of land for farmers and 1 "sitio" (4,428 acres) of land for stock-raisers. The new law controlled

the status and sale of slaves, and required that all settlers give nominal allegiance to the Roman Catholic church. Even after the new law was approved, Austin still waited to get his own grant confirmed. He finally got confirmation and left Mexico City on April 18, 1823 for Texas. Soon after returning to Texas, Austin, aided by the Baron de Bastrop, began issuing titles to the members of the Three Hundred.

During Austin's absence, the colonization of Texas had continued. Comparisons of several historical records show that nearly one-third of the 297 families introduced under Austin's first contract were in Texas by the end of 1823. Lands granted to these colonists were scattered through about fifteen counties, with Brazoria and Fort Bend the most heavily populated. In 1828, Stephen F. Austin created an administrative record of these early land grants. This handwritten book is called the *Registro*, and a digital copy of it is kept at San Felipe de Austin (the original is held in the collection of the Texas General Land Office in Austin). Many guests inquire about the Old 300 and want to know more about where these families settled. The *Registro* is an excellent resource that shows visitors the administrative copies of these early grants. The gift shop at San Felipe de Austin also carries the current collection of biographical sketches of many of the Old 300 settlers. Available documents include modern county maps to help visitors visualize and understand where these grants were located. Another excellent source is [Old 300: Gone to Texas](#) by Paul N. Spellman, 2014.

By the end of the summer of 1824 most of the original 300 colonists, known forevermore as the Old Three Hundred, were in Texas. During 1823–24 Austin and the land commissioner Baron de Bastrop issued 272 titles, but Bastrop was called away in August 1824, and the work remained unfinished until 1827, when the new land commissioner, Gaspar Flores de Abrego, issued the remaining titles. Since the family was the unit for distribution, Austin permitted unmarried men to receive grants in partnership, usually in groups of two or three. Twenty-two such partnership titles were issued to fifty-nine partners. In all, 307 titles were issued, with nine families receiving two titles each. Thus the total number of grantees, excluding Austin's own grant, was actually 297, not 300. The colonization decree required that all the lands should be occupied and improved within two years; most of the settlers were able to comply with the terms, and only seven of the grants were forfeited.

By the fall of 1825 the total population of Austin's Colony was 1,790. Sixty-nine of the families in the colony owned 443 slaves which accounted for nearly a quarter of the total population. One of the colonists, Jared E. Groce, had arrived from Georgia in January 1822 with ninety slaves. While not all of the original colonists survived or prospered, Austin's Old Three-Hundred, became "the first Anglo planter-gentry in the province" and their plantations, arrayed

along the rich coastal river-bottoms, constituted the heart of the burgeoning slave empire in antebellum Texas. Quote by historian T. R. Fehrenbach.

Thus, under the empresario system, Austin successfully settled the first 300 families in his colony. Over the next several years, he obtained three additional contracts and settled 900 more families in the colony, plus an additional 800 in partnership with Samuel Williams.

Over these years Austin was occupied with many matters besides inducing immigrants to come to his colonies. Although Austin had a lot of land<sup>1</sup> (empresarios were entitled to 15 leagues and 2 labors (66,774 acres) for every 200 families introduced; capped, however, at 45 leagues and 6 labors no matter how many families were brought in), he also had a lot of expenses and a tremendous amount of responsibility. Austin took the initiative in establishing a system of record-keeping to straighten out the problem of conflicting land grants. He had to pay and direct surveyors, allocate grants, prepare titles and records, entertain prospective colonists, make war against hostile Indians, and keep on good terms with friendly tribes. He also took care of serious legal issues, including the status of American slaves on Mexican soil, protection of settlers from debts left behind in the U.S., and establishing trade with the United States. At the same time, he had to deal with settlers, many of whom refused to pay their fees to the empresario to help defray the expenses of the colony.

Austin, who had maintained a close friendship with Joseph H. Hawkins and his wife, wrote frequently regarding their financial affairs, and after Hawkins' death, asked that some person be sent to Texas to represent the estate. Mrs. Hawkins, however, expressed absolute faith in Austin and requested that he continue alone. She died about 1829, but final settlement of the partnership was not made until 1832, when Austin wrote that the transfer of lands to the estate had been completed. Since land in Texas could not be held by nonresidents, it is probable that title to the Hawkins lands was vested in a trustee.

Austin tried to follow the laws of the Mexican government and encouraged his colonist to do so as well. Most did until conflicts between some immigrants, not necessarily Austin's colonists, began to rebel causing the Mexican army to retaliate. Relationships between the Texas immigrants including Austin's colonists and the Mexican government continued to deteriorate until the Texans rebelled and eventually declared their independence from Mexico in 1836. Stephen F. Austin, the Father of Texas, had now become a key figure in the Texas Revolution. And Texas was now a Republic.

<sup>1</sup> Caroline (Olson) Wiggins' father, Oscar G. Olson, acquired 147 acres of land in 1909 in Brazoria, TX which is part of the Stephen F. Austin 7-1/3 Leagues Grant, Abstract 20, Brazoria County, TX. Caroline is the wife of the compiler, Carl Wiggins.

Bibliography:

A Narrative History of Brazoria County, James A. Creighton, Brazoria County Historical Commission, 1974, 533 pgs.

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Old\\_Three\\_Hundred](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Old_Three_Hundred)

[http://www.tamu.edu/faculty/ccbn/dewitt/adp/history/hispanic\\_period/tenoxitlan/austins\\_colony.html](http://www.tamu.edu/faculty/ccbn/dewitt/adp/history/hispanic_period/tenoxitlan/austins_colony.html)

The Handbook of Texas, Texas State Historical Association, <https://tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/umo01>

<http://sfaold300.org/history/>

Joseph H Hawkins, Texas State Historical Association Online, <https://tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/fhaaz>

Stephen F Austin, Texas State Library and Archives Commission, <https://www.tsl.texas.gov/treasures/giants/austin/austin-01.html>

Stephen F Austin's Colony, Son of the South, <http://www.sonofthesouth.net/texas/stephen-f-austin-colony.htm>

Lone Star: A History of Texas and the Texans, T. R. Fehrenbach, 1968, [LCCN 68-25222](#).

Texas State Library and Archives Commission, <https://www.tsl.texas.gov/treasures/giants/austin/austin-01.html>

Lester G. Bugbee, "What Became of the Lively?" *Southwestern Historical Quarterly*, 3 (October 1899).

W. S. Lewis, "Adventures of the 'Lively' Immigrants," *Quarterly of the Texas State Historical Association* 3 (July 1899).

Guy Bryan Morrison Papers, Dolph Briscoe Center for American History, University of Texas at Austin.

Lone Star Rising, William C. Davis, College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 2006, [ISBN 978-1-58544-532-5](#)