

Episode 18 - (Chapter 7) Meet Steven F. Austin and the Original 300

Welcome to another chapter of The Hidden History of Texas.

So far, I have talked about how Mexican independence from Spain affected Texas.

How Americans began to move into Texas and how they often interfered with local authorities. In this chapter, I will talk about the person known as the founder of Anglo-American Texas. Steven Fuller Austin.

He was born on November 3, 1793 to Moses and Maria (Brown) Austin in southwestern Virginia. His parents moved the family to Potosi in southeastern Missouri in 1798 and into what we now know as Washington County. His father sent him off to school in Connecticut and he eventually spent two years at Transylvania University in Lexington, Kentucky. In 1810 he took over the management of his father's land business. By 1820, he had moved to Natchitoches (NA KA DISH), Louisiana and then to New Orleans. It was during this time that his father Moses was asking the Mexican government for permission to move 300 families into Texas.

Steven himself was not over enthusiastic about his father's Texas venture, but he decided to go along with it. However, Moses died soon after receiving approval and young Austin began to carry on the colonization enterprise under his father's grant. He came to an understanding with Governor Antonio Maria Martinez about

certain administrative procedures and was permitted by the governor to explore the coastal plain between the San Antonio and Brazos rivers for the purpose of selecting a site for the proposed colony. Some of the arrangement details were he was able to offer land to settlers in quantities of 640 acres to the head of a family, 320 acres for his wife, 160 acres for each child, and 80 acres for each slave.

Martinez warned Austin that he would be responsible for the colonist's good behavior. While Austin was in New Orleans recruiting people for the immigration, the provisional government set up after Mexican independence refused to approve the Spanish grant to Moses Austin, preferring to regulate colonization by a general immigration law.

Austin traveled to Mexico City and was able to convince the Mexican congress to complete a law that the emperor signed on January 3, 1823. It offered heads of families a league and a labor of land (4,605 acres) and other inducements and provided for the employment of agents, called empresarios, to promote immigration. (Remember I mentioned two other empresarios in earlier chapters, Haden Edwards and DeWitt and how they often caused conflict). In return for his efforts Austin was to receive some 67,000 acres of land for each 200 families he introduced. Immigrants were not required to pay fees to the government, a fact that shortly led some of them to deny Austin's right to charge them for services performed at the rate of 12½ cents an acre. The years following were a series of

missteps and other issues. One primary problem was the payment of expenses. He proclaimed a fee bill, which among other details allowed the land commissioner (the Baron de Bastrop in the first colony) to charge \$127 a league for signing titles, and Austin made a private arrangement with Bastrop to split this fee. A provision of the state law of 1825 allowed empresarios to reimburse themselves for costs and services, and under this law Austin required colonists to pay, or promise to pay, first sixty dollars and later fifty dollars a league. Nearly all such collections as he was able to make were consumed in necessary public expenses, which fell upon him because nobody else would pay them. So who made up the original 300?

Well my family is descended from some of the original 300. I am a descendant of William Gates and his son Samuel Gates. Families were important and the family was the primary unit for distribution, but 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.

The majority of the Old Three Hundred colonists were from the Trans-Appalachian South; the largest number were from Louisiana, followed by Alabama, Arkansas, Tennessee, and Missouri. Virtually 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, and many—including the Bell, Borden, Kuykendall, McCormick, McNair, McNeel, Rabb, and Varner families—already had substantial means before they arrived. Since Austin wanted to avoid problems with his colonists, he generally only accepted those of "better" classes; indeed, only four of the Old Three Hundred grantees were illiterate. Another indication of the financial stature of the grantees was the large number of slaveholders among them; by the fall of 1825, sixty-nine of the families in Austin's colony owned slaves, and the 443 slaves in the colony accounted for nearly a quarter of the total population of 1,790.

As I've talked about in other episodes, the 300 were not the only settlers, however, they are the ones that most people in Texas are aware of and they did have an affect on what was to take place in the 1830s when Texas wanted independence from Mexico.

That's going to wrap up this episode and volume 2 of the Hidden History of Texas, don't forget if you want more information about the history of Texas visit the

Texas State Historical Association. My next volume will deal with Texas in 1830
until Annexation by the United States.

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