

**STEPHEN FULLER AUSTIN**  
**“The Father of Texas”**

The life story of Stephen F. Austin is filled with stirring events, great deeds and also a full measure of tragedy. He spent fifteen of his forty-three years working for the success of Texas only to die during the first winter of the new Republic. In life he was eclipsed by newcomers, the military heroes of the revolution, who have continued to dominate the stage of history ever since then. It is safe to assume that few Texans today could provide more than a few words if asked to explain Austin’s role in our history. “The Father of Texas” clearly deserves much more than that.

He was born November 3, 1793 in Virginia, the son of Moses and Maria (Brown) Austin. As the lead mines in that region played out, the elder Austin moved his family in 1798 to Washington County, Missouri, where he operated a general store and was engaged in the mining, smelting and manufacturing of lead. Moses first sent Stephen off to a private school in Connecticut and later for two years at Transylvania University in Lexington, Kentucky. Stephen returned home in 1810 and went to work in the two businesses. After the family business failed, Stephen moved to Arkansas and then to Louisiana. Moses, meanwhile, traveled out to San Antonio in 1820, met with Spanish officials, secured permission to establish an American colony here, and then asked his son to assist him in what he called “The Texas Venture.”

Stephen went back home to meet with his father, only to learn the tragic news that Moses had died. His last words had been a plea for the son to carry his own work. And so, at the age of twenty-seven, Austin set out upon his father’s work, an enterprise that would consume the remainder of his own brief life. Granted permission to continue his

father's project, Austin traveled through the coastal region and eventually decided on the area between the Brazos and Colorado rivers as the site of his first colony. Each head of a household would be given a grant of 640 acres, plus another 320 for his wife and each child in the family, and 80 acres for each slave. The first settlers, part of a group that would come to be called "The Old Three Hundred," arrived in December 1821. Others soon followed, as did inevitable complications.

His first major problem came after Mexican Independence when the new provisional government refused to accept the Spanish grant. Austin traveled to Mexico City and began an unrelenting campaign to win over the new officials. The Mexican Congress eventually adopted a new and more generous agreement that gave heads of families a league and a labor of land (4,605 acres). Although several other complications kept Austin busy during the 1820s, the basic structure of the agreement remained in place. He also obtained three other contracts in 1825, 1827 and 1828 that allowed him to settle an additional 900 families.

For more than six years Austin exercised almost complete civil and military authority over his growing colony, although the colonists were allowed to elect militia officers and local alcaldes. His personal time was devoted to first developing and later maintaining a land system. This involved surveying and allocating land to applicants, preparing titles, overseeing teams of surveyors, checking their field notes, entertaining prospective colonists, making war against hostile Indians, and maintaining good relations with friendly Indians through food and gifts. He also codified Mexican civil and criminal laws for the benefit of the alcaldes, who in turn handled the court systems of that time. Austin himself settled any appeals, although he eventually established an appellate court

consisting eventually of seven alcaldes. The Constitution of Coahuila and Texas, adopted in 1827, expanded local government to a greater extent with an ayuntamiento or town council in each municipality.

Austin was in Mexico for much of the pre-Revolutionary period, working to repeal the Law of April 6, 1830, which prohibited further American immigration into Texas. He also spent much of his time in Saltillo, where he was a member of the legislature. Austin tried hard to find a moderate course, serving in the Conventions of 1832 and 1833, while trying hard to negotiate the Mexicans into repealing the unpopular law. He was imprisoned by the Mexicans in January 1834 at Saltillo on suspicion of trying to incite insurrection in Texas. Although formal charges never came, he remained a prisoner until December of that year. Returning to Texas, Austin cast his lot firmly with the Revolution. During the next several months, he served in a variety of positions with the revolutionary government.

Austin, at the request of his friends, offered himself as a candidate for the presidency of the new Republic of Texas. The voters preferred a war hero to a diplomat. After a bitter campaign, General Sam Houston defeated Austin in the September 1836 election. The new president offered Austin the office of Secretary of State, a position he held until his untimely death on December 27, 1836. All of the leaders of the Republic turned out for a great funeral service and accompanied Austin to his grave at Peach Point Plantation. His remains were relocated in 1910 to Republic Hill in the Texas State Cemetery.

## **THREE FAMILIES OF THE OLD THREE HUNDRED**

Three pioneer families who settled in what is now western Chambers County were part of Austin's original group of colonists, known as "The Old Three Hundred."

### **THE WILLIAM BLOODGOOD FAMILY**

Born about 1800 in either New York or New Jersey, William Bloodgood came to Texas from Louisiana in May 1824 with the family of Enoch and Delilah (Ballew) Brinson. Traveling along with them was Delilah's father, Page Ballew, and her younger sister, Levicy. Bloodgood's survey, dated August of that year, straddled Cedar Bayou, with a fourth of his land falling into what is now Harris County and the remainder in Chambers. William and Levicy were married on July 12, 1825. The date of William's death is not known, although he appears on the 1860 census of Harris County. Levicy appears to have died in 1887. The couple had the following children: Minerva, Thomas, William, Enoch, Page, Priscilla, Montreville and Laura.

Their youngest daughter, Laura Bloodgood Herman, left behind this fascinating tale from the battle of San Jacinto: "Someone knocked at the back kitchen door the day of the bloody battle. When Mother opened the door to see who it might be, there stood before her a man covered from head to foot in mud. Her eyes did not betray the fright that surged within her and she calmly asked what he wanted. He begged for something to eat. He answered the best he could, in his own language. Mother opened the door and let him in and prepared a wholesome breakfast for him. He drank a whole pitcher of water, ate the food heartily, thanked her most graciously and peacefully went on his way.

“I was all wide-eyed and quietly looked on and was very frightened. How very brave was my mother. She could not let her emotions betray her inner feelings, neither could she turn this unfortunate starving man from her door. I later learned that he was Santa Anna. I was only five years old but that eventful day was imprinted in my memory.”

#### THE JOHN IAMS FAMILY

John Iams was born in Steubenville, Ohio about 1808, the son of John and Mary (Haslett) Iams. The family moved to Louisiana and settled in the Berwick Bay area. Most published interviews with Iams indicate that he came to Texas in 1822 with his parents and settled at Cedar Point, near present-day Beach City. Iams told one journalist that his family came over from Louisiana by boat and settled at Cedar Point, where they built a crude log cabin. This property later became a celebrated retreat belonging to General Sam Houston.

His land grant in present-day Chambers County was dated in August 1824. He fought in the battles of Concepcion and San Jacinto. He may have lived as late as 1893.

In one interview he described an early encounter with the privateer Jean Laffite: “I saw Laffite in Louisiana before I came to Texas. I was a good big boy and remember him very well. He used to go up Bayou Lafourche, on his way to New Orleans for supplies. People think he must have been a desperate looking man; but he looked very pleasant, and was always in a good humor when I saw him. He was about six feet tall and was rather stout. He always had two barges of men with him. . .They would bring up silks and Irish linens and other fine goods, and would sell them to the neighborhood people very cheap; and that made them popular.”

THE CHRISTIAN SMITH FAMILY