



The Daughters of the Republic of Texas

STONE FORT CHAPTER - NACOGDOCHES, TEXAS

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REMEMBERING THE BIRTHDAY OF STEPHEN F. AUSTIN

On November 3, we celebrate the birthday of Stephen F. Austin, "The Father of Texas." Remembering his birthday provides a time to reflect on the life of our founder and the importance of his contributions to Texas history, and ultimately U.S history. He lived only forty-three years, but the significance of his achievements in the successful settlement and independence of Texas shaped our country's history forever. Who was Stephen F. Austin and how did he become "The Father of Texas?"

Stephen Fuller Austin was born in Wythe County, Virginia on November 3, 1793, the eldest of three surviving children born to Moses and Mary (Brown) Austin. In 1798, Moses Austin moved his family westward to the lead mining areas of southeastern Missouri, which was then in Spanish territory. There, Stephen's father established the town of Potosi and prospered with a lead mining business and general store.

At the age of eleven, Stephen was sent to Connecticut, where he received formal education at the Bacon Academy. He then studied at Transylvania University in Lexington, Kentucky, and upon graduation at age seventeen, returned to Missouri to work in his father's businesses. As a young man, he served in the territorial Missouri legislature and was instrumental in helping the Bank of St. Louis to acquire a charter. When the bank failed during the Panic of 1819, the Austin family suffered great financial loss.

Stephen looked south to Arkansas for a new beginning. There, he was active in business and ran for the office of delegate to the U.S. Congress, but was defeated. In 1820, he was appointed to be a circuit judge by the territorial governor of Arkansas. He served in this position only two months before moving on to New Orleans, Louisiana to study law. During this time, Stephen's father had traveled to San Antonio, where he obtained a land grant to bring three hundred families to settle in Spanish Texas. As an empresario, or colonization agent, Moses Austin hoped to rebuild his fortune. However, he died in 1821 before he could begin the venture. He left his land grant to his son,

Stephen, with a dying request that he complete the mission. At first he was reluctant, but with the persuasion of his mother, Stephen F. Austin abandoned his own plans and pursued his father's dream and the colonization of Texas.

Only twenty-eight years old, Austin traveled to San Antonio to obtain permission from Spanish officials to carry out the colonization venture of his father's grant. Once received, he explored areas of the Texas coastal plain and selected a site between the San Antonio and Brazos Rivers for his colony. He then traveled back to New Orleans to recruit colonists with the promise of land and a climate well suited to American agriculture. As the first settlers began to arrive in 1821, Austin learned that Mexico had declared independence from Spain and furthermore, the newly formed Mexican government would not recognize the grant made to his father by Spain. Instead, they wanted to regulate colonization with general immigration laws. Austin rushed to Mexico City and finally succeeded in obtaining a contract with the government to settle the 300 families. Known in Texas history as "The Old Three Hundred," they constituted the first legal Anglo-American settlement in Texas. Austin had thus completed the contract and fulfilled his father's dream. Under subsequent immigration laws of 1825, 1827, and 1828, Stephen F. Austin received contracts to settle an additional 900 families.

As the new Republic of Mexico opened Texas to additional settlement, the number of empresarios increased. Austin was the most successful, and was viewed as their leader. He was the official representative of the Anglo settlers in the legislature of the Mexican state of Coahuila y Texas. He provided leadership in the demanding work of the empresarios, who were responsible for both civil and military authority within their colonies. In addition to attracting colonists, Austin worked to develop a land system for permanently recording the details associated with issuing, surveying, preparing titles, and maintaining documents. The roots of the Texas Rangers can be traced to the small-armed groups Austin organized to protect the colonists. He promoted trade and the establishment of ports for the fast growing colonies. Austin also worked to maintain good relations with the central Mexican government.

By the early 1830's, however, friction between the central government and the Anglo settlers was growing because of tariffs and immigration laws. The Texans held two conventions, one in 1832 and one in 1833, to express desires for reforms. Austin presided over the conventions, and in April 1833, traveled to Mexico City and presented the petition with some success. On his way home, however, he was arrested and jailed in Mexico City for almost two years. Released in July 1835, Austin returned and, for a short time, served as the military leader of the Texans. He then represented the provisional Texas government to seek help from the United States in the Texas Revolution. Texans won their independence at the Battle of San Jacinto on April 21, 1836. While Sam Houston, leader on the battlefield, was elected the first president of the Republic of Texas, Stephen F. Austin served loyally in Houston's cabinet as secretary of state until his untimely death on December 27, 1836. When he learned of Austin's death, Sam Houston issued an official statement declaring, "The Father of Texas is no more; the first pioneer of the wilderness has departed."

Stephen F. Austin was originally buried in the Gulf Prairie Cemetery in Brazoria County. His body was moved to the Texas State Cemetery in Austin, where a re-burial took place on October 20, 1910. His headstone contains the following inscription: Stephen Fuller Austin, "The Father of Texas", was born in Wythe County, Virginia,

November 3, 1793 and died in Brazoria County, Texas, December 27, 1836. Wise, Gentle, Courageous, and Patient. He was the founder of a mighty commonwealth.

Stephen F. Austin's birthday is one of twelve Texas Honor Days designated by The Daughters of the Republic of Texas. The D.R.T. is the oldest women's patriotic organization in Texas and is dedicated to the preservation and education of Texas history. For more information on Texas Honor Days and the work of the D.R.T., please visit the website at www.drinfo.org

Sources: Barker, Eugene C. *The Life of Stephen F. Austin: Founder of Texas, 1793–1836*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1926.; Eugene C. Barker, "AUSTIN, STEPHEN FULLER," *Handbook of Texas Online* (<http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/fau14>), accessed October 26, 2012.; *The Encyclopedia of Arkansas History and Culture* /www.encyclopediaofarkansas.net; Strickland, Rex W. "Miller County, Arkansas Territory, The Frontier that Men Forgot." *Chronicles of Oklahoma* 18 (March 1940): 12–34; Texas State Cemetery, www.cemetery.state.tx.us; *The Father of Texas* by Archie McDonald.