

10-1978

Toward the Vision of Austina: the Life of Moses Austin

W. R. Fossey

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholarworks.sfasu.edu/ethj>



Part of the [United States History Commons](#)

Tell us how this article helped you.

Recommended Citation

Fossey, W. R. (1978) "Toward the Vision of Austina: the Life of Moses Austin," *East Texas Historical Journal*: Vol. 16: Iss. 2, Article 5.
Available at: <http://scholarworks.sfasu.edu/ethj/vol16/iss2/5>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by SFA ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in East Texas Historical Journal by an authorized administrator of SFA ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact cdsscholarworks@sfasu.edu.

TOWARD THE VISION OF AUSTINA: THE LIFE OF MOSES AUSTIN

by W. Richard Fossey

In 1821, Stephen F. Austin established the first colony of American settlers in the Mexican province of Texas and thus drove the entering wedge of Anglo-Saxon immigration which eventually Americanized Texas. Through diplomatic skill, political ability, and singleminded devotion to the people he served, he guided the American community from a nucleus of 300 families until it was strong enough to successfully throw off Mexican rule and establish an independent republic. Without Austin, wrote biographer Eugene C. Barker, "there is no reason to believe that Texas would differ today from the Mexican states south of the Rio Grande."¹

Without question, Austin deserves the honor which Texans have given him as the founder of Texas. It owes its existence as a state in the American Union primarily to the vision of this one man. Yet it was the vision of his father, Moses Austin, which preceded the vision of the son. It was Moses who travelled from the Mississippi valley to San Antonio and won the first grant to colonize 300 Anglo families at the time his son was content to seek employment as a clerk in New Orleans. When the fatigue and illness which he suffered from that journey brought him to his death bed, it was almost Moses Austin's dying wish that Stephen continue the enterprise which his father had initiated.

Quite understandably, little has been written about Moses Austin, since his life has been overshadowed by the accomplishments of his son. Yet Moses Austin deserves more than a footnote in Texas history. He is significant, not only for his accomplishments, but also as a representative of the kind of men who sought their destinies in the American Southwest during the early part of the 19th century.

Moses Austin was "imbued with the spirit of business," and he spent the last 23 years of his life on the Missouri frontier, a region filled with men like himself who poured most of their creative energy into making money. A contemporary described the most conspicuous traits of the men west of the Mississippi as, "enterprise in business, the pursuit of wealth, . . . and perseverance under the pressure of many difficulties."² An examination of Austin's contemporaries and acquaintances on the Southwestern frontier bears this out. Austin knew such men as Joshua Pilcher, William Ashley, and Andrew Henry, all leaders in opening the Rocky Mountain fur trade; and he probably was acquainted with some of the men who attempted to open the Santa Fe trade from St. Louis in 1813. Land speculators like Rufus Easton and John Rice Jones were his friends and business partners, and he had personal dealings with some of the principals in the Aaron Burr conspiracy.

Austin's journey to Texas, undertaken in the last year of his life, was the first step in the biggest business deal he ever envisioned. The grant to settle a colony in Texas was but a small part of what he hoped to accomplish. Much more important, in his mind, was the establishment of a port at the mouth of the Colorado River to which the trade of northern New Spain would enter, a port which would rival New Orleans and would establish Austin as a wealthy man.³ He planned to name the port Austina, the self-tribute of a man whose spirit of business opened Texas to the Americans.

W. Richard Fossey formerly served as Research Historian for the Fort Worth Museum of Science & History. He is currently enrolled in the University of Texas Law School.

Moses Austin, the son of Elias and Eunice Austin, was born in October, 1761, in the Connecticut valley town of Durham.⁴ His father was a prosperous tailor and a descendent of Richard Austin, also a tailor, who immigrated to Charlestown, Massachusetts, from England in 1638.

Like many other young New Englanders at the close of the American Revolution, Moses sought his destiny in the South and the West. In 1783, he moved from New Haven to Philadelphia, where he opened a dry goods store and formed a merchandising partnership with his brother Stephen. A branch business was established in Richmond, Virginia, and in September, 1784, Moses Austin moved to Virginia to take charge of the operation.⁵

It was during this time that Austin began to court Maria Brown, a young girl from Philadelphia. Maria was an orphan living with her mother's aunt, Mrs. Benjamin Fuller, a wealthy Philadelphia citizen.⁶ The only letter from Moses Austin to Maria which is extant was written in January, 1785, during their courtship; it shows that Austin displayed as much ardor and energy in courtship as he did in his future business enterprises:

For heavens sake tell me what is the matter why dont you write me am I forgot so shortly—no it shall not be so I will fancy to my self you love me still I cannot endure the Idea of being forgot by my Maria it cannot it must not be so O Maria I have a thousand things to say but have not time to say them all now could I see you one moment it would releave me from half my trouble but when that will be God only Knows.

He implored her to tell him whether she was willing to come to Virginia. "If you find your hart not inclined tell me so and Keep not one sintement of your hart . . ."⁷

Apparently Maria was willing to go to Virginia, for on September 29, 1785, they were married in Philadelphia.⁸

Little is known about the Austin's life in Virginia. Apparently, they knew prosperity for at least a time, because Austin built an imposing residence in Richmond of brick and marble, a structure which attracted much local attention in its time.⁹ Two daughters were born to the couple: Anna Maria, in 1787; and Eliza Fuller, in 1790. Both died in infancy. Their first son Stephen Fuller Austin, was born on November 3, 1793.¹⁰

Even when she was young and the prospects of her enterprising young husband must have appeared bright, Maria had a keen sense of the capriciousness of human events and an abiding pessimism about the prospects of finding happiness and security in the temporal world. When she was twenty-one years old, she began a letter to her husband:

How oft my Beloved Husband do we form to our Selves the most Agreeable Ideas. when in a moment our hopes are crushed and the higher we rise in Expectation the lower we fall in the Vexsation of Disappointment . . .

At this moment I am thinking of the Absurdity of looking for Happyness in this world, when in fact there is no such thing to be found—nor in my poor Opinion—did the wise disposer of all things ever design it should be in this state of probation, but that we may merit by our Sufferings and fortitude here—a better Existance hereafter, we must in short look beyond this little scene of things for felicity.¹¹

Maria's philosophy of life was a somber contrast to that of her husband, whose optimism was never quite crushed and who always found a new opportunity just over the horizon. But given the mercurial rise and fall of her

husband's fortunes and the uncertainties of life on the frontier, it is no wonder that her outlook did not brighten in later years.

In 1791, the Austins left Richmond to settle in Wythe County, Virginia, which was then on the western frontier of settlement. There, Austin took up the lead mining business, a vocation he followed for most of the rest of his life. Although he was in partnership with his brother Stephen, Moses Austin was personally in charge of operations. He employed as many as fifty or sixty men. He established a village near the mines and called it Austinville; thus Austin had placed his name on the landscape by the time he was thirty.

Throughout his life, Austin drew his relatives into his business dealings, and the enterprise in southwestern Virginia was no exception. Doubtless his enthusiasm and energy gave them confidence, for a great many family members followed Austin west from New England. He was joined in the mining venture by his nephew, Charles Austin, son of his partner and brother Stephen; and by a cousin, James Austin, who operated the post office in Austinville.¹² Moses Bates, husband of Austin's sister, Martha, was also in the area. Other Austins in Virginia were William and cousins Horace and Roderick.¹³

For some reason, the mining operation was not a success, and Austin looked to the West, as he was to do throughout his life, for the opportunity to reverse his fortunes.

Either from the grapevine of information which ran along the immigrant trails toward Kentucky and Tennessee, or in the course of his lead mining business, Austin learned of rich lead deposits in the Spanish province of Upper Louisiana, in what is now southwestern Missouri. Moreover, the Spanish commandants in Louisiana had begun circulating handbills in 1796, urging settlers to come to Spanish territory and offering land grants.¹⁴ Austin decided to travel to the province, examine the lead deposits, and, if possible, obtain a land grant in the mining region.

In December, 1796, Austin set out with Josiah Bell for Upper Louisiana, travelling by way of the Cumberland Gap and Frankfort, Kentucky. The weather was extremely cold; Austin recorded in his journal that the snow was two feet deep most of the way, and the rivers and creeks were frozen over. Even so, Austin found himself on the road to Kentucky amidst a throng of western emigrants, making their way across the winter wilderness to the Promised Land of Kentucky. He wrote in his journal:

I cannot omitt Noticeing the many Distress.d families I pass.d in the Wilderness nor can any thing be more distressing to a man of feeling than to see woman and Children in the Month of Decembr. Travelling a Wilderness Through Ice and Snow passing large rivers and Creeks with out Shoe or Stocking, and barely as maney raggs as covers their Nakedness, with out money or provisions except what the Wilderness affords . . . life *What is it, Or What can it give,* to make Compensation for such accumulated Misery . . . can any thing be more Absurd than the Conduct of man, here is hundreds Traveling hundreds of Miles, they Know not for what Nor Whither, except its to Kentucky, passing land almost as good and easy obtain.d, the Proprietors of which would gladly give on any terms, but it will not do its not Kentuckey its not the Promis.d land its not the goodly inheratence the Land of Milk and Honey. and when arriv.d at this Heaven in Idea what do they find? a goodly land I will allow but to them forbidden Land. exhausted and worn down with distress and disappointment they are at last Oblig.d to become hewers of wood and Drawers of water.¹⁵

Austin did not include himself in his perceptive observation of the western emigrants, for he was not riding west on the Kentucky road in search of the Land of Milk and Honey. Moses Austin was "an expectant capitalist," a man who found in the West the "conditions that encouraged him to extend himself."¹⁶ Enterprise, ambition, and the empire he planned to build compelled him westward—not biblical visions of the Promised Land. He was also a man conscious of himself in history. He realized that the West was a vacuum soon to be filled, and he understood that he had a unique opportunity to be among the first to fill it. He closed the journal of his journey to Upper Louisiana with these lines:

I have made these few observations of my Journey to the Missisipi for the Use of my son, should he live to my Age, Not Doubting but by that time the Country I have pass.d in a state of Nature will be overspread with Towns and Villages, for it is not possible a Country which has with in its self everything to make its settlers Rich and Happy can remain Unnoticed by the American people.¹⁷

On the morning of January 15, 1797, Austin crossed the frozen Mississippi River and entered the Spanish town of St. Louis. There was no tavern in the village and it was only through the assistance of an English-speaking man named Drake that he was able to obtain quarters for the night. After changing his clothes, he went immediately to visit the lieutenant-governor and commandant-general, Zenon Trudeau, to whom he presented letters of introduction and explained the nature of his business.¹⁸

In later years, Austin enlarged upon the story of his arrival in St. Louis to give it more drama and to make it appear as if the Connecticut Yankee had shrewdly taken advantage of the "weakness of Spanish character." This was the story he told his friend Henry Schoolcraft in 1818:

I have it from his own lips, that when he came near to St. Louis, . . . he thought it necessary to enter the town with as large a retinue . . . as possible. He led the way himself, on the best horse he could muster, clothed in a long blue mantel, lined with scarlet and embroidered with lace, and rode through the principal street, where the Governor resided, followed by his servants, guides, and others. So extraordinary a cavalcade, in a place so little frequented by strangers, and at such a season of the year, could not fail, as he had supposed, to attract the particular attention of the local authorities, and the Governor sent an orderly officer to inquire his character and rank. Being answered, he soon returned with an invitation for himself and suite to take up their residence at his house, observing, at the same time, in the most polite manner, and with characteristic deference to the rank of his guest, that there was no other house in town that could afford him suitable accommodations during his stay. The favourable impressions created by this *entree*, which Mr. Austin, in later life, related to his friends with inimitable glee, led him to his ultimate success.¹⁹

Austin lost no time in accomplishing his purpose. On January 16, he left St. Louis for St. Genevieve, a river town south of St. Louis. He arrived there on the 19th, and introduced himself to the Spanish commandant, Francois Vallé. He apparently impressed Vallé, for the commandant furnished Austin with a carryall and two horses for his inspection tour of the mining country forty miles to the west. Austin made a quick examination of the diggings, called Mine á Breton, found them "equal to my Expectation in Every respect," and was back in St. Genevieve on January 26.²⁰

On the 27th, Vallé issued Austin a permit authorizing him to settle families in Upper Louisiana.²¹ More than that, he entered into a partnership with Austin to develop the lead mines. Another Spanish official, Pierre de Hault de Lassus de Luziere, commandant of New Bourbon, showed his confidence in Austin by joining the partnership, as did John Rice Jones, an influential American in the region. In only twelve days, Austin had made a remarkable impression on the Spanish.²²

Austin hastened home to Virginia to wind up his affairs. By June, 1797, he came to an agreement with his brother Stephen, by which their partnership in the Virginia mining business would be dissolved. Austin agreed that all profits from his new venture in Louisiana would be for the mutual benefit of the two brothers until 1800, when they would divide land, mines, and other property between them.²³

In later years, Stephen Austin felt himself mistreated by his brother in regard to the dissolution of their partnership and believed that his brother had jumped from the wreck of their failing business, leaving him to suffer the consequences. Whether this was Austin's intention or not, Stephen certainly suffered great financial distress in the years following his brother's emigration to Spanish Louisiana. He was imprisoned for debt for a time and reduced to working as a laborer to support his family.²⁴ Moses Austin, safely out of the country, advised his brother to extricate himself from their joint creditors by declaring bankruptcy, but Stephen Austin refused to do it.²⁵ Finally, in 1808, their nephew, Henry Austin, negotiated a settlement of their dispute: but Stephen died penniless. His son Charles was compelled to ask Moses for funds to support Stephen's widow and daughter.²⁶

In June, 1798, Austin left Virginia for the last time and set out to permanently settle in Missouri. This time he was accompanied by his wife and family, several relatives, and some slaves, making up a party of forty people. They travelled down the Ohio River by barge. By the time they arrived at Kaskaskia, on the American side of the Mississippi, the party was so sick and exhausted that only two people of a group of seventeen could walk from the boat to shore. Two of Austin's nephews, Parson and Henry Bates, died on the journey. The Austins arrived in St. Genevieve in September, and spent the winter there.²⁷

Upper Louisiana in 1798 was even more primitive than western Virginia. Except for a few settlements on the Mississippi, largely inhabited by French-speaking people, the region was a perfect wilderness. Mine á Breton, forty miles west of the Mississippi River, had no permanent settlers. Miners worked the diggings three or four months a year, extracting the lead from shallow pits, and returned to the settlements in the winter. The Osage Indians were extremely hostile, and it was only when the tribes left the area for seasonal hunting expeditions that whites could enter the mining region with any feeling of safety.

The Indians were so fierce in 1799 that the French inhabitants of St. Genevieve were confined to the town.²⁸ Nevertheless, the Austins left the village and established a permanent settlement at Mine á Breton. The Osages attacked them there, but they had sufficient forces to withstand the assault.²⁹ The settlement was attacked at least once more in 1802, but with the aid of a cannon, probably loaned by the Spanish military authorities, the Austins again defeated the attackers.³⁰

Austin named the Mine á Breton community Potosi, after the famous silver mines of South America.³¹ By 1799, he had a saw mill and grist mill in operation and had erected a shot tower and furnaces in connection with his lead business.

The same year, he began construction of his private residence, Durham Hall, named after his birthplace in Connecticut. By 1804, the little community which he had founded numbered over 700 inhabitants, both French and American.³²

Austin revolutionized the lead mining business in Louisiana. Previously lead had been extracted by digging shallow pits, not more than ten feet deep. Miners found it easier to abandon pits at that depth and dig new ones rather than go to the trouble of raising the ore out of deeper excavations. The smelting process, conducted in crude furnaces, only extracted about 35% of the ore. Austin sank the first mining shaft and introduced a reverberatory furnace which extracted 65% of the ore. Independent miners soon found it profitable to have their ore extracted in Austin's furnaces rather than smelt it themselves.³³

After the failure at Austinville, Potosi was Austin's second chance to become wealthy, and it seemed for a time he would succeed. Between 1804 and 1808, Mine'a Breton reached its maximum production, employing as many as two hundred men.³⁴ To provide a shipping outlet for his lead on the Mississippi River, Austin, along with Samuel Hammond, founded the town of Herculaneum, which Austin named after the ancient buried city near Naples.³⁵

Just as in Virginia, Austin's relatives joined him in Missouri. James Austin and Moses Bates followed him west when the Virginia business failed; and his nephew, Charles Austin, eventually came, after it became hopeless for him and his father to save the business which Moses Austin had abandoned.³⁶ The children of Moses Austin's deceased brother, Elijah Horace Austin, Henry Austin, and Mary Austin Holley came to Missouri for a time. Henry eventually came to Texas, where he sent the first steamboat up the Rio Grande; and Mary Austin Holley wrote an early history of Texas.³⁷ Besides them, Timothy Phelps, brother of Elijah Austin's wife, came to Missouri and served as postmaster at St. Genevieve. Elisha Lewis, third husband of Elijah Austin's widowed wife, came also, as well as Dr. Aaron Elliott, husband of Moses Austin's sister, Ann.³⁸

If the qualities of perseverance, enterprise, and irrepressible optimism had been sufficient to make men rich in Missouri, Moses Austin would have been a wealthy man. But in addition to these virtues Austin was endowed with what his wife referred to as a "sanquine temper." He was irascible, tactless, and quick to take offense. When other men would have steered through the vagaries of Louisiana politics with caution and diplomacy, Austin managed to create some very powerful enemies.

By the treaty of San Ildefonso, signed in 1801, Spain retroceded Louisiana to France; but when the United States purchased Louisiana from France in 1803, the official transfer had not taken place; and Louisiana was still under Spanish administration. During these transition years, some Spanish officials, realizing that land values would increase with a change of governments, fraudulently granted land to their friends, in some cases antedating documents. Added to this, the complicated manner in which Louisiana settlers obtained title to their land contributed to the confusion about ownership, as well as the practice of many Americans who settled on lands during the last years of Spanish occupation in Louisiana with nothing but verbal permission from Spanish authorities.³⁹

These irregularities by Spanish officials created a great deal of anxiety among the Americans in Louisiana, who feared they would lose possession of their land due to fraudulent claims. Shortly before the transfer of Louisiana to the United States, a riot broke out at Mine'a Breton when a Spanish deputy surveyor tried to survey a tract of land which was already occupied. Moses Austin apparently was involved in this demonstration against Spanish land granting practices, for the Spanish lieutenant-governor, Don Carlos DeLasus, declared that Austin was "the principal in the riot," and although Austin "had

been greatly favored by the Spanish Government," he had thus shown his ungratefulness."⁴⁰

Austin displayed his disillusionment with Spain a second time as the Spanish departed from Louisiana after the American transfer. On their journey down river to New Orleans, DeLasus and Spanish troops landed at St. Genevieve to load the post's artillery. DeLasus sent word to Austin to return two pieces of ordnance which had been loaned to him to defend Mine a Breton against the Indians. Austin refused to give them up, saying that if "the Spanish wanted the cannon they could get them."⁴¹

When the Americans took possession of Louisiana, they refused to validate any titles dated after the treaty of Ildefonso until it could be determined which were legitimate. This decision affected Austin, who had not completed the laborious process of getting a clear title to his Mine a Breton holdings until 1802.

In this climate of anxiety and uncertainty which developed from the invalidating of land titles, two political factions arose in Louisiana Territory. One faction under James Wilkinson, who was appointed governor of Louisiana in 1805, was largely made up of long-time French residents. It included Auguste Chouteau, a wealthy merchant in the fur trade; Joseph Browne, territorial secretary; and John Smith T (the T standing for Tennessee), a skilled duelist and by all accounts one of the most disreputable characters in the Mississippi valley. An anti-Wilkinson party arose, largely Americans, which included Will C. Carr, an attorney and personal friend of Thomas Jefferson;⁴² Samuel Hammond, who, along with Austin, was co-founder of Herculaneum; Rufus Easton, first postmaster of St. Louis and later a congressional delegate for Missouri Territory;⁴³ and Austin. A large part of the political differences between these two factions focused on the disposition of land titles.

Austin was unfortunate enough to come into direct confrontation with Smith T. Smith was in possession of a floating land claim, probably antedated, which, he asserted, allowed him to claim a land tract wherever he chose. Part of the land he claimed included Austin's Mine a Breton holdings. Austin obtained the aid of the sheriff, Seth Hunt, to keep Smith from working the mines, but Governor Wilkinson backed Smith then began an effort to remove Austin from his appointment as judge of common pleas on the grounds Austin had engaged in illegal activities. Wilkinson backed Smith in this effort also, and he even appointed Smith to the office after Austin was removed.⁴⁴

Austin's troubles with Smith T flared up again on the 4th of July, 1806. On that day, Smith T, then a colonel of militia, assaulted Austin's house with a party of armed men in order to take a cannon from Austin, apparently after he had fired it in celebration of the holiday. Austin withstood the attack and wrote a letter the same day to Major Andrew Henry, a member of the grand jury, asking by what authority the cannon was demanded and adding, "I tell you now that if my House is forced by armed men so be It, I can only stand on the Defensive."⁴⁵

Smith T harassed Austin throughout the summer, spreading rumors that Austin had not title to his lands and even accusing Austin of threatening to murder him. To all this, Austin responded with remarkable restraint, given the circumstances, and Austin's temper. He wrote Smith a letter in August, 1806, declaring that in spite of all that had happened he was willing to entertain a reconciliation.⁴⁶ Their hostility continued for years, however. In fact, Smith and Austin's son Stephen, had a near fatal encounter of some kind in 1812.⁴⁷

Smith T was not Austin's only enemy; by his own admission he acquired quite a few over the years. A slave girl named Lyd tried to poison him in 1811, and he had reason to fear assassination.⁴⁸ Austin's irascibility surely contributed to the animosity towards him, for his friends often warned him to

control his emotions. Will Carr was not alone in his sentiments when he advised Austin, "If I may once be permitted to mention to you one trait in your character that may be amended; it is your temper."⁴⁹

For Austin, Missouri was not just a place to make money and return East; it was home. He worked to improve the community he had founded. He was a trustee of Potosi Academy when it was founded in 1817;⁵⁰ and he donated 40 acres of land for the erection of public buildings when Potosi was named county seat of Washington County. His wife, however, never reconciled herself to living in the West and hoped that when their fortune was secure Moses would sell out and return to the East.

Few documents exist from which we might learn of Maria Austin's life in Missouri. However, in 1811, she left Missouri to visit the East, a journey she took for her health and to put two of her children, Brown and Emily, in school. During the two years she was gone she wrote twenty-five letters to her husband which are extant, and from these letters emerges a portrait of a troubled woman whose attitudes toward the West were quite different from her husband's.

Maria Austin was addicted to opium, not an uncommon condition among women of her time when life was harsh, doctors were few, and many patent remedies contained addictive properties. She hoped that the trip east would ease what she called nervous pains in her back and chest and eliminate her need for opium, and for a time she believed her hopes would be realized. "I assure my dear Husband," she wrote, "That I exerted myself to the Utmost to git the better of takeing Opium I have succaded beyond my most sanquin Expectations & be assured my dearest friend I shall continue in my endeavors to do without it altogether."⁵¹

After her arrival on the East Coast, Maria put her children in boarding schools and then spent much of her time visiting relatives and friends in Philadelphia and New Haven, which she believed to be the "Hansomest place I ever was in."⁵² She wrote her husband that she had received so many social calls since her arrival in New Haven that she expected an entire week would be taken up returning visits: "in Short the Comeing Week will be nothing but one continuous Scean of visiting & Amusements."⁵³ It is easy to imagine the delight she must have felt to pick up the social life she had left behind twenty-seven years ago when she married Moses Austin as a girl of seventeen.

Her letters contained other concerns too, particularly fears for her family. In the two years she was away from Potosi, the Mississippi valley experienced several calamities. The New Madrid earthquake caused considerable damage in the region where the Austins resided; a fever raged in the Mississippi valley which took many lives, including that of Dr. Aaron Elliott, a relative of the Austins;⁵⁴ and the War of 1812 broke out, inciting the Indians to violence in the upper Mississippi valley. Added to these calamities, Austin had troubles of his own. Stephen had written Maria that a slave girl had tried to poison her husband, and there were disturbing references to a possible assassin.⁵⁵

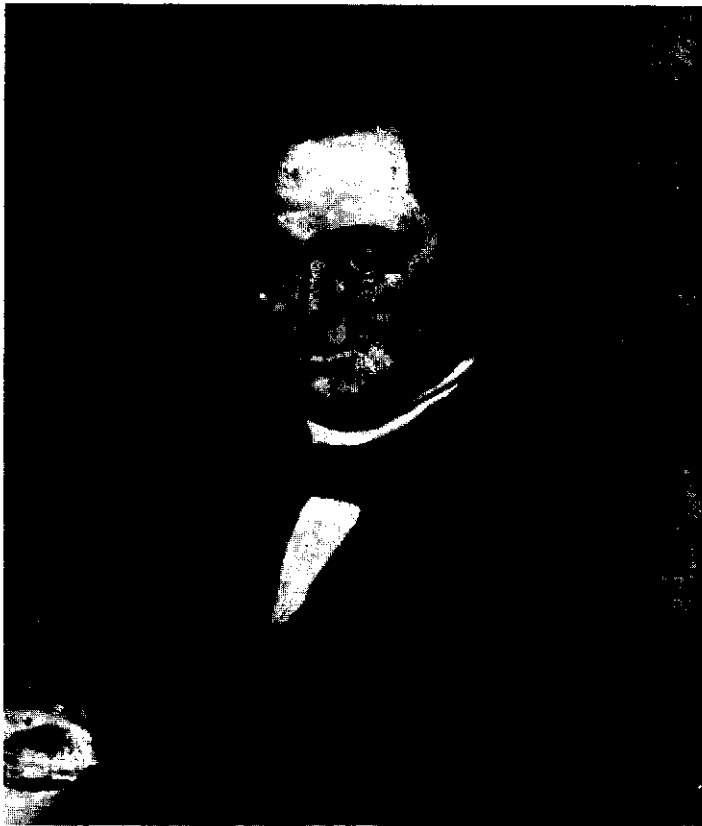
The society she enjoyed in the East and the fears she had of the West combined to compel Maria to urge her husband to sell out and return to New Haven. "Oh let me interest you," she wrote, "to arrange your affairs as soon as possible so as to leave the Country—you have had so many hare breadth escapes of your life that it appears like a Warning from above."⁵⁶

Her friends urged her to stay in the East, she wrote, and believing Austin to be wealthy, they could not understand why he didn't sell his holdings and live the remainder of his life in comfort. Even if Maria returned to the West, her friends advised that her daughter should remain in the East; and Maria agreed. "I do not wish my daughter to settle in Louisiana . . ."⁵⁷

But it was not to be. Not only was Austin not wealthy enough to sell his business and retire, there was not even enough money to keep Brown and Emily in school. So the family returned to Missouri in the spring of 1813, accompanied by James Bryan, Austin's business partner at the mines. The following August, Emily married Mr. Bryan, and like her mother, she wedded her future to the West.

When the War of 1812 broke out Maria had advised her husband to send plenty of lead for others to fight their battles with and "let both parties pursue their own [own] measures Unmolested by you—."⁵⁸ As it happened the war ruinously depressed the lead market, and before Austin could make a recovery, the Panic of 1819 enveloped the nation; and his Missouri business failed even more disastrously than his Virginia enterprise. The Bank of St. Louis failed in 1819, considerably contributing to his ruin, and the large band of enemies Austin had cultivated over the years probably helped to make his financial failure even worse than it otherwise might have been.

In 1818, as the decline in his fortune began to accelerate, Austin met Henry R. Schoolcraft, a mineralogist from New York who had come to Missouri to inspect the mineral resources of the region. Later, he would become an Indian agent in Michigan and a noted ethnologist of Indian cultures. Schoolcraft was impressed with Austin's hospitality, intelligence, and energetic spirit, and the two became fast friends. Austin prevailed upon Schoolcraft to try to sell his mining property for a 5% commission when he returned to New York.



Their correspondence gives evidence of Austin's increasing emotional distress as his financial situation rapidly declined through the summer of 1819. On June 8, 1819, Austin wrote Schoolcraft a detailed letter giving him the power of attorney to sell Mine á Breton, and indicating the price he was willing to accept. He also listed various goods which he desired Schoolcraft to purchase and ship west. These included not only articles of trade, such as coffee, cloth, and Indian goods, but also a substantial number of luxury items, such as a frame for the Austin coat of arms.⁵⁹

But as the weeks wore on, Austin reduced the price he would accept for his property, and there was no more mention of luxury goods. "For God, sake sell If you can and lett me have power to Draw for, 5 or 6 thousand Dollars If you can do no better. If this is not done I shall be in the power of my Enemies."⁶⁰

Austin's letters became more and more desperate, and sometimes he wrote two in one day, to better insure that at least one would be received. If he did not obtain \$6,000 by October, he wrote Schoolcraft on July 20, he would be subject to a sheriff's sale. On July 26, he wrote, "You will think me mad so I am or nearly so and shall not [?] regain my senses untill I have six thousand Dollars . . ." In a second letter, written the same day, he confessed that the distress his enemies caused him was "sufficient to make any man *Mad* and almost lay hands on himself . . ."

By August, Austin wrote he could not sleep and would not be able to until he heard some news from Schoolcraft about his estate.⁶¹ He feared Schoolcraft would be disgusted by so many letters, but he could not let a mail pass without writing.

But along with confessions of emotional distress and testimonies about persecution by his enemies, another theme appeared in Austin's correspondence to Schoolcraft that summer—Texas.

In June, 1819, James Long's filibustering expedition crossed into Texas. Austin paid close attention to its progress, monitoring the situation through his son Stephen, who was in Arkansas Territory at the time on business concerning a trading center which the Austins had established on Red River. On July 4th, Austin wrote Schoolcraft:

Stephen F. Austin says tell Mr. Schoolcraft that two grand expeditions are now underway [?] for the Spanish country 300 families are making ready to take possession of that part of red River within the *Spanish lines* which comes within [20?] miles of his plantation another is now making up—to take possession of St Antone under the command of a General long.

On August 18, 1819, Austin again wrote of Texas:

I have heard from my son Stephen he is much pleased with his situation and states that the expedition to *Texas* is going on with great energy & thinks St. Antone will be in the hands of the Americans in all October next. the army under General Long has advanced into the province of *Texas* and raised the Republican Standard & hundreds are daly Crossing the *Sabine* I understand that the first object will be to establish a provincial government and give 640 acres of land to each *Solder* & Officer . . . many men of property and reputation have already *Joined* both Spanish and Americans Not a *Royal Standard* is now raised short of St Antone and the *Cimansa Indians* have united with the Americans with many other *nations*. for God sake sell my estate and if you think of coming on wesh [west] to visit that country I will go with you to this I also Pledge myself.

Finally, on September 17, 1819, Austin wrote Schoolcraft for the last time. His emotional turmoil was gone. Calmly, he wrote, "I hope you will not think of the sacrifice I am to make, but do the best you can and I will be satisfied." Putting his failure in Missouri behind him, he fixed his vision for the last time on the West.

I shall as soon as my business is Closed in this country Visit St Antonio which place I have but little doubt is now in the hands of the Americans. I have lately received accounts from our friend & son Stephen F. Austin. he has been very sick being much expose on the red River but is again in health . . . that country is filling up with *People* beyond all calculation a few years will make it a state.

Between that day and the day he finally entered San Antonio, Austin's plans changed more than once. The Long expedition failed, and it was necessary for him to present himself in San Antonio as a citizen who would be loyal to the Spanish Crown rather than the supporter of a filibustering movement. For a short period, at least, Austin even considered going back East rather than going to Texas.⁶²

But in the months to come Austin's Texas plans crystallized. Although he was so impoverished as to be unable to obtain funds to get his son Brown out of debtor's prison in Kentucky, he confidently set out on a new enterprise, the boldest he had ever envisioned. He rode to San Antonio and received permission to settle a colony of three hundred families on the Colorado River in the Spanish province of Texas. The purpose of this colony was not primarily agricultural: rather, he informed his son, "I have asked for leave of settlement for 300 families and (200) Thousand Acres of Land to open a *Port Town* . . ." This town, which he would name *Austina*, would be greater than *Austinville*, *Potosi*, or *Herculaaneum*; it would be a town which would be "equal to New Orleans in Consequence."⁶³ Austin envisioned a trading center from which the goods of New Spain would flow out to the world and which would establish himself again as a man of property.

He died, however, before his plans could be carried out, worn out from illness and the fatigue of his journey to San Antonio, but optimistic almost to the end. In a letter to his son Stephen, written only nineteen days before his death, he wrote, "Raise your Spirits times are changing A new chance presents itself nothing is now wanting but Concert and firmness."⁶⁴ His son carried on the enterprise, but he developed an agricultural colony rather than a commercial center. Moses Austin's vision of *Austina* was never realized.

For the prospects of Texas, it was probably fortunate that Stephen rather than his father guided the course of the first Anglo colony in Texas. Whereas Stephen was tactful, cautious, and temperate, Moses Austin was contentious, undiplomatic, and, in the words of his wife, "two often precipitate in his conclusions and often ere[d] from acting from the Impulse of the moment."⁶⁵ Nevertheless, Moses Austin's spirit of business, his perseverance, and his unflinching optimism in the possibilities of the West opened Texas to the Americans. In the coming years men much like him would firmly secure it to the United States.

NOTES

¹Eugene C. Barker, *The Life of Stephen F. Austin* (Austin, 1949), 447.

²Henry R. Schoolcraft, *Scenes and Adventures* (Philadelphia, 1853), 228.

³Eugene C. Barker, (ed.), *Austin Papers, I, Annual Report of the American Historical Association*, Vol. II, 385-387.

⁴Barker, *The Life of Stephen F. Austin*, 3.

⁵*Austin Papers, I, 1, 35-36.*

⁶Laura Bryan Parker, Geneological Notes, Moses Austin Biographical File, Barker Texas History Center, University of Texas at Austin.

⁷Moses Austin to Maria Brown, January 25, 1785, *Austin Papers, Archives*, Barker Texas History Center, University of Texas at Austin.

⁸*Austin Papers, I, 1.*

⁹Gertrud R. Rath, "The Life and Times of Moses Austin in Missouri" (Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Texas at Austin, 1924), 7.

¹⁰*Austin Papers, I, 1.*

¹¹*Ibid.*, 7-8.

¹²Stephen Austin to James Austin, January 8, 1800, *Austin Papers.*

¹³Mattie Austin Hatcher to Eugene C. Barker, July 29, 1920, Moses Austin Biographical File.

¹⁴William E. Foley, *A History of Missouri*, Vol. I: 1673 to 1820 (Columbus, 1971), 43-44.

¹⁵Moses Austin, "A Memorandum of M. Austin's Journey," etc., *American Historical Review*, Vol. V (April, 1900), 525-526.

¹⁶William H. Goetzmann, "The Mountain Man as Jacksonin Man," Bobbs-Merrill Reprint Series, reprinted from *American Quarterly*, XV (Fall, 1963), 8.

¹⁷Moses Austin, "A Memorandum of M. Austin's Journey," 542.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 535.

¹⁹Schoolcraft, *Travels in the Central Portions of the Mississippi Valley* (New York, 1825), 242.

²⁰Moses Austin, "A Memorandum of M. Austin's Journey," 540.

²¹Translation of permit for Moses Austin to settle families in Upper Louisiana, January 27, 1797, *Austin Papers.*

²²*Austin Papers, I, 29-31; and Barker, 11.*

²³*Ibid.*, 35-36.

²⁴Stephen Austin to Moses Austin, February 23, 1801, and July 25, 1801, *Austin Papers.*

²⁵Stephen Austin to Moses Austin, February 23, 1801, *Austin Papers.*

²⁶Charles Austin to Moses Austin, July 13, 1810, *Austin Papers.*

²⁷*Austin Papers, I, 2.*

²⁸Louis Houck, *A History of Missouri*, I (Chicago, 1908), 371.

²⁹*Austin Papers, I, 2.*

³⁰Houck, I, 371.

³¹Schoolcraft, *Travels*, 244.

³²U.S. President, 1801-1809, *Message From the President of the United States to Both Houses of Congress*, 8th November, 1804 (Washington, 1804), 19. This document contains a report on the lead mines of Missouri written by Moses Austin.

- ³³Foley, I, 59-60.
- ³⁴Rath, 113.
- ³⁵Houck, III, 186.
- ³⁶Charles Austin to James Bryan, July 2, 1810, Austin Papers.
- ³⁷Lee, 57; and *Handbook of Texas*, I, 827.
- ³⁸Lee, 57, 86; and Houck, III, 67.
- ³⁹Houck, III, 35.
- ⁴⁰Houck, II, 366.
- ⁴¹*Ibid.*
- ⁴²Houck, III, 15.
- ⁴³*Ibid.*, 14-15.
- ⁴⁴*Austin Papers*, I, 97-98.
- ⁴⁵*Ibid.*, 109-110.
- ⁴⁶*Ibid.*, 111.
- ⁴⁷Maria Austin to Moses Austin, June 7, 1812, Austin Papers.
- ⁴⁸Maria Austin to Moses Austin, June 7, 1812, and November 24, 1811, Austin Papers.
- ⁴⁹*Austin Papers*, I, 112.
- ⁵⁰Houck, III, 69.
- ⁵¹Maria Austin to Moses Austin, July 20, 1811, Austin Papers.
- ⁵²Maria Austin to Moses Austin, September 8, 1811, Austin Papers.
- ⁵³*Ibid.*
- ⁵⁴Maria Austin to Moses Austin, September 21, 1811, Austin Papers.
- ⁵⁵Maria Austin to Moses Austin, June 7, 1812, Austin Papers.
- ⁵⁶Maria Austin to Moses Austin, November 24, 1811, Austin Papers.
- ⁵⁷Maria Austin to Moses Austin, March 16, 1812, Austin Papers.
- ⁵⁸Maria Austin to Moses Austin, August 7, 1812, Austin Papers.
- ⁵⁹Moses Austin to Henry R. Schoolcraft, June 8, 1819, photocopy, Austin Papers.
- ⁶⁰Moses Austin to Schoolcraft, June 26, 1819, photocopy, Austin Papers.
- ⁶¹August 13, 1819.
- ⁶²*Austin Papers*, I, 333.
- ⁶³*Ibid.*, 387.
- ⁶⁴*Austin Papers*, I, 393.
- ⁶⁵Maria Austin, undated fragment, Austin Papers.