Les Communistes in East Texas

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While the Democrats were being drowned by the strains of "Tippecanoe and Tyler Too" during the Log Cabin Campaign of 1840, two events took place in opposite parts of the world that would lead eight years later to a disastrous attempt to establish utopia in the prairie of northeast Texas: The publication of The Voyage to Icaria in France and the formation of a colonizing company in Louisville, Kentucky. This endeavor to establish utopia went by the name of Icaria and the members believed they were involved in a most significant historical event - the establishment of the communist society of the future.

The founder of Icaria was Etienne Cabet, a French lawyer, politician, and publicist, who spent five years in exile in England during the 1830s because he faced a prison sentence in France. The government of Louis Philippe gave him the choice of exile or imprisonment because of his activities among the working classes and his public criticisms of the policies of the government. After his return to France, he published in 1840 a utopian romance, modeled after Thomas More's Utopia, entitled The Voyage to Icaria in which he portrayed in great detail an ideal communist society. The French workingman who read this book could not help making the contrast between the tranquil, happy world it depicted and the misery and suffering he experienced in his own life.

During the 1840s Cabet came to have a large following among the French working classes as a result of his books, especially The Voyage to Icaria, and his newspaper, Le Populaire. By 1848 when the word communiste was used in France it usually referred to the followers of Cabet. However, Cabet's communism did not include class conflict nor the violent overthrow of the government. He asked his followers to have "civil courage" while persuasion and example brought about a gradual, peaceful, social revolution in France. Cabet believed that all except the very wealthiest of the bourgeoisie could be persuaded to join hands with the workers to usher in utopia.

During the same year that saw the publication of Cabet's The Voyage to Icaria in France, a small group of businessmen in Louisville, Kentucky, backed by some London investors, banded together in order to obtain a grant of land from the Republic of Texas for the purpose of colonization. At this time Texas was suffering from lack of money, low land values, and the need for defense against Mexico and the Indians. Thus, Texas was in dire need of more settlers to pay taxes, help with defense, and increase land values. When the Louisville...

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group placed their proposal before the Fifth Congress of the Republic of Texas it passed and was signed on February 4, 1841.6

This law authorized a contract with William S. Peters, the leader and organizer of the Louisville shopkeepers, to establish a colony in northeast Texas in what is now parts of Grayson, Cooke, Denton, and Collin counties. Actually, between 1841 and 1843 four separate contracts were signed which, while they gave the company extensions of time for fulfilling the terms of the contract and greatly extended the boundaries of the colony, also reserved every alternate section of land for the Republic of Texas.7 The last contract, signed on January 20, 1843, extended the company's grant until July 1, 1848, and added over ten million acres to the colony. Peters Colony was to receive ten sections of land for every 100 families they brought to the colony and five sections for every 100 single men. They were also permitted to charge the colonists a fee for transportation, surveying, and acquiring title which could be collected in land provided it was no more than half the individual colonist's grant.8

Attracting large numbers of people to the colony turned out to be a much bigger job than the Louisville businessmen had anticipated. Transportation difficulties, fear of Indians, and legal disputes over the contracts all worked against the company. As of July 1, 1844, only 381 colonists had arrived and stayed in Peters Colony; this included 197 heads of families and 184 single men.9

As the 1848 deadline came closer, William S. Peters tried to interest Robert Owen, the English socialist, in the Colony. In 1824 Owen had tried to establish a community of his own at New Harmony, Indiana, and when that failed attempted to get the government of Mexico to allow him to establish a colony in Texas in 1828.10 Peters undoubtedly knew about New Harmony and possibly had even heard about Owen's Texas project. Owen is the link which united William S. Peters and Etienne Cabet in September, 1847. But for almost two years prior to that time Peters made several trips across the Atlantic trying to meet with Owen and enlist his support in bringing people to the colony.11

Judging by his letters to Owen, Peters was an excellent, but sometimes over-zealous, salesman.12 In his first letter to Owen, dated November 1, 1846, Peters tells Owen that "I have read with delight all those works of yours which I could lay hold of and I am proud to say that I am with you in heart and mind." Whether Peters was a socialist as he maintains in his letters or merely trying to win Owen's confidence is hard to determine, but one suspects the latter. Peters describes Texas in glowing terms as having the best climate and the most productive soil in the world. A July 9, 1847, letter to Owen states that the
Trinity River is being made navigable through our colony and a railroad is to go on to the great trading city of Santa Fe where commerce has enriched the merchants of St. Louis, but we are not so far from it by four times as that city.

While Peters was trying to entice Owen into supporting his colonization project, Cabet was facing the greatest dilemma of his life in France. As economic conditions grew worse in France in 1846 and the workers became restless, it became clear to Cabet that the bourgeoisie were frightened by working class activity and drew closer to the ruling class. Cabet's dream of working class and bourgeoisie unity was being shattered. Some workers were beginning to listen to the advocates of class conflict and violent overthrow of the government. Cabet's "grand strategy of left-wing unity...had run aground in the mire of a rapidly changing society. Theory and practice no longer meshed."

If Cabet wanted to keep his following among the workers, he would either have to adopt the idea of class struggle or find some other outlet for working class frustrations. In the May 9, 1847, issue of Le Populaire Cabet revealed the solution to his dilemma. In an article entitled "Workers, let us go to Icaria!" he argued that since the Icarians in France were being prosecuted, it was time to follow the advice of Jesus Christ: "If thou art persecuted in one city, get thee thence to another." By leaving degenerate Europe behind, Cabet stated they would be able to claim "our dignity as men, our rights as citizens, and Liberty and Equality." The Icarians would be "the new Hebrews" who would "conquer the Promised Land, a new paradise on Earth." This was not to be a small project; land must be found large enough to build a "veritable communist nation." Between 10,000 and 20,000 Icarians would be involved in establishing the community.

When Cabet announced the emigration project, he had no idea where the land needed would be found, except that he thought it might be somewhere in America. Being familiar with Owen's attempt to establish a community at New Harmony, Indiana, he asked Dr. Berrier-Fontaine, with whom he had shared a house during his exile in England, to help him enlist Owen's aid. Berrier passed the task on to Charles Sully, a French bookbinder living in London, who was a devoted Icarian. Through Sully's efforts Cabet and Owen were brought together and land was found for the new "Paradise on Earth" in Texas. William S. Peters had arrived in London on September 23 and through Owen was put in touch with Cabet. Sometime between September 23 and November 14, 1847, Cabet and Peters, through the efforts of Sully, reached an agreement. Le Populaire of November 14 announced that Icaria would be in Texas.

While Cabet announced in the same issue of the paper the names
of the advanced guard and mentioned that Sully was on his way to
the United States to make preliminary arrangements, he failed to
mention one very important piece of information he must have learn­
ed from Peters.21 Peters Colony was divided into 640 acre squares in
checkerboard fashion with the state of Texas reserving for itself every
alternate square. In each section controlled by Peters, only half a sec­
tion, 320 acres, would be available to the Icarians. It is known that
Cabet, despite his long stay in England, did not have good command
of the English language.22 Possibly, because of this, he did not fully
understand the intricacies of Texas land laws. Without such an ex­
planation, it is hard to understand how Cabet expected to found a
community on noncontiguous pieces of prairie land. However, none
of this was made known to the members of the advanced guard. Sul­
ly had departed for America and everything seemed to be in order
for the great hegira.

On the morning of February 3, 1848, the “first advanced guard,”
composed of sixty-nine selected men23 dressed in specially designed
black velvet uniforms with grey felt hats, left Le Havre for America
on the ship Rome.24 The day before in a ceremony on the deck of the
ship Cabet had addressed “these brave men who are going to a dis­
tant country to realize my dream.” At the end of the ceremony the
Icarians stood bare-headed, singing in chorus their song of departure:

Arise, workers bowed in the dust
The hour of your waking has struck.
On the American shores we see waving
The banner of the Holy Community.
No more corruption, no more suffering,
No more crime, no more sorrow,
Majestic Equality advances:
Proletarian, dry your tears.
Go found our Icaria,
Soldiers of Fraternity,
Go establish in Icaria,
The happiness of Humanity.25

In an article appearing a few days later in Le Populaire, Cabet en­
thusiastically described February 3, 1948, as “an epoch-making date,
for on that date one of the grandest acts in the history of the human
race was accomplished.”26

Who were these sixty-nine pioneers in humanity’s cause? Surpris­
ingly, not all were Freshmen: one was from Rome, one from Spain
and four from German states. They ranged in age from 17 to 58 with
the average age being 41. The 69 Icarians included nineteen farmers,
eight carpenters or cabinet makers, five tailors, five blacksmiths and
mechanics, four weavers, four gardeners, and various other occupa­
tions including a watchmaker, two physicians and an architect.27 The
architect, Alfred Piquenard, later became famous in the United States for his designs of the Illinois and Iowa state capitol buildings. 28

They were not the poorest of workers since one of the prerequisites of becoming a member of the advanced guard was making a preliminary "contribution" of 600 francs. The other prerequisite was that all emigrants to Icaria had to sign a "social contract" which made Cabet the sole authority in Icaria for ten years. 29 These were strange prerequisites for a society that was on the threshold to the millennium.

On March 27, after fifty-one days at sea, they arrived at New Orleans. As the Icarian pioneers came within sight of the city they heard the salute of 100 guns being fired on the public square. 30 The salute, however, was not in celebration of their arrival but in celebration of a revolution that had occurred in France while the Icarians were at sea. On February 24 the government of Louis Philippe had fallen from power and a Second Republic had been established. A faster ship, the Cambria, had brought the news of the revolution to New York City on March 18 and the citizens of New Orleans had received the news only two days before the Icarians arrived. 31

News of the revolution in France caused division within the advanced guard. Some argued that they should return immediately to France, that France needed them in this time of revolution and that Cabet had always intended for Icaria to be in France and not in Texas. This was not the opinion of the majority, however. Only five men deserted the enterprise at this time, but they were among the most influential and cultivated of the group. The deserters included LeClerc, a physician and surgeon, and Piquenard, the architect who had also served as Cabet's secretary. 32

On March 31, after four days in New Orleans, the remaining men in the advanced guard boarded the steamboat Monterey not for Icaria but for Shreveport, Louisiana. 33 They had been led to believe by Cabet, who had received his information from Peters, that the Red River was navigable to the very shores of Icaria. They now discovered that due to the raft in the river above Shreveport they could go only as far as Shreveport by steamboat and from there they would have to make their way overland to Icaria.

They arrived at Shreveport, in 1848 a small town of 1700, at 9 o'clock in the evening on April 4. The next day the Icarians unloaded their baggage from the steamboat in a driving rainstorm. 34 The Icarians, like many travelers today, were burdened by excessive baggage, especially if they had to haul it overland on their backs or in a wagon. They decided to buy land in Shreveport in order to build a shed to house the baggage they could not carry overland.

Much of the information about this part of the journey to Icaria
comes from a letter written by Henri Levi on June 2 to his family in France when he finally arrived in Icaria. The letter vividly describes the journey from Shreveport to Icaria. One incident related by Levi was his discovery on the second day at Shreveport that his cousin whom he had not seen for fifteen years was a merchant in Shreveport. H. Levi and Company rendered much service to the Icarians in Shreveport, receiving their mail and helping them find what they needed.

The Shreveport Journal, under the heading “Society of Communists,” described the Icarians as “an able set of fellows who appear not to mind the difficulties with which they expect to meet.” The difficulties the newspaper referred to were those of trying to move baggage and men some 250 miles through the near-wilderness of northeast Texas. To facilitate this task, Charles Sully, the agent sent earlier by Cabet, had purchased some 3000 acres of land, called Sulphur Prairie, from a John Becknell. Sulphur Prairie was a day’s journey northeast of Mt. Pleasant. Thus, the first leg of the journey was to Sulphur Prairie by way of Marshall, then up the “Choctaw Trail” through Jefferson, and on to Mt. Pleasant.

On April 6, two days after arriving in Shreveport, twenty-five men left with the only wagon the Icarians could find while the rest remained to build the storage shed and continue the search for more wagons. At noon on April 8, giving up the search for more wagons, fourteen volunteered to make the trip without the aid of a wagon. Henri Levi, one of the volunteers, describes their three-day forced march on which they managed to catch up with the men with the wagon. By this time the Icarians had come to realize that traveling in Texas was not the same as traveling in France. During the 1840s an experienced traveler in this part of Texas went on horseback and with no more than one or two companions. This mode of traveling was advisable since there were no inns or hotels along the way. It was the custom of the area for inhabitants to take in travelers for the night and to share their food with them. However, this was impossible for the Frenchmen because no one living in a cabin on the frontier had accommodations and food for such a large group.

The Icarians slept in the forest and ate the food that they carried with them, mainly vermicelli. They suffered from what they considered to be “stiffing heat” and many of them became fatigued and some fell ill. To add to their problems the axle on the wagon broke about three days walk from Mt. Pleasant. They were also worried that the rains might come and swell the streams and delay their reaching Mt. Pleasant. By April 18, almost two weeks after leaving Shreveport, the last of the Icarians reached Mt. Pleasant with the repaired wagon on their way to Sulphur Prairie. There the sick were attended and fresh supplies were purchased for the short trip to
Sulphur Prairie. Despite its beautiful name, Mt. Pleasant in 1848 was far from a pleasant place to stay. The Jackson family stayed several weeks in Mr. Pleasant that spring and painfully recalled that,

\[
\text{It was there the live mosquitoes} \\
\text{Their merry songs would sing,} \\
\text{And the fleas would dance to music} \\
\text{That had such a business ring.}^{40}
\]

At Sulphur Prairie some of the men started to build lodging and gardens while others headed for Icaria. At this point the Icarians were in three groups: one at Shreveport, one at Sulphur Prairie, and the third headed for Icaria in Peters Colony by way of Bonham. The April 22, 1848, issue of the Clarksville Northern Standard contains an excerpt from the Journal de Havre describing the departure of the Icarians from France. Charles DeMorse, the editor of the Clarksville paper, then states that

This paragraph relates to a community, one of whose settlements or towns is about to be established upon a tract of land in Titus County, purchased of John Becknell, and known as his former residence, about six miles to the right of the road, leading from Duty's crossing of the Sulphur to Mrs. Morton's on White Oak. Some 50 or 60 of the settlers are now upon the land preparing to build, which we are told, they will do with brick. We understand that they have another town in the Cross Timbers, and that they are to have others scattered through Texas, and that a company have already started for the Cross Timbers... It is said that they will establish an iron foundry in Titus. It is also said they will clear out the Sulphur, commencing this summer. We hope so, and believe that putting 50 men upon it, it will be found no great undertaking.\(^{41}\)

What did DeMorse think about having a group of communists in his own vicinity? In the same issue he states that "This colony...will be doubly a benefit to the people of all this section of country, in the increase of conveniences, and the consumption of the new products of the surrounding country."\(^{42}\) Apparently, even French communists were welcome on the Texas frontier.

A month and a half later, on June 10, the Clarksville Northern Standard states that "We are informed that the first comers at the colony in Titus have all gone to Peters Colony to obtain grants of land, and that all who arrive before July, will also go there with the same object. By those who may arrive subsequent to that time, the work in Titus will be carried on."\(^{44}\)

What had happened? On May 19 Adolphe Gouhenant, the leader of the first advanced guard had returned to Sulphur Prairie from Peters Colony to inform them that they must leave at once for Icaria.\(^{45}\) Gouhenant had learned when he reached Peters Colony that free land was available only until July 1, 1848. After that date they would have
to purchase land for a dollar an acre. In order to claim the free land, a cabin had to be built on every section of land claimed before July 1. Cabet apparently knew this when the agreement was reached with Peters but failed to inform the members of the advanced guard.

The group at Sulphur Prairie, which now included those who had stayed for a while at Shreveport, left for Icaria on May 21, two days after Gouhenant's arrival. They were told, probably by Gouhenant himself, that the route to Icaria by way of Bonham was very dangerous. During the summer of 1848 there were Indians encamped around Bonham and this may have been enough to frighten Gouhenant. For this reason they decided to take another route that a local resident had pointed out to them. However, they soon found out that route means one thing in France and another in Texas. A route in the Texan sense, according to Levi, is simply "the place where it is necessary to pass, even though there do not exist any markings from the point of departure to that of arrival."

The route suggested, as far as can be determined, was to follow the south bank of the Sulphur River past the point at which it divides into a north and south fork and then cross the south fork into what is now Delta County. From there they were to head west to the open prairie of western Hunt County and Collin County and, thereby, reach the Cross Timbers area.

The journey from Sulphur Prairie to the open prairie of western Hunt County would have been enough to discourage even the most committed idealist. The rains never seemed to stop; they spent one night walking in water up to their knees and sometimes elbows being guided only by the light from the lightning which never ceased. They were constantly plagued by mosquitoes and gnats and they ran low on food. A settler residing on Spring Creek Prairie in Collin County stated that the Icarians "passed by his house during the past year. They travelled on foot through the country, carrying packs on their backs, during the hottest season of the year . . . . They were very careless as it regards exposure and food, and usually lived in creek bottoms." They took with them enough bread, salt, tea, and brandy to last three days. When they ran low on bread they bought some unsieved cornflower and made bread which Levi states resembled "minced straw" and was certainly not "the meal of Lucullus."

After twelve days of walking, losing their way on several occasions, they finally arrived at Icaria on June 1. The first advanced guard had selected land at the junction of Denton and Oliver Creeks in Denton County as the site for Icaria. This location is about one mile northeast of the present town of Justin. With the July 1 deadline only a month away, the new arrivals set to work building cabins and plowing the fields. By July 1, through strenuous effort in the
scorching heat of a Texas summer, they managed to build thirty-two cabins. This meant that they had secured for themselves 10,240 acres of land, a far cry from the million acres that Cabet had mentioned before they left France. Also, the 10,240 acres of land was divided into thirty-two noncontiguous parcels.

During July and August they continued to build and plant crops in preparation for the arrival of the many other Icarians who were expected to join them. Cabet had talked about 1500 going to Icaria as the "second advanced guard." However, overexertion, the fierce Texas sun, and bad drinking water were beginning to take their toll. Several became ill with chills and fever, four died, and a fifth was killed by lightning.51 By the middle of August the great enthusiasm of early summer was gone and the able-bodied were preparing to return to New Orleans when they were surprised by the arrival of the second advanced guard. Instead of the 1500 mentioned by Cabet, only nineteen had left France on June 3 for Icaria and only ten arrived in Icaria on August 29. The rest had become ill between Shreveport and Icaria.

The change in attitude among the Icarians during the summer of 1848 from great enthusiasm to disillusionment can perhaps best be captured through excerpts from letters written to friends and relatives in France. On May 13 in a letter written to Cabet shortly after the arrival of the first advanced guard and signed by several Icarians, they state that "the country from Bonham to the source of the Trinity is one of great beauty and amazing richness which unites all the advantages for our colony. We have chosen the land at the junction of the Denton and Oliver Creeks, an admirable site. Here there are beautiful woods, excellent water, and extremely fertile soil."52 In a letter written on May 20 to Cabet, Gouhenant exclaims, "Oh! If you could see Icaria, it is an Eden! When you are offered the presidency of the Republic, come instead to Icaria - you will be very happy, very rich and very great among us."53

The enthusiasm is still evident as late as July 12 when Gouhenant wrote to Cabet that

Finally, we have 32 sections, Icaria is founded. It is enough to nourish 15 to 20 thousand people. The larger number is valid and all compete with zeal and eagerness in the work we are doing. The carpenters are constructing cabins of timber, our mechanics occupy themselves with the construction of a mill; others are building an oven; the gardeners, farmers, laborers, colliers, all our brothers are in motion preparing for the second advanced guard, that they will have perhaps all the things of prime necessity.54

Only a little over a month and a half later the scene had changed drastically. Favard, the leader of the second advanced guard, wrote the following to Cabet shortly after his arrival at Icaria.
How can I depict to you the situation in which I have found our brothers? Almost all who survive are sick. Four are dead; the first was Gaillot, the second was Callet, who was killed by lightning, the third was Guerin, and the fourth Tange . . . We should not be able to bring the women here by these abominable roads. Wagons could not make more than two or three leagues a day. One finds no villages, but only farm houses at long intervals, and in none of them have they beds for four persons. One does not even find bread; for the people of the country do not make bread except in small quantities at the very moment of eating.... All our attention is given to those who are most ill, and to preparation for departure. But what is most annoying is that we have incurred a debt of seven or eight thousand francs, and we are embarrassed for means to liquidate it under the circumstances. If we can arrange with our creditors we will occupy ourselves exclusively with our retreat to Shreveport . . . .

Apparently arrangements were made with the agents of Peters Colony for the decision was made to divide what money remained equally among all members and to retrace their steps to Shreveport in small groups. The retreat of the Icarians to Shreveport, many ill with fever, must have been an especially difficult trip because of the painful contrast of their present plight with that of a few months earlier. When they all finally rejoined in Shreveport four were missing; they had died along the way. Henri Levi was one of these.

Even though some of the Icarians would go on with Cabet to establish another community in 1849 in Navoo, Illinois, the high tide of Icarianism was passed. 1848 was the year of great hopes and shattered dreams for many people, but probably none more than the Icarians.

It was not just fever on the plains of Texas that dampened the ardour of the Icarians, but also blood on the streets of Paris. The Bloody June Days, June 22-24, which pitted the army and national guard of the Second Republic against the workers of Paris, brought about reprisals by the government that made it difficult for the Icarian organization to operate in France. This, coupled with the dismal failure of the attempt to establish utopia in Texas, turned workers' attention to other doctrines, especially to one that appeared in a small pamphlet earlier in the year entitled The Communist Manifesto.

A leader in political difficulties who let his zeal for community building dim his judgment, a land agent eager to attract emigrants by a July 1 deadline, a river that was not navigable for steamboats past Shreveport, a climate that took its toll on people who overexerted themselves, and a revolution in France all made the Icarian venture in Texas a disaster. A bell the Icarians brought with them from France can still be seen in Justin and is all that remains to re-
mind us of the heroic efforts but tragic ending of an attempt to build Paradise in Texas. 58

NOTES

1 A recent account of Cabet's life may be found in Christopher H. Johnson, Utopian Communism in France: Cabet and the Icarians, 1839-1851 (Ithaca, N.Y., 1974).
3 Johnson, Utopian Communism in France, 78-82.
5 Connor, The Peters Colony of Texas, 2.
7 Connor, The Peters Colony of Texas, 43.
8 Connor, The Peters Colony of Texas, 39.
9 Connor, The Peters Colony of Texas, 69, 70.
11 Peters mentions this in his letters to Owen which may be found in the Owen Papers (University of Wisconsin microfilm, 1,090, Reel #6).
12 Owen Papers, Documents Nos. 1529, 1447, 1457, 1534 and 1515.
13 Johnson, Utopian Communism in France, 231.
14 Johnson, Utopian Communism in France, 231.
15 Johnson, Utopian Communism in France, 238.
16 Johnson, Utopian Communism in France, 238.
17 Johnson, Utopian Communism in France, 44, 255.
18 Johnson, Utopian Communism in France, 256.
19 Owen Papers, Document No. 1515.
20 Johnson, Utopian Communism in France, 256.
21 Johnson, Utopian Communism in France, 256.
23 All the accounts state that there were 69 members of the advanced guard. However, the passenger list from the ship Rome shows 75 Icarians on board. The additional six are two young couples each having a one-year-old child. The Journal de Havre article reprinted by the Clarksville Northern Standard also states that there were 75 Icarians sailing for America. See National Archive Microfilm No. 259, Passenger Lists of Vessels Arriving at New Orleans, Roll 28.
24 Prudhommeaux, Histoire De La Communaute Icarienne, 18.
25 Prudhommeaux, Histoire De La Communaute Icarienne, 18.
26 Ernest G. Fischer, Marxists and Utopias in Texas, (Burnet, Texas, 1980), 126.
27 National Archive Microfilm No. 259, Roll 28.
29 Johnson, Utopian Communism in France, 250-253.
31 New Orleans Daily Bee, March 25, 1848.
33 New Orleans Daily Picayune, March 31, 1848.
From a letter written by Henri Levi, one of the advanced guard, in 1848 and reprinted in the Icarian newspaper, *L'Observateur*, No. 4, December, 1880.

*L'Observateur*, December, 1880.

*Shreveport Journal*, April 10, 1848.

*L'Observateur*, December, 1880.

*L'Observateur*, December 1880.

*Jackson, Sixty Years in Texas*, 14.

*Clarksville Northern Standard*, April 22, 1848.

*Clarksville Northern Standard*, April 22, 1848.

*Clarksville Northern Standard*, April 22, 1848.

*Clarksville Northern Standard*, June 10, 1848.

*L'Observateur*, December 1880.

*L'Observateur*, December 1880.

*Jackson, Sixty Years in Texas*, 15.

*L'Observateur*, December, 1880.


*L'Observateur*, December, 1880.


Johnson, *Utopian Communism in France*, 278-283.