

Texas Historical Commission

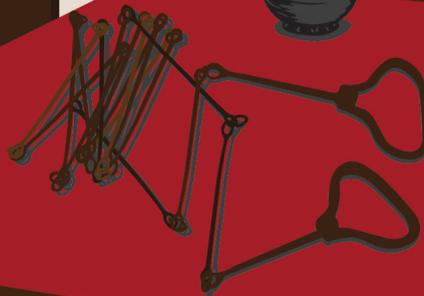
Was Austin a Successful Empresario

Grade 4 & 7

SAN FELIPE de AUSTIN

STATE HISTORIC SITE

San Felipe, Texas



TEXAS
HISTORICAL
COMMISSION



visitsanfelipedeAustin.com



Virtual Field Trip



Image Stephen F. Austin, empresario. Wiki Creative Commons

The Militia in Austin's Colony

Overview: A New Beginning for Texas

In the final Part 11 in the *Empresario* series from the Texas Historical Commission's **San Felipe de Austin** site, learners consider the empresario system that brought permanent settlers to Mexican Texas during the early 19th century. Activities explore the questions of what happened once an empresario completed a contract, and whether or not Stephen F. Austin can be considered to be an example of a successful empresario. A video and primary source documents are included.

Objectives

- Demonstrate understanding of the empresario system in 19th century Texas.
- Compare data on early empresarios of Mexican Texas.
- Identify the challenges Austin faced during his empresario experience.
- Analyze primary source documents.
- Reflect on the empresario experience.

Social Studies TEKS

4th Grade: 4.14.B, 4.2 A E, 4.21, 4.23

7th Grade: 7.1 A, 7.2 E, 7.20, 7.23

Resources

- Video: Was Austin a Successful Empresario? (THC YouTube) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n0ZhVS6wWZc&feature=youtu.be>
- Activity 1: Early Empresarios activity resource
- Activity 2: Laying a Foundation activity resource
- Activity 3: Journal Reflection: Successful Empresario? activity resource
- Primary Source: Letter from Stephen F. Austin letter to James W. Breedlove, 1829



Vocabulary

empresario (ehm preh SAH ree oh) noun: a person who was contracted by the Mexican government to bring colonists to settle in Texas

empresario contract (ehm preh SAH ree oh kahn trakt) noun: legal contract granted by the Mexican government for the number of families an empresario could bring to Texas and location of where they were to settle

Historical Context

A variety of *empresarios* arranged contracts with the Mexican government to bring settlers to Mexican Texas in the early 19th century. Depending on the terms of the contracts, each empresario was allowed to bring from 40 to 800 families to an area. In 1825 alone, the Mexican government approved contracts that brought 2,641 families to Texas. If every empresario had completed their contract, Mexican Texas would have had a large population, but many empresarios either never completed their contracts or didn't settle a single family.

The prospect of obtaining large amounts of land and money was what motivated many to become empresarios. The possibility of financial gain was what originally brought Stephen F. Austin's father, Moses Austin, to Texas.

In 1821, Moses Austin received the first empresario contract from Spain for 300 families. However, he died in June of that year. His son, Stephen F. Austin, took over his father's work and renegotiated that contract with the Mexican government, receiving their permission to settle those 300 families in 1823. Stephen F. Austin was the most successful of all the empresarios in Texas. In addition to overseeing his father's original contract, he received additional contracts in 1825, 1827, and 1828, distributing about 4 million acres to 1,200 families. Stephen F. Austin obtained a fifth contract in partnership with Samuel May Williams in 1831 for an additional 800 families, but that contract was never completed.

Many people became empresarios with the intent of making money. Did it work? Not really. Moses Austin proposed charging colonists 12.5 cents an acre for land in Texas to help cover costs, but this didn't last. Once Mexican colonization laws were finalized, empresarios were paid in land for their work attracting settlers. However, the empresarios really couldn't make any money selling that land. Settlers weren't interested in buying the empresarios' land because the Mexican government was already giving other large tracts of land away to settlers nearly free of charge. After a few years, the colonization laws changed, allowing empresarios the ability to earn some money from land titles they gave to their colonists.



This change in the laws did not help Stephen F. Austin, however. At the end of his life, he died deeper in debt than when he first came into Texas. In one letter, Austin wrote that all of his wealth was tied up in land that had an uncertain value. Austin owned around 250,000 acres of land. He had plans to sell the land later in life when the prices for land increased. Unfortunately, he didn't live to see the increase in land value as he died in December of 1836 at the age of 43. While he was considered the most successful empresario, it didn't translate into financial success.

While he could have made money elsewhere, Stephen F. Austin made the protection and promotion of Texas his priority. In July 1836, he wrote, "*The prosperity of Texas has been the object of my labors, the idol of my existence—it has assumed the character of a religion, for the guidance of my thoughts and actions, for fifteen years.*"

Video: Was Austin a Successful Empresario?

To introduce the activities, have learners watch the video, **Was Austin a Successful Empresario?** Share reactions after viewing.

Activity 1: Early Empresarios

In this activity, learners use the data on the **Early Empresarios table activity resource** to gather information. Preview the table data, including column headers and questions. Share responses when completed.

Answer Key

According to the data on the table:

- In which year were the most number of contracts granted? **1825**
- What were the reasons empresarios failed to complete their contracts? **unfulfilled, expired, gave up the contract, sold the contract**
- Green De Witt was contracted to settle 400 families, but only 166 were settled. What percentage of families is that? **$166/400 = 41.5\%$**
- Based on final contract status, who could be considered the most successful empresarios? **Stephen F. Austin, Martin de Leon (fulfilled their contracts)**

Activity 2: Analyzing Primary Resources

In this activity, learners analyze a primary source document, **Stephen F. Austin's 1829 letter to James Breedlove**, for information. In this letter, Austin outlined his journey as an empresario, including the difficulties he had to overcome, and explains how the role changed over the years and what benefits he expected to gain from his efforts. Preview the letter and address any challenges in reading the language of the original text. The text in this resource is only part of the full letter. The complete document can be accessed at the [Digital Austin Papers](#). Share responses when completed.



Answer Key

- Who besides Stephen F. Austin was commissioned to survey Mexican Texas land for settlement? **Baron de Bastrop**
- In addition to being the Empresario and Commissioner for the colony, what other duties was Austin assigned? **sole judicial officer, commandant of the militia, Commandant-General of the military department**
- How did Austin's U.S. friends react to his ambition of "laying a foundation" for settlement in Texas? **They didn't support it as they thought it was impracticable**
- How did Austin use the money from colonists who were able to pay him for land? **to buy land for those who couldn't afford it, defray expenses of the government, provide food and gifts to "Indians" to keep them friendly**
- What did Austin say were his reasons for not being "in a situation to write connectedly" in this letter? **recovering from sickness, mourning the death of his brother**

Activity 3: Stephen F. Austin: Successful Empresario?

In this activity, learners use the **journal activity resource** to reflect on Stephen F. Austin's role as an empresario in settling Mexican Texas in the early 19th century. Share responses when complete.

Activity 1 Resource: Early Empresarios

This table provides data on Stephen F. Austin and the other early empresarios of Mexican Texas. Use the data to answer the questions.

Empresario	Year of Contract Grant	Number of Contracted Families to Settle	Final Contract Status
Stephen F. Austin	1823	300 (297)	Fulfilled
Sterling Robertson	1825	800 (279)*	Unfulfilled
Green DeWitt	1825	400 (166)	Unfulfilled
Frost Thorn	1825	400 (0)	Expired
Martin De Leon	1825	41 (41)	Fulfilled
Stephen F. Austin	1825	close to 500 (500)	Fulfilled
John Purnell & Benjamin D. Lovell	1825	200 (0)	Gave up the contract
Arthur Wavell	1826	400 (0)	Expired
Joseph Vehlein	1826	300 (0)	Sold his contract
David G. Burnet	1826	300 (0)	Sold his contract

*This number is an estimate of the number of families contracted to join the colony by 1834. That number grew to an estimated 600 families by the end of 1836.

Activity 1 Resource: Early Empresarios pg2



Images: Stephen F. Austin (L), Wiki Creative Commons. Green DeWitt (R), public domain.

According to the data on the table:

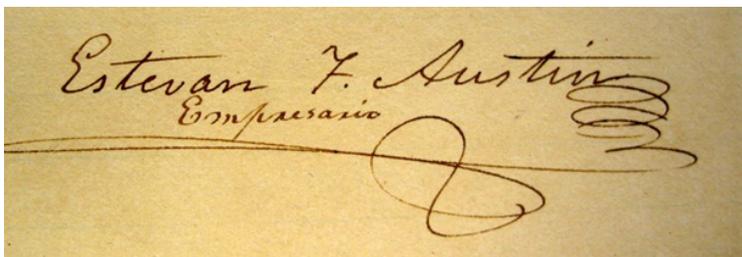
- ★ In which year were the most number of contracts granted?

- ★ What were the reasons empresarios failed to complete their contracts?

- ★ Green De Witt was contracted to settle 400 families, but only 166 were settled. What percentage of families is that?

- ★ Based on final contract status, who could be considered the most successful empresarios?

Activity 2 Resource: Laying a Foundation



Estevan F. Austin
Empresario

Read the excerpts of the primary source document, Stephen F. Austin's 1829 letter to James Breedlove, to answer the questions. The full text of the letter can be accessed at [Digital Austin Papers](#).

- ★ Who besides Stephen F. Austin was commissioned to survey Mexican Texas land for settlement?
- ★ In addition to being the Empresario and Commissioner for the colony, what other duties was Austin assigned?
- ★ How did Austin's U.S. friends react to his ambition of "laying a foundation" for settlement in Texas?
- ★ How did Austin use the money from colonists who were able to pay him for land?
- ★ What did Austin say were his reasons for not being "in a situation to write connectedly" in this letter?

Activity 3 Resource: Journal Reflection: Successful Empresario?

Think about the role of empresarios in settling families in Mexican Texas in the early 19th century. Stephen F. Austin is one of the most well-known empresarios, but was he a successful one? Write your reflections to the questions below based on your knowledge of the empresario system of early Texas.

★ **Should Stephen F. Austin be considered a successful empresario? Why or why not?**

★ **What could Austin have done differently in his role as empresario?**

★ **How would Texas be different today if Austin had declined to take over his father's grant?**



Primary Resource: Letter from Stephen F. Austin to James Breedlove, 1829

Austin's, Texas, Oct. 12, 1829

James W. Breedlove, —Sir:

The authority given to me was to introduce and settle 300 families from the United States or elsewhere, in certain limits of Texas. The Baron de Bastrop and myself were jointly appointed the Government Commissioners to survey the lands of the settlers and issue titles to them in due form in the name of the Government.

...

We were entitled as commissioners to receive fees or pay for our services, and the necessary office fees and charges for writing, translating and recording, and also the surveying fees, all of which were fixed by a regulation of the Government of Texas, and were, or ought to have been paid by the settlers; for the Government allowed us nothing for our services. I was therefore both Empresario and Commissioner to my first Colony.—Besides this, I was specially appointed by the Supreme Government of Mexico, the Civil Chief, the sole judicial officer, and the commandant of the militia of the new Colony, subject always to the orders of the Government of Texas, and the Commandant-General of the military department, but for these services I received nothing from the Government. These several appointments (for they were all separate and distinct the one from the other,) threw a vast burden of labor and responsibility and expense upon me individually,—An expense and labor which I was not bound by my contract as Empresario to bear.

...

My ambition was to be the means of laying a foundation for spreading an intelligent and an enterprising population over this fertile and hitherto unknown and wilderness country; perhaps, also, I had a little pride in wishing to succeed, for I undertook this enterprise in opposition to the advice of my friends in the United States, who nearly all pronounced it visionary and impracticable.

..

The colonization business is the last on earth that any man ought to undertake for the sole purpose of making money; and no Empresario will ever advance one step if no other motive than money influence him—for he will not undergo the labor and receive the abuse for all he can make—that [is] he will not advance legally...



And I have also succeeded in laying a permanent foundation for the settlement of Texas by an enterprising population, and the day is not far distant when it will become the richest and most powerful State of the Mexican Confederation. But I am poor I have not even the means of living with comfort and that decency which my situation would seem to require, unless I raise those means by a sacrifice of a part of my premium land so hardly earned, and that I will not do for it is my only stake for my old age. Will it not appear strange to you that although such is my real situation an opinion has gone abroad that I have made myself rich by what I received from the settlers or rather by selling land to them as the uninformed and ignorant have styled the fees which I was by law entitled to as Commissioner, and for surveying, etc, etc.

Strange as it may seem it is nevertheless a fact, the majority of the settlers were unable to pay anything, and must have left the country if the fees had been exacted from them promptly, and in order to keep all afloat I did exact prompt payment from those who were able to make it, and out of the money thus raised I paid the way of the poor who were unable to pay anything, and I also defrayed the expenses of the administration of the local Government, and was enabled to keep the Indians friendly by presents and feeding them until we get strong enough to whip them into subjection, and by this course of policy I have saved this settlement and brought it to what it now is, and have secured large landed estates to hundreds of poor men who otherwise would [not] or could not ever have got one foot of land.

... I shall come off badly, for I doubt very much whether I shall live to reap much advantage from my premium land, which as I before observed, is my only stake, and it is not free from embarrassments created solely for the benefit of this settlement.

I have just recovered from a dangerous spell of sickness, and also I have to mourn the recent death of an only and beloved brother, and, I am not in a situation to write connectedly on any subject; you must therefore overlook my style. I will be responsible for the facts which I have stated.

Stephen F. Austin