Texas Historical Commission

Forming a Colonial Government

Grade 4 & 7

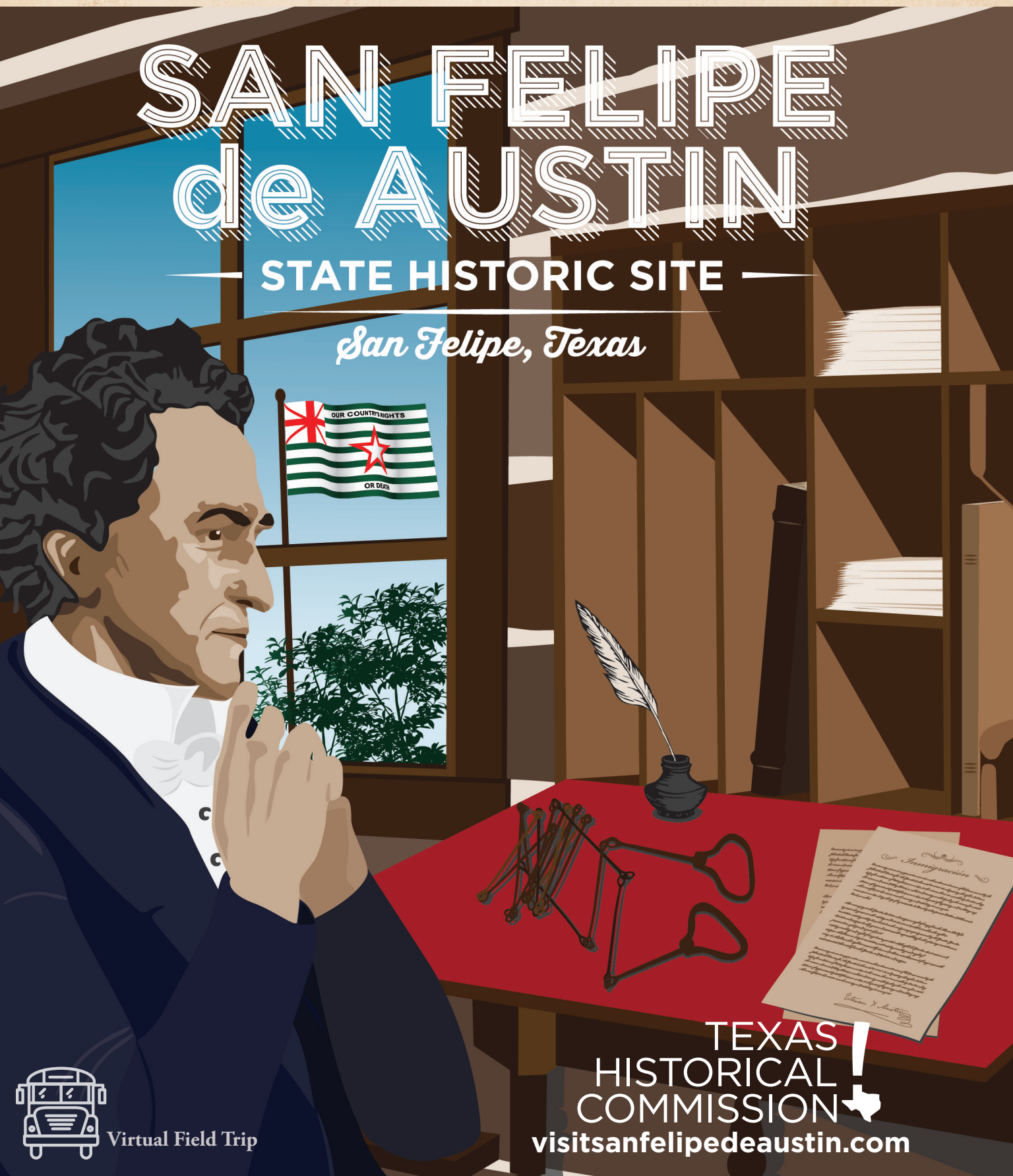

Image of Stephen F. Austin, Texas empresario. Wiki Creative Commons.

Forming a Colonial Government

Overview: A New Beginning for Texas

In Part 7 in the *Empresario* series from the Texas Historical Commission's **San Felipe de Austin** site, learners are introduced to the role of empresarios in forming colony governments in Mexican Texas during the early 19th century. Activities include analyzing fictional application letters from potential government members. Primary source documents from Stephen F. Austin and an introductory video are included.

Objectives

- Demonstrate understanding of the empresario system in 19th century Texas.
- Identify the qualities and skills best suited for roles in early Texas government.
- Analyze primary source documents.
- Reflect on the empresario experience.

Social Studies TEKS

4th Grade: 4.15, 4.21 B, 4.23
7th Grade: 7.1 B, 7.2 D E, 7.17 A, 7.23

Resources

- Video: Forming a Colonial Government (THC YouTube) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c5VxdhkqSMk&feature=youtu.be
- Activity 1: Forming a Government activity resources
- Activity 2: Selecting a Government activity resource
- Activity 3: Journal Reflection activity resource
- Primary Source: Letter from Jose Antonio Saucedo to colonists, 1824
- Primary Source: Stephen F. Austin letter to J.H. Bell, 1828

Vocabulary

alcalde (all KAHL day) noun: a mayor who also acts as a judge during legal disputes

alguazil (AL gwah zeel) noun: a sheriff who enforces the law and serves an alcalde

ayuntamiento (ah yoon tah me EHN toh) noun: a city or town council

constable (KAHN stuh bull) noun: a person who issues warrants issued by an alcalde

constitution (kahn stih TOO shun) noun: a document that outlines the laws of a country, state, or organization

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

Historical Context

In 1821, Mexico declared its independence from Spain and began to form a government and write a constitution. While Stephen F. Austin received permission to continue his father's empresario contract in 1823, Mexico did not have a completed constitution until 1824, and the state of Coahuila y Tejas did not finish their constitution until 1827. As a result, empresarios in early Mexican Texas had no written laws regarding the formation of colony governments.

In settling Mexican Texas, empresarios had a complicated role. They were required to fulfill the conditions of their contract by bringing a certain number of settler families into an area. In addition, they were instrumental in leading local governments. In some cases, the empresario's permission was required before the local government could take any action.

Over time, the empresarios received more specific directions on how to form those governments. Each colony was required to have a capital which served as an administrative center. Colonies were divided into districts, each of which was led by an alcalde. By the end of the Mexican Texas era in the 19th century, Stephen F. Austin's colony was comprised of seven districts.

If a colony's population was large enough, it was required to form an ayuntamiento, or a town council. The ayuntamiento was empowered to improve the public roads in and around towns, to promote the establishment of hospitals and schools, to organize boards of health, and other civic duties. As the population grew, the government added more officials, including positions similar to notaries, aldermen, sheriffs, census takers, and government attorneys.

Activity 1: Forming a Government

To understand how early governments were shaped by Texas empresarios, have learners read the primary source letter transcriptions on the **activity resource worksheets**. First read Jose **Antonio Saucedo's 1824 letter** to colonists outlining the boundaries of the new colony and Stephen F. Austin's authority as empresario of the colony. Then read **Stephen F. Austin's letter to J. H. Bell** imploring him to accept a position on the ayuntamiento. Preview both letters as well as the comprehension questions. Note: The language of the text of both letters is the original. Assisting learners in understanding the meaning of the text may be helpful and/or necessary. Share question responses when completed.

Answer Key for Jose Antonio Saucedo letter:

- What duties did Stephen F. Austin have as "political chief and judge" in the colony? **administer justice, preserve good order, command the militia**
- How many alcaldes (Alcaldas) was Austin going to have to help him serve the public? **as many as were necessary**

Answer Key for Stephen F. Austin letter:

- Why does Stephen F. Austin tell Mr. Bell that he would be a valuable candidate for joining the colony's ayuntamiento? **Mr. Bell is a good man and a good businessman.**
- Why does Austin say he's waiting to leave the colony to travel to the United States to bring more families to the settlement? **He wants to be sure there's a well-organized government before he leaves.**

Activity 2: Selecting a Government

In this activity, learners will consider what qualities and skills would make someone a good selection for a position in early Mexican Texas government. Empresarios couldn't call elections to fill government positions, but had to appoint colonists who petitioned for the positions and were willing to serve.

In this activity using the **Selecting a Government activity resources**, learners read the fictional petitions from interested colonists who are vying for various positions and select the citizens most qualified to serve. The positions are alcalde, alguazil, constable, and three ayuntamiento members. Review the vocabulary to remind learners of the responsibilities of each position. Preview the petitions and the selection chart. Share responses and reasons for selections when completed.

Selection Answer Key (based on qualifications):

- Alcalde: William Jamestown
- Alguazil: Charles McAvery
- Constable: Enrique Garza
- Ayuntamiento members: Murphy Hill, Godwin Mueller, Arthur Rivers

Non-selection Answer Key:

- Elliot Patton: can't read or write
- Francis McMahon: primary motivation appears to be making money rather than serving
- Dr. Balthazar: primary motivation appears to be to reduce competition from other doctors
- Federico McNally: business is his primary priority, ayuntamiento would be secondary
- Eugene Daniels: disqualified because he doesn't live in the colony
- Tommy Hubbard: gun skill is his only qualification

Activity 3: Journal Reflection

Using the **journal reflection activity resource**, learners will write in response to the qualities they feel are most important for government service in early Texas and now.

Activity 1 Resource: Jose Antonio Saucedo Letter, 1824

Read this transcription of a letter Jose Antonio Saucedo wrote to colonists in 1824. He explained the boundaries of Stephen F. Austin's colony and described what authority Austin had as empresario. **Write answers to the questions based on your reading.**

Jose Antonio Saucedo Political Chief of the Province of Texas,

the Colony formed by its Founder, Stephen F. Austin on the Rivers Colorado and Brasos in this Province for the present, and until the judicial district of 5 leagues square are established as the law directs shall form one district, the limits of which shall be as follows, "From the Sea shore to the road running from San Antonio de Bexar to Nacogdoches and on the west as far as la Baca Creek and on the East as far as the Creek called Choclate Bayou including the creeks and waters of the Colorado and Brazos in which district said Austin shall have a general command and Superintendance as political Chief and Judge to administer justice preserve good order and command the Militia in conformity to the powers granted to him by the Superior Government which he is to exercise for the present and untll the "Ayuntamiento" of the Colony are organized according to the laws of the Country in the discharge of which duties he will he aided by the number of Alcaldas that may be deemed necessary for the better Accomodation of the publick.

San Felipe de Austin 20th of May 1824 4, 3

Jose Antonio Saucedo Gefe Polo.

★ What duties did Stephen F. Austin have as "political chief and judge" in the colony?

★ How many alcaldes (Alcaldas) was Austin going to have to help him serve the public?

Activity 1 Resource: Stephen F. Austin Letter, 1828 pg.1

Read this transcription of a letter from Stephen F. Austin to J. H. Bell urging him to become a member of his colony's ayuntamiento. **Write answers to the questions based on your reading.**

Jany. 21. 1828

Dr sir,

I recd, your letter stating that you wish to decline serving as one of the Ayuntamiento, and feel somewhat discouraged at your determination—As you personal friend, I should say you did right, but as a friend of this colony, I must say you are doing wrong—It is very important to get good men, and men of business in the Ayúntamto. I feel no individual interest on the subject and as a mere individual I am indifferent who are elected—but in all matters connected with the welfare of this colony I cannot feel or think indifferently—As for myself I shall devote my whole time and attention to the land business and have some idea of taking a trip into the United States in order to try and bring out a large number of families in a body, but I do not wish to leave the colony again, even for a moment, untill I see the local government well organised, and this cannot be done without putting good men in office

I am getting very tired and worn down with the business and were it not my duty to the settlers who are here never to abandon them, I should give up my last contract with the Govt for the settling of the new Colony, and either settle myself down on a Stock farm, or seek some other country where I might hope to find harmony but it is my duty to persevere and for that reason, and that alone, I will go on—

you are wrong to decline serving for I think you can do an important service to the colony as a member of the Ayuntamto but you have a right to do as you please, tho if you are elected the law compels you to serve—

I have heard of no opposition to Ingram and I think he will be unanimously elected I am sorry to say that Kinny has also declined serving, tho, he is excusable for his business I expect will compell him to devote all his time to his private affairs—I have not thoroughly known Kinny untill last winter he is a usefull and valuable man and I wish it was in my power to aid him in his pecuniary difficulties—

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Activity 1 Resource: Stephen F. Austin Letter, 1828 pg.2

My friend we must all be united and harmonious—without this the colony never can flourish—-poor Pettus is broken up—he has been imprudent in the highest degree—and has abused me and every one else—if I had the means of aiding him I would freely do so— he is in misfortune—-let that alone be remembered and all his abuses forgotten—I send you a valuable neighbor (I hope) in Mr. Robison, I have nearly given him a small place merely because I think him a good man

Think better of the matter and say you will serve- My respects to Mrs Bell I can let you have some fig roots next year if the slips I brought from Bexar grow

S F Austin

★ Why does Stephen F. Austin tell Mr. Bell that he would be a valuable candidate for joining the colony's ayuntamiento?

★ Why does Austin say he's waiting to leave the colony to travel to the United States to bring more families to the settlement?

Activity 2 Resource: Selecting a Government: Petitions

You are an empresario and must appoint colonists to fill these positions in your government: Read these fictional petitions and decide which colonists are the best candidates for each one. Fill in the Selecting a Government Roster when you have decided. You must fill these positions:

Alcalde: leads the government and serves as a judge if needed (like a mayor and judge)

Alguazil: enforces the laws and orders of the Alcalde (like a sheriff or police officer)

Constable: delivers Alcalde's court summons to colonists and explains procedures (like a constable)

Ayuntamiento members (3): directs the development and organization of a town (like city or town council members)

Empresario,
I, Enrique Garza very much wish to serve in the government you are establishing in this colony. Before I joined this colony, I served as a constable in Zacatecas, Mexico and I served well. I am well skilled in finding the people who had been summoned to court and in informing them of their legal rights. I am confident that I will be able to serve in this role faithfully once again.

We are on the frontiers where little is known of the laws of this new Republic. I wish to extend my hand to help keep order in this colony.

– Enrique Garza

With warm regards,
I would like to receive the position in your colony's government. I should say that I am having a friend of mine write this letter to you as I do not know how to write myself. Back in my home of Tennessee I argued against the law numerous times. I have argued successfully against the laws of Tennessee so many times that I am a perfect candidate to join this new government. I wish to serve as the alcalde, constable, or as the alguazil.

One another note, will I be receiving many letters while serving in the government? I can't read. Just as my friend is writing this letter because I do not know how to write.

– Elliot Patton

Good day,
I have heard you are looking to fill the role of an alcalde and I would like to be considered for this position. I was a judge in my home state of Massachusetts before I came to Texas. I was noted for having an even hand when giving my judgements. While we don't know the laws of Mexico at this time, I am ready to adopt them once they have been delivered to us. Good health to you. **– William Jamestown**

Hello,
I want to take the position of the alcalde in this colony. Like everyone else in this colony, I am not familiar with Mexican law. As those laws haven't been written yet, but I have heard that the alcalde will be able to impose fines on law breakers. One question I have for you is how much of the fine does the alcalde get to keep. I could use a new way to bring in some money and I am sure you could too. I would be willing to give you some of the fines that are paid to me. **– Francis McMahon**

Warm greetings,
I would like to apply for the position on the ayuntamiento. I have not held a position like this before and I am eager to contribute to the development of this a country in any way I can. **– Murphy Hill**

Hello,
I am interested in joining the ayuntamiento that is being formed. I am aware that one of the tasks of the ayuntamiento is to issue permits to qualified doctors to practice their trade in the colony. I have been a doctor for decades now and I know the difference between good doctors and bad doctors. In short, I am the best doctor and there is no need for any more doctors. By preventing any other doctors from coming to this area I will also be able to secure my family a wealthy future.

-- **Dr. Balthazar**

Greetings,
I am writing to you today to request a position on the ayuntamiento. I was a member of town councils in my home country of Westphalia and I am familiar with what will be expected of them.

– **Godwin Mueller**

Kind regards,
I am eager for the ability to join the government of the colony in the position of alguazil. I haven't held a position of this type before, but I have a good and quick aim should the need arise.

– **Tommy Hubbard**

Hello,
I would like to join the ayuntamiento, but I have a few questions. My time is extremely valuable, and I would like to know how much time I would have to dedicate to this position. I would be able to attend a meeting for a few days every two to three months. I would like to assist the government but not at the expense of my farm and other businesses. I routinely travel to New Orleans and I will not be able to delay these trips for any meetings of the ayuntamiento.

– Federico McNally

Hola,
I would like to be considered for a position in your colonial government. Before joining this colony, I served as a sheriff in Virginia for 5 years where I apprehended many a criminal for the local courts and judges. I have heard that the alguazil has a job that is like that of a sheriff. While it is not my favorite line of work I will gladly serve again.

I foresee the Spanish language will be the way we will be required to communicate with the Mexican Government. So I have already begun learning how to read, write and to speak the language.

– Charles McAvery

Salutations,
My name is Arthur Rivers and I would like to join the ayuntamiento in this colony. I am a resident of the town the ayuntamiento will be representing and I wish to help guide its growth. In being a town resident, I will be able to attend all the meetings of the ayuntamiento. I would also be able to hear any concerns of the colonists even when the other members of the ayuntamiento are not in town. I have not been a member of such an organization before, but I wish to serve my new homeland as best as I can. – **Arthur Rivers**

Hello,
I would be the perfect candidate to become a constable in your colonial government as I had been a constable for San Antonio back when the Spanish were rulers of Mexico. I am willing to travel back and forth to your colony from my home around San Antonio. Once I hear I am needed I will be quick to arrive in your colony. I look forward to hearing from you. – **Eugene Daniels**

Activity 2 Resource: Selecting a Government: Roster

Now that you have read all the petitions from colonists to fill positions in your government, complete the roster with the names of your selections and the reasons for your choices.

UPPER BRAZOS DISTRICT

Position	Person	Reasons Selected for Position
Alcalde		
Alguazil		
Constable		
Ayuntamiento 1		
Ayuntamiento 2		
Ayuntamiento 3		

Activity 3 Resource: Journal Reflection

Think about the role an empresario has in appointing members of a new settlement government. Write about what you believe are the basic skills and the best qualities a person should have to lead in any government. You may write about this from the viewpoint of early 19th century Texas, or today's Texas.