

## **Don Martín de León**

**1771-1834**

### **I. Context**

Texas in the early 1800's was largely a vast unsettled wilderness controlled by Nueva España, an immense territory owned by Spain that included modern Mexico and a large part of the southwestern United States. In 1821, Nueva España achieved independence from Spain and first became the Mexican Empire, a monarchy. Later, in 1824 it became the United Mexican States, a federal republic with its own Constitution. After independence, Mexico soon felt the need to protect its Texas territory, which was adjacent to the United States' Louisiana Purchase Territory, from possible American annexation. The young country was left with little money but had plenty of unclaimed land so it utilized the empresario system as a way to settle and populate the province with loyal and honorable citizens.

Stephen F. Austin was the first to receive an empresarios grant from Mexico on April 14, 1823, largely because it was a ratification of a prior contract between his father, Moses Austin, and the Spanish authorities. Seeing his opportunity, Don Martín de León applied on April 8, 1824, to the Provincial Delegation of San Fernando de Bexar (in San Antonio) for an empresarios grant. Don Martín received the second empresarios grant which helped to carve the central Texas Gulf Coast out of the wilderness and start it towards civilization.

### **II. Overview**

Don Martín de León was born in Cruillas<sup>13</sup>, Nuevo Santander (modern day Tamaulipas), Nueva España (modern day Mexico) in 1771<sup>5&6</sup>. His parents, Bernardo de León and Maria

Antonia Tomasa Galvan, were of Spanish descent and had come with their respective families to Nuevo Santander with or shortly following the original settlers of the province led by Don José de Escandon beginning in 1748<sup>9</sup>. They were both members of the prominent Spanish families that settled Coahuila & Nuevo Leon almost two hundred years earlier<sup>10,11,12</sup>. In 1766 Captain Joaquin Galvan, Don Martín's uncle, founded the Villa of Cruillas for Don Jose Escandon<sup>8</sup>. Many Galvan family members, including Martín's parents who had lived in Burgos previously, came to join the new settlement<sup>8&9</sup>. As a young man, Don Martín saw his Tio Joaquin build the settlement of Cruillas from nothing and perhaps that is what inspired him to later found his own colony in the wilderness.

As a young man Don Martín worked as a muleteer<sup>1</sup>, carrying cargo from the nearby mines at San Nicolas to distant places such as Monterrey and possibly even San Fernando de Bexar (San Antonio) in Texas. About 1790, at about the age of 19, he joined the military regiment, the Fieles de Burgos (Faithful of Burgos), and reached the rank of Captain<sup>1</sup>. About 1795, Don Martín de León married Doña Patricia de la Garza of Soto la Marina, also in modern day Tamaulipas, Mexico<sup>7</sup>. Don Martín had traveled throughout Texas during his muleteer and military careers. Compared to his homeland to the southwest, valuable mineral deposits such as gold and silver were virtually non-existent but the grass was abundant and so were the wild herds of horses and cattle.

Don Martín de León and his family moved to Texas sometime between 1798 and 1801 and originally established his Rancho Santa Margarita near present day San Patricio on the Texas side of the Nueces River, which was then the boundary of Texas<sup>4</sup>. In both 1807 and 1809, Don Martín petitioned the Spanish government for an empresarial grant, but was denied<sup>2</sup>.

Don Martín and his children saw a great deal of political upheaval during their lives. In 1810 the War for Independence from Spain began and Texas found itself right in the middle of it. In 1813, Don Martín and his family had to leave the Nueces and return to their family in Soto La Marina for awhile to protect their young children which now included Fernando, Candelaria, Silvestre, Guadalupe, Felix, Agapito, Maria de Jesus, and baby Refugia. After the rebels were defeated at the Battle of Medina in August 1814, Don Martín returned to Texas to settle closer to the Presidio La Bahia at Goliad and to the friends they had earlier made in the area, the Aldrete Family. This time Don Martín set up a brush-fenced pasture of several leagues between the Aransas River and Chiltipin Creek for capturing the wild mustangs<sup>2</sup>. Don Martín's herds were growing rapidly, providing a solid income to support the family. Revolutionaries began to appear again, but this time in Nuevo Santander so Don Martín kept the family safe on the ranch in Texas.

Don Martín de León, applied again on April 8, 1824, to the Provincial Delegation of San Fernando de Bexar (in San Antonio) for a empresarios grant<sup>13</sup>. In his petition, Don Martín stated the intention to establish peaceful relations, to settle the uncultivated and uninhabited wilds of Texas, and to bring knowledge of the divinity of the Lord our God into these remote deserts of North America. He pledged that his efforts will facilitate trade and commerce and serve as a point of defense<sup>13</sup>. His petition was approved on April 13, 1824, just 5 days later. Don Martín recruited colonists, purchased supplies and arranged transportation using his own funds (Doña Patricia contributed her \$9,800 dowry to the enterprise)<sup>2</sup>. Don Martín moved to the colony with his original settlers shortly after receiving his grant. The grass here, 5 to 6 feet high as far as the eye could see, was even better than at the Nueces due to more annual rainfall, and could support immense herds of livestock. The trees along the rivers were larger, more plentiful and would

provide timber for construction. The city was laid out. Guadalupe Victoria was placed on a high knoll just outside the floodplain but with good access to the vital waters of the Guadalupe.

As empresario at the colony, Don Martín also supervised the creation of basic social infrastructure such as roads, schools, sawmills, the establishment of *Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe* Catholic Church in 1824 (which became Saint Mary's Church, the second oldest Catholic Parish in Texas), and established the Empresarial Courier Service. He provided for the defense, granted land to settlers, enforced the laws of Mexico, and represented the colonists to the distant government of Mexico<sup>1</sup>. Everyone contributed to the construction of the community buildings<sup>2</sup>.

Though his original empresarial grant did not include specific boundaries, they were later fixed as Mission Valley on the north, Coletto Creek and the Guadalupe River on the west, the Lavaca River on the east, and a line 10 leagues (26.8 miles) from the Gulf shore on the south<sup>1</sup>. In 1829, his colony was expanded to the north and in 1831 also to the south to Matagorda and Espiritu Santo Bays which included much of modern Calhoun County<sup>1</sup>.

In addition to the colonists from Mexican states to the southwest, De León soon found several illegal Anglo settlers arriving<sup>15</sup> in his Colony. He accepted them as members of his colony, though the alcalde of La Bahia complained to officials in Saltillo. Saltillo soon confirmed de León's position on the matter. De León's Colony included people from the U.S., Canada, Ireland, France, and Germany. These people included John Linn, John Wright, and Joseph Ware, who contributed greatly to the success of the colony<sup>2</sup>. Qualifying settlers were entitled to a league (4428 acres) and labor (177 acres) of land, or about 4605 acres. Other settlers from Mexico began to arrive and by March of 1826, Don Martín had fulfilled his first

contract<sup>2</sup>. His obligations met, the empresario was paid in land. Don Martín was entitled to 5 leagues and 5 labors (23,028 acres) of good land. His land grant, which he named Rancho El Sacramento, was actually 25,321 acres of land<sup>18</sup> as it included some marshland on the edge of the bay that was considered unusable and was customarily not counted toward the total allotment.

One of the more important accomplishments of the de León Colony was the establishment of a port just north of the present-day city of Port Lavaca on Lavaca Bay which provided the de León Colony crucial access for trade and supplies by sea to the other port cities in Mexico and the United States. Ships began to bring supplies and colonists bound for Victoria by docking in northwestern Lavaca Bay as early as 1829, if not earlier<sup>15</sup>. However, when Don Martín secured the right to settle the coastal leagues in 1831, a thriving town quickly developed around a core of warehouses owned by John Linn. Originally called New Port, it came to be known as Linnville in homage to Mr. Linn's efforts. It grew to include as many as 200 people just before it was destroyed in the Great Comanche Raid of 1840<sup>17</sup>. The settlement of the coastal leagues of modern Calhoun County and particularly this early port of Linnville by the de León Colony established Matagorda Bay as a vital shipping link for later generations of settlers who desired to immigrate to Texas and the American West through the port cities of Indianola and Lavaca (Port Lavaca).

In 1834, Don Martin de León died in a cholera epidemic that had started the previous year in Europe, and then swept into the U.S., and was then carried into Texas by some of James Power's Irish colonists who became infected while passing through New Orleans<sup>2</sup>.

### **III. Significance**

The Martín de León Colony, like the Austin Colony, was instrumental in the colonization of Texas. Don Martín was the only true Tejano empresario and his colony was second only to that of Stephen F. Austin's in terms of success. To quote Austin, *"If he who, by conquest, wins an empire and receives the world's applause, how much more is due to those who, by unceasing toil, lay in the wilderness the foundation for an infant colony, and build thereon a vigorous and happy state..."*.

The satellite village in modern Calhoun County, Linnville, provided a vital link to civilization and brought many colonists, supplies, and news to Don Martín de León's Colony, helping to set up Victoria and the surrounding areas for continued growth. The early Tejano culture that arrived with Don Martín stressed the importance of family, community, and God; included things we take for granted today such as the right of women to own property (which did not exist in Anglo law) and much of our modern local government system<sup>14</sup>. It also formed the roots of many things that symbolize Texas today such as ranching, rodeos, cowboys, and of course Mexican food.

The site of the proposed marker at Six Mile Park in Calhoun County is located approximately at the 10 league limit of settlement which marks the edge of the original de León Colony and falls within the final boundaries of the de León Colony which included most of western Calhoun County. Looking southeast along the Lavaca Bay shore, the former site of Linnville is visible two miles distant. Looking 3/4 of a mile northeast across the bay, the prominent bluff now called Keeran Point, formerly the south end of Don Martín de León's Rancho El Sacramento, is visible standing proudly against the never ceasing waves of Lavaca Bay. Likewise, the descendants of Don Martín de León and his colonists and the way of life they brought to the Texas wilderness are still evidenced throughout Calhoun County today.

#### IV. Documentation

- <sup>1</sup> Hammett, A.B.J. *The Empresario*. Waco, Texas: Texian Press, 1973.
- <sup>2</sup> Crimm, Ana Carolina Castillo. *De León, A Tejano Family History*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2003
- <sup>3</sup> Grimes, Roy, ed. *300 Years in Victoria County*. Austin: Nortex Press, 1985
- <sup>4</sup> *Petition of Don Martín DeLeon to the King of Spain for a land grant on the Nueces River, 1801*. The Martín de León Collection, Victoria Public Library, Victoria, Texas.
- <sup>5</sup> *Census of the Santa Margarita Ranch, 1811*.
- <sup>6</sup> *Census of 1810 & 1811 of the La Bahia District of Nuevo Santander*.
- <sup>7</sup> Brown, John Henry. *History of Texas from 1685 to 1892*. St. Louis: L. E. Daniell, 1892.
- <sup>8</sup> Jones, Irma Garza Cantu & Maria de la Garza Dellinger. *Baptisms of Our Lady of Monserrat Catholic Church 1767-1799, Located in Cruillas, Tamaulipas, Mexico*. San Antonio: Los Bexarenos Genealogical Society, 2001
- <sup>9</sup> Garmendia Leal, Guillermo. *Fundadores de Tamaulipas 1748-1770, Tomo I*. Monterrey: Garmendia, 1991.
- <sup>10</sup> Garmendia Leal, Guillermo. *Diego de Montemayor, Sus Descendientes*. Monterrey: Garmendia, 1996.
- <sup>11</sup> Duaine, Laurence A. *With All Arms, A Study of A Kindred Group*. 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed. Austin: Nortex Press, 2004.
- <sup>12</sup> Family Search.org. *Database of Catholic Church Records of Mexico*. <<http://www.familysearch.org>>
- <sup>13</sup> *Petition of Don Martín DeLeon to the Provincial Delegation of Bexar*, April 8, 1824.
- <sup>14</sup> Andres Tijerina. *Tejano Origins*, <<http://www.tamu.edu/faculty/ccbn/dewitt/tejanoorigins>> (Sons of DeWitt Colony Texas), Provided to site courtesy of Randall Tarin from the files of Alamo de Parras from a May 4, 1998 article.
- <sup>15</sup> Linn, John J. *Reminiscences of Fifty Years in Texas*. Austin: State House Press, 1986.
- <sup>16</sup> Smithwick, Noah. *The Evolution of a State or Recollections of Old Texas Days*, Austin: University of Texas Press, 1900.
- <sup>17</sup> Texas State Historical Association. *Linnville, Tx (Calhoun County)*. <<http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/hvl58>>
- <sup>18</sup> Partition Deed of the John N. Keeran Estate, Victoria County Deed Records.