

SAN FELIPE DE AUSTIN

state historic site

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Friends of San Felipe de Austin

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TEXAS HISTORICAL COMMISSION
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VISITORS GUIDE

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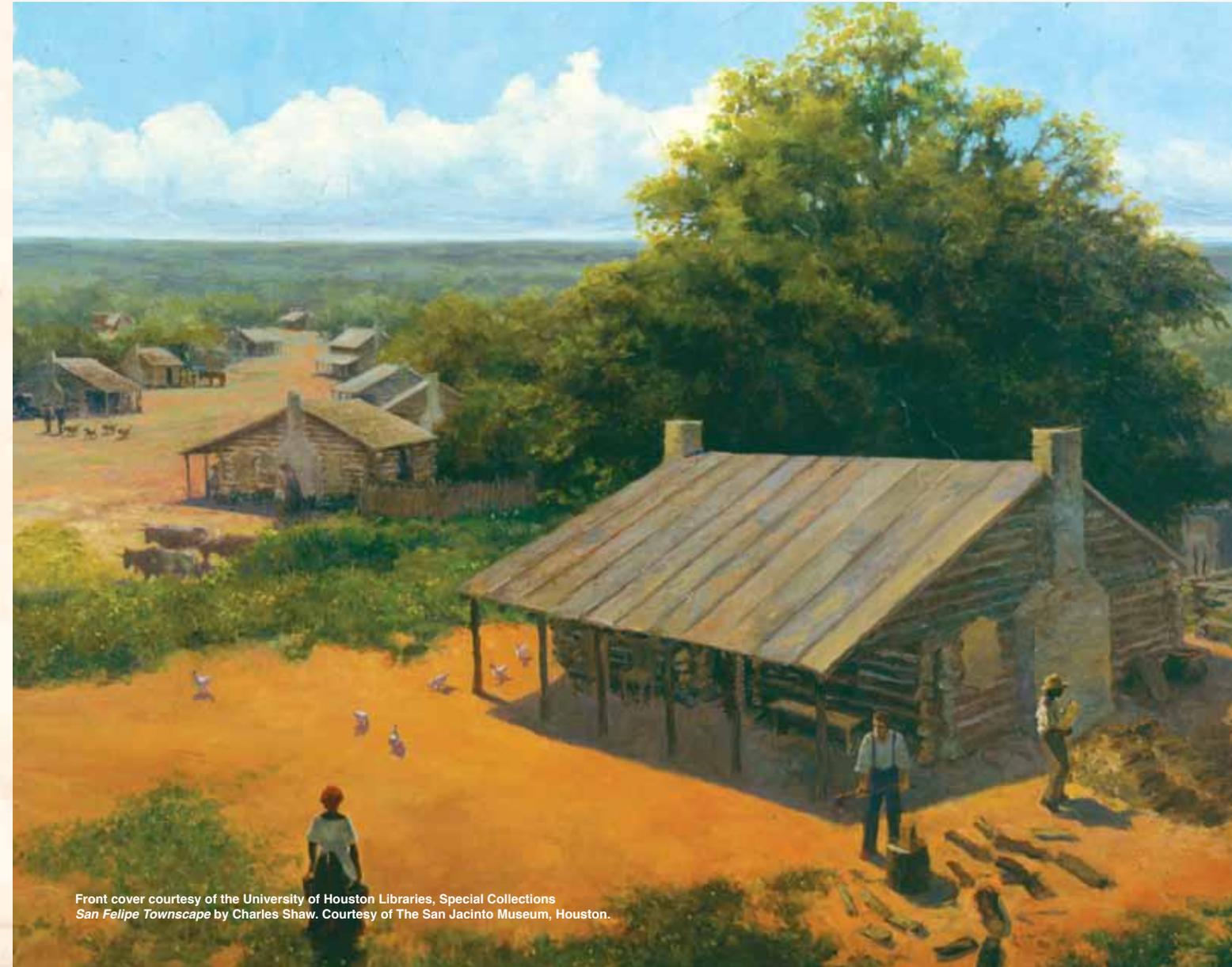


*S. F. Austin
Dec 1. 23. 1836*

TEXAS HISTORICAL COMMISSION

Welcome to San Felipe de Austin State Historic Site, which honors the spirit of early Texas pioneers. Founded in 1823, the town served as the capital of Stephen F. Austin's colony. From here, Austin managed the affairs of emigrant Americans moving to Mexican Texas under his contracts as an *empresario*, or land agent. Called the "Father of Texas,"

Austin oversaw the transfer of nearly six million acres of public land to private ownership during the colonial era. Here on a bluff near the Brazos River you can walk in the footsteps of hardscrabble colonists who carved out a better life for themselves and who sacrificed so much in support of an independent Texas.



Front cover courtesy of the University of Houston Libraries, Special Collections
San Felipe Townscape by Charles Shaw. Courtesy of The San Jacinto Museum, Houston.



San Felipe town plat and signature, far right, courtesy of the Texas General Land Office

STEPHEN F. AUSTIN'S COLONIAL CAPITAL

In 1821, Moses Austin received one of the first permits from the Spanish government to settle 300 families in Texas, but he died before he could realize his plans. His son, Stephen Fuller Austin, was acknowledged as his father's successor, but later that year Mexico won its independence from Spain. Austin had to travel to Mexico City in 1822 to secure his rights as an empresario from the new Mexican government. Austin quickly found willing colonists, and by the end of the summer of 1824 most of the 300 families had arrived in Texas. Their lands were along the rich bottomlands of the Brazos, Colorado, and San Bernard rivers, extending from present-day Navasota and La Grange to the Gulf of Mexico. According to the colonization agreement, each farming family received 177 acres and each ranching family about 4,428 acres with river frontage.

Austin established San Felipe de Austin as his capital with town lots and four public squares: Commerce, Constitution, Military, and *Campo Santo* (cemetery). Most of the homes and businesses were built near the commercial square. As the capital of the first established colony in Mexican Texas, San Felipe served as a political center for all empresarios and became a gathering place for colonial leaders and the provisional capital of revolutionary Texas. San Felipe was the only place where Austin ever owned a home.

Confluence of Cultures

San Felipe was likely one of the most culturally diverse communities in Texas during the colonial era. Diversity of language and ethnicity added to an already intriguing mix of residents and visitors in the town. American backwoodsmen and political elites, enslaved and free people of African ancestry, informal trading parties of area Indian tribes as well as official intertribal delegations, Tejano herdsmen and Mexican governmental leaders, and a self-proclaimed Dutch nobleman known as Baron de Bastrop all interacted along the streets of San Felipe de Austin. A variety of merchants came to the town to sell their wares, including tavern and innkeepers and even billiard hall operators. Freed African American Celia Allen managed a bake oven where



Above: *The Reading of the Texas Declaration of Independence*, by Charles Berkeley Normann, 1936, oil on canvas

Courtesy of the Star of the Republic Museum, Collection of the Joe Fultz estate, Navasota, Texas

she sold bread. William B. Travis was a town resident before his death at the Alamo, and he sent his famous "Victory or Death" letter from the Alamo to San Felipe. Stephen F. Austin reflected his commitment to his new cultural homeland by signing official documents with the Spanish variant of his name—Estevan.



Texas Independence

The town emerged as the *de facto* capital of all Mexican colonies when it hosted the delegate conventions of 1832 and 1833 with participants voicing a goal of Texas as a Mexican state, separate from Coahuila y Tejas. These conventions and the Consultation of 1835 began to define a common political identity for the immigrant colonists—at times joined by the Tejano residents of Goliad and San Antonio—that ultimately would propel them toward armed rebellion against the Mexican government to secure independence. In early 1836, the provisional government moved to Washington-on-the-Brazos where the Declaration of Independence was adopted.

The war with Mexico ended badly for San Felipe de Austin when the town was burned by its residents during the evacuation known as the "Runaway Scrape." Following the fall of the Alamo, Mexican General Santa Anna and his advance forces briefly occupied the ruins of the town prior to their defeat at the Battle of San Jacinto. Over time, the town was resettled simply as San Felipe. Evidence of the historic township is visible in the street names and in the remnants of the original town squares—most recognizable is *Campo Santo*, the cemetery.

The Colonial Press

A printing press was essential for frontier communities as a way to communicate important news and also to lend a sense of permanence. For a government town, a press was vital to generate necessary forms and records. The *Texas Gazette*, at times renamed

the *Mexican Citizen*, operated in San Felipe from 1829 to 1832 as one of the earliest Texas newspapers. The first book published in Texas, written by Stephen F. Austin, was printed by the Gazette press in 1829. In 1835, the *Telegraph and Texas Register* began operating under the guidance of Gail Borden, Jr. and soon became the unofficial voice of the Texas revolution movement. It also printed many other important Texas documents, including the Declaration of Independence. The final issue was being printed in Harrisburg (modern Houston) when the press was captured by Santa Anna's men just a week before the Battle of San Jacinto.



This 1928 obelisk commemorates the site of Austin's original home and land office.