A Letter on Texas Annexation

Overview: Building a New Nation
When Texas became an independent republic in 1836, one of the few European countries to recognize that new status was France. Alphonse Isidoré Dubois de Saligny was appointed to serve in Austin as France’s charge d’affaires, the country’s diplomatic representative in Texas. A few years later, Texas was in the middle of a conflict over annexation to the United States. In this lesson, learners analyze primary source translated excerpts from a letter de Saligny wrote in 1844 to French Foreign Minister Francois Guizot describing his conversation with Texas President Sam Houston regarding the issues of Texas’ annexation.

Objectives
- Demonstrate understanding of the political dynamics of Texas’ annexation to the United States.
- Analyze a primary source document transcript for information.

Social Studies TEKS
7th Grade: 7.1B, 7.4B

Resources
- Activity: A Letter from Dubois to Guizot and worksheets
- Primary Source: Full letter text from Dubois to Guizot
- Resource: French Legation State Historic Site information
Vocabulary

ascertain (ah ser TAYN) verb: to find something out; to make sure of something

chargé d’affaires (SHAR zhay dah fehr) noun: a diplomatic official who temporarily takes the place of an ambassador

circumspect (SER kuhm spekt) adjective: cautious; careful

enjoin (ehn JOYN) verb: to tell or urge someone to do something

primary source (PRY meh ree sorss) noun: an immediate, first-hand account of an event, created by a person who was involved in the event

Historical Context

In 1839, Alphonse Isidoré Dubois de Saligny was appointed as chargé d’affaires to the Republic of Texas. Earlier that year, he had been sent to Texas to determine whether the newly independent territory should be recognized by France as an independent nation. Dubois’ favorable report on the viability of the territory’s economic potential and its ability to retain its independence led to France’s official recognition and the signing of a treaty, which gave Texas a favorable trade status with France.

As the diplomatic representative of France, Dubois’s goals were to promote commerce, French cultural habits, protect French residents, and, most importantly, prevent Texas’ annexation to the United States. During his appointment, he met with politicians such as the president of Texas, Sam Houston, to discuss political events. He later relayed those conversations to the French government through a series of letters.

One of Dubois’ correspondents in the government was François Guizot, France’s Minister of Foreign Affairs from 1840-1847. Guizot successfully repaired diplomatic relations with Britain while he was in office. In 1847, Guizot became the 17th prime minister of France, a position he held until the 1848 revolution toppled the government of King Louis Philippe I.
Activity 1: A Letter from Dubois to Guizot

In this activity, learners analyze transcribed excerpts of an 1844 letter from Dubois to French Foreign Minister Guizot. In this letter, Dubois relates conversations he had with President of Texas Sam Houston regarding the potential annexation of Texas. Neither Houston nor Dubois wanted that annexation to move forward.

Preview the primary source letter excerpts and comprehension questions. The language of the letter text is the original, translated from French. Assisting learners in understanding the meaning of the text may be helpful and/or necessary. Discuss any challenges in dealing with transcriptions of primary source materials.

Answer Key:

1. Is the French government for or against the U.S. annexation of Texas? **against**

2. According to Dubois, what European country was the first to recognize Texas’ independence? **France**

3. What treatment from Texas does Dubois complain about to President Houston? Despite France recognizing its independence, Texas doesn’t seem to be repaying France for that with either goodwill or support.

4. In this excerpt, President Sam Houston tells Dubois how he feels about the idea of Texas’s annexation. Is Houston for or against it? What reasons does he give? Houston is against annexation because it would make Texas an unimportant U.S. territory with no political power of its own.

5. In this excerpt, President Sam Houston explains the event that caused him to negotiate with the U.S. government regarding Texas’ annexation. What was it? The U.S. Congress secretly and unanimously passed a resolution for Houston to begin negotiating the annexation, or they would appoint a commission to negotiate on Texas’ behalf.

6. In this excerpt, President Sam Houston indicates that he thinks the Texas/U.S. annexation effort will fail, and that Texas won’t receive any help from the U.S. with the Mexican conflict. What does he offer to France and Great Britain for their help? to grant their products into the ports of Texas and to open a commercial artery to Mexico and the southern states of the Union.

7. In this excerpt, what does Dubois suggest about Houston’s handling of the whole annexation issue? That Houston is “covering his bases” by figuring out how to pitch either the failed or successful annexation attempt as a positive reflection on his actions regardless of the outcome.

8. Dubois sees Houston acting against his true feelings about Texas’ annexation to the United States. What does Dubois say is Houston’s reason for doing that? Houston wants to be President of the United States.
The President still tries to persuade himself, despite the reports of the Texian chargé d’affaires in Paris, that France attaches no importance to the incorporation of Texas in the United States and will not be displeased if this plan is realized. He also persists in thinking, despite proof to the contrary, that when captain Elliott left he was completely enlightened and satisfied with the explanations given him by the Texian cabinet. I realized the necessity of dispelling such an illusion, at least where we are concerned, and I replied: “General, France was the first European power to recognize the independence of Texas, and ever since she has ceased to give this country proofs of her goodwill and sympathy.”

★ Is the French government for or against the U.S. annexation of Texas?

★ According to this excerpt from Dubois, what European country was the first to recognize Texas’ independence?

★ What treatment from Texas does Dubois complain about to President Houston?
“You are aware, Mr. de Saligny of my views on the question of annexation of Texas to the United States. They are the same today as they were three years ago. I do not know of what degree the United States would reap the benefits from this measure promised by some people. But what I do know is that for Texas and for Texans the results would be disastrous. Instead of being an independent state with a promising future, we would become a territory of no importance, at least of no political importance. Annexation would annihilate us.”

In this excerpt, President Sam Houston tells Dubois how he feels about the idea of Texas’ annexation. Is Houston for or against it? What reasons does he give?

“…in our relations with this government I have always behaved with much circumspection and deference, and when, seven or eight months ago, it made its first overtures to me concerning our incorporation into the American unit, I declined respectfully and gratefully but explicitly and definitely… That was the situation when, at the beginning of the last session, the same offers were revived both here and in Washington, and repeated with a persistence - this between ourselves - that I thought amounted to importunity. For my part, I held firm and persisted in my refusal. But Congress, on whom influence had been brought to bear, got hold of the affair and in a unanimous secret resolution of the two houses enjoined me to begin negotiations immediately with the American government… I was in an extremely precarious position my best friends in the two houses had abandoned me. I was alone against the whole of Congress, and I no longer even possess the leverage of my veto, since the unanimous vote of the two houses had struck it down in advance. Already several representatives, anticipating my resistance, were talking of having Congress nominate commissioners to go to negotiate with the United States in the name of Texas… This succeeded in silencing my objections, and I had to resign myself to examine the proposals of the United States.”

In this excerpt, President Sam Houston explains the event that caused him to negotiate with the U.S. government regarding Texas’ annexation. What was it?
“… I think that our treaty will be rejected by the Senate, and I hope that everyone will be completely cured of the annexation humbug. It will be obvious to all that we can expect nothing from the American government and that our only possible course is to turn again to France and Great Britain. In returned for their aid in helping us to settle our differences with Mexico, we shall offer important commercial advantages for the future. We will grant their products free entry into the ports of Texas, and we shall open up to them a broad and assured commercial artery for the provisioning of Mexico and even of the southern states of the Union.”

In this excerpt, President Sam Houston indicates that he thinks the Texas/U.S. annexation effort will fail, and that Texas won’t receive any help from the U.S. with the Mexican conflict. What does he offer to France and Great Britain for their help?

By nature the President is extremely circumspect in all his dealings. He exhibits a sort of feline prudence and a shrewdness that sometimes amounts to williness and trickery… Perhaps he calculated as follows: if the treaty is rejected by the American Senate or if it survives that test and then as killed by the objections of the Congress or Texian people, General Houston could always put all of the blame on his opponents for this abortive attempt and show that he had always been opposed to annexation and had only consented to negotiate with the United States when coerced and against his will… But if, on the contrary, despite all resident resistance and obstacles in both Texas and the United States, the President succeeded in achieving the union of the two countries, he would receive all the glory for this great act, to say nothing of the rewards anticipated to serve his private ambitions.

In this excerpt, what does Dubois suggest about Houston’s handling of the whole annexation issue?
Activity Resource: A Letter from Dubois to Guizot pg. 4

In enumerating the reasons that had determined him to enter upon a policy contrary of his convictions, General Houston naturally refrained from speaking of the entreaties made by general Jackson and several other friends. Nor did he mention the presidential hopes that they employed to dazzle him. But I have it from a good source, as I have already had the honor to report to your Excellency, that this consideration was stronger than any other with him. Colonel Hockley was telling me only yesterday that General Houston, who has dreamed of nothing else for the past few months but the Presidency of the United States, was still trying to go against the evidence and persuade himself that immediate annexation was still within the realm of possibility.

Dubois sees Houston acting against his true feelings about Texas’ annexation to the United States. What does Dubois say is Houston’s reason for doing that?
The President still tries to persuade himself, despite the reports of the Texian chargé d’affairs in Paris, that France attaches no importance to the incorporation of Texas in the United States and will not be displeased if this plan is realized. He also persists in thinking, despite proof to the contrary, that when captain Elliott left he was completely enlightened and satisfied with the explanations given him by the Texian cabinet. I realized the necessity of dispelling such an illusion, at least where we are concerned, and I replied: “General, France was the first European power to recognize the independence of Texas, and ever since she has ceased to give this country proofs of her goodwill and sympathy.

Appearing more vexed and then surprised, General Houston replied: “If such is the case, I am truly very grieved. for me it is very important that your government should not doubt either my candor or my loyalty. I do not want it to think that just when it interposed its good offices to bring about a settlement between US and Mexico, I repaid its demonstrations of interest by seeking to play a double game. And I am convinced that after you have heard the explanations that I am about to give you, and that I beg you to convey to your government, it will recognize that I was forced to submit to circumstances beyond my control—which I more than anyone deplore in --- and that I am not to blame in this affair.

“You are aware, Mr. de Saligny of my views on the question of annexation of Texas to the United States. They are the same today as they were three years ago. I do not know of what degree the United States would reap the benefits from this measure promised by some people. But what I do know is that for Texas and for Texans the results would be disastrous. Instead of being an independent state with a promising future, we would become a territory of no importance, at least of no political importance. Annexation would annihilate us. You also know that ever since the formation of our government we have not had much reason to be grateful to the American cabinet, which many a time during the presidency of Mr. Van Buren as under the present administration seems to have taken a pleasure in subjecting us to insulting actions and humiliations that only the consciousness of our weakness prevented me from resenting as I would have wished it is obvious to me that although an immense part of the population of the United States entertained strong sympathies for our country and our cause, the federal government, far from sharing their interest in our future, is jealous and fearful of anything that might tend to consolidate our position or to increase our prosperity. Also, in our relations with this government I have always behaved with much circumspection and deference, and when, seven or eight months ago, it made its first overtures to me concerning our incorporation into the American unit, I declined respectfully and gratefully but explicitly and definitely. Furthermore, I must also confess to you that I thought that the cabinet of Mr. Tyler, regardless of its eagerness to bring up this great political act would encounter along the way obstacles that seem insurmountable to me. And I did not wish to expose us to the humiliation of a second refusal. And then, at the time I had the hope that thanks to the support of France and England we would soon succeed and arriving at our honorable and satisfactory settlement of our differences with Mexico. This consideration counted for much of my refusal.
“That was the situation when, at the beginning of the last session, the same offers were revived both here and in Washington, and repeated with a persistence - this between ourselves - that I thought amounted to importunity. For my part, I held firm and persisted in my refusal. But Congress, on whom influence had been brought to bear, got hold of the affair and in a unanimous secret resolution of the two houses enjoined me to begin negotiations immediately with the American government...I was in an extremely precarious position: my best friends in the two houses had abandoned me. I was alone against the whole of Congress, and I no longer even possess the leverage of my veto, since the unanimous vote of the two houses had struck it down in advance. Already several representatives, anticipating my resistance, were talking of having Congress nominate commissioners to go to negotiate with the United States in the name of Texas. On the other hand, our negotiations with Mexico had taken a discouraging turn. The report from Hockley and Williams had about convinced me of the impossibility of success on that score. This succeeded in silencing my objections, and I had to resign myself to examine the proposals of the United States. However, unwillingly to expose the country to the unpleasantness of a refusal such as we had experienced in 1837 or two the consequences that we might incur on the part of Mexico, I resolved to take precautions and to demand guarantees that, I confess to you, I scarcely thought I would be able to obtain. Therefore, I declared that before entertaining proposals or before sending a special agent to Washington, as was requested, I wanted a guarantee from the American cabinet, insofar as it could be given, that any arrangements that might be agreed upon would be ratified by the Senate of the United States. In the name of President Tyler I was given official assurances that the members of the Senate had been consulted individually and that more than 2/3 of that body had pledged themselves in advance to vote for a Treaty of annexation. Then I demanded that the federal government send before hand some 1200 or 1500 American soldiers to our frontier along the Sabine River and dispatch a fleet of 10 or 12 ships to protect us from any aggression from Mexico in the future.

After circling his office once or twice he continued: “I have explained to you how the negotiations were begun between us and the American government. To describe to you the course of action I intend to follow now.” I still do this in a few words and with the same frankness. “You know where the negotiations stand at present period despite the confidence shown by President Tyler, I think that our treaty will be rejected by the Senate, and I hope that everyone will be completely cured of the annexation humbug. It will be obvious to all that we can expect nothing from the American government and that are only possible course is to turn again to France and Great Britain. In returned for their aid in helping us to settle our differences with Mexico, we shall offer important commercial advantages for the future. We will grant their products free entry into the ports of Texas, and we shall open up to them a broad and assured commercial artery for the provisioning of Mexico and even of the southern states of the Union.”

Although this dispatch is already too long, I cannot close it without submitting to your Excellency a few observations on the explanation entered upon by General Houston with me. No doubt he had some ulterior motive in mind, but in general I am inclined to believe in his sincerity, although with certain reservations.
By nature the President is extremely circumspect in all his dealings. He exhibits a sort of feline prudence and a shrewdness that sometimes amounts to wiliness and trickery. Therefore it would not indeed be impossible that in maneuvering the negotiations to the point where they now are he was able to avoid any definite commitment. Perhaps he calculated as follows:

If the treaty is rejected by the American Senate or if it survives that test and then as killed by the objections of the Congress or Texian people, General Houston could always put all of the blame on his opponents for this abortive attempt and show that he had always been opposed to annexation and had only consented to negotiate with the United States when coerced and against his will.

In either of these two hypothesis, the President might calculate, France and England would be alerted by experience to the possibility of annexation. Fearing another attempt that might succeed, they would see the necessity of adopting a more active and more effective means to influence Mexico. And Mexico, tired of war, aware that it is powerless to reconquer Texas, and to whose interests it is to avoid the proximity of the United States, will eventually be persuaded to come to terms.

But if, on the contrary, despite all resident resistance and obstacles in both Texas and the United States, the President succeeded in achieving the union of the two countries, he would receive all the glory for this great act, to say nothing of the rewards anticipated to serve his private ambitions.

In enumerating the reasons that had determined him to enter upon a policy contrary of his convictions, General Houston naturally refrained from speaking of the entreaties made by general Jackson and several other friends. Nor did he mention the presidential hopes that they employed to dazzle him. But I have it from a good source, as I have already had the honor to report to your Excellency, that this consideration was stronger than any other with him. Colonel Hockley was telling me only yesterday that General Houston, who has dreamed of nothing else for the past few months but the Presidency of the United States, was still trying to go against the evidence and persuade himself that immediate annexation was still within the realm of possibility.

I am [etc.]

[signed] A. de Saligny

In 1839, France recognized the Republic of Texas as an independent country. The French king choose Jean Pierre Isidoré Alphonse Dubois de Saligny as his representative (chargé d’affaires) in Texas.

In 1840, Dubois moved to Austin and begin meeting with Texas government officials. At that time, Austin was the capital city of the new republic. Dubois lived in Austin’s first hotel which was owned by Robert Bullock. It was located near Congress Avenue and 6th Street. But Dubois wanted his own house. He hired builders to construct the house on San Marcos Street in Austin, Texas. It was to be both his personal residence and the official Texas office of the French government.

During the short time Dubois lived in Austin, he wasn’t very successful in forming good relations with Texas leaders. He supported the Franco-Texian bill that proposed to move 8,000 French families to Texas and establish 20 forts throughout the state. Texas had just fought a war to gain independence from the king of Spain. Mirabeau B. Lamar and other leaders who didn't like the Franco-Texian bill worried that it would give the king of France too much control over Texas. The bill failed and never became law. Dubois also got into an argument with his old landlord, Robert Bullock. That fight eventually became known as the Pig War.

In May of 1841, Dubois decided he had had enough and left Austin without letting the French government know. He never got a chance to live in the house on San Marcos Street. It was still being built when he left Texas.

In 1848, Dr. Joseph W. Robertson bought the French Legation house. Dr. Robertson, his wife, their 11 children, and 9 enslaved workers all lived on the site. The house remained in the Robertson family for over 100 years.

The French Legation opened as a museum in 1956. It is the only building in Austin that dates from the time when Texas was a country. The house is now one of the state historic sites operated by the Texas Historical Commission.

For more information, visit https://www.thc.texas.gov/historic-sites/french-legation-state-historic-site.