

MOSES AUSTIN (1761 – 1821)

Of Connecticut & Missouri

Moses Austin was a very industrious man. He is recognized as the founder of the American Lead Industry, was the first to settle a community west and inland of the Mississippi River, and was the first to get permission to bring Anglo-American settlers into Spanish Texas.

Moses was born in Durham, Connecticut on October 4, 1761, son of Elias Austin and Eunice Phelps and great grandson of Anthony Austin of Suffield. Instead of following in his father's footsteps as a tailor, farmer and tavern keeper, he chose to go into the dry goods business in Middletown at the age of 21. In 1783 he moved to Philadelphia, Pennsylvania to go into business with his brother, Stephen. It was there that he met and married Mary Brown. They had 5 children, three of whom lived to adulthood: Stephen Fuller Austin, Emily Margaret Austin and James Elijah Brown Austin .

Soon after moving to Philadelphia he extended his business to Richmond, Virginia and established Moses Austin & Company. In 1789 he secured a contract to roof the new Virginia capitol in lead. The state promised to pay above the market price if the lead was from Virginia. His company quickly gained control of the richest lead deposits. He brought experienced miners and smelters from England to improve efficiency of his operation. He founded Austinville (Wythe County) at the lead mines in 1792.

Encountering problems, and with his business going bankrupt, he started looking elsewhere for lead. After visiting mines in Spanish Upper Louisiana in the winter of 1796-97 he obtained a grant to part of Mine a Breton, which is where modern day Potosi, Missouri stands. It was there that he established the first Anglo-American settlement west of and back from the Mississippi River in 1798. He aggressively expanded his holdings and gained control of almost all smelting in the area and amassed a wealth of \$190,000. This second period in the history of the American lead industry is known as the "Moses Austin Period". His contributions influenced the lead industry until heavy machinery revolutionized mining and smelting after the Civil War. Because of Aaron Burr's conspiracy, the war of 1812 and depressed conditions, Austin joined a group in founding the Bank of St. Louis, the first west of the Mississippi. The bank failed in 1819 and his finances were in trouble. He had relinquished the mines to his son Stephen and moved to Herculaneum, Missouri, a town that he established in 1808 as a river shipping port for his lead, and returned to merchandising.

Unable to escape his debt, he developed a plan in 1819 for settling an American colony in Spanish Texas. The Adams-Onis Treaty clarified the Spanish title to Texas and he went to San Antonio in December 1820, seeking permission from Governor Antonio Maria Martinez. While there he chanced to meet with the Baron de Bastrop. They had met years before in New Orleans. Bastrop lived in San Antonio and encouraged the governor to endorse the proposal for the colony. The governor forwarded the plan to higher authorities on December 26, 1820.

Returning from this trip Moses came down with pneumonia and only lived two more months. During that time he learned that permission for the colony had been granted. He devoted all of his energy to the "Texas Venture". On his death bed he told his wife to write a letter for him to Stephen, begging him to take his place and continue the enterprise he had started.

Moses Austin died on June 10, 1821, at the home of his daughter, Emily Austin Bryan, and was buried in the Bryan family cemetery. In 1831 the remains of both Moses and Mary were moved to a public cemetery in Potosi, Missouri, on land they once owned. Their tomb rises three feet above ground and has the wrong date of death for Moses. The only marking on it says "MOSES AUSTIN – DIED 1820. In 1938 members of a Texas historical group, supposedly led by an Austin, during the dark of night tried to move his body to the Lone Star State to be near his son Stephen. Their attempt was thwarted by a group from town. They only succeeded in marring the tomb by putting an ugly hole in it.

Editor's note: The first group of settlers that Stephen Fuller Austin took to Texas is referred to as the "Old Three Hundred". Of those original three hundred, 297 titles were issued.