

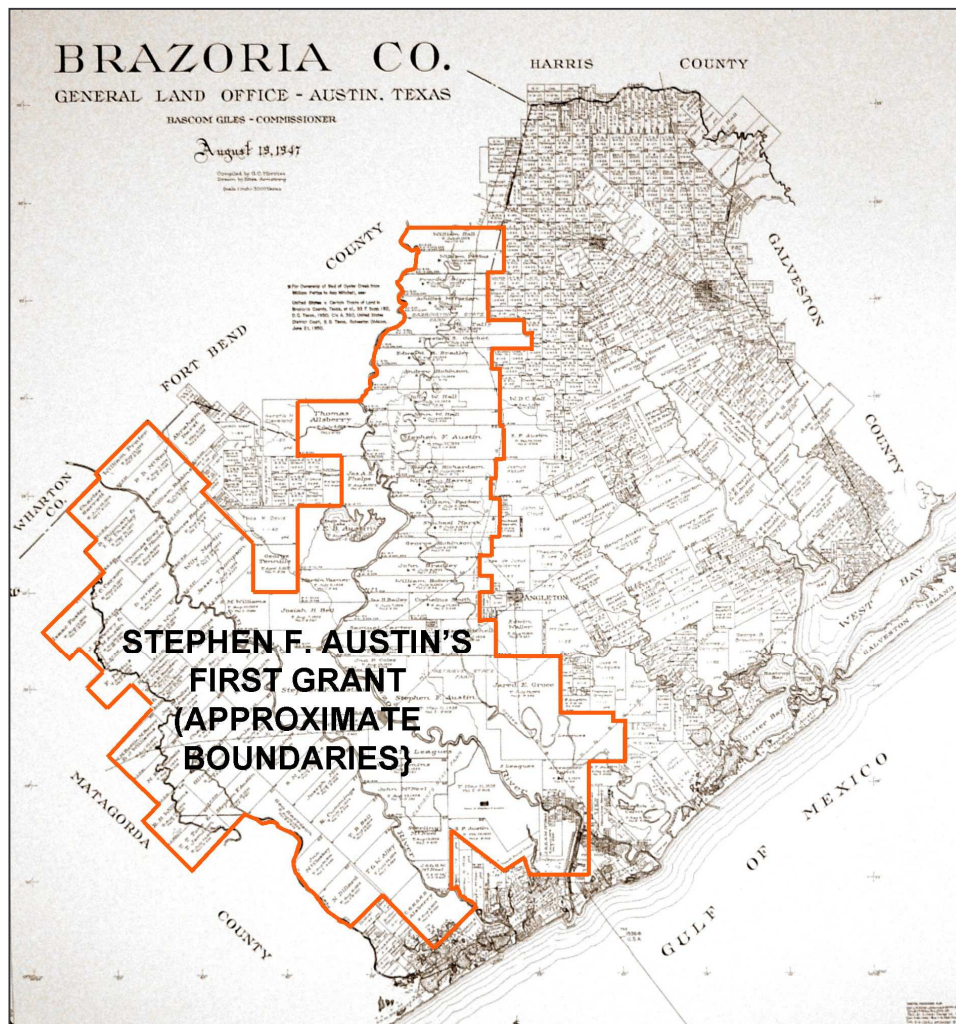
CULTURAL HISTORY

The Old Three Hundred in Brazoria County

by Neal McLain

In previous columns, I've described how Stephen F. Austin obtained four Empresario Grants from the Government of Mexico shortly after Mexico won its independence from Spain. Together, these grants authorized Austin to settle approximately 1,200 families in what is now Texas; the first of these grants, issued in 1823, authorized him to settle 300 families. Under the terms of the grant, each family was to receive one league and one labor of land, or approximately 4,606 acres or about 7.2 square miles. As Empresario, Austin himself was responsible for surveying each parcel; the Baron de Bastrop, representing the Mexican government, was responsible for recording titles.

For his first grant, Austin selected the area along the Gulf coast beginning at the Lavaca River and proceeding eastward. By the time he had fulfilled the requirements of the grant, the colony extended as far eastward as the approximate center of present-day Brazoria County.



Brazoria County Map showing Original Land Surveys in Austin's First Empresario Grant
Texas General Land Office, Austin, Texas, August 1947. Printed March 2003.

The Old Three Hundred in Brazoria County

This map reveals Austin's commitment to obeying the terms of the first Empresario Grant:

- Each parcel encompasses a fairly large geographic area. This is consistent with the league-and-labor requirement specified in the first grant. By way of comparison, note the relative sizes of the first-grant parcels with respect to the one-square-mile parcels (visible the northern parts of the County) authorized under later Empresario Grants.
- Each parcel has access to water for agriculture and livestock. Every one of the first-grant parcels in Brazoria County abuts (or straddles) one of five freshwater streams — Linnville Bayou, Cedar Lake Creek, the San Bernard River, the Brazos River, or Oyster Creek.



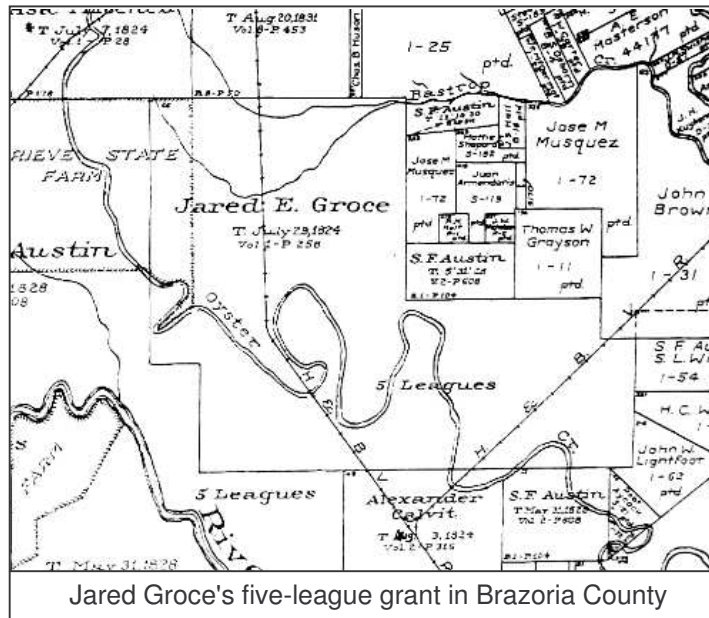
**Brazoria County Map showing Original Land Surveys
in relation to nearby waterways in Austin's First Empresario Grant**

Texas General Land Office, Austin, Texas, August 1947. Printed March 2003.

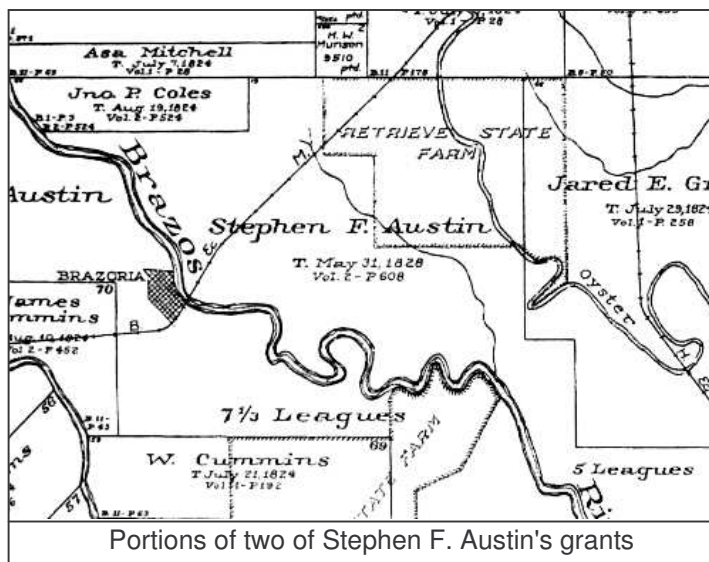
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Sixty-nine of the first-grant parcels are located in (or partially in) Brazoria County. Most of these parcels consist of one league plus one labor, as specified by the Mexican Colonization Law. But there were several exceptions:

- Some settlers purchased additional lands from their own funds. An example is Jared E. Groce, who owned five leagues in Brazoria County. Most of the present-day City of Clute is located in Groce's five-league grant.



- Austin himself, as Empresario, became a major landowner in the colony. Under the Mexican Colonization Law, an Empresario could receive as much as 15 leagues and two labors of land for each 200 families settled. Parcels owned by Austin are scattered through the first-grant lands, and several are located in Brazoria County. Most of the present-day Cities of Brazoria and Lake Jackson are located in two of Austin's land grants.



The Old Three Hundred in Brazoria County

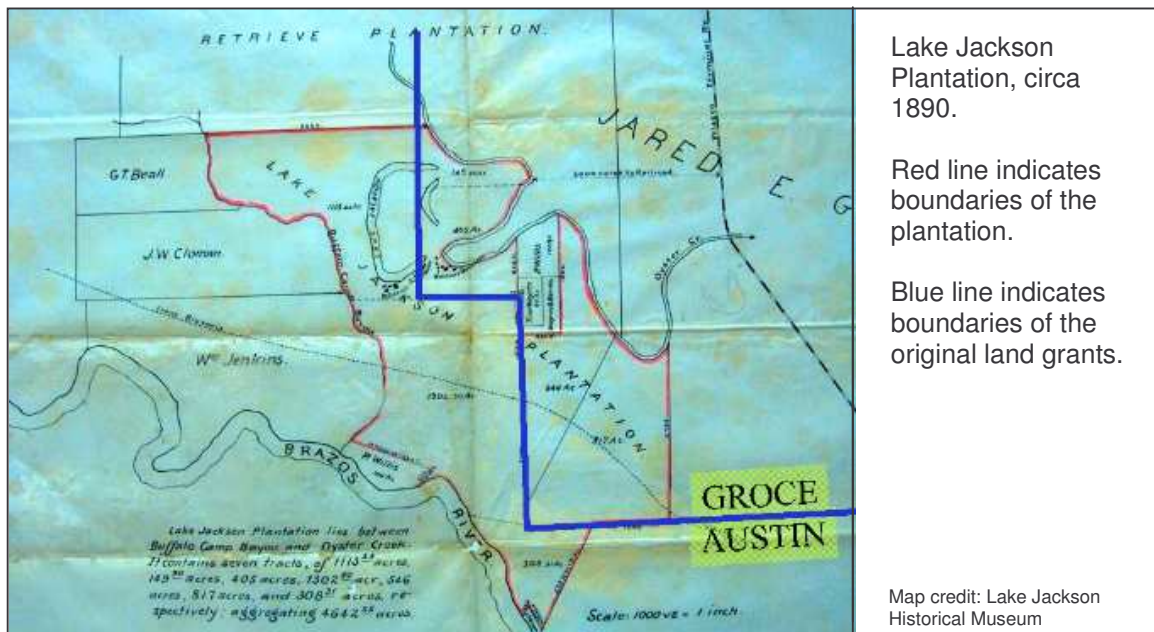
- Some settlers arranged to have their one-labor-grants placed near San Felipe, the capital of the colony and a major trading center. But their original one-league-grants remained in Brazoria County.

By the time Austin had fulfilled the first Empresario Grant, a total of 307 titles had been issued, with nine families receiving two titles each. Thus the total number of grantees, excluding Austin's own land grants, was actually 297, not 300. The Colonization Law required that all the lands should be occupied and improved within two years; most of the settlers were able to comply with the terms, and only seven of the grants were forfeited. ^[1]

In the years since Austin built his colony, the original land grants have been repeatedly subdivided. Some owners divided their holdings among their heirs; others sold off portions of their lands to outside parties. The original boundaries of these land grants can still be found today, but in many cases, it requires a sharp eye and considerably research to find them.

This leads to an important distinction: the difference between a "land grant" and a "plantation." A "land grant" is land granted *by* an Empresario *to* a settler under terms specified in the Empresario Grant (I sometimes refer to land grants as "parcels" to avoid confusion with "Empresario Grant"). A "plantation" consists of lands held by a particular owner at a particular time, typically used for agriculture. In rare cases, a plantation may be congruent with an original land grant. But most plantations were assembled by later generations from whatever lands were available for purchase at the time. Many plantations consisted of parts of one or more land grants.

The Lake Jackson Plantation, assembled by Abner Jackson, illustrates this point. As the following map ^[2] of the plantation indicates, it consisted of portions of Stephen F. Austin's 5-league grant and Jared E. Groce's 5-league grant.



The Old Three Hundred in Brazoria County

[1] "Old Three Hundred" by Christopher Long. The Handbook of Texas Online. n.d. Accessed 09 Aug 2009
<<http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/OO/umo1.html>>

[2] "Map of Lake Jackson Plantation." Author unknown. Lake Jackson Historical Museum, Lake Jackson, Texas. The image of map shown here was provided by Jeff Durst of the Texas Historical Commission.