



# SPANISH AND MEXICAN LAND RECORDS



The Land Office is the repository for original Spanish and Mexican land titles in Texas. These records, known collectively as the Spanish Collection, are the most important collection of the original documents anywhere for the history of land distribution in Texas prior to 1836. Present-day Texas, however, is a composite of parts from four different Spanish provinces (northern Nuevo Santander, eastern Nuevo México, Chihuahua, and Texas). After Mexican independence in 1821, Nuevo Santander became the state of Tamaulipas; Texas joined the province of Nueva Extremadura (later Coahuila) to form the Mexican state of Coahuila y Texas. The records housed at the Land Office reflect these political differences.

Beginning in the 1760s, land titles were issued to settlers and military officers of the Spanish Empire in the region we now know as South Texas, between the Río Grande and the Nueces River. The Mexican state of Tamaulipas continued the issuance of land titles in the area after Mexican independence. This process lasted until the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo (1848) ceded the territory to the United States. The records for South Texas include:

- ◆ **RECORDS OF THE VISITA GENERAL:** The five volumes record a *testimonio* or official copy of the distribution of land tracts (known as *porciones*) in the 1760s to the residents of the Río Grande settlements established by José de Escandón, namely: Laredo, Mier, Camargo, Revilla (Guerrero), and Reynosa. Approximately 170 *porciones* are located within the present boundaries of Texas. The copies were transcribed from the originals in Mexico and include an English translation. The Land Office does not hold any records for *porciones* granted south of the Río Grande.
- ◆ **LAND TITLES:** Issued by the Spanish or Mexican governments, these are the titles to original land grants in South Texas. Most of these are in the form of *testimonios* and many of the grants do not have a corresponding copy of the original title. Despite the lack of a proper title, land tracts in South Texas were still eligible for the confirmation reviews of the 1850s.
- ◆ **REPORT OF THE BOURLAND & MILLER COMMISSION:** A report containing the recommendations made by commissioners Bourland and Miller, appointed to investigate Spanish and Mexican land titles in South Texas; their recommendations were the basis of the Confirmation Act of 1852.
- ◆ **FIRST-CLASS HEADRIGHTS:** These files, created in the early 1850s, document the process of perfecting the title under the State of Texas and contain surveys, tax payments, and other pertinent information regarding the land grant prior to the issuance of the patent. A limited number of these records also include information on the conveyance of title.
- ◆ **PATENT:** A land patent is the official document that severs the land from the sovereign, recognizing that the land is now in private hands. This is generally the last document on file for the land grant, any information after the issuance of the patent should be consulted at the county deed records office where the land is located.

The history of the settlement and land distribution processes in the region may be consulted through the *New Guide to Spanish and Mexican Land Grants in South Texas*, which can be purchased directly through our website.



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Settlements in the area north of the Nueces River began with the missions and presidios established in San Antonio and Nacogdoches in the early eighteenth century. Soon after its creation, the Mexican state of Coahuila y Texas established a Colonization Law that allowed immigrants from the United States and other countries to settle within its borders, which set off a rush of new settlements between 1824 and 1836. The records for Central and East Texas include:

- ◆ **MISSION RECORDS:** The original title to Mission San José, the oldest extant title to Texas land, is housed at the Land Office and is part of a series of records of the missions of Central Texas. Other records include *testimonios* of the titles to Missions Concepción, San Juan Capistrano and San Francisco de la Espada; inventories, correspondence, and matters of land ownership; disputes between ranchers and the missionaries; as well as secularization and the subsequent distribution of mission lands.
- ◆ **LAND TITLES:** Although Spanish settlement of Texas began in the 1720s, only about 30 titles were issued to settlers prior to Mexican independence in 1821, primarily in the San Antonio de Béxar and Nacogdoches regions. Between 1824 and 1835, however, land commissioners, *alcaldes*, and political chiefs issued over 3,700 titles under the colonization laws of the state of Coahuila y Texas. These documents contain a petition from the grantee, an order of survey, the field notes, and the title of possession. The Collection also includes approximately 1,400 unfinished titles that for reasons unknown were not completed. Like with most of the titles for Spanish and Mexican Texas, these records are in Spanish, but translations are available for most of them.
- ◆ **TOWN RECORDS:** These records consist of surveys and titles to town lots of San Felipe de Austin and Victoria, the survey for Gonzales, and titles to town lots in Liberty.
- ◆ **ORIGINAL FIELD NOTES:** These documents are closely associated with the land titles mentioned above. The field notes were generally in English and translated to Spanish for their inclusion in the official title. Sometimes, these documents show features such as roads, home sites, and trails.
- ◆ **CHARACTER CERTIFICATES:** Issued by the local authorities, these documents accompanied the grantees petition for a title and included his or her place of origin, year of immigration, marital status, and size of family.
- ◆ **REGISTERS OF FAMILIES:** Stephen F. Austin, Benjamin R. Milam, Arthur Wavell and Charles Taylor kept records of the families entering their respective areas. Austin's *Register* is the most exhaustive of the four, but it does not contain the records of the Old 300 settlers.
- ◆ **CORRESPONDENCE:** Includes official correspondence on political affairs in Texas dating from 1821 to 1836. Correspondents include *empresarios*, *alcaldes*, the commandant general of the Eastern Interior Provinces, and the governor of Coahuila and Texas. Another group of correspondence pertains to the political chief of Nacogdoches.
- ◆ **LEGAL DOCUMENTS, DECREES, PROCLAMATIONS, CENSUS RECORDS, OFFICIAL APPOINTMENTS, AND TREATIES:** This collection contains a large number of official documents concerning *empresario* contracts, slavery, Indian affairs, government, and other pertinent subjects.
- ◆ **OFFICIAL MINUTES OF THE AYUNTAMIENTO OF SAN FELIPE DE AUSTIN (1829-1832):** For a printed version of these minutes, see the *Southwestern Historical Quarterly*, Vols. XXI, XXII, XXIII, and XXIV.