



Spanish and Mexican Records in the Texas General Land Office

The General Land Office is the repository for original Spanish and Mexican land titles in Texas. These records, known as the Spanish Collection, are the most important collection of original documents anywhere for the history of land distribution in Texas prior to 1836. The collection is particularly strong for the period of Mexican sovereignty (1821-1836). The resources in this collection are summarized below.



Spanish Period, 1720 – 1821

Province of Nuevo Santander

Auto de la general visita (Acts of the Visit of the Royal Commissioners). Transcribed from the archives in Mexico, these volumes record the distribution of land by the royal Spanish commissioners in 1767 to the Rio Grande settlements of Laredo, Mier, Camargo, Revilla, (later Guerrero) and Reynosa, which were established by José de Escandón. About 170 of the *porciones* granted to individual settlers at that time are located within the present boundaries of Texas. The General Land Office copies include a translation of the commissioners' proceedings.

For a general history of these grants and an index to Land Office information on specific *porciones* and other Spanish and Mexican grants in this area, see the Texas General Land Office's *New Guide to Spanish and Mexican Land Grants in South Texas*.

Land Titles. The Texas General Land Office contains files on some 35 large Spanish land grants in the area between the Nueces River and the Rio Grande, although only a few of the titles in the form of *testimonios* (duplicate copies of the originals) are actually in the Land Office. Most of the General Land Office documents on these grants pertain to their confirmation and patenting by the state of Texas.

Report of the Bourland and Miller Commission (1851). This report contains a summary of the findings and recommendations of the commissioners appointed in 1850 by the state of Texas to investigate Spanish and Mexican land titles south of the Nueces River. The commissioners' recommendations were the basis of the Confirmation Act of February 10, 1852.

For a discussion of this commission and its activities see Galen D. Greaser and Jesús F. de la Teja, "Quieting Title to Spanish and Mexican Land Grants in the Trans-Nueces: The Bourland and Miller Commission, 1850-1852," *Southwestern Historical Quarterly* 95 (April 1992): 445-464.

Province of Texas

Land Titles. Approximately 30 titles from the Spanish period remain of record in the Texas General Land Office, most of them from the Nacogdoches area. The Land Office records include fewer than ten titles from the San Antonio and Bahía del Espíritu Santo areas.

Mission Records. Records regarding the Spanish missions include copies of titles (Concepcion, San Juan Capistrano, and San Francisco de la Espada), inventories, and correspondence. The records concern matters of ownership, disputes between missions and ranchers, secularization, and distribution of Espada mission lands. The title to the San José Mission (1720), the oldest extant title to Texas land, is on loan to the Texas General Land Office from the Moody Foundation.

Town Records. These files contain correspondence, field notes, and lists of settlers associated with the founding of San Marcos de Neve and Trinidad de Salcedo.

Province of Chihuahua

No originals or copies of Spanish land grants in this area have reached the General Land Office. Records on several of these grants can be found in GLO Bexar first class files and in the El Paso County sketch files (Surveying Division).

For a history of grants in this area, see *Spanish and Mexican Land Grants in the Chihuahuan Acquisition*, by J. J. Bowden.

Mexican Period, 1821 – 1836

State of Tamaulipas

Land Titles. Some 120 titles to land in Texas from the Mexican state of Tamaulipas have been recognized as valid. Of these, about 40 *testimonios* have been deposited in the Texas General Land Office. The land covered by these titles is between the Nueces and Rio Grande rivers. Many of these grants are included in the report of the Bourland and Miller Commission (see above).

State of Coahuila and Texas

Land Titles. The Spanish Collection contains more than 3,700 titles issued by commissioners, *alcaldes*, and political chiefs in Texas under the colonization laws of Coahuila and Texas. The titles generally contain the formal petition for land, a report on the petitioner, an order of survey, field notes, and the title of possession. The titles are in Spanish; however, many are available in

translation. The collection also includes approximately 1,400 unfinished titles which often contain information of interest to genealogists.

The *Catalogue of the Spanish Collection of the Texas General Land Office, Part I: Titles, Unfinished Titles, Character Certificates, Applications for Admission, Registers & Field Notes* is the finding aid for this part of the collection. The catalogue also contains an account of the origin of the Spanish Collection.

Town Records. These records consist of surveys of San Felipe de Austin, Gonzales, and Victoria, and the titles to town lots in Liberty and Victoria.

Original Field Notes. Closely associated with the land titles, these descriptions and sketches were prepared by the actual surveyors of the tracts. These field notes, written in English, can sometimes show features such as roads, home sites, and Indian villages. The names of the chain carriers are also frequently included.

Character certificates. Most are dated 1834-35 and were issued by local authorities in the department of Nacogdoches to settlers who intended to petition for land grants in that area. Many are in English and may give place of origin, year of immigration, marital status, and size of the settler's family. Proof of good character was required before becoming eligible to receive land. *Character Certificates in the General Land Office of Texas* (Gifford White, editor) provides a compilation of the genealogical information in the character certificates, applications for admission and unfinished titles.

Applications and certificates of admission. The collection includes a small number of standardized applications for admission in Stephen F. Austin's colony. In most instances the information from these applications was also recorded in *Austin's Register of Families*. Printed certificates of admission can be found with the titles issued to Green DeWitt's colonists. These certificates give the date of arrival in the colony, marital status, and size of the colonist's family.

Registers of Families. Registers exist for settlers seeking admission in the colonies of Stephen F. Austin, Benjamin R. Milam, and Arthur Wavell. Individual entries may include place of origin, age, marital status, name of spouse, size of family, and occupation. A typescript list of Commissioner Charles S. Taylor's orders of survey supplies similar information. The registers do not include all settlers admitted in these colonies.

See *Stephen F. Austin's Register of Families* (Villamae Williams, editor). See also *1830 Citizens of Texas* (Gifford White, editor) for a compilation of information from *Austin's Register of Families* and the DeWitt certificates of admission.

Correspondence. The Spanish Collection includes approximately 2.5 linear feet of official correspondence on political affairs in Texas dating from 1821 to 1835. The largest group consists of letters and official communications relative to land matters to and from the political chief of Texas at Béxar. 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, Treaties. A large number of official documents concerning empresario contracts, slavery, Indian affairs, government, and other subjects of significance during this period are present in this collection.

The *Catalogue of the Spanish Collection of the Texas General Land Office, Part II: Correspondence, Empresario Contracts, Decrees, Appointments, Reports, Notices & Proceedings* describes the items in this part of the collection.

Original 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.

State of Chihuahua

No original records of Mexican land grants in West Texas have reached the General Land Office. Documents on the Mexican land grants confirmed in this area are found in the GLO Bexar first class files and in the El Paso County sketch files (Surveying Division).

Additional references:

Eugene C. Barker, ed., *The Austin Papers*.

Henry Putnam Beers, *Spanish and Mexican Records of the American Southwest*.

Malcolm McLean, ed., *Papers Concerning Robertson's Colony in Texas*.

William Herman Oberste, *Texas Irish Empresarios and Their Colonies: Powers, Hewetson, McMullin and McGloin: Refugio and San Patricio*.

Virginia H. Taylor, *The Spanish Archives of the General Land Office of Texas*.

or, visit the GLO web site at <http://www.glo.texas.gov>



Texas General Land Office
• **Jerry Patterson, Commissioner** •
1700 North Congress Avenue, Austin, Texas 78701
Phone (512) 463-5277, 1-800-998-4GLO
TDD (512) 463-5330

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