

General Manuel de Mier y Terán Letter to Mexican President Guadalupe Victoria

Introduction

After a decade of revolution and war, Mexico won its independence from the Spanish Empire in 1821. The former territories of New Spain transitioned to Mexican states. One of the largest states, Tejas, was under the control of the powerful Comanche Nation despite Mexico's claim to the region. The same year as independence, the Mexican government invited Americans to settle in Texas, offering generous land grants to agents (empresarios) who convinced Americans to relocate to Mexican state of Texas. The most successful empresario, Stephen F. Austin, brought 300 families to his settlement in 1825. By 1830, over 7,000 Americans lived in Texas, including close to 1,000 enslaved people.

The Mexican government required the American immigrants adopt Roman Catholicism and speak Spanish. A third condition emerged after 1824, when the neighboring state of Coahuila abolished slavery along with several other Mexican states. At the same time, the native-born Mexicans living in Texas (Tejanos) worried about the growing influence and size of the American population. The Comanche retained control of trade and land within Texas, but also worried about the power of the Americans, who seemed especially intent to protect slavery no matter what the Mexican government decreed.

General Manuel de Mier y Terán served in the Mexican revolution against Spain. In 1827, Mexican President Guadalupe Victoria dispatched Terán the Texas to assess its military, commercial, and agricultural potential. Terán warned that Mexico was losing control over Texas, and the Americans seemed to think they were still in the United States rather than immigrants in a foreign country. Appointed commandant general for the northeast states and federal commissioner of colonization, Terán improved defenses, instituted new taxes, and tried to offset Anglo dominance of Texas. It did not work, and the Americans declared Texas an independent republic in 1836.¹

¹ [Original source is believed to be in the public domain](http://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/disp_textbook.cfm?smtID=3&psid=551). Also see: Mintz, S., & McNeil, S. (2018). The Texas Revolution. *Digital History*. Retrieved August 14, 2019 from http://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/disp_textbook.cfm?smtID=3&psid=551

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...As one covers the distance from Béjar² to this town, he will note that Mexican influence is proportionately diminished until on arriving in this place he will see that it is almost nothing. And indeed, whence could such influence come? Hardly from superior numbers in population, since the ratio of Mexicans to foreigners³ is one to ten; certainly not from the superior character of the Mexican population, for exactly the opposite is true, the Mexicans of this town comprising what in all countries is called the lowest class--the very poor and very ignorant. The naturalized North Americans in the town maintain an English school, and send their children north for further education; the poor Mexicans not only do not have sufficient means to establish schools, but they are not of the type that take any thought for the improvement of its public institutions or the betterment of its degraded condition. Neither are there civil authorities or magistrates; one insignificant little man--not to say more--who is called an alcalde⁴, and an ayuntamiento⁵ that does not convene once in a lifetime is the most that we have here at this important point on our frontier; yet, wherever I have looked, in the short time that I have been here, I have witnessed grave occurrences, both political and judicial.

Therefore, Senor President⁶, I must disturb you in the same way I was disturbed to see the foreign colonists' attitudes toward our nation. Most of them, with the exception of few who have traveled to our capital, know no other Mexicans than the inhabitants about here, and excepting the authorities necessary to any form of society, the said inhabitants are the most ignorant of Negroes and Indians, among whom I pass for a man of culture. Thus, I tell myself that it could not be otherwise than that from such a state of affairs should arise an antagonism between the Mexicans and foreigners, which is not the least of the smoldering fires which I have discovered. Therefore, I am warning you to take timely measures. Texas could throw the whole nation into revolution.

The colonists⁷ murmur against the political disorganization of the frontier, and the Mexicans complain of the superiority and better education of the colonists; the colonists find it unendurable that they must go three hundred leagues⁸ to lodge a complaint against the petty pickpocketing that they suffer from a venal and ignorant alcalde, and the Mexicans with no knowledge of the laws of their own country nor those regulating colonization, set themselves against the foreigners, deliberately setting nets to deprive them of the right of franchise and to exclude them from the ayuntamiento. Meanwhile, the incoming stream of new settlers is unceasing; the first news of these comes by discovering them on land already under cultivation, where they have

² Bexar (Béjar) was the first Spanish settlement in what is now Texas. The Presidio San Antonio de Bexar served as fortification for the growing settlement, particularly the nearby Mission de San Antonio ("the Alamo"). The Battle of Bexar (1835) was an early skirmish between Americans living in Texas and the Mexican government, a year before the Battle of the Alamo (1836). In other words, Terán left San Antonio and headed to Nacogdoches (near Houston and Galveston).

³ "Foreigners" refers to Americans living in Tejas.

⁴ The magistrate, or person in charge of courts (both lawyer and judge).

⁵ General term for municipal government, i.e., town council.

⁶ Mexican President Guadalupe Victoria.

⁷ Americans.

⁸ Roughly 1,035 miles.

been located for many months; the old inhabitants set up a claim to the property, basing their titles of doubtful priority, and for which there are no records, on a law of the Spanish government; and thus arises a lawsuit in which the alcalde has a chance to come out with some money. In this state of affairs, the town where there are no magistrates is the one in which lawsuits abound, and it is at once evident that in Nacogdoches and its vicinity, being most distant from the seat of the general government, the primitive order of things should take its course, which is to say that this section is being settled up without the consent of anybody....

In spite of the enmity that usually exists between the Mexicans and the foreigners, there is a most evident uniformity of opinion on one point, namely the separation of Texas from Coahuila⁹ and its organization into a territory of the federal government. This idea, which was conceived by some of the colonists who are above the average, has become general among the people and does not fail to cause considerable discussion. In explaining the reasons assigned by them for this demand, I shall do no more than relate what I have heard with no addition of my own conclusions, and I frankly state that I have been commissioned by some of the colonists to explain to you their motives, notwithstanding the fact that I should have done so anyway in the fulfillment of my duty.

They claim that Texas in its present condition of a colony is an expense, since it is not a sufficiently prosperous section to contribute to the revenues of the state administration; and since it is such a charge it ought not to be imposed upon a state as poor as Coahuila, which has not the means of defraying the expenses of the corps of political and judicial officers necessary for the maintenance of peace and order. Furthermore, it is impracticable that recourse in all matters should be had to a state capital so distant and separated from this section by deserts infected by hostile savages. Again, their interests are very different from those of the other sections, and because of this they should be governed by a separate territorial government, having learned by experience that the mixing of their affairs with those of Coahuila brings about friction¹⁰. The native inhabitants of Texas add to the above other reasons which indicate an aversion for the inhabitants of Coahuila; also the authority of the comandante and the collection of taxes is disputed...

The whole population here is a mixture of strange and incoherent parts without parallel in our federation: numerous tribes of Indians, now at peace, but armed and at any moment ready for war, whose steps toward civilization should be taken under the close supervision of a strong and intelligent government; colonists of another people, more progressive and better informed than the Mexican inhabitants, but also more shrewd and unruly; among these foreigners are fugitives from justice, honest laborers, vagabonds and criminals, but honorable and dishonorable alike travel with their political constitution in their pockets¹¹, demanding the privileges, authority and officers which such a constitution guarantees.

⁹ Coahuila was/is the Mexican state bordering Texas. The Mexican Constitution of 1824 created the state of Coahuila y Tejas (Coahuila and Texas). In 1827, Coahuila banned Americans from bringing slaves into the Coahuila and emancipated enslaved children under the age of 14. Shortly thereafter, Coahuila passed a law stating any enslaved person brought into Texas should be freed within 6 months. Americans were outraged.

¹⁰ The Americans want slaves.

¹¹ Americans carry around the United States Constitution claiming their constitutional rights (especially the right to enslave, protected by the US Constitution) in Mexico.

Most of them hold slaves, who, now having perceived the favorable intent of Mexican law with regard to their tragic state, are becoming restless to throw off their yoke, while their masters believe they can keep them by making (the yoke) heavier. They commit the barbarities on their slaves that are so common where men live a relationship so contradictory to their nature: they pull their teeth, they set dogs upon them to tear them apart, and the mildest of them will whip the slaves until they are flayed.¹²

Thus, the growth of the population, its extraordinary nature, and the interests and security of the nation to my mind call for us to put here a political chief, and a tribunal or counselor employing all necessary means...then we could proceed to create prosperity for the colonists, many of whom – who are not prosperous because of their situation – lean toward rebellion and troublemaking. Then we could situate the old wild tribes who, with the introduction of the new ones, can no longer survive on hunting because their animals are being decimated. Though it seems unbelievable, the merchants' books show that in one year, 80,000 deerskins have been shipped from this town as a result of trade with the savages. This trade might continue for two or three years, but finally the deer will be finished, as has occurred in the (United) States of the north, and this is another of the reasons why the wild tribes of that nation flow into our territory.

Forgive the amount of reading I have sent you, but I wish to inform you right away about this country and not wait until the day I present my complete observations to the government, because by then the time to take corrective action will have passed.

¹² Remember your Jefferson: *"There must doubtless be an unhappy influence on the manners of our people produced by the existence of slavery among us. The whole commerce between master and slave is a perpetual exercise of the most boisterous passions, the most unremitting despotism on the one part, and degrading submissions on the other. Our children see this, and learn to imitate it; for man is an imitative animal.... If a parent could find no motive either in his philanthropy or his self-love, for restraining the intemperance of passion towards his slave, it should always be a sufficient one that his child is present. But generally, it is not sufficient.... The man must be a prodigy who can retain his manners and morals undepraved by such circumstances."*