

A Description of San Felipe de Austin

San Felipe de Austin was founded in 1824 by Stephen Austin and soon became the economic and political center of his colony. In 1828 a nineteen-year old blacksmith named Noah Smithwick moved there. Seventy years later, Smithwick dictated his memoirs about his experiences in Texas to his daughter.

San Felipe de Austin! The shibboleth [password] that flings the door of memory wide; the spell that bids the tide of years roll back, and from the ashes, where it has lain these sixty years and more, conjures up the old town which formed the nucleus [center] of the movement that eventuated [resulted] in the extension of the great American Union in an unbroken plane from the Atlantic to the Pacific. . . .

Though not one of the Three Hundred, the writer was but a few years behind them, and knew them all by repute, many of them personally. The town was still in its swaddling clothes [infant's clothes] when the writer made his advent therein in 1827. Twenty-five or perhaps thirty log cabins strung along the west bank of the Brazos River was all there was of it, while the whole human population of all ages and colors could not have exceeded 200. Men were largely in the majority, coming from every state in the Union, and every walk in life.

There seeming to be a good opening for my trade in San Felipe, I bought a set of tools from George Huff on the San Bernard and set up business in the parent colony in the year 1828. In the absence of a more comprehensive view, a pen picture of the old town may not be uninteresting. The buildings all being of unhewn [rough] logs with clapboard [planked] roofs, presented few distinguishing [different] features. Stephen F. Austin had established his headquarters something like half a mile back from the river on the west bank of a little creek—Palmito—that ran into the Brazos just above the main village. Just above Austin's house was the farm of Joshua Parker. Austin's house was a double log cabin with a wide "passage" through the center, a porch with dirt floor on the front with windows opening upon it, and chimney at each end of the building.

In this vicinity the Ingram brothers, Seth and Ira, had a store, with them being associated Hosea N. League, a lawyer by profession, who with his wife lived near by. League later formed a law partnership with David G. Burnet, their office being in the immediate vicinity. Ira Ingram later moved to Matagorda, of which municipality he was the first alcade [officer]. He also drew up the first declaration of Texas independence, at Goliad, in 1835, was a member of the first Texas Congress and Speaker of the House. Seth Ingram, a surveyor, laid off the town of San Felipe. William Pettus, better known as "Buck" Pettus, who was later elected a member of the Ayuntamiento, also resided in a suburban villa in the "west end." Going on down to the town

Reading 9, Primary Source, Level 1, continued

proper, which lay along the west bank of the Brazos, the first house on the left was my bachelor abode, and near it, on the same side, stood the “village smithy” over which I presided. Then came the Peyton tavern, operation by Jonathan C. Peyton and wife; the house was the regulation double log cabin. The saloon and billiard hall of Cooper and Chieves, the only frame building in the place, was next below the Peyton’s. The first house on the right as you entered the town from above was Dinsmore’s store, and next it the store of Walter C. White. The office of the “Cotton Plant,” the first newspaper in the colonies, and near it the residence of the genial proprietor, Godwin B. Cotton, filled the space between White’s store and the Whiteside Hotel, which differed from its companion buildings, only in point of elevation, it being a story and a half in height; through the center ran the regulation “passage,” and at either end rose a huge stick and mud chimney.

It must not be understood that these rows of buildings presented an unbroken or even regular line of front; every fellow built to suit himself, only taking care to give himself plenty of room, so that the town was strung along either side of the road something like half a mile . . . “Pretty good as to length, but rather thin.”

UNDERSTANDING WHAT YOU READ After you have finished reading the selection, answer the following questions in the space provided.

1. What were some of the professions of the residents of San Felipe? _____

2. How was the town laid out? _____

3. According to Noah Smithwick, what was the historical significance of San Felipe?

ACTIVITY On a separate piece of paper, draw a bird’s-eye view of San Felipe as described by Noah Smithwick and label the buildings.