All Foreigners—the general law of 1824...guarantees the security of their persons and property in the territory of the Mexican Nation, and those foreigners who wish to remove to any of the settlements of the state of Coahuila y Tejas [Texas] are at liberty to do so; and the said State invites and calls them.

—Mexican Law, 1824

Coahuila y Tejas was the name of the Mexican territory that formed the country's northern border. This vast area—known now as Texas—was part of independent Mexico in 1824. During that same time period, Mexico was itself one of the largest countries in the world. Its first constitution had established the United Mexican States—with a central government in Mexico City—that was modeled after that of its northern neighbor, the United States. To maintain a secure boundary between the two countries, rapid settlement and development were needed.

Texas was not new to innovative ideas. In 1811, the revolutionary leader Juan Bautista de Las Casas had proclaimed independence from Spain and allowed free trade between the U.S. and Texas. Bautista was a key figure in the revolt led by Miguel Hidalgo y Costilla (see pages 4–6), and it was in Texas that this rebellion was crushed. The deaths suffered as a result of the uprising left too few Texans of Spanish descent to undertake the development of the area by themselves. However, it proved difficult to find people from the southern Mexican states who were interested in helping and willing to face the challenges of the Texas wilderness. As a result, the state followed the example set by its northern neighbor and encouraged immigration.

When news reached Green DeWitt in Missouri about the potential rewards for a successful empresario, DeWitt decided to travel to Mexico City in 1822. DeWitt had served as an officer in the U.S. Army and also as sheriff. However, after spending three months in Mexico, he returned to Missouri without presenting a petition. Then, in 1824, DeWitt again heard about colonization efforts and recently passed laws that favored such settlements. A second
time, he traveled to Texas. While there, he became close friends with Stephen F. Austin, the first empresario (see pages 31–33). DeWitt relied on Austin as a guide through the maze of politics required to obtain his own empresario grant. With the help of Austin and a member of the Mexican legislature from Texas, DeWitt, along with a few colleagues, received a grant on April 15, 1825, that gave them the right to introduce 400 families into the area southwest of the Austin Colony. More than 75,000 acres were set aside for DeWitt. The first 15,000 were to be given to him after 100 families had settled. The remaining 60,000 acres would be prorated for delivery as he fulfilled his contract with additional families. Thus, the DeWitt Colony of Texas was officially born.

However, unlike Austin, DeWitt was a relatively weak leader, and the DeWitt colonists were left to organize their community. By the spring of 1827, the group numbered only 40 members, all determined to fulfill their promise of developing and securing Texas. There was a growing fear, however, that the Mexican government would not provide for their promised security and rights.

As conditions worsened, DeWitt colonists acted in behalf of their adopted Mexican government and stopped an uprising by American immigrants near the U.S. border with Louisiana. They declared, “that they had come to settle in the Mexican Nation by the benign influence of her laws.”

By the time the first government census was taken in 1828, the DeWitt Colony numbered 113 people—36 single men and about 14 families with children. The majority were skilled farmers and ranchers from frontier regions in Arkansas, Kentucky, Missouri, North Carolina, Tennessee, and West Virginia. In 1834—according to Mexican government records—there were 900 colonists, all recognized as citizens of the United Mexican States. The choice to settle in Texas seemed a good one, as it was a time of peace, prosperity, independence, and hope for the colonists.

Just a year later, the dream was shattered. The government in Mexico City abolished the constitution, and threatened the lives of DeWitt colonists as Mexican citizens. The colonists reluctantly protested the changes, hoping to restore the provisions of the 1824 constitution and to establish an independent state of Texas within the United Mexican States. Their hopes, however, were soon dashed and, together with Tejano liberals who opposed the centralists in power, they rallied to fight for an independent Republic of Texas.

DeWitt colonists were among those defending the Alamo in San Antonio. Following their defeat, their families and those of the other colonists had to abandon their homes, which were destroyed in front of the advancing Mexican army. Just weeks later, the tide turned with victory at San Jacinto (see also page 30). DeWitt colonists fought in this battle as well and celebrated with all Texans the independence from Mexico and their new identity—the Lone Star Republic. Almost 10 years later, on December 29, 1845, Texas became the 28th state admitted to the United States.