

# Life and times of the Baron de Bastrop

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*Posted Nov. 21, 2009 @ 12:01 am*

*Updated Nov 21, 2009 at 8:12 PM*

Bastrop, La.

Monday will mark the 250th birthday of the Baron de Bastrop, a man whose life and accomplishments remain mysterious to this day.

Contemporaries and historians have long debated his true identity. Was he a Prussian soldier of fortune, a French nobleman, or an American adventurer who made pretensions to Dutch nobility to engage in fraudulent colonization schemes? The answer seems to be, none of the above.

Records from the Netherlands show the Baron was born Philip Hendrik Nering Bogel in Paramaribo, Dutch Guiana, on Nov. 23, 1759, the son of Conraed Nering and Maria Bogel. His family moved to Holland in 1764, where he enlisted in the cavalry as a young man.

In April 1782 he married Georgine Lijcklama a Nyeholt. The couple had five children and settled in Leeuwarden, where Bogel served as collector general of taxes for the province of Friesland. Then in 1793, he was accused of embezzlement and fled the country after the Court of Justice of Leeuwarden offered 1,000 gold ducats for his arrest.

Bögel changed his name to Felipe Enrique Neri and adopted the title Baron de Bastrop. The origins of this title are obscure. One historian has speculated it could mean Baron of the Lowlands, from the French trop meaning too and bas meaning low. The title might have been a grammatical mistake, as the proper French title should have been Tropbas.

Somehow the Baron wound up in Louisiana in April 1795. We do not know whether his wife or children ever came here with him. His wife was living in Holland when she died in 1811, and the fate of their five children is unknown.

Spain had acquired the Province of Louisiana in 1762. The Ouachita District at this time encompassed most of north Louisiana and southern Arkansas, and was gradually being settled by Americans from the Natchez Country as the nation moved toward the Revolution.

Under the Royal Order of Aug. 1774, the Spanish Governor-General of Louisiana, Carondelet, had power to grant land to colonizers. Carondelet's goal was to create a buffer zone against American encroachment in the Ouachita District and make the settlers independent of the U.S. through local wheat production.

Spanish officials established the Ouachita Post in 1785 and placed the district under the administration of Commandant Don Juan Filhiol. The post was later called Fort Miro and would grow into the city of Monroe.

In June 1796 the Baron petitioned Carondelet for land 12 leagues square in which he might introduce families to the Ouachita District and promote the cultivation of wheat. Carondelet describes the Baron in a June 2, 1796 letter to Filhiol:

*“The Baron de Bastrop, who is now coming down the river ... appeared to me to have correct principles, and to possess a great share of sense, and the mildness of his temper is such that it has endeared him to all here. You will, no doubt, be highly pleased with him; he will conduce to enliven your situation ...”*

The Baron arrived in the Ouachita and complained the land granted him was populated by natives and subject to overflow. He asked the location be changed so his lands would flank the Ouachita River, Bayou De Siard and Bayou Bartholomew. Carondelet granted the Baron a huge tract encompassing all of the future Morehouse Parish and much of West Carroll Parish.

The Baron also gained water-power rights on De Siard and Bartholomew for the establishment of flour mills and his own monopoly on milling and exporting wheat. In return, the Spanish government expected him to bring in 500 families to settle on the grant, with the Crown underwriting transportation expenses, six months' provisions and seeds for the initial wheat crop.

The Baron went looking for colonists in Philadelphia and Louisville, Ky. He returned to the Ouachita in the spring of 1797 with 17 families comprised of 99 individuals. John Coulter, one of the settlers from Louisville, later produced a document the Baron had given them:

*“I will give to every family, industrious and well recommended, 400 acres of land – take where they please – six months' provisions, all kinds of seeds they want to plant out, and their children (that is to say, boys) will be unregistered; and when they come to age, 400 acres of land will be given to each of them, during this current spring.”*

The colonists came in two parties, one of which was detained at New Madrid for a month waiting for a boat from the Spanish government. The Baron finally bought a barge to bring them to Louisiana.

Also in 1797, the Baron built one flour mill at the mouth of Bayou De Siard. Filhiol gave him additional land at the junction of De Siard and the Ouachita River, which came to be known as Point Plantation. Here the Baron built large warehouses and began a mercantile business and Indian trade. Historians locate the site of this business east of Forsythe Park in Monroe, between Park Avenue and the river. Carondelet, meanwhile, was unhappy with the American colonists and suspended the Baron's project. Financial aid to the settlers was cut off, and Carondelet was replaced by Natchez commandant Manuel de Lemos. The Baron met with de Lemos in New Orleans and proposed to bring in German farmers instead of Americans, but this idea never materialized.

The Baron made a third trip to Kentucky in the summer of 1799, where he had earlier met Abraham Morehouse, a native of New York. The disillusioned Baron sold 1/12 of his grant to Morehouse for 14,500 pesos. The following year, he sold the rest of the grant to Morehouse.

The latter moved to the Ouachita District, established a plantation near Bayou De Siard, and later moved to Prairie Mer Rouge. In Dec. 1799 Morehouse petitioned for the rights and privileges to the Bastrop grant. Then, unable to profit from the grant, Morehouse deeded it back to the Baron in Sept. 1800 and returned to Kentucky for a time.

The Baron proposed to create a trade monopoly in the river valley, bring in more settlers and build Fort Carlos; all of these plans were scrapped when the Ouachita flooded in 1802.

Bastrop mortgaged his whole grant to Stephen Wendt to secure payment of a loan. When the U.S. took possession of Louisiana in Dec. 1803, the Baron executed power of attorney to John Nancarrow to manage his interests here, and moved to Spanish Texas in 1805.

The Baron almost crossed paths with William Dunbar, who was sent by President Jefferson to explore Louisiana in 1804-05. Dunbar notes in his journal that he spent a night at Bastrop's plantation in the Ouachita, but did not meet him. In the Baron's absence, some of the colonists filed suit against him in the County Court of Ouachita for failing to honor his contract on behalf of their children. The suit was not pressed.

A contemporary who had known the Baron in Louisiana describes him as follows:  
*"A few men were inspired to confidence by his exterior appearance: a beautiful figure, a face sweet and calm; his manners were simple and easy, and his conversation was agreeable without being brilliant. He was very affable without apparent pretension; never refusing to oblige a friend, and in his own house the best of hosts. Therefore all of his faults were rather the vices of his spirit. He deceived people everywhere, regardless of their station in life or education. In the United States ... he ruined all who became interested in his projects, which were all marked by disaster ... He went away from Ouachita taking nothing with him and having done more harm than the meanest of men ..."*

Bastrop arrived in Nacogdoches, Texas in Aug. 1805 with three slaves and a French servant. He moved on to San Antonio de Bexar and petitioned the Commanding General at Chihuahua for permission to settle there as a Spanish citizen.

Texas was, at this time, mostly unoccupied and Americans were starting to move in. The Baron tried to start another colony near Bexar, but his efforts were less successful this time. He was appointed Second Alcalde of the Ayuntamiento at Bexar – similar to both mayor and sheriff – because of his fluency in English, Spanish, French and Dutch.

Bastrop petitioned for Spanish citizenship in Feb. 1810. In his sworn statement, he said that he had been engaged in buying goods for the Spanish troops at Bexar and freighting them by mule-team; that he was building a house in Bexar; and that he kept a flock of sheep on the Guadalupe River.

Connecticut businessman Moses Austin came to Bexar in Dec. 1820 and proposed to Gov. Antonio Martinez to bring 300 families into Texas. Martinez, under orders not

to allow any American settlers, told him to leave. Austin was crossing the town plaza when he ran into Bastrop, who he had met in New Orleans some time ago. The Baron invited Austin to stay in his home for six days, and helped persuade Martinez to reconsider the colonization plan. We do not know what caused the governor to change his mind, but historians think Bastrop's influence helped.

Austin's son, Stephen Austin, would later write of Bastrop: *"He invited my father to his room, where lived in great poverty, but his influence with the government was considerable, and was very great with the inhabitants of Bexar who loved him for the benevolence of his disposition. He was a man of education, talents, and experience ..."*

Austin then went to Natchitoches and took ill with pneumonia. He wrote a letter to Bastrop depicting the future of Texas and asked for the Baron to invest in his project. Austin's grant was approved in Jan. 1821; he died five months later.

Stephen Austin inherited his father's 200,000-acre grant between the San Antonio and Brazos rivers. He persuaded Texas to grant him three more contracts for a total of 900 additional families. This was a smart move, as the U.S. was in a time of depression and Americans were eager to start over in a new land.

Bastrop served as Stephen Austin's land commissioner. He received \$127 per league for signing titles, and split his fee with Austin. He also served as interpreter between Austin and Martinez.

Texas began to fill with settlers as Austin and Bastrop offered them land at nominal cost. Acting Gov. Luciano Garcia appointed the Baron as Commissioner of the Austin colonies. He issued land titles and advised settlers on the laws and decrees of Spanish Texas.

In Sept. 1823 the colonists elected Bastrop to the provincial deputation at Bexar. From there, he was appointed as the sole representative from Texas in the Legislature of the Constituent State of Coahuila-Texas of the Mexican Republic. During his time at the capital, Saltillo, the Baron pushed legislation favorable to immigration and played a key role in passage of an act to establish a port at Galveston. As the lone voice of the American settler in Texas, his skills in the art of persuasion came in very handy.

He failed in his efforts to gain religious toleration for Protestants and government subsidization of tobacco. When the legislature discussed the issue of slavery in Texas, Bastrop was absent due to illness from Jan.-Feb. 1827.

The Baron died from the unknown illness on Feb. 23, 1827. His will dictates his body should be "buried in a sacred place, with modesty ..." The President of the legislature named a committee to assist in the interment, which was funded by Juan Antonio Padilla, with whom the Baron had lived while in Saltillo.

The efforts of Bastrop and Morehouse led to growing occupation of the land that became Morehouse Parish by legislative act in March 1844. However, the settlers

here faced thorny questions about legal entitlement to the lands after Louisiana was purchased by the United States.

The U.S. Supreme Court ruled in Dec. 1850 the agreement between Bastrop and the Spanish government did not give him title to the land. The Baron was only the administrator of the grant, and it was the responsibility of the settlers to secure legal titles.

In March 1851 the U.S. Congress enacted legislation so that all settlers who could prove they had occupied and cultivated land in the Bastrop grant for 20 years would receive legal title to the land. With this problem solved, the population of Morehouse Parish grew even faster.

The City of Bastrop became the first incorporated community in the parish when the state legislature passed Act 74 in 1852.

In Texas, the small community of Mina on the Colorado River was re-named Bastrop in 1837, in honor of the man who had aided Moses and Stephen Austin.

Two monuments have been erected to the Baron in Bastrop, Texas. The first was placed in Bastrop State Park in 1936; the second features a bas relief sculpture of the Baron and was placed on the Bastrop County Courthouse grounds the same year.

The second monument reads: *"Let his name bring to mind the friend and advocate of the pioneer in a foreign land."*

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