

A F R O N T I E R W O M A N

# Emily Winters

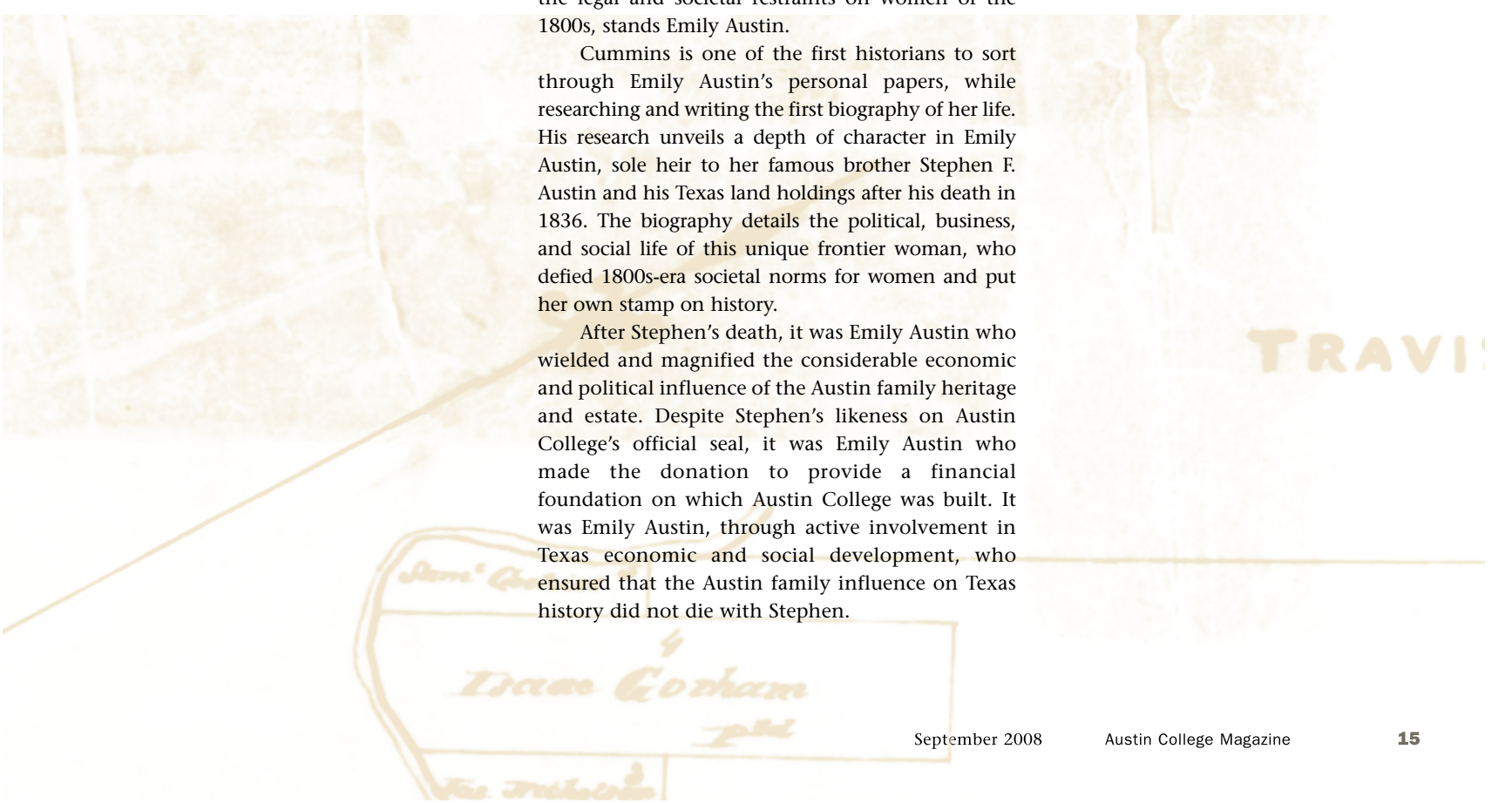
*by Dara McCoy*

**S**tephen F. Austin wasn't the only pioneering spirit in the renowned Austin family. While Stephen led groups of settlers to tame the wilds of the Texas frontier, his sister Emily Austin blazed her own path through a male-dominated era few women of her time dared. Her story will be detailed in a new biography in 2009 by **Light Cummins**, Austin College professor of history. This groundbreaking story reveals that the intertwining storylines of Texas' birth and the Austin family run much deeper than Moses and Stephen F. Austin.

Stephen F. Austin was named the "Father of Texas" at his funeral by Texas history icon Sam Houston and was a significant leader during the Texas Revolution and its early years as a republic. Monuments to Austin include the namesakes of the Texas state capital and two Texas higher educational institutions, as well as a 60-foot statue in Angleton, Texas. His likeness is on Austin College's official seal. Yet, obscured by the enormous shadow cast by one of Texas' most prominent historical figures and by the legal and societal restraints on women of the 1800s, stands Emily Austin.

Cummins is one of the first historians to sort through Emily Austin's personal papers, while researching and writing the first biography of her life. His research unveils a depth of character in Emily Austin, sole heir to her famous brother Stephen F. Austin and his Texas land holdings after his death in 1836. The biography details the political, business, and social life of this unique frontier woman, who defied 1800s-era societal norms for women and put her own stamp on history.

After Stephen's death, it was Emily Austin who wielded and magnified the considerable economic and political influence of the Austin family heritage and estate. Despite Stephen's likeness on Austin College's official seal, it was Emily Austin who made the donation to provide a financial foundation on which Austin College was built. It was Emily Austin, through active involvement in Texas economic and social development, who ensured that the Austin family influence on Texas history did not die with Stephen.



## THE LIFE OF EMILY AUSTIN

**T**hough born in Virginia in 1795, Emily Austin spent most of her adolescent life in Missouri, at that time part of the western U.S. frontier, where her father Moses Austin operated a lead mining business. Emily received a quality education by frontier standards at a Lexington, Kentucky, boarding school for four years and almost two years at the Hermitage Academy, a prestigious girls' school near New York City. It was an education that would serve her well and may have played a part in her concern for education later in life.

After her schooling, Emily returned to Missouri and married a young merchant, James Bryan, who eventually joined her father in the mining business. But a series of events starting in 1819 would thrust Emily Austin into a role that defined the independent woman who would eventually settle in Texas. The Panic of 1819, a depression after the War of 1812, left the Austin

family in financial ruin. In 1821, Moses Austin died after obtaining a grant to bring 300 colonists to Texas. Finishing what his father started was the beginning of Stephen F. Austin's story in Texas.

Emily Austin's story took a different turn. One year after her father's death, James Bryan died, leaving Emily a young widow solely responsible for four children and her aged mother. With the family wealth decimated and Stephen committed to the colonization of Texas, Emily's frontier became providing for her family, a difficult and socially unseemly prospect for a single woman in the 1800s. "In that social construct, southern men

tended to view women of their class as delicate, submissive helpmates," writes Cummins. "Women from Emily Austin's social class in the South related to the world through the framework provided by the men in their lives."

By 1822, that social construct had failed Emily and no man with the ability to provide support remained in her family. "All of the Austins were strong-willed people," Cummins said. "She was no less strong-willed than Moses or Stephen F. Austin, and her years of widowhood created a circumstance where she could no longer worry about acceptability." Survival became Emily's focus, and by that necessity, self-reliance was born. She took in sewing from neighborhood men, opened a small school and charged a modest tuition, and put others in her household to work on various crafts, like bonnets, to sell.

Eventually, Emily remarried, to James Franklin Perry, and at Stephen's beckoning, they moved to Texas in 1831 and established Peach Point Plantation, the place that Stephen also came to call home. Cummins is convinced the "period of constant hardship and material deprivation as the sole breadwinner for her mother and her children" created the Emily Austin who would later be unafraid to manage actively the Austin estate.

## REAL ESTATE, RAILROADS, AND POLITICS

When Stephen F. Austin died in 1836, he left his entire estate not in James Perry's name, nor in the names of Emily's sons, but directly to Emily Austin. "As the sole surviving heir of Moses and Stephen F. Austin, Emily had become one of the largest individual land holders in Texas and indisputably its richest woman," Cummins writes. While Texas law didn't allow married women to enter into contracts in their own name, separate from their husbands, it did allow them to retain personal ownership of land inherited individually, noted Cummins.

Emily's management and enhancement of this inheritance and the Austin family political and social prominence elevated her as a woman ahead of her time. Though legal restrictions on women concerning business and contractual transactions often meant Emily had to act through the signatures of her husband or



*Emily Austin shipped this bed from Missouri to Texas.*

sons when they were grown, Cummins said the letters and records Emily kept revealed her to be very involved in the management of the Austin estate.

Emily was active in urban planning and in selling land — often doing so personally as a real estate agent of sorts — to raise capital and disposable income. She was an investor in the first attempt to build a railroad in Texas. Her son Moses Austin Bryan was the secretary of the first railroad company in Texas, but Emily was the chief stockholder, Cummins explained. Emily even loaned money to Gail Borden to purchase his first herd of dairy cows. “We all know what he did,” Cummins added.

Throughout Stephen’s life as a political leader, Emily entertained guests and organized parties for her unmarried brother. Later, when her son Guy M. Bryan entered politics, Emily retained the role of hostess, seemingly unabashed about sharing her views when the opportunity presented itself, Cummins said. At one point, Emily hosted eventual U.S. president Rutherford B. Hayes, a close friend of Guy Bryan’s, at Peach Point plantation.

Emily also utilized the Austin family wealth and fame in social development through philanthropy. She was instrumental in founding the first Episcopal church in Texas — a denomination she had been a part of prior to marrying Perry — and recruiting its first bishop, Leonidas Polk, who became a famous Civil War general and has the military base of Fort Polk, Louisiana, named after him. She also brought one of the earliest educators to Texas in Thomas J. Pilgrim to teach her own children. Pilgrim founded the first school in Texas with Emily’s support, according to Cummins.

In 1840, Reverend Daniel Baker traveled to Peach Point Plantation, having just left the founding meeting of the Presbytery of Brazos. The idea to found a Presbyterian college in Texas had formed out of that meeting, and Baker had been told to visit Emily Austin about funding. Baker’s visit was successful, as Emily and her husband, James Perry, were devout members of the Presbyterian Church and agreed to support the college. In 1849, Baker renewed his efforts to found the college and Emily honored her earlier pledge by deeding acreage in Brazoria County and all the Austin family’s claims to pension funds or monies due to

Stephen from the State of Texas to the college. It was this gift that made possible the founding of Austin College, one of the earliest colleges in Texas.

Concern for her family was a driving factor in Emily’s life, evidenced by the years she alone supported her family in poverty and by her activity to preserve and grow her inheritance for the future provision of her children. “When she died in 1851, she passed on to her living children the entire Stephen F. Austin estate, which was greatly augmented in size,” said Cummins. In fact, Emily’s Last Will and Testament valued her estate at \$450,000 in 1851 U.S. dollars, which would roughly equal \$12 million in purchasing power by today’s terms, according to Cummins’ calculations.

#### EMILY AUSTIN’S TEXAS?

To diminish Stephen F. Austin’s role in the birth of Texas would be preposterous, but to downplay or ignore the woman who helped raise this “child” diminishes the full legacy of the Austin family. Stephen’s place in Texas history is cemented, but Emily’s equally important role is just beginning to be revealed and understood through efforts like Cummins’ biography.

“Emily Austin was very much her own woman, with strong and well-articulated personal feelings centered on a steely personality bolstered by a rock-solid resolve for action that would enable her to survive through almost six decades of frontier hardship,” writes Cummins. “She was in many ways a very modern woman. As the daughter of Moses Austin and sole heir of her brother Stephen F. Austin, she had political, economic, and social status in Texas, which made her absolutely unique and unprecedented.”

In the 1800s, the fortitude required for a single woman to care for five dependents with no male assistance and later be a guiding hand in the maturation of Texas was no less impressive than the fortitude Stephen displayed in settling the Texas frontier. By shedding light on these lesser known chapters, the story of Texas, the Austin family, and women’s history gains new breadth and depth.



# FROM EMILY AUSTIN TO AUSTIN

## Significant Moments in Women's Rights

**1848** The first women's rights convention is held in Seneca Falls, New York, resulting in a call for equal treatment under the law and voting rights for women.

**1869** Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton form the National Woman Suffrage Association, seeking women's right to vote.

**1893** Colorado is the first state to grant women the right to vote.

**1919** The federal woman suffrage amendment, originally written by Susan B. Anthony and introduced in 1878, is passed by the House and Senate.

**1920** The 19th Amendment to the Constitution grants women the right to vote.

**1960** The Food and Drug Administration approves birth control pills.

**1961** President John Kennedy establishes the President's Commission on the Status of Women and appoints Eleanor Roosevelt as chairwoman.

**1963** Betty Friedan publishes *The Feminine Mystique*. The book becomes a best-seller and galvanizes the modern women's rights movement.

**1963** Congress passes the Equal Pay Act.

**1966** The National Organization for Women is founded with the aim to end sexual discrimination by means of legislative lobbying, litigation, and civil disobedience.

**1971** *Ms. Magazine* is first published, selling 300,000 copies in 8 days; editor Gloria Steinem is launched as an icon of the modern feminist movement.

**1972** The Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) is passed by Congress. Originally drafted in 1923, the amendment died in 1982 when it failed to achieve ratification by a minimum of 38 states.

**1972** The Supreme Court rules that the right to privacy includes an unmarried person's right to use contraceptives.

**1972** Title IX of the Education Amendment bans sex discrimination in schools; participation of women in athletics and professional schools increases dramatically.

**1973** The Supreme Court establishes a woman's right to a safe and legal abortion.

**1996** The Supreme Court rules that the all-male Virginia Military School has to admit women in order to continue to receive public funding. It holds that creating a separate, all-female school will not suffice.

Excerpted from "Women's Rights Movement in the U.S.: Timeline." Infoplease. © 2000-2007 Pearson Education, publishing as Infoplease.

**E**quality for women has come a long way since the days of Emily Austin, but some successful Austin College alumnae understand that it hasn't been too long ago that women were pressing for more individual rights — and that today's women encounter new and different challenges.

**Becky Russell Sykes '67**, executive director of the Dallas Women's Foundation, remembers a time when expectations for women were very different than those for college-aged women today. "I grew up in the '50s and by the time I got to Austin College, the prevailing thought was that girls would marry and have a family, and that was it," she said. "We really didn't have any role models for professional women."

Sykes followed the plan pretty well — marrying and taking a teaching position for a few years before leaving the workforce to start a family — until an economic depression hit Texas in the mid-1980s. "I had to go back to work," Sykes said. "I was 41 or so when this happened, and this was a great shock to my system."

So, Sykes returned to the workforce as an administrative assistant to the man who bought Greyhound Lines and relocated the company to Dallas. The company's violent 1990 drivers strike and Chapter 11 bankruptcy gave Sykes a tough return to the work world. "It was some of the best experience I could have had because I was such a bleeding heart, and I toughened up working in this corporation," Sykes said.

Sykes later worked for a TV station, as a development director for Southern Methodist University's Meadows School of the Arts, and as a non-profit consultant before being contacted by an organization that she had helped start 15 years before. Sykes had served as the first board president of the Dallas Women's Foundation when the organization got its start, addressing inequality of funding between female-focused agencies and male-serving groups like YMCA and Boy Scouts of America. "At that time, less than four percent of annual foundation dollars across the nation were going to programs specifically for women and girls," she said.

Sykes was asked to serve as the interim executive director and in 1998 was hired to fill the role. She said the Dallas Women's Foundation is a place for women to learn about philanthropy and to provide a source of funding for the community's girls and women, who often face unique issues like the scary prospect Emily Austin faced in caring for her children and elderly mother.

Sykes, who deals with women's philanthropy on a daily basis, firmly believes that women, like Emily Austin, have been a driving force in development and progress not only for women's issues but also for a much broader spectrum of issues. "Individual women from the early days of this country have been building America through their volunteer work and through philanthropy for social change," Sykes said. "Women were using their wealth to open doors, and it

# COLLEGE WOMEN OF TODAY

always had to do with elevating people and lifting people out of their circumstances or giving them opportunities.”

**Catherine “Kiki” Moore McLean** ’85, who had a front row seat to an important moment in women’s history this year as a senior campaign adviser for Senator Hillary Clinton, agrees. “One thing women have always been good about doing is finding a way to move themselves forward, even in the era of Emily Austin, who couldn’t work the front channels, but worked the back channels,” she said. (See *The Race for Madam President* in the online magazine.)

**Virginia Smith Volpe** ’90, director for Global Transaction Services at Citi, is part of a generation of women that has had the benefit of women role models. “I am very thankful for the generation before me because they fought tooth and nail, and now I don’t have to,” she said. “You still don’t see women in all positions. It’s a work in progress, but advancement based on merit is happening.”

However, she sees the progress of generations before her and today’s continuing evolution of women’s rights as slightly different. What Volpe finds “breathtaking” is that women are taking success into their own hands and going beyond “glass-ceiling” terminology. “The generation before me defined success by giving up anything necessary to get to the top,” Volpe said. “What I am seeing now, in my generation and beyond, is the ability of women to define success on their own terms. That can mean a combination of marriage, partners, kids, friends, life outside of work, and career.”

Sykes and McLean hope that younger women don’t lose sight of the progress made. “Equality is still an issue and always will be until we have economic parity,” McLean said. “I think we have some generational challenges for women who are growing up not knowing some of the restrictions women ahead of them experienced.”

Sykes, who as a married woman couldn’t own property in her own name by Texas law until the Marital Property Act of 1967, recognizes that the landscape for women has changed dramatically during her lifetime, but hopes the stories of the women who pushed for those changes aren’t forgotten. “Young women and girls need to hear these very inspiring stories about Emily Austin and other women in history,” Sykes said. “When I came along, there was no such thing as women’s history. The great advantage that younger women have now is role models.” 🐾



COURTESY PHOTOS

*Becky Russell Sykes*



*Virginia Smith Volpe*



*Catherine “Kiki” Moore McLean*

**WEBxTRA**  
magazine.austincollege.edu

The Race for Madam President: Reflections from Kiki McLean