

An historical marker for the La Reunion Colony is now sitting west of Hampton Road at a tee-box on the Stevens Park Golf Course. La Reunion colonists grazed sheep here while their village was more than half a mile north. Moved repeatedly over the years, in 1924 *The Dallas Morning News* reported that this monument was originally set beside Westmoreland Road.



## “La Reunion” Colony: Utopian Socialist Neighbors

Jim Barnes -- revised 13 February 2007 -- original version for SPENA Newsletter  
(plus one minor correction 4th October 2010. Picture & caption added, plus minor changes made on 23<sup>rd</sup> April 2017)

“La Reunion” is an important chapter in Dallas history. Nothing of the William Myers Section was ever part of the Colony; but La Reunion was right next door – west of modern Hampton Road, extending from modern Davis north past the Trinity River.

In June of 1855 the vanguard of what would eventually total around six hundred utopian idealists from France, Belgium, and Switzerland arrived in Texas. They were followers of radical new social theories promoted by Charles Francois Fourier. They came to America to establish a new order of communal living; but their ideal society failed almost immediately and many left.

La Reunion’s history is too long to recount here. There has been a great deal written on it already; my favorite is *The White Cliffs of Dallas* by George Santerre (1955). The La Reunion colonists originally all lived together in a communal village of stone buildings located at the brow of the escarpment, just to the west of where Hampton Road starts its long downhill descent. Their historic town site is completely gone, utterly blasted away to quarry limestone for the old cement factory and then paved over by Interstate highway. Colonists used the low flatland of modern West Dallas as their agricultural fields and used our highland prairies for grazing flocks of cattle and sheep. Children spent

nights in the fields and would run for adults with rifles when packs of wild wolves threatened the sheep. Since barbed wire didn't arrive until the 1880s, fences were few. There was no Hampton Road then, and no one was living on the western half of the William Myers Section until the Stevens family arrived fifteen years later, so I imagine the livestock of La Reunion roamed freely across the old bison grassland where Stevens Park houses now reside.

Below is a letter from Max Reverchon (1810-1879), a La Reunion colonist who arrived in 1856 with his eighteen year old son, Julien (1837-1905). They were experts in agriculture and botany. In this letter back to France, Max described our area as it appeared to him in the 1850s. Due to its length, the original text has been heavily edited (...).

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Excerpts from: "Greetings From La Reunion: A Letter from Jacques Maximilien Reverchon"; originally published in *the Bulletin of the European American Colonization Society in Texas*; January 1858; translated by architect James Pratt (copyright 1985):  
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Reunion, 14 July 1857

Sirs:

... I have meditated long, as a man, father of a large family [and] have decided to settle in Texas, if it is possible for a man to take that decision without compromising the future of those who are dear to him. The result of my observations and studies have been an appeal to the members of my family remaining in France, that they should come rejoin us next spring.

... The town of La Reunion is situated on the edge of high plateaus that dominate the vast basin of the Trinity. From this highest point the view is immense. On his feet looking north, the spectator can follow all the contours of the Trinity which is buried in the forest. The course of this river is marked by immense cottonwoods that project 30 to 40 feet above all other trees. On the southern side opening to the west, the slope of the high prairie is very steep; it is hilly irregular and wooded in a most picturesque manner. To the north of the Trinity the land rises in a gentle slope, vast plains, slightly uneven, are found between the forest and the highlands, and form that which is called the Bottoms. The lands of these Bottoms are heavy, dense, exclusively argillaceous and saturated with a humus accumulated for centuries; they are extremely rich.

These lands are unhealthy; the fever is at home there; one can cultivate them almost without danger, but not live in them. They are difficult to work and the great rains quickly compact them; in the great heat there are deep cracks formed and the success of the harvest finds itself compromised. The corn there takes on tree-like proportions; the wheat grows equally well. To say what these lands can produce when we will be a position to work them properly is impossible; we can only assume in advance that the yield will be immense.

... The aspect of the great valley of the Trinity is severe and imposing... On the highlands, or undulating prairies, the impression is not more of the same; there all is more smiling, more gracious, and more appropriate to human proportions. The folds of these vast undulations an infinite number of little streams form naturally to unit with larger ones, to finally flow into the Trinity. All these watercourses are diverse in form and aspect, and do not identically resemble each other; on their banks is crowded a very picturesque woody vegetation, the plant growth following the progress of the gullies. Slight at its beginning, this vegetation soars most splendidly in the lower part of the big gullies and creeks which are the genuine bottoms. A large flaw looms here to darken the description of this beautiful nature which unites so much grace and majesty; it is the absolute lack of water in the major part of the earth.

... The subsoil of the high prairie is calcareous rock. The depth of the soil varies from zero to one meter, but it hardly exceeds that figure; its composition is humus, limestone and clay, but is generally the humus that dominates.

... It is my duty to point out one of the greatest difficulties offered to putting soil into cultivation; it is that in Texas and as I believe in all of North America, the land is overrun by livestock; in a word, the immense herds that wander over the vast territory are never restrained; they roam free. Consequently it is absolutely necessary to fence and fence strongly your field, that in summer resembles an oasis in the middle of the desert, to protect it from direct assaults by the dense masses of bulls, cows, horses, and pigs, above all the pigs who, multiplied to infinity, traverse the woods and plain in numerous herds and know very well how to unit to increase their pressure on one of the weak points of your fence, and to make a large breach, through which is precipitated the roaring torrent, whinnying and grunting. If you are not sufficiently alert to drive out the intruders, all hope of a harvest is soon destroyed. The fences become more and more expensive as the forests are consumed (and God knows with what vandalism they are treated!); many localities will experience the impossibility of farming for lack of means of fencing.

... Let us finish, then, these few general glimpses and approach the subject of crops [being] cultivated or to be cultivated here. To the actual state of things, in the first place wheat and corn arise. Wheat grows equally well on the high and low prairie; it does not produce much hay but the ear is fine, the grain well nourished, very heavy, giving excellent flour. As to the specific crop, the wheat yields from 20 to 22 bushels per acre; in proportions to the cultivation being improved, it will yield 15, 35, and even 40.

... Rye and oats also thrive with fairly good success. I believe that one should give preference to barley whose product, very superior in quality and in quantity, will be employed perfectly for the nourishment of cattle and horses, as that [method] is practiced in Algeria, and with which moreover one will be able to make excellent beer, which is not to scorn. However, the cultivation of oats in the bottoms as forage, cut green, can be of great use. The corn, in my opinion ought to be put in the first rank. In the bottoms, it can reach 4 or 5 meters, and produce 3 or 4 big ears; on the high prairie, a well cared for cultivation will carry it to 3 meters; it gives 2, 3, and 4 ears. Forty-five bushels an acre is not exaggerating and, if you want, you can combine with it another crop, 500 or 600 beautiful watermelons that will have taken advantage of their guardian shelter.

Wheat, barley, corn, rye, and oats that's all for the cereals. Potatoes until now have not produced good results. ... Sweet potatoes will produce a rich yield as soon as we will have gained the necessary experience to cultivate them properly. All the French beans have only produced minimal results. ... Cantaloupe and watermelons thrive wonderfully, particularly the latter that produce magnificent and delicious yields, invaluable in the scorching climate.

All the cucumber family will thrive if it were not for the myriads of stink bugs and other insects that can destroy in some hours the most beautiful and vigorous plants. I can guarantee the success of cabbage, which resists dryness very well. ... The carrots and beets also thrive. The turnips become magnificent provided that it rains a little at the end of August or beginning of September, in order to allow their sowing.

In spring we can have good and beautiful salad greens without watering. During the month of March, irrigation or not, it is fine; the asparagus and artichokes will grow very well. This year I have gotten some heads of garlic; superior to all that I have harvested in France.

... As for tree cultivation, only the peach is cultivated; it produces enormous yields of good quality, when it escapes the freezes in spring. In the forest we find the pecan, plum and persimmon trees that give edible fruits. ... Add to this ... the almond and fig trees, when we will have been able to get them: plums, almonds, figs – here is a trinity that would be enough to make the fortune of a country.

I have kept the vineyard for the closing. ... I may be mistaken, but in writing this word, it seems to me that I have just unlocked for all the world a mine more superior than that of Sacramento: the Texas limestone soils. The wines of Texas are destined to take their place among the finest wines of the world, and to open a new source of enjoyment for gourmets. ... In torrents the dollars will flood the coffers of those who first will be able to deliver to America the noble Texas wine....

Signed: Max Reverchon