

'Icaria," a Footnote to the Peters Colony

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INHISBOOK, *The Peters Colony of Texas*, Mr. Seymour Connor gives a history of the Peters Colony Land Company in which he describes the strange assortment of men who formed it, the various contracts awarded to the company giving it a wider and wider area of exploitation, and lists the settlers awarded contracts under Peters Colony grants.

The Peters Colony was the first of the "empresario" land and emigration companies established in the Republic of Texas under the so-called "law of February, 1841." The purpose of this law was to encourage emigration to the new Republic by making it as easy as possible to get low-cost land for settlement. This law authorized the President of the Republic to enter into an empresario contract with the persons named in the law, and a more unusual group of land speculators could hardly have been found. All twenty were strangers to Texas, and eleven of them were Englishmen. In addition, they were musicians, not businessmen. William Smalling Peters, one of the Englishmen, seems to have been the organizing force behind the petition to the Texas Congress. At least, his name headed the list of petitioners, and the colony was known from the beginning as the "Peters Colony." *

The Peters Colony was never a great success as an emigration company, but they did manage to get their contract renewed four times, each time for a larger chunk of north Texas. All contracts with this Company were to expire on July 1, 1848, which was also the date of the end of the empresario land companies in Texas. The brief history of the Peters Colony has been well documented with the exception of the last group to contract for land from the Company. This was a group of

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1. Seymour Connor, *The Peters Colony of Texas. A History and Biographical Sketches of the Early Settlers* (Austin: The Texas State Historical Association, 1959), pp. 22-23, 28.

Frenchmen who called themselves Icarians. They were followers of the French socialist Etienne Cabet, who had bought the land for the purpose of establishing there the perfect community, "Icaria." The only reference to "Icaria" in Connor's book is a footnote: "Nor does any statistical evidence remain of the French communistic settlement at New Icaria ." ²

There seem to be several reasons why so little is known of the Icarian settlement in Texas. In the first place, the Icarians were French, and all their records and reports were written in French. Second, there is no copy of their contract in the extant Peters Colony files. This is probably due to the fact that in July 1852, a raid was made on the home and office of one Henry O. Hedgcoxe, the Colony's agent in Texas. All his files and records were confiscated by disgruntled settlers and deposited in the Dallas County court house. They were apparently destroyed when the court house burned some years later. In any case, they were never seen again. ³

The Icarian footnote to the Peters Colony began in 1847. With his time running out and a lot of land still on his hands, William Peters returned to England, where he tried to generate some interest in emigration to Texas. He even went to Robert Owen, the eminent English socialist, and tried to interest him in land for another "New Harmony." Owen, however, was involved with other plans and could not accept. Instead, he referred Peters to his friend and disciple, Etienne Cabet, who just happened to be in England consulting with Owen about site possibilities for his own Utopian communistic community. ⁴

Cabet had become acquainted with Owen during a political exile in England some years before. Upon his return to France in 1841, he had published his novel, *Voyage en Icarie*, ⁵ in which he set forth a perfect community named "Icaria," where all men enjoyed economic equality. This Utopia was an advanced industrial community, which provided its inhabitants not just with basic needs, but with all the comforts of a high order of civilization. The book was an instant success; it became a bestseller and was translated into English, German, and Spanish. The dissatisfied workers of France seized on it as the perfect expression of the kind of life they wanted. Groups of Icarians sprang up in every city in France, and for the next seven years, Cabet turned out reams of fatherly advice to them in his newspaper, *Le Populaire*.

As dissatisfaction with the monarchy of the bourgeois king, Louis-Philippe, continued to increase, together with the number of unemployed,

2. Ibid., p. 108n.

3. Ibid., pp. 142,149.

4. Albery Shaw, *Icaria. A Chapter in the History of Communism* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1885), pp. 22-23.

5. Etienne Cabet, *Voyage en Icarie* (Paris: Bureau du *Populaire*, 1846).

the workers of France felt more and more oppressed. The Icarians themselves were persecuted for preaching a new form of government. By 1847, the demands of his followers had grown to such a pitch that Cabet felt compelled to make plans to establish an Icarian community outside France, in a country where they could find the freedom to practice what he preached.

Thus it was that Cabet decided to go to London to discuss American site possibilities with his old friend Robert Owen. Owen had been to America several times, and had even been to Texas. He spoke highly of Texas and put Cabet in touch with William S. Peters.

Cabet was greatly impressed by Peters, who told him that his company had almost ten million acres of land along the Red River. Cabet, dazzled at the thought of so much land at such low cost, signed an agreement with Peters in London, on January 3, 1848. The English copy of this agreement was taken to Texas by the First Advance Guard of Icarians, who apparently gave it to Henry Hedgcoxe as proof of their right to settle the land.⁶ This English copy was undoubtedly lost with the rest of Hedgcoxe's papers, but Cabet kept a French translation. Re-translated, it reads:

Peeters [*sic*] Concession

London, January 3, 1848

I, William Snelling Peeters [*sic*], founder of the Red River and Trinity colony, in Texas, member of the Emigration and Land Company of Texas, and land-owner,

On this day, make over to M. Cabet of Paris (lawyer, former procurer-general, chief and director of a great association of Icarian communists, all men of good and scientific education, of France, England, etc., etc., desiring to settle on a part of the lands situated at the eastern limits of the above-mentioned Colony), the following proposition:

He can settle there as many families as possible, conforming to the conditions of the concession made to the aforementioned Company by the government of Texas, that is to say before the first of July, 1848; and for each family, he will receive 320 acres or a half-section of land, and in addition, as a bonus, 40 acres (which makes 360 acres per family) and 160 acres for each unmarried man over 17 years of age. By family is meant a man and his wife, with or without children, a widower or widow with two or more children. Two young unmarried men also comprise a family.

The preceding proposition is firm and certain according to the act of the Congress of the Republic of Texas, and according to the powers vested in me by the Company and the Directors named to conclude and consummate the contract, conforming to the act of Congress.

Hereinafter are the proposals that I strongly recommend to the Company as being just and necessary (I do not have the shadow of a doubt that the Company will approve them immediately) and in conformance with the following conditions:

6. *Proces et Acquitement de Cabet, Accuse d'escroquerie au sujet de Vemigration icarienne. Histoire d'Icaria* (Paris: Bureau du Populaire, 1884), p. 62.

M. Cabet will pay two dollars per acre for the sections reserved by the government on the assumption that we will obtain them at one dollar per acre; if, on the contrary, we obtain them for a half dollar, M. Cabet consents to pay a dollar and a half per acre.

He will receive additional concessions from the government, to wit: a section for each 100 families for the erection of a school and a church, at the government price, which is at the rate of twelve dollars per section.

The land given will be taken in whole or in part, according to M. Cabet's desire, and the sections reserved by the government as belonging to the Company, can be exchanged, according to the wishes and at the mutual agreement of the two parties.

Finally, if M. Cabet should desire to buy a portion of land belonging to the Company independently of the sections reserved, the same price of two dollars per acre (or less if possible) will be acceptable and agreeable to the Company.

M. Cabet will begin to colonize between the 97th degree of longitude west of Greenwich, or twenty degrees longitude west of Washington, and the western limit of the colony.

Signed: William Snelling Peeters [*sic*]

For Richard COAD and Sons, signed: Richard COAD [*sic*], European agent for the Emigration and Land Company of Texas.

Witness: John Inarriot DEUSLE [*sic*], done at Meuve, 4 Bridgestreet and 23 Lincolns Inn Fields.⁷

Back in France, Cabet and his Icarian followers made rapid preparations to take advantage of what seemed to be a magnificent opportunity. On February 3, 1848, a group of sixty-nine, called by Cabet the First Advance Guard, set sail from Le Havre. These men, whose purpose was to scout the land and choose the site for the first settlement of the families who were to follow in several months, carried with them tools, equipment and supplies. Their ship, the *Rome*, landed in New Orleans on March 27, 1848, and was greeted by the sound of cannon, which they took to be a salute to their arrival. Instead, it was a salute heralding the Revolution of 1848, which deposed the monarchy in France forever and ushered in the Second Republic. This revolution at home changed the picture for Icaria as a community, and for many Icarians as individuals. Why leave France, when profound changes were being made in the political situation, which would, hopefully bring about changes in the economic picture? Some of the Icarians defected immediately, but other converts were picked up from among Frenchmen living in New Orleans. Most of the group went to Shreveport by steamer, then overland to a site they had picked in Denton County, near present-day Justin.

As we all know, the Icarian colony in Texas failed. There were many

7. Jules Prudhommeaux, *Icarie et son fondateur Etienne Cabet. Contribution a l'etude du Socialisme Experimental* (Paris: Edouard Comely et Cie., 1907), pp. 613-614.

reasons for this failure, but one was undoubtedly the fact that the Icarians just didn't have enough time. They did not arrive at their site until May 1848. They worked hard against the July 1st deadline, building cabins and clearing land, but there was a limit to what they could accomplish. Their equipment was not suitable, supplies ran short, and the men fell ill with fever. They left Texas in August, abandoning forever their "million acres on the Red River."⁸

It was not, however, the end of the matter for the Peters Colony. In October 1848, William Peters tried to gloss over the failure and again, in a letter full of self-pity, made Cabot another offer. Translated from the French it reads:

My dear Mr. Cabot,

Since your departure from London, unusual things have happened to thwart your first attempts and prevent you from taking possession of that vast terrain, which I procured for myself at a great expense and placed entirely at your disposal. Never-the-less, a certain portion of land was ceded to you, where the first foundations of the glorious Icaria were laid. Oh, that you were not able to send, in time, about ten thousand souls, while this district was still open to you, and when the land had been ceded to you for nothing!

This set-back has deeply affected me and upset my own affairs; for, in order to procure for you the means and the space necessary to put your magnificent plans into effect in a region both so beautiful and so rich, I neglected to look after my own interests, just so that the world could receive from you these important moral lessons for which it has such an urgent need.

No matter what the reason, men of politics do not put themselves out nor so easily renounce their own interests as some do. And today the question is, how to make good on the initial disasters and attenuate the misfortune which has resulted from them? For the mutual good of both contracting parties, I reply: I have in this colony properties worth 10,000 pounds sterling, and that is all that I possess. In addition, there are six members of my family whose properties, together, equal mine in extent. We are, then, in a position to furnish you with as much land as you could desire for a great number of years.

Each quarter, you could make me a payment, which would enable us to live and furnish us the means of keeping a house, both for myself as well as for those members of my family who depend on me. Then you would be permitted to take possession of alternate, prime sections which are next to yours, and to build as many cities, towns and villages as you pleased.

Ten thousand square acres of land have been ceded to us for each 100 families that we introduced. We have, in addition, the alternate half-sections that we will take in the middle of yours, in order to sell them to you and to cede them to you, so that you can round out your holdings.

This land, which produces two crops per year, will give you a return of a

8. Shaw, *Icaria*, Chapter II.

hundred to one, I dare even say a thousand to one, and will make the Icarian Society the richest and most flourishing on the globe.

/s/ Peters

p.s. I estimate that, in our capacity as acting agent in our great Company, we can, between my sons and myself, round up 450,000 acres of land. Last year, I bought 100,000 more acres, but I cannot give you the exact total. For the present, this is of no consequence. I will make every effort so that your society can increase rapidly and all your projects can be realized. We still understand each other perfectly, and the principles of Brotherhood will always reign between us.⁹

By then, however, Cabet was in no position to take advantage of Peters' offer. He and his group, which he had joined in New Orleans late in 1848, were on their way to Nauvoo, Illinois, to take possession of the former Mormon settlement there.

As for the land in Texas, some of the claims were granted according to the contract between Cabet and Peters. The claims are noted in Connor's work, but the connection with Icaria could not be made for lack of information. By looking at the French records, we learn that three members of the First Advance Guard decided to stay in Texas. They were Luc Bourgeois, Etienne (or Eli) Drouard, and Adolphe Gouhenant.

Luc Bourgeois, variously described as a tailor, farmer, baker, cook, carter and sailor,¹⁰ was issued a land certificate by Thomas William Ward in 1850. It was sold unlocated and later patented in Denton County (Fannin Third Class No. 1371)¹¹ At some point, Bourgeois moved to Dallas, where he was identified as a tailor by Victor Considerant in his book *Au Texas*, describing the trip he made to that state in 1853.¹² Bourgeois was also encountered in Dallas by Arthur Lawrie, a member of the scouting party led by Considerant's agent Francois Cantagrel to choose the land for "La Reunion." Lawrie mentions Bourgeois in the journals he kept on his trip to Northeast Texas in 1854-55.¹³ Bourgeois helped set up buildings for the Fourierist Phalanx, "La Reunion," which Considerant founded near Dallas in 1855, and he is mentioned several times in *Nauffrage au Texas*, Dr. Savardin's account of the colony's disasters, as having been of great help to the "Reunion"

9. *Notre proces en escroquerie, ou poursuites dirigees contre les citoyens Cabet et Krolikowski a l'occasion de la fondation d'Icarie* (Paris: Bureau du Populaire, 1894), p. 41.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 91.

11. The original of this grant and all others cited in this paper are on file in the Texas Land Office, Austin, Texas.

12. Victor P. Considerant, *Au Texas* (Paris: Librairie Phalansterienne, 1854), p. 59.

13. V. E. Gibbens, ed., "Lawrie's Trip to Northeast Texas, 1854-1855," *Southwestern Historical Quarterly* 48, no. 2 (October 1944): 238-253.

settlers.¹⁴ Bourgeois last appears in the 1860 Census for Dallas County as married, but with no children.¹⁵

Etienne (or Eli) Drouard, a member of the First Advance Guard,¹⁶ was issued a certificate for 320 acres by Thomas William Ward in 1850 (Fannin Third Class No. 1716) and sold his patent in 1854. It is interesting to note that he and Luc Bourgeois were issued their certificates on the same day at Alton, Texas, and acted as witnesses for each other.

Adolphe Gouhenant, a painter¹⁷ and the ill-fated leader of the First Advance Guard, was issued a certificate for 320 acres by Thomas William Ward in 1850, and later patented two 160-acre tracts in Tarrant County (Robertson Third Class Nos. 1681 and 3362). Gouhenant had been Cabet's cherished disciple in France for many years before he was picked to be the leader of the first group to go to Texas. He seems to have done his job capably until suddenly, in July 1848, at Icaria, he was shorn of his blond hair and curly beard, of which he was very proud, and kicked out of the community forever. His trunk had been searched and letters, decided to be incriminating, were found. He was "accused of being a traitor, a police agent, convicted of having offered his services to one of the prefects of Louis-Philippe in some letters signed by him and discovered at the prefecture after the February Revolution."¹⁸ He, too, went to Dallas, and was encountered by Victor Considerant, whom he convinced by his personal charm and powers of persuasion that he had been badly mistreated by Cabet. At first, Considerant seemed agreeable to champion his fellow-countryman, but after a while he let the matter drop. Gouhenant was lauded in the first edition of *Au Texas*, and not mentioned in the second.¹⁹ Gouhenant was also encountered by Lawrie,²⁰ and he is mentioned unfavorably by Dr. Savardin, who did not mince words and accused Gouhenant of unduly influencing Considerant to his own advantage.²¹

14. Eloise Santerre, "Reunion. A Translation of Dr. Savardin's *Un Naufrageau Texas*, with an Introduction to Reunion and a Biographical Dictionary of the Settlers," (M. A. Thesis, Southern Methodist University, 1936).

15. U.S. Census, Dallas County, 1850-1860.

16. *Notre proces en escroquerie*, p. 91.

17. *Proces du Communisme a Toulouse avec les portraits des douze accuses et la vue de l'audience, dessines par Leon Soulie* (Toulouse et Paris: Bureau du *Populaire*, 1843). This trial, in which Gouhenant and eleven others were tried for sedition, gives the most complete biographical information on the leader of the First Advance Guard.

18. *Proces et acquirement de Cabet*, pp. 68-69.

19. Considerant, *Au Texas*, p. 190. This notice was not included in the 1855 second edition.

20. Gibbens, "Lawrie's Trip to Northeast Texas, 1854-1855," p. 248.

21. Santerre, "Reunion," pp. 36-37.

In addition to the three who stayed in Texas, heirs of seven other men who died on this venture were also awarded land.

Etienne Barroux, a lock-smith and mechanic,²² died on the retreat from Texas in August 1848. His heirs were issued 320 acres by the Dallas County Court in November 1853 (Nacogdoches Third Class Nos. 2944 and 3093).

Jean (or John) Louis Boissonnet was a member of the First Advance Guard, but it is not known just when he died. However, his heirs were issued 320 acres by the Dallas County Court (Robertson Third Class No. 2507).

A cabinet-maker named Guerin was the third man to die at Icaria, before the retreat.²⁴ His heirs were issued a certificate for 320 acres by the Dallas County Court (Robertson Third Class No. 4566), and the land was patented in 1874.

P. Guillaume Guillot, a pastry-cook from Angers, who "sang the praises of Icaria loudest, who most actively exhorted his family to come join him in September, died the first" at Icaria.²⁵ His heirs were issued 160 acres in Dallas County in 1853 (Robertson Third Class No. 4665). This was sold in 1858.

Henri Levy (or Levi) was another of those who died on the retreat from Texas. A native of Rheims, he wrote a diary of the trip from New Orleans to Icaria.²⁶ His heirs were issued a certificate for 320 acres by the Dallas County Court (Robertson Third Class No. 2508).

Juan Roviera, a Spaniard, was one of the two doctors sent along to keep the members of the First Advance Guard in good health. He seems to have suffered spells of madness and finally committed suicide in New Orleans, after the retreat and after he had been joined by his wife and young child.²⁷ His heirs were issued a certificate for 320 acres by the Dallas County Court (Nacogdoches Third Class No. 2899).

Henri Sauge (or Sauger) was the fourth man to die at Icaria.²⁸ His heirs were issued a certificate for 320 acres by the Dallas County Court (Robertson Third Class No. 2512).

All these claims, except that of Guillot (not ascertained), were issued at the November 1853 term of the Dallas County Court, and the same lawyer, John C. McCoy, acted for the heirs.

22. *Notre proces en escroquerie*, p. 91.

23. *Ibid.*, p. 99.

24. *Ibid.*, p. 92.

25. *Défense du Citoyen accusé d'escroquerie devant La Cour d'Appel de Paris (11 December 1850)*. (Paris: Bureau du *Popukire*, 1851), p. 16.

26. "Henri Levi's *The Perilous Voyage to Icaria* (1848)," trans. and ed. Jane DuPree Begos, *Communal Societies* 3 (1983): 147-157.

27. *Proces et acquittement de Cabet*, p. 115.

28. *Notre proces en escroquerie*, p. 99.

And so ends the footnote to the Peters Colony—sadly, in disillusionment, death and dispersal.

As we all know, Icaria did not end in Texas. As mentioned previously, the group went first to Nauvoo, Illinois, where they found a community made to order by the departing Mormons. Utopia continued to be illusive, however, and the group soon split into factions. Cabot took his loyal followers to establish a new community at Cheltenham, near St. Louis, but he died there, a disillusioned old man, in 1856.

A new community shortly evolved in Corning, Iowa, but that, too, split into factions. Then, from the Corning group, there evolved one that called itself "Jeune Icarie," Young Icaria. Optimistic with what looked to be a bright future, the group slowly fell into debt from which it could not extricate itself except, it was felt, by relocation. The most enthusiastic headed for California, and there created "Icaria Speranza." Finally, "Icaria Speranza," too, sank under the load of debt, and the insistence that members speak and write fluent French kept away those who might have provided the energy for a fresh start.²⁹

Thus ended one man's dream of community, whose motto "All for One, and One for All" stirred the imagination of thousands.

29. Robert V. Hine, *California's Utopian Colonies* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983 [1953]), chapter 4.