Why Did Texas Almost Fail as a Spanish Colony?

In the summer of 1519, four Spanish ships sailed up the eastern coast of the Gulf of Mexico. Led by Alonso Álvarez de Pineda, the men on these ships became the first Spaniards—in fact, the first white men—ever to see the land that would become Texas. Nine years later, Cabeza de Vaca and a handful of shipwreck survivors became the first Spaniards to actually live on Texas soil. After years in slavery, Cabeza walked to Mexico City, where he told his story and shared his dream of founding a Spanish colony in this huge new land to the north.

Cabeza imagined a population of Spanish settlers who would treat the Native Americans as friends. He saw them as future trading partners and future Spanish citizens. In this respect, Cabeza was a man way ahead of his time. Cabeza’s dream never came to be. At the time, Spain was more interested in gold than colonization. Soon after Cabeza left Mexico for Spain, Spanish conquistador Francisco Coronado was sent north in search of treasure. He and his army made it as far as modern-day Kansas, but came up empty. Instead of gold, Coronado found only Indians who lived in houses made of hide and, in his words, “wander around with the cows.”

In 1607 Spain established its first northern settlement in Santa Fe, New Mexico. It was not until 1682 that it built its first Texas settlement at Ysleta, near modern-day El Paso. Finally, around 1690, the Spanish turned an eye to the east. French settlers were moving into east Texas from Louisiana, and this made Spain nervous.

To scare off the French, Spain had a plan. The government would establish Catholic missions near Indian settlements in east Texas. The Franciscan friars running these missions would Christianize the Indians, teach them Spanish and encourage them to farm. At the same time, soldiers would be sent north to build and occupy presidios near the missions. In a few years, the Indians would become good Spanish citizens. Then, as land around the missions became safe, settlers from Mexico and Spain would move into Texas.

In some ways, the plan worked. Missions were established and presidios were built. Some settlers did arrive. But as a colony, Texas did not prosper. The famous Rubi Report of 1768, requested by the king of Spain himself, recommended that Spain abandon Texas, close most of its missions, and pull back its presidios to a line along the Rio Grande. Only the strong community around San Antonio would be maintained. Not all of the Rubi Plan was carried out, but it tells us how the Spanish government felt. When Mexico claimed independence from Spain in 1821, Texas had few Spanish citizens and most of the missions had been abandoned.

This Mini-Q asks you to determine what went wrong with the Spanish plan. That is, “Why did Texas almost fail as a Spanish colony?”