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Victor Considerant and the Failure of La Réunion

RONDEL V. DAVIDSON*

While traveling from Dallas, Texas, to Fort Worth via the Dallas-Fort Worth Turnpike, one crosses about 1,200 acres of land on the outskirts of West Dallas which once accommodated an experiment to fulfill one of the nineteenth century's most noble dreams—the dream that man could establish social, economic, and political justice through some type of communal association. Today the area is bounded on the north by the Trinity River, on the south by the Old Fort Worth Highway, on the east by Hampton Road, and on the west by Westmoreland Avenue. Perhaps ironically, this territory now harbors an industrial park with all its pollution and a black ghetto complete with a de facto-segregated high school and a government housing project.

Over one hundred years ago Victor-Prosper Considerant (1808-1893) 1 a leading French socialist and political figure, attempted to found a utopian community on the soil of northeastern Texas based upon the central ideas of another French socialist, François-Marie-Charles Fourier (1772-1837). 2 From all appearances, Considerant was the ideal person to organize such an endeavor. A former engineer in the

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1 It must be noted that Victor Considerant's surname does not have an acute over the e. Because French rules indicate that an accent should appear over the e, numerous American historians have inadvertently placed one there. Since Considerant had difficulty in his own lifetime getting some of his contemporaries to omit the acute, the error is understandable. This article, however, will utilize the correct spelling, Considerant and not Considérant.

2 The Fourierist movement, founded upon the ideas of Charles Fourier, became one of the leading socialistic movements in western Europe during the period from 1837 to 1849. Brilliant, but eccentric and reclusive, Fourier advocated a form of utopian socialism based upon communal type experiments which he called phalansteries. Because of the tedious, ambiguous, and often preposterous nature of his writings, Fourier's ideas did not take hold during his lifetime. Frenchmen could not comprehend his detailed philosophical discussions regarding cosmology, and many were repelled by some of his fantastic ideas, such as the advocacy of free love and his famous prophecy that the sea would turn into lemonade. The popularity of Fourierism during the thirteen years following his death can be attributed largely to the leadership of Victor Considerant and his followers in the Fourierist school. For the most useful account of Fourier's ideas in English see Frank E. Manuel, The Prophets of Paris (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1962), 195-248. For a more comprehensive account in French see Hubert Bourgin, Fourier, Contribution à l'étude du socialisme français (Paris, 1905).
French army who held the rank of captain, Victor Considerant had become disillusioned with military life and deeply concerned with the political and social injustices spawned by a corrupt monarchy and by laissez-faire capitalism in early nineteenth-century France. At the age of twenty-four, he abandoned a secure army position for an uncertain career as a socialist writer and propagandist. During the period from 1837 to 1849, his ideas and activities significantly affected the political and intellectual developments in Europe generally and in France particularly. As the leading propagandist and director of the Fourierist school, after the death of Charles Fourier in 1837, Considerant, more than any other individual, popularized Fourierism. He authored over twenty books, numerous pamphlets and essays, and edited three newspapers. His publications, particularly Destinée sociale (1836–1844) and the Exposition abrégée du système phalanstérien de Fourier (1845), brought the master's ambiguous and sometimes preposterous ideas out of obscurity, rationalized them, and placed them before the public. Under Considerant's leadership, the École sociétaire, the official Fourierist society, organized branch societies in almost every major city in Europe and in the United States and disseminated propaganda throughout the world. His writings influenced such figures as Karl Marx, Wilhelm Weitling, Alexander Herzen, Louis Blanc, and Fyodor Dostoevsky. His ideas, along with those of other nineteenth-century socialists, laid the basis for the twentieth-century democratic socialist movement.

Prior to the Revolution of 1848, forces threw Considerant into the political arena, first as a member of the Municipal Council of Paris and then as a candidate for the Chamber of Deputies. Despite his avowed pacifism, his daily newspaper, Démocratie pacifique (1843–1849), helped to create an atmosphere of rebellion on the eve of the Revolution in 1848. After the abdication of Louis Philippe, his activities became more consequential as he served the Second Republic in the Constitutional Assembly, the Luxembourg Commission, the Constitutional Committee, the Committee of Work, and the National Assembly. In spite of his diligent efforts to bring social democracy to France, Considerant's ideas, as those of most of the socialists in the assembly, were buried by the resurfacing Right. Fearing that Louis Napoleon would

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abolish democracy and create another empire in France. Considerant bitterly opposed his campaign for election to the presidency in 1849. After the election of Napoleon, he and Alexandre-Auguste Ledru-Rollin led the opposition against the Bonaparte demagogue which resulted in the peaceful, but abortive, rebellion of June, 1849. On November 15, 1849, the High Court of Justice convicted Considerant of treason against the Second Republic, but he escaped across the border to Belgium. Under these circumstances, he, along with his wife and mother-in-law, came to the western frontier of the United States to found a communal experiment. After the collapse of La Réunion, the colony in Texas, he moved to San Antonio where he resided in obscurity until 1869. While in San Antonio, he published an interesting and prophetic analysis of society in Mexico, particularly attacking the institution of peonage, entitled *Mexique, Quatre lettres au Maréchal Bazaine* (1868). In 1869 Napoleon III lifted the ban on Considerant, and he returned to Paris where he lived the remainder of his life as a teacher and socialist sage of the Latin Quarter. He died in Paris in 1893, a citizen of the United States.

Victor Considerant's Fourierist writings during the period from 1832 to 1848 laid the basis for the social, economic, and political structure of the future Texas colony. He believed that contemporary society had disrupted and prohibited the basic human drives to unite and to cooperate and, thereby, had alienated individuals and social classes. Man and his passions were basically good, but social and economic institutions were corrupt. Several years before Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels published their famous manifesto, Victor Considerant exposed such defects of unregulated capitalism as the creation of monopolies, the destruction of small industry and agriculture, the concentration of wealth and political power, overproduction, depressions, cyclical economic tendencies, imperialism, and class warfare.

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4 Much of the material presented herein is drawn from Rondel V. Davidson, "Victor Considerant: Fourierist, Legislator, and Humanitarian" (Ph.D. dissertation, Texas Tech University, 1970). For the most useful sources in French see Hubert Bourgin, *Victor Considerant, son œuvre* (Paris, 1909), and Dommanget, *Victor Considerant*.

Although Considerant's analysis of nineteenth-century society was almost identical with that of Marx, their solutions were radically different. According to Considerant, the answer could be found in a pacific and evolutionary reorganization of society. He believed that Fourier's phalanstery was the social and economic unit which would provide the solution. In the phalanstery approximately three hundred families would combine their efforts to provide sufficient food, clothing, housing, education, and social enrichment. Although everyone would be required to work, all vocational endeavors would be rotated among the various inhabitants according to preference and natural aptitude. The principal activities would be those of agriculture, manufacturing, commerce, and domestic economy; art, science, and education; self-government and social intercourse. Regarding the political structure, Considerant propounded a system of pure democracy based upon universal suffrage and direct legislation.\(^6\)

Considerant made it clear that Fourier's system was not a form of communism. He believed in equality of opportunity but not in equality of remuneration. These communes were to depend upon private capital, and private property holdings could be retained. The phalanstery would serve simply as the tenant. Profits would be distributed through a system of dividends allocated to the members in proportion to the amounts of capital, skill, and labor contributed by each. At the end of the year, the value of all production would be divided into three-twelfths for skill, four-twelfths for capital, and five-twelfths for labor.\(^7\)

Although Victor Considerant remained a Fourierist throughout his lifetime, during the period 1843–1849 he began to deviate slightly from pure Fourierism. He came to realize that nineteenth-century man was not fully prepared intellectually or emotionally for a viable experiment in phalanstery living. First, the nation must be brought to an improved state of social harmony through a system of political democracy and government regulation and control of the economy. Man must be educated and prepared through an evolutionary process. As Considerant became increasingly involved in French politics, he advocated such practical reforms as state welfare programs for the poor, the orphaned, and the aged; government ownership of the means of communications and transportation, particularly the railroads; a state system of long-term, low-interest rate loans; arms reduction; separation of church and state; freedom of the press; free and compulsory public school education; state


\(^7\) Ibid., I, 170–195.
cultural programs; penal reforms; the unification of Europe; universal suffrage, including women; and female social and economic emancipation. He was the only member of the national assembly in 1848 who demanded that women be given the vote in the new French constitution. Throughout this period he consistently refused to associate with any communal experiment.\(^8\)

Considerant did not accept the idea of undertaking a communal experiment until after he was driven into exile, and he was experiencing a very unhappy and frustrated existence in Belgium. During these days of exile and political suppression, from July, 1849, to November, 1852, Considerant, little by little, returned to pure Fourierism. He reluctantly decided to attempt an experimental phalanx. Because of the reaction which was sweeping Europe, he could not consider France or Belgium for an experiment. For a time he favored Switzerland, but he could muster no support for an undertaking there. With much pain, he came to realize that no European country would support or tolerate a Fourierist experiment.\(^9\)

Albert Brisbane, one of Considerant’s oldest disciples in America and one of the leaders of the Fourierist experiment at Brook Farm, Massachusetts, had pressed him for many years to establish a community in the United States. Brisbane argued that the United States had more fertile land, a more active and experimental population, and fewer prejudices than Europe. Considerant had always rejected Brisbane’s line of reasoning, contending that an experiment must be conducted in the environs of an industrial center in Europe to have relevance for contemporary, urban society. In 1852 Brisbane visited Considerant in Belgium and renewed his appeals for an experiment in the United States. Although Considerant first refused, he could find no alternative. After several influential Fourierists counseled him to accept Brisbane’s proposal, Considerant agreed to take a trip to the United States and to evaluate the country’s resources.\(^10\)

On November 28, 1852, Victor Considerant left Antwerp and arrived in New York City on December 14. Since Brisbane could not travel with him until the spring, Considerant decided to utilize his free time by studying the English language and American culture. For this purpose, he spent six weeks at the North American Phalanx in New

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8 Démocratie pacifique (Paris), 1843–1848; Dommanget, Considerant, 24–38.
9 C. Coignet, Victor Considerant, sa vie, son œuvre (Paris, 1895), 73.
10 Ibid., 74; Brisbane to Considerant, November 20, 1832, March 17, 1843, December 2, 1851, January 13, 1852, in Archives sociétaires (Archives Nationales, Paris, France).
Jersey. This American version of Fourierism did not impress him. He sent unfavorable reports back to Belgium, complaining of mismanagement and of little resemblance between Fourier's concepts and the North American Phalanx. After completing his studies at the phalanx, he returned to New York, visited Boston, and spent a few weeks at the Oneida Community in upstate New York. In early April he met Brisbane at Batavia, Ohio, near Cincinnati.¹¹

On April 30 Considerant and Brisbane left Cincinnati to tour unsettled areas of the Southwest, particularly Texas. Before leaving Cincinnati they met with a small group of Fourierists under the leadership of Benjamin Urner, who encouraged Considerant to establish a phalanx in Texas. From Cincinnati they traveled by boat down the Ohio River to the Mississippi River, down the Mississippi to the Arkansas River, and up the Arkansas, through Little Rock to Fort Smith on the Arkansas-Oklahoma border.¹² By horseback, on May 19, 1853, they left the "complete civilization, young, alert, and flourishing" of Fort Smith and crossed through the "rude and savage" Indian territory of eastern Oklahoma. Four days out of Fort Smith they emerged from the dense foliage into the rolling hills of northeast Texas. As they approached the uninhabited territory somewhere north of Dallas, the scenery captured Considerant's imagination, and he decided that he had found the perfect location for a Fourierist experiment. With ecstasy, he exclaimed:

"Nature has done all. All is prepared, all is arranged: we have only to raise those buildings which the eye is astonished at not finding; and nothing is appropriated nor separated by the selfish exclusiveness of civilized man; nothing is cramped. What fields of action! What a theatre of manoeuvres for a great colonization operating in the combined and collective mode! What reserves for the cradle of Harmony, and how powerful and prompt would be its development, if the living and willing elements of the World of the Future were transported there! A horizon of new ideas, new sentiments and hopes, suddenly opened before me, and I felt myself baptized in an American faith."¹³

While in Texas, Considerant surveyed the areas around Clarksville, Gainesville, Dallas, and Fort Worth for possible communal locations.

¹¹ Coignet, Considerant, 76; Ernest Discailles, "Le socialiste français Victor Considerant en Belgique," Bulletins de l'Academie Royales de Belgique, XXIX (1895), 737; Victor Considerant, Au Texas (Paris, 1854), 2–8; Considerant to Julie Considerant, January 3, 26, 1853, Archives sociétaires.


¹³ Considerant, Great West, 4–5, 6. The first quote is from 4–5; the longer from 6.
The Texas climate and soil and the vitality of the western settlers particularly impressed him. From Fort Worth, he and Brisbane traveled to Austin and then to New Orleans. At New Orleans, an attack of yellow fever delayed him for fifteen days. He embarked from New Orleans in July, stopped for brief visits in Havana, Cuba, and New York City, and arrived in Belgium on August 29, 1853.¹⁴

When Considerant returned to Belgium, he began preparations for an expedition to Texas. In early 1854, he published two books, one at New York in English, The Great West: A New Social and Industrial Life in its Fertile Regions, and another at Paris in French, Au Texas. Considerant produced these two separate books because he wanted the experiment to be a joint undertaking of Europeans and Americans. He realized that the urbanized Europeans would need the assistance of the American frontiersmen for the project to succeed. Both publications included enthusiastic praise of Texas, its lands, its climate, and its economic opportunities. They also contained a detailed plan, phase by phase, for the establishment of a Fourierist phalanx.¹⁵

Although he warned prospective participants of the hardships of the frontier, of the likelihood of receiving no return on their investment, and of the extensive cooperation and hard labor which would be required of each individual, Considerant wrote in an optimistic spirit. The Great West and Au Texas demonstrate his superior ability as a propagandist. In The Great West, he proclaimed:

Friends, the Promised Land is a reality. I did not believe it, I did not go to seek it, I was led there step by step. We have seen it and traversed it for forty days, and I have now described it to you. The redeeming idea sleeps in the captivity of Egypt. Let it awaken! Believe, and the land of realization, the Promised Land is yours. One strong resolution, one act of collective faith and this country is conquered. I bring you the news of salvation, I show you the way and I propose the inauguration. Let us only unite in purpose, and little as the outside world may dream of it, the new social era will be founded.¹⁶

In the conclusion of the two books, Considerant appealed to all people of good will, socialists or otherwise, who might be interested in the colonization enterprise. He requested prospective participants to apply through offices in Paris or in New York City, indicating how much capital they could invest, their intentions regarding immigration, and in-

¹⁴ Ibid., 7–23; Considerant, Au Texas, 10–45; Considerant to Julie Considerant, June 18, 1853, Archives sociétaires.
¹⁵ Considerant, Great West; Considerant, Au Texas.
¹⁶ Considerant, Great West, 27.
formation concerning other possible immigrants. He established agencies of registration and subscription in New York City, under the direction of Brisbane, and in Paris, under the direction of Charles Brunier.¹⁷

In September, 1854, Considerant founded the European Society for the Colonization of Texas, a joint stock company which would be based upon a capital of 5,400,000 francs. The immediate response excited him. Within a few weeks, he collected over 1,000,000 francs in subscriptions, and several hundred people applied to participate in the endeavor. The early organizational successes and his impressions of America further stimulated Considerant’s enthusiasm. In December, 1854, he, his wife, and his mother-in-law departed for New York City with exuberance and optimism.¹⁸ In the preface to The Great West, Considerant had written:

On our globe, America is at present the Country of Realizations. Its spirit is that of diversity, of movement and enterprise, the love of inventions, of experiments, of adventures. It is absolutely the opposite of our old Europe, timourous and enslaved to routine, even in its progressive aspects; despotic even in its aims of liberty. Oh my friends, how beautiful and powerful a thing is Liberty! How strengthening is its air, and what sane delight to breathe it! Ah! I exclaimed with swelling lungs, did Europe but afford us such conditions, or were our European elements but in America! How promptly would our great end be attained!¹⁹

Unfortunately, Victor Considerant did not realize that prejudice and obstacles lay as thickly along the banks of the Trinity River in Texas as along the banks of the Seine in Paris.

Considerant’s early optimism soon turned to defeatism. From the outset insurmountable problems insured the failure of La Réunion. François Cantagrel, a close associate of Considerant’s and one of the founders of the Society of Colonization, preceded him to the United States. In late 1854, he purchased the land on the Trinity River, which, at the time, was about three miles west of the small community of Dallas. Before Considerant arrived in June, 1855, almost two hundred colonists had made their way to the proposed location, and anarchy reigned. Neither he nor any of the other leaders ever established economic or political order out of the chaos. Although he had hoped for

¹⁷ Ibid., 59–60.
¹⁹ Considerant, Great West, 2–3.
more than 1,200 colonists, only some 500 participated in the experiment during its five-year existence and never more than 350 at any given time. In the end, financial insolvency destroyed the endeavor. By 1859 almost all of the colonists had moved to nearby settlements, particularly Dallas, and many had returned to Europe.20

Numerous factors led to the failure of La Réunion—some were Considerant’s responsibility, others were not. First, the colonists did not follow the elaborate plans which Considerant had laid down in The Great West and in Au Texas. Aware of the previous failures at utopian experiments in the United States, Considerant had outlined a cautious and evolutionary plan for the development of the colony. First, the Society would purchase land and then prepare it for settlement. According to Considerant, the land must be fully prepared before any settlers arrived. The colonists should come in stages. The first stage would be a small group of skilled Europeans and Americans who would cultivate the soil, establish buildings, and furnish the colony for comfortable settlement. Considerant enumerated the conditions which must exist before permanent settlers arrived: comfortable housing, a complete system of alimentary supplies, a large stock of animals, ample provisions for clothing, workshops and tools, agricultural and industrial production in full swing, and a commercial agency for the sale and purchase of products. The Society would also provide transportation for all immigrants from the port of entry to the Texas location. Considerant even itemized and computed the first two years’ projected expenses.21

The second group of colonists, arriving in the second year, as Considerant planned, would find a comfortable and pleasant habitat in full agricultural and commercial operation. Approximately 1,200 colonists would settle permanently and develop social and intellectual activities. He envisioned the establishment of complete educational facilities from primary schools to a university of higher learning. The university, “where English and French literature, the arts, the physical, mechanical, and other sciences, shall be taught by men of approved ability in every branch of instruction,” would be open to all United States citizens. According to Considerant, the economic system and the methods of em-

20 Kallist Wolski, American Impressions, trans. by Marion Moore Coleman (Cheshire, 1968), 174. For a detailed account of La Réunion, from the Texas standpoint, see William J. Hammond and Margaret F. Hammond, La Réunion: A French Settlement in Texas (Dallas, 1958). For a more personal account by a descendant of one of the original colonists, see George H. Santerre, White Cliffs of Dallas: The Story of La Réunion, the Old French Colony (Dallas, 1955).

21 Considerant, Great West, 29–42.
ployment would be flexible. He emphasized freedom of choice in all phases of the phalanx, particularly in the area of work. For remuneration, he devised a system of profit sharing based upon the input of capital and labor. Emphasizing the anticommunist nature of the phalanx, he urged capitalists to participate in the experiment.22

Considerant did not plan for La Réunion to be the only commune in Texas. He hoped for the future extension of the phalanx system throughout the southwestern part of the United States. For the future, he envisioned a network of colonies in Texas, New Mexico, and Oklahoma engaged in vast commercial, social, and intellectual intercourse, with La Réunion as the hub.23

Throughout these stages of development, Considerant emphasized the importance of a joint European-American endeavor. He argued that Americans and Frenchmen had contrasting characteristics which would complement each other. The “calm, cool judgment, combined with the practical enterprise of the American,” would offset the “Gallic vanity and levity.” Conversely, the French emphasis on intellectual and social improvement would be beneficial to the crude American environment. He particularly desired the practical knowledge of the American frontiersmen to aid the inexperienced Europeans in establishing a western settlement.24 Thus, before coming to the United States, Considerant had developed what should have been a workable and successful plan for the evolutionary establishment of a colony on the frontier of Texas. According to William and Margaret Hammond, Considerant’s scheme would have succeeded in establishing some type of colony had his plan been followed.25

Unfortunately, Considerant was never able to initiate any portion of his detailed scheme. The overzealous settlers and agents in Europe and


23 Considerant, Great West, 45; Considerant, An Texas (1855), 169.

24 Considerant, Great West, 36, 52–53. Quotes are from p. 52. Considerant’s discussion of the complementary qualities of the Americans and the French caused the Hammonds to misinterpret his intentions. They state that Considerant wanted to create a super-race. See Hammond and Hammond, La Réunion, 37. A more detailed study of Considerant’s ideas indicates that such was not the case. Considerant was anti-chauvinistic and advocated racial equality throughout his career. Nowhere in his writings does he propound the inbreeding of Frenchmen and Americans to establish a superior race. In The Great West, he was appealing merely to the Americans to lend their special knowledge and experience to his experiment.

25 Hammond and Hammond, La Réunion, 51.
the United States refused to follow any of his instructions. As previously noted, various groups ignored his pleas and came before the society could make any provisions for their shelter or food. When Considerant arrived in June, 1855, anarchy reigned among the two hundred colonists who had preceded him. In the face of such chaos, he could not organize the practical economic aspects of the colony. Moreover, the town which emerged did not resemble the phalanx which Considerant had proposed. In 1859 La Réunion contained a large general store, a small hotel, a blacksmith shop, a bootmaker, tailor and mechanic’s shop, a building for offices, a kitchen and dining hall, and a few isolated cottages. The failure to follow detailed and possibly workable guidelines spelled doom for the colony from the outset.\(^26\)

A second factor which caused the failure of La Réunion was the type of colonists who came to settle in the Texas community. Considerant had asked for almost all farmers and for numerous laborers to fill the ranks of the first phase of colonization. But almost no agrarians or workers came, the highest estimate of actual farmers in residence at the colony was about ten. From the beginning to the end, the colony suffered from a critical shortage of competent mechanics, carpenters, and farmers. Moreover, few of those practical-minded American frontiersmen participated. The culturally elite came from France, Belgium, and Switzerland to settle in the wilds of Texas: artists, musicians, songwriters, journalists, lawyers, philosophers, and scientists. Unsuited for the hard life on the frontier, the immigrants were unable to perform the practical tasks required to establish a successful economic operation. In the first crucial year of the colony’s existence only two inhabitants could speak enough English to communicate with the natives. Since, according to one report, no one in Dallas spoke French in 1855, communication became a serious problem. As a result of their inability to perform functional duties, the settlers quickly became homesick, discontented, quarrelsome, and economically impotent.\(^27\)

Changes in the conditions of settlement in Texas during the seventeen-month period which separated Considerant’s first visit from his arrival in the United States in early 1855 can be cited as a third reason for the failure of the colony. Drastic alterations in the availability of unset-


tled territory and in the price of land in Texas bedeviled Considerant's plans. He had hoped to conduct the experiment in a totally unsettled environment—one which contained no preconceived prejudices against socialism and which would permit free innovation and experiment. When he returned in 1855, settlers had occupied much of the choice territory in Texas. These conditions forced the society to purchase less desirable land.28

The rapid settlement of Texas and the corresponding increase in the demand for land created a drastic rise in land prices. During Considerant's first visit, the Texas government was giving each homesteader 160 acres of land and selling additional land for fifty cents an acre. Some private citizens were selling land as low as eighteen cents an acre. Reliable sources had indicated that the state government would give the society a sizable grant of land for the purpose of colonization. When Considerant returned, the government had abolished land grants to settlers, and the price of land had increased dramatically. The society paid five dollars an acre for the first purchase of land in Dallas County. As shall be noted later, the state legislature refused to consider any type of land grant for the European socialists. The high cost of land devoured most of the society's capital and diverted funds from other commercial and economic enterprises.29

Closely related to the preceding factor, a fourth cause for the early breakup of the colony, was that of general financial difficulties. The society did not attract enough capital investment to provide a stable financial situation. After the early successes, subscriptions to the experiment almost ceased. Moreover, when Considerant arrived in New York City in January, 1855, he learned that many of the European stockholders had withdrawn their support. One Belgian investor came all the way from Europe to Texas and demanded and received a refund of his stock. The society never attained more than 20 percent of the needed capital. The high cost of supplies and goods on the Texas frontier magnified the shortage of funds. One of the colonists who returned to Belgium, Charles Crespel, stated that the high cost of living in Texas was the major cause of failure. In the end, the colonists exhausted their financial resources.30

28 Considerant, Du Texas, 16-17; Considerant, European Colonization, 5, 16.
29 Considerant, European Colonization, 16-17; Considerant, Great West, 25-26; Lutz, "Almost Utopia," 324-325.
30 Considerant, Du Texas, 9-10; Discailles, "Considerant," 745; Coignet, Considerant, 83; Hammond and Hammond, La Réunion, 109-110; Wolski, Impressions, 192-193.
The attitude of Texans toward the colony must be noted as the fifth factor which led to the dissolution of La Réunion. When Considerant returned to the United States in early 1855, the Know-Nothings party was riding the swells of super-nationalism in the South and in Texas. Having a broad base of support in Texas, the party and the sentiment which gave impetus to this form of bigotry actively opposed Considerant and his European immigration. In addition to this nativism, anti-abolitionist sentiment ran high in Texas during this period. Fearing the abolitionist doctrines of European socialists, the advocates of slavery in Texas also diligently worked to combat the communal experiment.31

The newspapers, particularly the *Texas State Gazette* and the *Texas State Times*, both of Austin, led the opposition to the socialistic community in Texas. The newspapers' criticisms of the settlers on the grounds that they were communists, abolitionists, atheists, foreigners, and a threat to the pure American way of life demonstrated a complete lack of knowledge of Considerant's philosophy. A letter to the editor, printed in the June 2, 1855 *Texas State Gazette*, called the settlers an "armed band of seditious, lawless, foreign abolitionists."32 On February 17, 1855, a typical editorial in the *Texas State Gazette* referred to the Fourierist immigrant as "a neighbor who will rob and plunder us whenever he can get the chance," and threatened Considerant with overt and serious opposition.33 The *Gazette* editorials mirrored the general feeling of people in the Lone Star State. Numerous individuals sent letters of commendation to the editors for their stand. Sensitive to such opposition, Considerant published a retort in April, 1855, entitled *European Colonization in Texas: An Address to the American People*. In this pamphlet he logically and systematically refuted every accusation which the newspapers had made against the experiment. Considerant's efforts produced unsatisfactory results. When the pamphlet arrived in Texas, opposition increased.34

The state legislature reflected the general attitude of fear and opposition toward La Réunion. As a result of his first visit, Considerant was depending heavily on a large land grant from the Texas government.

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31 For a detailed account of the opposition in Texas to La Réunion, see Hammond and Hammond, *La Réunion*, 63–84.

32 *Texas State Gazette* (Austin), February 17, June 2, August 11, 1855; *Texas State Times* (Austin), August 4, 1855.


In December, 1855, he presented a petition to the legislature appealing for grants of land in Texas. Although Considerant and others worked diligently for the grants, the Texas legislature consistently refused to consider their request. All that he received from the Texas government was a bill permitting incorporation. On September 1, 1856, after much debate in the senate and the house regarding the “French Colony of Communists,” Governor Elisha M. Pease signed a bill to incorporate the “American Colonization Society in Texas.” Dominated by fear and prejudice, the people of Texas insured the collapse of La Réunion by refusing to participate in the experiment and by prohibiting needed grants of land.35

A sixth, and possibly the most significant cause for the failure of the colony was the environment, particularly the soil and climate. The topography was rocky, unlevel, sandy, and unproductive. Although George Santerre speculates that the society chose the terrain because it resembled the fertile wine producing regions of France, the land was not even suitable for that profitable occupation. From a cash crop standpoint, the land was unsatisfactory and the colonists were never able to turn a profit from the crops.36 In addition to the soil, the climate further complicated the colonists' problems. Reports indicated that the winters of 1855–1856 and 1856–1857 were unusually severe in Texas. The hurriedly and poorly constructed housing did not provide adequate protection from the cold. One colonist stated that from February 7 to March 2, 1857, the temperature averaged fifteen degrees above zero inside the cabins. When the winter subsided, unbearable heat replaced the cold. The hot Texas sun prevented the European immigrants, who were accustomed to a much more temperate climate, from performing their duties during the day. They generally rested from ten o'clock in the morning until three or four o'clock in the afternoon, attempting to work between the hours of four and ten in the morning and three and nine in the afternoon and evening. The hot Texas summers produced many

35 Official Journal of the House of Representatives of the State of Texas at the Adjourned Session, Sixth Legislature (Austin, 1856), 566; Official Journal of the Senate of the State of Texas at the Adjourned Session, Sixth Legislature (Austin, 1856), 304–341, 412; Considerant, European Colonization, 20–21; Hammond and Hammond, La Réunion, 80–84. Even the Galveston Weekly News, about the only newspaper in Texas which wished Considerant success in his settlement endeavor, opposed his application to the state legislature for free land grants. The Galveston paper argued that the land in Texas was now too valuable to be granted free to any settlers. See Galveston Weekly News, August 14, 1855.

types of discomforts which the Europeans were totally unable to manage, one in particular being the abundance of snakes. One inhabitant reported that they killed a dozen snakes per day during the summer, and that the snakes alone drove several colonists away. With the heat came drouth. Northeast Texas suffered a perilous water shortage during the summers of 1855 and 1856. Cantagrel had established the colony near a spring, but it dried up early in the summer of 1855. From then on, they had to haul their water in kegs from a distance. Since obtaining water was a serious problem, gardens, crops, and cattle succumbed to the dry heat and winds.37

The weather conditions and the shortage of indispensable supplies, such as salt and sugar, produced suffering, discomfort, and finally death. The first casualty came in late July, and in the last two weeks of August six European immigrants passed away at La Réunion, usually with high fever and chills. The deaths created a terrific psychological depression among the inhabitants. Writing in his diary on September 1, 1855, one of the colonists gave expression to this despondency:

Here with us, want is beginning, and there is present already the prophesied lack of sugar and salt. For two days we have had no salt for our food, and have had to drink our coffee and tea without sugar. This can go on for two or three months, as the oxen, with their wagons, which bring in supplies of this sort, will not be able to start from Houston until the end of October, arriving here around the end of December. . . . Winter? What is there to say of winter? Many of us perhaps will by then have already gone to the other world, and of those remaining, will they continue on with the place?38

Poor terrain, cold, heat, and drouth caused much economic distress and personal physical discomfort. As a result of the environment, many colonists were returning to Europe by the beginning of 1856. Clearly, Considerant or Cantagrel should have been more efficient in evaluating the environment.

The final factor which led to the failure of the Fourierist experiment, and the one most relevant to this study, was the leadership ability of Victor Considerant. The failure of colonists and agents to follow his instructions, the early arrival of settlers, the high price of land, the refusal of the state legislature to grant the society territory, the difficult climate, the opposition in Texas, and the shortage of funds combined to erode

37 Considerant, Du Texas, 41; Wolski, Impressions, 178, 182, 186-189; Hammond and Hammond, La Réunion, 112-113.
38 Wolski, Impressions, 191.
Considerant’s morale. Before he arrived on the scene in Texas, he had decided that the experiment was hopeless.\footnote{Considerant, Du Texas, 4–7.}

Once at La Réunion, amid the anarchy and conflict, a deep depression seized him. As his former optimism turned to defeatism, he became sullen, withdrawn, and totally negative toward the adventure. Under rigorous psychological strain, he succumbed to a severe nervous malady which incapacitated him for long periods of time. In this mental and physical state, Victor Considerant, who only a few months earlier had proclaimed a new social order, contemplated suicide. With much pain and self-effacement, he wrote: “In the midst of all the ideas which seized my mind, of all the kinds of pain which hacked at me, of rages which filled my desperate thoughts, I was incessantly ruled by the same impulse: write to Europe that all is ended by an immediate liquidation and commit suicide.”\footnote{Ibid., 8–9.} Noting his defeatist attitude and his earlier refusals to consider a communal endeavor in the United States, one must question whether Considerant ever truly believed in the phalanstery experiment in Texas.

Suffering from mental and physical anguish and certain that the colony would be a failure, Considerant provided little leadership. When he was not confined to bed, he was traveling in other parts of the state. He spent much time in Austin and San Antonio, seeking support for the experiment. He had no success. After the state legislature refused the land grant, he wrote to France informing his collaborators that the colony would break up and advising that they send no more settlers to Texas.\footnote{Ibid., 14–16; Considerant to Julie Considerant, August 28, 1856, Archives sociétaires; Coignet, Considerant, 86–87; Santerre, White Cliffs, 65; Savardan, Texas, 172, 206–207.}

Madame Considerant probably kept her husband from complete mental collapse during these trying days. Julie Considerant had always been a source of strength and a faithful ally to her husband. Far from hindering his work, she encouraged him in his socialist activities. In 1842, for example, during a political crisis in Paris, she wrote to him declaring: “Your entire life must be consecrated to the movement and I will hang myself immediately if I cause you to take a false route. . . . The more rugged the path, the more necessary it becomes to take such a path.”\footnote{Julie Considerant to Considerant, August 1842, in Archives sociétaires.}

Throughout the unpleasant experience at La Réunion, Julie gave her husband encouragement, support, and love. From the outset, she worked
alongside him and the other colonists, performing physical tasks to which she was unaccustomed. Concerning her role at the colony, Kalikst Wolski, a Polish immigrant who kept a brief but valuable diary of his six months' stay at La Réunion, wrote:

enduring with courage whatever hostile circumstances she met, she encourages us by her own example to endure all we must for the sake of the future. . . . After her arrival at the colony, when it was known that others would be coming, and later the wives of artisans from France, Belgium, and Switzerland, she proposed working right alongside these as an equal, finding honor, as she explained, in being a useful member of society, and no longer leading a life of idleness in salons fitted out with oriental couches, as she had done in Paris.43

Despite her physical labors during the day, Julie attempted to enhance the cultural and intellectual atmosphere at the commune. Not far from the housing complex, along the banks of the Trinity River, she found a clump of cedar trees which formed a pleasant and secluded shelter from the hot sun. Under these cedars, on the rude Texas frontier, Madame Considerant established a salon, and there she received all the colonists who wished to get away in the evenings and enjoy exchanging ideas and pleasantries. In a romantic account of Julie's endeavor, Wolski wrote:

In her cedar salon the floor was covered with a rug of natural green, for here the grass was always fresh, as it was shaded from the sun's burning heat. Above were the branches of trees spreading wide, their thick, broad leaves refreshed from time to time with benevolent dew. As a ceiling we had the clear, ever pleasant vault of heaven. The moon—or the millions of glittering stars that shone so brilliantly—took the place of a lamp. In place of the tones of a piano, we had the pleasant twittering and harmonious singing of masses of birds which had chosen the place as their headquarters; and instead of a sofa, armchairs, and other chairs, hammocks were hung from tree to tree, or there were nets of thick twine on which, rocking slowly back and forth, one could be free from the unpleasant visits of snakes, always crawling in uncounted numbers everywhere in this region. . . . Often these gatherings lasted to a late hour, even until one or two in the morning, in the salon of that cedar grove where extraordinarily captivating and often highly erudite conversations went on, though more often the talk was of a light and witty nature, with anecdotes exchanged back and forth.44

In May, 1858, Considerant left Texas for a sojourn in France.45 Al-

43 Wolski, Impressions, 184–185.
44 Ibid., 185.
45 The Hammonds state that Considerant left La Réunion permanently in July, 1856. Hammond and Hammond, La Réunion, 109. This information is incorrect. According to
though still under sentence of deportation, he obtained permission to visit in his homeland for a few months. He undertook the trip for the purpose of seeking additional financial assistance for the colony. The journey served only to depress Considerant further. Ironically, the first person he met at the railway station when he entered France was an old political enemy, Adolphe Thiers, a former minister to Louis Philippe and a strong conservative force in the National Assembly in 1849. During a cursory encounter between the two, Thiers quipped: "Ah! you will find this country much changed, very affable, very content." Thiers's diagnosis proved correct. The reactionary reign of Napoleon III had suppressed all liberal opposition. The Fourierist society lay prostrate, never to emerge again as a dynamic movement. Under these conditions, Considerant could muster no additional support for La Réunion. After visiting with some of his old friends and family, particularly Madame Coignet, his wife's cousin, he purchased some plants and some grains for the colony and returned to Texas.

When Considerant arrived at the colony in the winter of 1859, he found it in complete ruins. Most of the inhabitants had dispersed. Under these conditions, Considerant, with his wife and Madame Vigoureaux, moved to the outskirts of San Antonio. Thus ended Victor Considerant's only attempt to fulfill the program of his former master, Charles Fourier. In a book published in Paris in 1857, Du Texas, premier rapport à mes amis, Considerant blamed himself entirely for the failure of La Réunion. He confessed that after the initial failure to follow his plans, his self-confidence and initiative diminished. By his own admission, Considerant's defeatism immobilized his effectiveness as a leader.

Considerant's correspondence in the Archives Nationales, he maintained his permanent residence at La Réunion until late 1859. The impression that he left in 1856 probably came from the fact that he was gone most of the time, visiting in Austin, San Antonio, and Europe. During his excursions, Julie and Madame Vigoureaux, his mother-in-law, remained at the colony. Considerant to Julie Considerant, September 20, 1856, August 28, 1857, May 16, June, August 12, 1858, and January 6, 1859; Considerant to M. Coignet, May 7, 1857, January 5, March 28, 1858, Archives sociétaires; Bourgin, Considerant, 113.

46 Considerant to Ernest Renan, n.d., Archives sociétaires.
47 Considerant to Julie Considerant, August 12, 1858, January 6, 1859, ibid.; Coignet, Considerant, 88–89.
48 Coignet, Considerant, 89; Bourgin, Considerant, 113.
49 Considerant, Du Texas, 9–31. Dr. Augustin Savardan published the only lengthy account of the events at La Réunion by an actual participant, in Savardan, Texas. Unfortunately, Savardan's book is not a reliable source, as it is full of inaccuracies and distortions.
Although the European settlers failed in their attempt to establish a utopian society, they added much to the cultural, intellectual, and scientific development of nineteenth-century Texas, particularly in Dallas County. Many of the colonists brought new knowledge, skills, and abilities to the territory. Julien Reverchon, a botanist and scientific farmer, introduced advanced agricultural methods in the area; John Manduel established the first brewery in the county; Jacob Nussbaimer was the first butcher in Dallas; and John B. Louckx became a distinguished architect. Ben Long, after the dissolution of La Réunion, became the mayor of Dallas and later was killed serving as sheriff of the county.50

The most significant area of contribution was that of music. Considerant always emphasized the importance of music in the social and cultural development of a phalanx. The colonists brought a piano, the first in Dallas County, an organ, flutes, and violins to the new colony. While the community existed, the settlers met once or twice a week for singing, dancing, and playing music. Several songwriters came with the immigrants, most notably, Allyre Bureau, the former conductor of the Odéon Orchestra in Paris. Bureau wrote two songs at La Réunion which are still sung by children in Texas: “Clang! Clang! Clang!” and “Choosing a Flower.”51

The failure of most of the utopian socialist experiments in the United States during the nineteenth century has motivated their observers and critics to assume that basic defects in the structure of communal living prevents its success. According to this interpretation, man is

Savardan severely criticized Considerant for poor leadership. His attitude may be explained in part by the fact that much antipathy existed between the two. Savardan, the number one culprit in disobeying Considerant’s instructions, brought the largest group of settlers to Texas before the founder was ready to receive them. From that point on, the two never agreed. Other participants were favorable toward Considerant, arguing that he did all he could in the face of overwhelming obstacles. See particularly Discailles, “Considerant,” 745; Wolski, Impressions, 173–191. According to Wolski, despite the ill feelings between the two, Considerant consistently defended Savardan against a group of malcontents who were blaming the doctor for many of the problems at La Réunion. Mrs. George H. Santerre, wife of the deceased author of the White Cliffs of Dallas, also supports the argument that Considerant did all he could to make the colony a success, and that Savardan was considered the chief troublemaker. According to impressions given to her by descendants of the original colonists, the failure of the experiment was beyond the control of Considerant. Mrs. George H. Santerre to R. V. D., interview, November 26, 1971.


basically motivated by selfish and individualistic concerns and, there-
fore, cannot function effectively in a communalistic environment.52
While this interpretation might have some validity, it is not applicable
to Considerant's experiment. Other factors—factors not related to the
communal structure—caused the collapse of La Réunion. A close eval-
uation of previous utopian experiments indicates that the validity of the
concept of association and cooperation through some type of communal
structure has yet to be disproved.

52 For a detailed discussion of utopian socialist experiments in the United States during
the nineteenth century, see Arthur Eugene Bestor, Jr., Backwoods Utopias: The Sectarian
and Owenite Phases of Communitarian Socialism in America: 1663–1829 (Philadelphia,
1950); and Charles Nordhoff, The Communistic Societies of the United States (New York,
1875).