

Another impetus for Dallas's rapid rise as the region's dominant town was the settlement of La Reunion, established four miles west of Dallas. The first French settlers of La Reunion arrived in 1854 via New Orleans, and the main body of the French, Swiss, and Belgian colony arrived from Houston with a caravan of oxcarts the next year. Its leader, Victor Considerant, a disciple of the French socialist Francois Marie Charles Fourier, sought to establish a cooperative community. Considerant, exiled by Napoleon III for protesting French military adventures in Italy, believed the acquisitive nature of human beings could be regulated through their organization into self-supporting groups of 1,600 individuals. Although the utopian settlements were to be primarily agricultural and cooperative, Considerant did not abolish private ownership of property. La Reunion was to be the first of many such cooperatives in Texas. All members of the community, including women, enjoyed equal political rights and the opportunity to achieve economic independence.

Initial encounters between La Reunion colonists and citizens of Dallas took place in the colony's cooperative store. La Reunion's merchants carried an unusual selection of goods, many far superior to what was available in Dallas. The cooperative store quickly developed a clientele among Texans as well as colonists. Dallas residents regarded the foreigners with more curiosity than apprehension. In spite of initial concern that parties with music might desecrate the Sabbath, many regularly accepted invitations to the Europeans' Sunday afternoon and evening dances.

Eventually numbering almost 350 persons, the La Reunion colony contained highly educated professionals as well as scientists, artists, writers, musicians, artisans, and naturalists. La Reunion, however, lacked the agricultural expertise to ensure success under primitive and strange conditions. Considerant purchased a beautiful tract on a limestone bluff that reminded him of vineyard country in France but was, in fact, the worst agricultural land in Dallas County. After a three-year struggle, the immigrants disbanded La Reunion and many of the colony's leaders, including Considerant, returned to France. Most of the European settlers remained, however, and by 1860, 160 La Reunion colonists lived in Dallas. Others purchased farms in Dallas County, and one group began a new settlement six miles south of La Reunion on Mountain Creek.

The infusion of so many skilled Europeans into a commercial crossroads serving relatively prosperous farmers further distinguished Dallas, a town of not quite 2,000 in 1860, from county seats to the north, south, and east. The colonists were quickly integrated into community life—one served as the city's mayor. Another former La Reunion resident founded Dallas's first brewery. Julien Reverchon, who came to La Reunion in his teens, and Jacob Bell, who left Switzerland to join his family after it moved to Dallas, won international acclaim as naturalists. Portrait artists, piano tuners, cigar makers, jewelers, dancing masters, and the like added their talents to those of carpenters, stone masons, shoemakers, and immigrants possessing skills more practical in a frontier town to supply goods and luxury items to area farmers who, fortuitously, could afford them.