GERMAN COLONIZATION IN TEXAS BEGAN BEFORE Texas independence, with the efforts of Friedrich Ernst in nearby Industry and the later work of the German Emigration Company based at Nassau Farm, next to present-day Winedale. After 1836, hundreds of German families bought farmland in the Fayette County area and established Lutheran churches, educational institutions, and social clubs. During the Civil War, many Germans in this region opposed slavery, secession, and Confederate military service. With the end of the war and of the slave plantations, many more immigrant farmers and artisans poured into the area. Their presence began to alter the cultural landscape. Two key figures in the history of the Lewis-Wagner homestead at Winedale were German immigrants Rudolph Melchior and Joseph George Wagner.

In the 1840s, German noblemen formed the Society for the Protection of German Immigrants in Texas (Veritas zum Schutz deutscher Einwohner in Texas). Also known as the Adelsverein, the Society had both philanthropic and commercial aims. Its initial base was its showcase 4,000-acre Nassau Plantation just south of Winedale. The Society’s commissioner-general, Prince Carl of Solms-Braunfels, dashed about the countryside near Round Top with his fellow nobles and hosted lavish parties and horse races. The Society eventually promoted German colonies farther to the west to avoid Anglo-American influences. By the time it went bankrupt in 1848, the Society had brought in more than 7,000 settlers and firmly established Texas as a destination for succeeding generations of German immigrants.

By 1860, German settlers in the Round Top vicinity owned 129 farms, and Round Top was becoming a largely German community. German immigrants introduced new cultural elements into the area’s predominantly Anglo and African American society. They brought their own language, food, architecture, music and art, and the Lutheran Church. The Bethlehem Lutheran Church in Round Top (f. 1866) houses a hand-carved cedar pipe organ built by Johann Traugott Wandke. The half-timbered Kneip house, now known as the Schuededamen House, nearby typifies the Texas-German town house of the 1800s.

Rudolph Melchior (d. 1860) was one of the many skilled craftsmen and artists who came to the Round Top-Winedale area in the 1850s. He later resided in the community of intellectuals at Latium in nearby Washington County. Melchior applied his decorative artistry to the many fine homes in the region, including the residence at Winedale now known as the Lewis-Wagner House. In the upstairs parlor of the house, Melchior’s ceiling art depicts the four seasons, with a central wreath of morning glories framing a green parrot, a favorite German motif. The source for his decorative ideas can be seen in Melchior’s Teppich Buch, or “Day Book,” of sketches made on his journey to Texas in 1853.