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Slaves and Rebels: The Peculiar Institution in Texas, 1861-1865

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That the Civil War changed the lives of southern blacks forever is a truism that tends to obscure the drama that slaves experienced during the war. The Confederate surrender dealt the institution of slavery its final blow, but the war years already had seen drastic changes in the lives and status of slaves. All over the South thousands of slaves flocked to areas occupied by Northern armies seeking long-denied education in missionary schools, proving themselves in the federal army, and broadening their economic opportunities. Far from the liberating Union lines, Texas slaves endured a different kind of war than did blacks east of the Mississippi River. "White man," said a former Texas slave to a WPA interviewer long after the Civil War had ended, "we 'uns didn't know dere am de war. We seed some sojers at de star[t], but dat all." Indeed, although many black Texans extended the boundaries of their bondage, they usually had no choice but to wait out the war with their masters, while the masters had no choice but to rely on their slaves even more than they had in peace time.  

This may have been difficult in light of the Lone Star State's recent history. Six months before Texas seceded from the Union, the "Texas Troubles" — a wave of arson and alleged poisonings — convinced white Texans that meddling Northern preachers and peddlers had instigated a massive slave insurrection. Most of the business district of Dallas burned down on July 8, 1860, and fires broke out in a number of other north Texas towns. Rumors flew around the state that the slaves had planned a general uprising for August 6 and town meetings hastily organized vigilance committees to patrol rural areas and keep an eye on suspicious strangers. Members of the Chatfield Vigilance Association pledged to defend their families, as well as their "honor and property" against the "robbers, murderers, assassins, traitors ... and thieves" at large in the land. To that end, vigilantes hanged at least ten white men and nearly thirty blacks. Relative peace returned to Texas by early autumn.  

Texans did not often discuss the faithfulness of their slaves during the next five years; perhaps the latent but ever-present potential for violence within the slave system caused them to reassure themselves with silence. "The negroes, as a general thing," reported the Marshall Texas Republican after the shooting had stopped, "have acted very well towards their owners and the white residents of the South, during the disturbed condition of the country for the last four years." A few joined "the invaders," but only because of their "ignorance and the superior control of the white man." With a confidence that belied whites' later reactions...
to blacks during Reconstruction, the Republican asserted that the "war has demonstrated ... that the idea of negro insurrections, once so prevalent, is a humbug."

The war-time behavior of many Texas slaves supported the editorialist's assertion. Slave members of a Marshall Methodist Church hosted a supper for the minister and other guests early in 1865, while blacks in Houston raised $40 for sick soldiers with a "grand ball" in July 1862. James Hayes, a slave on a plantation near Marshall, validated the popular image of the faithful slave after his master marched off to the army. Whenever Hayes returned from town with the mail, his mistress "run to meet me, anxious like, to open de letter, and was skeert to do it." One day he "fotcher a letter and I could feel it in my bones; dere was trouble in dat letter." Young Master Ben — the oldest son, who had gone off to war with his father — had been killed in action; "all de ole folks, cullud and white, was cryin' ... When de body come home, dere's a powerful big funeral and after dat, dere's powerful weepin's and sadness on dat place."

Many slaves went to war as horse-tenders, nurses, or personal servants to their masters. Rube Witt enlisted in the Confederate army but reached Mansfield, Louisiana, after Confederate forces had turned back General Nathaniel P. Banks' Yankee troops, while James Cape helped rob a Yankee train and suffered a shoulder wound while fighting in Tennessee. Some slaves went to great lengths to prove their loyalty. William Byrd walked all the way from Virginia to Texas after his master became a Federal prisoner and waited until after the war to be freed. Henry Smith marched beside his master's son in the Texas Brigade until the latter was killed at Petersburg, then buried him and carried his belongings back to his family in Texas.

Slaves who remained at home frequently demonstrated their loyalty when they "kept de work on de plantations going, for dey had to keep on livin' an' some one had to do dis work." The slaves on Burke Simpson's plantation "jis stayed an' took keer of things for de Master while [he] wuz away to de war." When Union troops invaded South Texas and tried to entice slaves away from the King Ranch, a Houston newspaper proudly reported, they "remained with their mistress ... proving true to the last." Few blacks considered escaping from the Bexar County ranch on which Felix Haywood worked, because "we was happy." Life "went on jus' like it always had before the war ... We get layed-onto time on time, but gen'rally life was ... just as good as a sweet potato." Slaves were not unaware of the threat they posed to Southern society, however. "If every mother's son of a black had thrown 'way his hoe and took up a gun to fight for his own freedom along with the Yankees," Haywood believed, "the war'd been over before it began." Nevertheless, "we couldn't help stick to our masters. We couldn't no more shoot 'em than we could fly."

Life did not continue unbroken on every Texas plantation. James
Hayes recalled that although day to day life went on "like always ... some vittles was scarce." The war "sho' did mess us up," according to Mollie Dawson of Navarro County. Since much of the plantation's produce went toward feeding and clothing Confederate soldiers, "we didn't have as much ter eat as we had been having and our clothes and shoes had ter last us longer." Masters bound for the army often found overseers to take their place. Andy Anderson's master hired a man named Delbridge, and "after dat, de hell start to pop." Delbridge "half starve us niggers," Anderson remembered, "and he want mo' work and he start de whippin's ... I guess dat Delbridge go to hell when he died, but I don't see how de debbil could stand him." The fighting reached other slaves, as well. Philla Thomas' father, laboring on Confederate breastworks, died during a Yankee bombardment of Galveston, and when Federal gunboats lobbed shells into Corpus Christi, "all de folks ... takes to de woods and sev'ral am still gone." Slave children were warned against going into the woods by themselves. Manuel Armstrong, a young boy during the war, recalled that deserters from the Confederate army hid in a nearby forest. Fearing that "de chillen would tell on 'em," the fugitives would "ketch dem an' whip dem an' scare dem an' sen' dem home so they wouldn't come back no mo!'"

In the face of these hardships, Texas slaves could hardly ignore the war, although whites tried to prevent them from hearing news from the front. One plantation mistress remembered that "the white men didn't talk the situation around where the niggers could hear ... knowing that the nigger is a natural news ferret, and the biggest gossiper that ever was." Nevertheless, she recalled, "they knew that everything they said finally reached the niggers' ears." Few slaves "in the whole South ever let on that they knew anything ... They just kept their mouths shut, and their eyes and ears open." Former slave J.W. King said that "some of de men on de plantation would slip up to a open winda at de big house at night and ... lissen whut was read f'om a letter." Bad news for the Confederacy fueled the slaves' hopes. Despite their distance from the battlefields, they instinctively grasped what was at stake in the white men's war. Around late night fires, Abram Sells recalled, the older men would crouch, "stiffin' the ashes with the pokes and rakin' out the roas' taters. They's smokin' the old corn cob pipe and homemade tobacco and whisperin' right low and quiet like what they's gwineter do and whar they's gwineter go when Mister Lincoln, he turn them free.'"

Despite the fairly normal war-time relations between whites and blacks in Texas, those whispered conversations around late-night fires — combined with the absence of a large percentage of the white adult male population — helped inspire the surliness that some Texans detected in their slaves. A Houston newspaper complained in January 1865 about the insolence of the city's blacks. They uttered obscenities in the presence of children, refused to yield roads or sidewalks to white ladies, and bought illicit liquor from white merchants. The editor declared that local slave
owners were “altogether too lenient ... and too regardless of their [slaves’] behavior.” Likewise, the San Antonio News reported in mid-1864 that blacks were “pulling on important airs” on that city’s streets. A “general negrow row” ensued in Nueces County when a female slave stole about $2000 and distributed it among her black and Hispanic friends. Authorities recovered only $700. A Harrison County black allegedly plundered the home of a Mrs. Manson, whose husband was off fighting the war, then burned it down to escape detection. A few whites also reported aberrant behavior among slaves on their plantations. Jack, a slave on John B. Walker’s plantation, ran away three times during the summer of 1864. Once he left after having “refused Authority,” and on another escapade he “borrowed” a mule.10

Mrs. Lizzie Neblett recorded the deterioration of slave behavior on her Grimes County plantation in a series of letters to her husband Will, who was away in the army for much of the war. She complained late in 1863 that most of the slaves would not do anything unless they were told, and that “I find I must think continually for them.” Several slaves resisted whippings from the overseer or ran away, part of a disturbing trend of insolence and misbehavior among slaves in the neighborhood. The situation had gotten so bad that many owners were afraid to flog their slaves. One slave, threatened with a beating by one of Mrs. Neblett’s elderly neighbors, “cursed the old man all to pieces, and walked off in the woods.” He came back only after his master promised not to punish him. Another neighbor’s slaves rode his horses all over the county during their nocturnal adventures, and she doubted whether her own slaves were much better: “I believe if I was to tell [the overseer] to whip one of the negroes they would resist & it would make matters no better so I shall say nothing, and if they stop work entirely, I will try & feel thankful if they let me alone.” Fear had also entered her relationship with the slaves: “I won’t sleep with my doors open, any more, & if they break open either door or window I’ll have time to be better prepared for them & will fight till I die.” She continued in this vein in a later letter when she wrote, “I would not care if they killed me, if they did not do worse.”11

The large migration of blacks into Texas from other states added a unique dimension to the story of slavery in Civil War Texas. Thousands of them were shipped from more distressed portions of the Confederacy during the course of the war. Many came from nearby Louisiana and Arkansas, but planters from as far away as Virginia also brought their slaves to Texas. Late in the war, Elvira Boles came to Texas with her master, “a dodgin’ in and out, runnin’ from de Yankees” all the way from Mississippi. Somewhere along “dat road,” Elvira’s baby died and was buried in an unmarked grave. Tempe Elgin was a toddler when her master brought her mother and sister to Texas from Arkansas; her father, who belonged to a different owner, followed them for sixty miles, imploring his wife to escape with him. She refused, “so pappy rode away on his
hoss and mammy never did see him again." The odyssey of Josh Miles began when his owner decided to leave Virginia early in the war. They reached Texas two years later after lengthy stays in Nashville, Memphis, and Vicksburg were interrupted by invading Yankee armies. Another former slave told of moving to Texas from Franklin, Louisiana, with about 300 other slaves, while Van Moore, who grew up in Texas, recalled his mother's stories of how, as a band of slaves and their masters set out for Texas from war-torn Virginia, the "white folks" encouraged the slaves by telling them that in Texas "de lakes [were] full of syrup and covered with batter cakes, and dey won't have to work so hard." Other masters showed less concern for their slaves' states of mind. Litt Young journeyed west from Vicksburg in 1863 under an armed guard who tied the male slaves to trees at night.

Some Texas slaves, reversing the migratory process, hurried the day of freedom by escaping from their masters and a handful — forty-seven — joined the Union army. Some slaves on a Williamson County plantation ran away — despite the nearly automatic "whippin' at de stake" that would greet them if caught — when a cruel overseer took over for their master, who had gone to fight in the war. Susan Ross' brother, after refusing to go to the army, fled his master's plantation after a beating so severe that "you couldn't tell what he look like." Although the war years did see an apparent escalation in the number of runaway slaves, escape held little chance of success, at least according to one Burleson County ex-slave. "I never seen any slaves that tried to run away until after the war," said John Mosley, "but ... they never got very far at that." At least one master had "all de quarters move up close to de big house, so if we tries to make de run for it in de night he can catch us." Punishment was sure and swift for captured escapees. Lee McGillery saw "a few slaves try to run away to the north after the war started and when the white folks of the south find them they would most of the time jest shoot them. Some few they never did find."13

Most of the slaves attempting to escape exploited the traditional sympathy between Mexicans and blacks by making their way to Mexico. Felix Haywood declared that "in Mexico you could be free. They didn't care what color you was, black, white, yellow, or blue." Haywood claimed that hundreds of slaves fled to Mexico, and "got on all right," becoming in effect, Mexicans, and raising their children to speak only Spanish. At one point Mexicans on the south bank of the Rio Grande rigged up a flatboat in the middle of the river. Once a fugitive reached the boat he could easily pull himself across to freedom. Jacob Branch reported that slave patrols "rid[e] de Mexican side [of] dat river all de time, but plenty slaves git through, anyway." Sallie Wroe's father hauled a load to Travis County cotton to the border. Upon reaching his destination, he and a number of other drivers paddled a bale of cotton over the river to Mexico. When he returned to his family after the war, he told them "he done git 'long
fine with Mexico. He learnt to talk jes’ like them.’’ Similar instances led the Houston Tri-Weekly Telegraph to warn its readers against taking even “their trusty negroes” to Matamoros on business. The booming border town was “overrunning with these trusty, now insolent negroes.” “Loose colored women” and escaped slaves with plenty of spending money would lure otherwise faithful slaves into the welcome anonymity of the city. 14

As a non-citizen, even the least faithful slave legally could not be charged with disloyalty. A Confederate district judge ruled in May 1863, that since slaves “are not members of the body politic — & do not owe allegiance to the Govt.,” they could not be tried for treason. Nevertheless, the state legislature responded to the potential threat of rebellious slaves and Northern invaders by passing several laws aimed at preventing slave insurrections — especially those instigated by marauding Yankee troops or their emissaries. An act passed on March 5, 1863, condemned persons convicted of selling, giving, or loaning, any sort of weapon or ammunition to a slave to up to five years hard labor, while another established a penalty of from five to fifteen years for any officer of the United States armed services guilty of “inciting insurrection or insubordination.” In addition, “any person of color” captured while invading Texas could be enslaved, a fate suffered by at least a few black Yankees, and it was illegal to leave slaves alone without “free white” supervision or to allow a slave to pretend to own or to control property. Other “disloyal” slaves fell outside the bounds of the law. Late in 1864, three railroad workers took eight hours to beat a black man to death for allegedly stealing three yards of homespun cloth, while another slave suspected of murdering his master was captured in Rusk County, brought home to Tyler, and burned at the stake. Vigilant Texans near La Grange hanged an escaped slave named Yorick — two weeks after General Robert E. Lee surrendered at Appomattox — when he was found “endeavoring to accomplish a purpose too horrid to mention” upon a “German girl.” 15

Despite the problems caused by some Texas slaves during the Civil War, neither the war nor the behavior of their chattel property led Texas Confederates to question the desirability of retaining the peculiar institution. Some masters hurried to the frontier of Texas late in the war, hoping to outrun the Yankees and establish themselves far beyond the effective boundaries of emancipation. A Travis County slave owner relocated in Robertson County, according to one of his bondsman, “cause he done figured de Yankees can’t git up dere.” As late as May 1865, owners of runaway slaves still offered rewards of up to $500 in Confederate currency, and J.L. Maxwell of Collin County offered to exchange his small farm for “Negro property” that same month. Even after the remnants of the Confederate presence in Texas had been surrendered, the Marshall Texas Republican confidently predicted that Southerners would be allowed to keep their slaves in some form of perpetual servitude. Emancipation “naturally” would be followed by “vagrancy, filth, disease, and crime” among the
freedmen; masters should be kind to their servants, motivated by "an attachment for the race, by a grateful remembrance for past services."16

The experiences of masters and slaves in Texas during the Civil War flowed out of two conflicting pre-war situations: the general faithfulness of most slaves counterpointed to the constant threat that they posed to the institution. While some Texas slaves confirmed Southern fears of that threat by taking advantage of war-time tumult to expand the boundaries of their lives, most did not, in any meaningful way, challenge the restrictions placed on their lives by the peculiar institution. In fact, at least one free black voluntarily gave up his freedom during the war. George, a "free man of color," petitioned the Collin County District Court to become the slave of James B. Thomas. As Martin Jackson's father told him, "the War wasn't going to last forever, but ... our forever was going to be spent living among the Southerners after they got licked." Reconstruction would, in many ways, fulfill Jackson's prophecy.17

NOTES


4Marshall Texas Republican, June 2, 1865.


17 Lizzie to Will Neblett, November 4, August 13 and 18, 1863, Lizzie Neblett Papers, Barker Texas History Center.


21 The American Slave, v. 5, pt. 4, p. 125; Marshall Texas Republican, May 19 and June 16, 1865.