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THE EAST TEXAS BAPTIST WORLD OF GEORGE WEBB SLAUGHTER, 1844-1852

by Ron Ellison

Out of the mystic dawn of Baptist work in East Texas in the 1840s emerges the form of George Webb Slaughter, one of the early missionary Baptist proclaimers of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

In 1826-1827 George Webb, a lad in his mid-teens and already an accomplished horseman, carried mail between "McGuffin's or Crow[']s Ferry via Fort Jessup to Natchitoches [Louisiana]," where he may have met Sam Houston.¹ The future held many thrilling episodes for young Slaughter. The mystique of warfare was his natural legacy because American Revolutionary minuteman Walter Slaughter, veteran of Captain Thomas Wade's light horse cavalry, was George Webb's grandfather, and William, his father, had served with Andrew Jackson at the Battle of New Orleans.²

George Webb Slaughter was born on May 10, 1811, in Lawrence County, Mississippi, the state in which he remained until 1825. At that time his father, lured by the prospect of free land and greater opportunities, began the arduous wagon journey toward Texas. Stopping in Sabine Parish, Louisiana, they made their home near Fort Jessup for five years. During this time George Webb began freighting commodities across the Sabine River into Mexican-controlled, Catholic Texas. With an eye to even larger business ventures, it was probably George Webb's persuasiveness that induced his father to cross the river in 1830 and settle in Sabine County.³

After participating in the Battle of Nacogdoches in the summer of 1832, Slaughter continued to transport goods from Louisiana to Texas, including "the effects and library of [Sam] Houston, ... to Nacogdoches in 1833."⁴ During the Texas Revolution, he participated in the "Grass Fight" and rode with Houston's forces, delivering several messages between Houston and Fannin and communications from Houston to Travis in the Alamo.⁵ Slaughter also served as a procurer for Houston's army. He returned home following the victory at San Jacinto, and on his twenty-fifth birthday, May 10, 1836, married eighteen-year-old Sarah Jane Mason. This was probably the first marriage in the Republic of Texas performed by a Mexican *alcalde*; another marriage ceremony took place on October 12.⁶ Their first child, born on February 11, 1837, was named Christopher Columbus [whom they called "C.C."]. Slaughter raised a few cattle and ran a freighting business for settlers and the Texas government until he was called once again to fight, this time in the Cherokee War, in which he was "slightly wounded" on July 15, 1839.⁷

While attending a meeting conducted by a Methodist preacher,

Ron Ellison lives in Beaumont, Texas. A version of this article was presented to the East Texas Historical Association meeting in Beaumont on February 22, 1992.

Slaughter related, "I was convinced of being a lost sinner in God's sight, and by his grace was happily converted, which I have never doubted."⁸ Thus, he became a Methodist in 1831, but by closely examining the Scriptures, he became dissatisfied and remained so until 1844, when he heard Peter Eldredge, a Baptist minister from Georgia and Alabama, preach the "very doctrine that I was constrained to believe from reading the Bible."⁹ Both he and his wife were baptized by Eldredge into the fellowship of Bethel [now New Hope] Baptist Church at Milam, Sabine County, in June 1844.¹⁰

Meanwhile, the social and political climate in Shelby County was hardly conducive to peace and harmony in East Texas in the 1840s. The Regulator-Moderator War had torn the county asunder and set up two camps of opponents. The disturbance began in 1839 and ended only when Sam Houston sent in troops in 1844 to quell the rebellion. Effects of this conflict spilled over into adjoining San Augustine and Sabine counties, which continued to feel its aftershocks in both secular and religious areas.¹¹ It was known that "San Augustine, Jasper, Sabine, and Shelby counties averaged a man killed each week and sometimes two." There was little morality. Then came the churches and preachers.¹²

In the religious arena on the Baptist front stood Peter Eldredge, one of the preachers at Bethel Church. After leaving Georgia and Alabama because of his unorthodox practices, among which was open communion, his beliefs remained suspect and he soon came into conflict with other Baptists in East Texas.¹³ His open-communion stance posed a problem for most Baptists, the majority of whom believed it a breach of faith to admit someone to the Lord's Supper table who had not been "scripturally baptized," that is, by immersion. If others were admitted it was an affront to the faith. But admit them, Eldredge did, and practiced other forms of "apostasy," according to both Hardshell and Missionary groups. Additionally, those baptized by Eldredge were at times refused membership in other Baptist churches.¹⁴

Eldredge came to Milam, Texas, from Barbour County, Alabama, and in the summer of 1844 he held the camp meeting for two weeks at Bethel Church.¹⁵ "He was very zealous and of indomitable courage, his soul, it seemed, was set wholly on fire, seeing and hearing the great wickedness of the country." And when Eldredge "was in the spirit of preaching, he preached with great power."¹⁶ The Lord blessed his labors in wondrous ways during the camp meeting and "a great revival broke out then and there, and the organization of a Baptist church [probably Milam] at its close was the result."¹⁷ This activity took place in the heart of "as wicked a settlement as ever there was on this earth. Some of the most hardened sinners, bold in their wickedness were stricken down as Saul of Tarsus."¹⁸

Records of the second session of the Sabine Association in 1844 reflected the great revival that took place under Eldredge's preaching in Bethel Church. They reveal 130 received for baptism, fifteen by letter, and

four "restored." At the same time, however, forty-three were dismissed from the fellowship. The total membership of 119 was twice as high as the next largest church in the association.¹⁹ Asa Wright served as the pastor at Bethel but Eldredge is listed as a delegate from Bethel and one of the few ministers in the association.²⁰

Three ministers emerged from this revival. One was G.W. Slaughter, who prior to his conversion, was said to be "one of the most daring in his wickedness that the world had ever produced."²¹ Even though Slaughter had but three weeks of formal education, Benjamin F. Burroughs, reflecting back upon the times, testified:

While poor and very illiterate, I have heard him deliver some of the most powerful exhortations that I ever heard fall from the lips of any human being. When exercising that gift, he seemed to be wholly on fire[,] soul and body. He never missed a meeting in his reach when he was able to go. I lived in sight of him and was with him a great deal. He appeared that the cause was near his heart. He would scarcely ever talk about anything but religion.²²

Slaughter is listed as one of the delegates from Bethel Church to the Sabine Association in 1845 and Eldredge appears as an ordained minister, possibly serving as pastor by then. The church letter was mislaid, so the number of members was given as 119, the same as the previous year.²³

After his conversion, Slaughter "began to beg sinners to come to Christ" as he preached, held revivals, and established churches on both sides of the Sabine River.²⁴ The first protracted meeting he held away from home was in San Augustine County. It lasted eleven days in June 1845. There he baptized thirty-seven people, of whom thirteen were Methodists. Slaughter continued the meeting five days longer and baptized eleven more, three of them Methodists, one being a class leader. Sarah, Slaughter's wife, helped by traveling thirty-five miles to take clothing to him during the revival, and remained with him several days at the end of the meeting.²⁵ Slaughter spent the rest of the year in independent missionary work, and with the help of a deacon and licensed minister organized a church and baptized 125, two of them in Louisiana.²⁶

Slaughter was busy in 1846. He worked steadily as a missionary, receiving payment for his labor part of the time, but working a portion of the time with no financial compensation. He organized seven churches: two in De Soto Parish, Louisiana, and five in Texas—two in Shelby County, one in San Augustine County, one in Newton County, and one in Sabine County. Since great distances separated his churches, Slaughter's wife was often up until midnight preparing his clothes in order to ensure him an early start. The year's labor was fruitful, however, because it produced a harvest of 367 souls for baptism. While at home, his wife, with the assistance of a fifteen year old Negro boy, took care of other domestic duties, including raising an average crop.²⁷

Slaughter traveled as a missionary only part of the time in 1847 and 1848 while declaring that he “attended four of the new churches, held a prot[r]acted meeting at Milam, county site of Sabine c[C]ounty, [and] organized a church of nine members[,] giving it part of my time.”²⁸ During these two years this church increased to seventy-seven members, fifty by experience [or statement] and baptism and the remainder by letter.²⁹

During 1849 and 1850 Slaughter served as chaplain to Jackson Masonic Lodge No. 35 in Sabine County and continued to care for four churches where he held from two to three revivals per year while organizing four additional churches. One of these assemblages was “in Sabine County, Houston Bayou c[C]hurch; one on line of Sabine and Denton [*sic*] counties, Sandy Creek c[C]hurch” which had a membership of twenty-nine, all new converts except two. Another congregation, Red Land Church, was established in San Augustine County. It had seventeen members, but increased to forty-two souls by 1851.³⁰

Slaughter had been licensed to preach by 1847. In the spring of 1848 Benjamin F. Burroughs asked that Southern Baptist missionary Jesse Witt assist in ordaining Slaughter and two other men, J.B. Packer and R. Meador [or Meadow]. Witt initially consented and spent the night at Slaughter’s house along with Packer and Meador and examined them. The next morning he declared that he could take no part in the ordination, “saying to them almost with tears in his eyes, that they were as rotten in doctrine as rotten could be.” He did not mean to hurt their feelings and loved them dearly as Christians, but “went back to church and preached for them with great warmth and feeling.”³¹ Much to the surprise of the church and the whole county, Witt talked with them freely about their “Open public advocacy of apostasy and open communion,” and “told them he was conscientious in the matter, and could not participate in their ordination.” Since all the church members were unfamiliar with church rules they were critical of Witt because they knew no better at the time.³²

Most churches in the Sabine Association were of the “Hardshell” order. However, several congregations who sent delegates to associational meetings were Missionary Baptists involved in missionary endeavors. But since the association disapproved of missionary activity, it rejected a Missionary circular on “The Strength of Christian Charity,” and warned against lodge members and other conflicts in October 1847. Subsequently, four missionary-minded churches withdrew and formed the Eastern Missionary Baptist Association on December 3, 1847.³³

In 1848 Witt preached missionary messages in a loving spirit to the delegates of the Sabine Association, but nevertheless was castigated by the “Hardshell” preachers.³⁴ Finally, the association voted against Witt’s motion to become a Missionary body, ousted Bethel Church in Sabine County—along with the Bayou and Milam churches—because of their open

communion practices, and declared a non-fellowship for Missionary Baptists and those Baptists who were in the habit of visiting Masonic Lodges, or Lodges of the Sons of Temperance.³⁵ At least four men, Eldredge, Slaughter, Burroughs, and Basil E. Lucas, were unwelcome to continue "fellowship" with the Primitive Baptists because of three of the four reasons listed for "non-fellowship": they were open communicants, Missionary Baptists, and Masons.³⁶

Weakened as they were by ridding themselves of those "undesirable elements," when the delegates of the Sabine Association met the next October in 1849, they voted to dissolve the body.³⁷ By the latter part of December, four or five churches of the "open-communion" order met at Bethel Church in Sabine County. Seeking to distance themselves from the anti-missionaries, they organized an independent Free Will Baptist Association with Burroughs serving as clerk.³⁸ In October 1850, four of these churches—Ayish Bayou, Bethel, Milam, and Sardis—met with Ayish Bayou Church in San Augustine County, where Slaughter served as moderator. This was an extreme group which passed highly idealistic resolutions impossible to fulfill. No record of them is available after 1850 but quite likely within two years their force had been spent.³⁹

By 1852, serving as a bivocational pastor, Slaughter had baptized approximately 1,233 souls while founding twenty-seven congregations in ten East Texas counties and seven churches in three western Louisiana parishes. Because of sparse population, these early churches sometimes were formed with as few as five or six believers.⁴⁰

Other events early in the 1850s made these years a time of upheaval and transition for Slaughter. His father died in April 1850, and he realized the family needed more acreage for raising cattle than was available in Sabine County. Anticipating this circumstance, Slaughter and his brother, William, had acquired a new Freestone County ranch by 1849. In June 1852, Slaughter, his wife, four sons, and one daughter began the trek with ninety-two head of cattle to join William at the ranch alongside the Trinity River in southeastern Freestone County near the town of Butler.⁴¹ Longtime Texas Baptist leader Rufus C. Burleson recalled years later meeting Slaughter for the first time:

We first met in [June] 1852 in Neches [River] bottom. I was returning from the Baptist state convention [*sic*] at Marshall, [*sic*] and he was going west with a small stock of cattle, with a noble wife and a noble family of boys and girls. On parting he said: "Brother Burleson, I am going to the far west, and while you are rounding up sinners and Baptists in the great cities and colleges, I will be rounding up cattle and stray Baptists and sinners on the frontier. And we will make Texas a grand Baptist state, consecrated to the good of man and the glory of God." And no man ever did his duty more nobly.⁴²

Slaughter remained in Freestone County from 1852-1857, whereupon he moved to Palo Pinto County. He resided there until his death in 1895 at

nearly eighty-four years of age, except for about four years in Emporia, Kansas, from 1871-1875.

Slaughter was instrumental in directing many souls to Christ, leading perhaps as many as 2,500 to 3,000 persons through the baptismal waters.⁴³ In addition to the twenty-seven congregations he established in East Texas and seven in Louisiana, he founded five in central Texas, 1852-1857, three in Kansas, 1871-1875, and several others for a total of twenty-six in northwest Texas. Slaughter began a grand total of at least sixty-eight churches.⁴⁴

Frontier historians James Cox and Zane Mason state that Slaughter organized more churches and ordained many deacons and more preachers than any other person in Texas.⁴⁵ They may be accurate, although Mason's study focused primarily on Baptist pioneer work in Texas from 1865-1885. However, only God knows all the labors of Slaughter in East Texas and beyond as well as innumerable other rugged preachers of the Word who helped shape the convictions of countless individuals and consequently changed for the better the religious complexion of the Lone Star State.

NOTES

¹"Indians - Markers," *Robert Bruce Blake Research Collection in 75 Volumes*, Vol. 65, pp. 319-20, compiled in the Eugene C. Barker Texas History Center Archives Collection, 1958-1959, University of Texas at Austin, pp. 319-20 (copy in special collections at Stephen F. Austin University, Nacogdoches); Edna McDaniel White and Blanche Findley Toole, *Sabine County Historical Sketches and Genealogical Records* (Beaumont, 1972), pp. 31-33. Slaughter served as a witness in this land-grant trial of *Russell Heirs, Appellants, vs. James Mason* (Sarah Jane Mason Slaughter's uncle), Appellee, first held in Sabine County about 1843 but tried again in Shelby County in 1851 where it was filed on March 13, 1852.

²David J. Murrah, *C.C. Slaughter: Rancher, Banker, Baptist* (Austin, 1981), p. 4 (See this excellent study for further details on the early Slaughters.); Don W. Slaughter, "Anyone Interested?" (Lubbock, Texas Tech University Southwest Collection, Typescript, Slaughter Family Reference File).

³"A Talk with Rev. G.W. Slaughter Who Fought the Battles of Texas," *Dallas Morning News*, May 27, 1894, p. 9, Carrie Averill Slaughter Papers, 1862-1960 (hereafter cited as CAS Papers), (Lubbock, Texas Tech University Southwest Collection, microfilm), p. 133; "G.W. Slaughter," [autobiographical essay] *Texas Baptist and Herald* (hereafter cited as TB&H), April 19, 1894, p. 6, CAS Papers; Murrah, *C.C. Slaughter ...*, p. 4. Murrah states that perhaps William and Nancy kept their children in Louisiana five years because Texas was then controlled by Mexico which allowed no doctrine except Catholicism to be propagated and Fort Jessup furnished protection for nearby settlers.

⁴*Dallas Morning News*, May 27, 1894, p. 9; R.B. Blake, "Battle of Nacogdoches," *Handbook of Texas*, 3 vols. (Austin, 1952, 1976) II, pp. 256-57; Murrah, *C.C. Slaughter ...*, pp. 4-5.

⁵"Grass Fight," *Handbook of Texas*, I, p. 719; "A Talk with Rev. G.W. Slaughter" *Dallas Morning News*, May 27, 1894, p. 9; Murrah, *C.C. Slaughter ...*, p. 5. In the *Dallas Morning News* interview Slaughter, at the age of eighty-three, stated that he delivered two messages to Travis at the Alamo and was in route with a third when he met Mrs. Dickinson and her servant who had fled. Murrah says *presumably* Slaughter delivered a message to Travis at the Alamo.

⁶Helen Gomer Schluter and Blanche Finley Toole, *1850 Sabine County, Texas Census with Added Family Information and Corrections* (n.p., 1979), p. 31; Murrah, *C.C. Slaughter ...*, p. 5. Besides this earlier marriage date, "bond marriages" were upheld and viewed by society as

legitimate when no judge or preacher was available. David J. Murrah, letter to author, May 1, 1990, states: "I have no problem with the account of the Slaughter marriage ... If he [Christopher Columbus] was conceived out of wedlock, I do not think his parents would have named him in honor of the Columbus Day on which they were legally married. There was a situation of unusual circumstances because of the Revolution."

¹"Cherokee War," *Handbook of Texas*, I, pp. 334-35; "A Talk with Rev. G.W. Slaughter ...," *Dallas Morning News*, May 27, 1894, p. 9; Murrah, *C.C. Slaughter ...*, pp. 5-6; "Cherokee War," *Robert Bruce Blake Research Collection ...*, 5:317; Louis W. Kemp Collection, "General Biographical Notebook," (Austin, Barker Texas History Center, n.d.)

²TB&H, April 19, 1894, p. 6.

³TB&H, April 19, 1894, p. 6.

⁴TB&H, April 19, 1894, p. 6.

⁵See Edward Clark's "The Regulator-Moderator War," *The Texas Gulf Historical and Biographical Record* (November, 1965), I, pp. 17, 22; *Home and Foreign Journal* (hereafter cited as HFJ) (Richmond, June 1848), III, p. 18.

⁶TB&H, March 5, 1896, p. 12.

⁷Sabine Baptist Association (Louisiana), *Minutes*, 1854, p. 9.

⁸Sabine Baptist Association (Louisiana), *Minutes*, 1854, p. 9.

⁹TB&H, March 5, 1896, p. 12.

¹⁰TB&H, March 5, 1896, p. 12.

¹¹TB&H, March 5, 1896, p. 12. This must have been Milam Church because it was admitted to the Sabine Association as a new church in 1844 with fourteen members. Asa Wright was pastor here and at Bethel.

¹²TB&H, March 5, 1896, p. 12.

¹³Sabine Baptist Association [Texas unless otherwise noted, hereafter cited as SBA], (Waco, Baylor University, The Texas Collection), Tables, 1844, p. 4.

¹⁴SBA, *Minutes*, 1844, p. 1.

¹⁵TB&H, March 5, 1896, p. 12.

¹⁶TB&H, March 5, 1896, p. 12.

¹⁷SBA, 1845, Tables, p. 2.

¹⁸TB&H, April 19, 1894, p. 6.

¹⁹TB&H, April 19, 1894, p. 6.

²⁰TB&H, April 19, 1894, p. 6.

²¹TB&H, April 19, 1894, p. 6.

²²TB&H, April 19, 1894, p. 6.

²³TB&H, April 19, 1894, p. 6.

²⁴TB&H, April 19, 1894, p. 6; William Tellis Parmer, *A Centennial History of Sexton Lodge No. 251, A.F. and A.M., Sabine County, Texas, 1860-1960 and A History of Jackson Lodge No. 35, A.F. and A.M., Sabine County, Texas, 1847-1857* (Milam, Texas, 1960), pp. 28, 57, 60-61; James D. Ward, Grand Secretary, Masonic Grand Lodge Library and Museum of Texas to author, June 19, 1990.

²⁵TB&H, March 19, 1896, p. 9.

²⁶TB&H, March 19, 1896, p. 9. Slaughter stated that he was ordained on the second Sunday in June 1845 in the 1894 account but in an 1882 article he stated it occurred in 1846, [Palo Pinto Baptist Association, (hereafter cited as PPBA), *Minutes*, 1882, p. 11.]. The SBA *Minutes*, 1847, list him as L.M. or licensed minister. Besides Burroughs, writing in the TB&H, April 2, 1896, p. 13, states that it was in the spring of 1848 before Slaughter, Packer, and Meador were ordained. Therefore, the Burroughs account is probably the most accurate. Notwithstanding, however, the turmoil in the Sabine Association in 1848 and the ostracism of Eldredge and Slaughter and the other missionary Baptists, it may have been after October 1848 when the three were ordained by Basil E. Lucas and Eldredge. See B.F. Burroughs' intriguing articles: "Fifty Years Ago" TB&H, March 5, 1896, p. 12; March 19, 1896, p. 9; and April 2, 1896, p. 13; SBA, *Minutes*, 1843-1845

and 1847-1849; "G.W. Slaughter," TB&H, April 19, 1894, p. 6; Sabine Baptist Association (Louisiana), *Minutes*, 1854, p. 9. (Nashville, Southern Baptist Historical Commission Library and Archives); *Texas Baptist*, October 4, 1856, p. 2; "Report of G.W. Slaughter, His 36 [sic] Years Labor in the Ministry in Texas," PPBA, *Minutes*, 1882, p. 11; *Redland Herald*, (San Augustine, Texas), July 6, 1844, p. 2 and July 13, 1844, p. 2; Peter Webster Eldredge (Peter Eldredge's grandson), to J.M. Carroll, two letters of March 16, 1919, and March 28, 1919. (Fort Worth, Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, A. Webb Roberts Library Archives), J. M. Carroll Collection, file #270. Peter Webster Eldredge also stated that his grandfather baptized Slaughter's eldest son, C.C. Slaughter, "early in life."

⁴³HFJ, (April 1848), II, p. 267; SBA, Title page, 1847.

⁴⁴TB&H, March 19, 1896, p. 9.

⁴⁵SBA, *Minutes*, 1848, p. 5.

⁴⁶Parmer, *A Centennial History ...*, pp. 60-61.

⁴⁷SBA, *Minutes*, 1849, p. 2.

⁴⁸TB&H, April 2, 1896, p. 13; Jack Williams, National Association of Free Will Baptist, Inc., to author, June 12, 1990; James R. Lynch, American Baptist Historical Society, to author, July 3, 1990; Gary Fenton Barefoot, Free Will Baptist Historical Collection at Mount Olive College, to author, August 30, 1990. None of these Free Will Baptist national organizations have any record of this Free Will Baptist group so they must have been independent Free Will Baptists.

⁴⁹Z.N. Morrell, *Flowers and Fruits in the Wilderness; or Forty-Six Years in Texas and Two Winters in Honduras*, 3rd ed, rev. (St. Louis, 1882), pp. 192-93

⁴⁰TB&H, April 19, 1894, p. 6; PPBA, *Minutes*, 1882, pp. 11, 13.

⁴¹Murrah, *C.C. Slaughter ...*, pp. 6-7; TB&H, April 19, 1894, p. 6; "G.W. Slaughter 36 Years Labor ...," PPBA, *Minutes*, 1882, p. 11; Carrie J. Crouch, *Young County, History and Biography* (Dallas, 1937), p. 322.

⁴²"Pioneer Slaughter," *Dallas Morning News*, March 17, 1895, cited and reprinted in TB&H, March 28, 1895, p. 4, copy in CAS Papers, Texas Tech, p. 136.

⁴³James Cox, ed., *The Cattle Industry and the Cattlemen of Texas and Adjacent Territory* (New York, 1959), p. 305; Zane Allen Mason, *Frontiersmen of the Faith, A History of Baptist Pioneer Work in Texas 1865-1885* (San Antonio, 1970), p. 99; "G.W. Slaughter," TB&H, April 19, 1894, p. 6; PPBA, *Minutes*, 1895, p. 10.

⁴⁴*Texas Baptist Herald*, March 28, 1878, p. 2 and May 13, 1886, p. 2; TB&H, April 19, 1894, p. 6; "G.W. Slaughter 36 Years Labor ...," PPBA, *Minutes*, 1882, pp. 11-13; *The Palo Pinto Parker County Baptist*, February 24, 1940, pp. 1, 5, 7, 8, 10; *A Brief History of Palo Pinto Baptist Association ...*, p. 34; Mason, *Frontiersmen of the Faith*, p. 100.

⁴⁵Cox, *The Cattle Industry ...*, p. 305; Mason, *Frontiersmen of the Faith*, p. 99.