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## THE ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT OF THE DIXIE FRONTIER: HENDERSON COUNTY, TEXAS 1850-1860

*by Kenneth Howell*

Even though cotton production and land speculation already were central to the Texas economy, historian Walter L. Buenger maintains that Texas was less mature economically, socially, and politically than any of the other Lower South states during the 1850s.<sup>1</sup> This seems to have been true for Henderson County. The county strongly resembled other Southern counties during their formative years. As in the earlier frontier days of older Southern areas, there were no truly large planters in Henderson County. According to the Census of 1850, the two largest property holders in the county, William C. Bobo and John H. Reagan, held \$5,000 worth of real estate. Their landholdings averaged more than 2,000 acres, which in East Texas during this period was equivalent to the landholdings of a middle-size planter.<sup>2</sup> Also just as in the earlier periods of older frontier areas of the South, the obligations of most taxpayers were relatively light because they had small farms. The Census of 1860 estimated the taxable values of the county at \$2,114,874. This included \$1,464,179 in personal property, mostly slaves, and another \$650,695 in livestock. Thus, the county began much like other counties of the Old South, a struggling agrarian society existing on subsistence farming while trying to capitalize on cash crops.<sup>3</sup>

Most of Henderson County's wealth came from agriculture. Farming was so important to the economic development of the county during the 1850s that men were judged on how well they managed their farms and marketed their crops. Those who enlarged their farms and produced more than the previous year were held in high regard; those who did not were considered failures. Robert D. Palmer, resident of a small farming community in the southern part of the county, recalled:

Ten or fifteen acres was taken in [the] first year and year after year the farm grew larger, so that in a few years we had a good size farm. It was said then that if a man let his farm grow smaller he was no good, but if a farmer wanted to keep in good repute he should make his farm a little larger every year.<sup>4</sup>

Henderson County farmers divided into two classifications, yeomen farmers and small planters. According to figures in the Census of 1850, most of the early settlers were yeoman.<sup>5</sup> These farmers and their families typically worked their farms without the aid of slave labor. For such people, wealth meant owning a plot of land and the necessary equipment to work it.

Middle-size farmers or small planters were those who held lands valued between \$500 and \$9,999.<sup>6</sup> In 1850 fifty-two settlers in Henderson County fit this classification. Some twenty-six held \$1,000 or more in real estate property.<sup>7</sup> Because all of the farms in the county were either middle-size or smaller, cash crops were not exported from Henderson County in large quantities. It does not follow, however, that commercial crops were not grown during this period. The production of cotton increased late in the 1850s. The

county's cotton production grew from thirty-one bales in 1850 to 2,105 bales in 1860.<sup>8</sup> When compared to the harvests of neighboring counties, this figure suggests that Henderson County was located on the edge of what could be called the "Southern Frontier." Census records for counties to the east and south of Henderson County show a much larger increase in cotton production during the 1850s, while those to the north and west experienced little increase.<sup>9</sup> The men responsible for this rise in production were primarily middle-size farmers. Because only a limited number of people could afford to farm commercially, most must be considered subsistence farmers. For people living in near-frontier conditions, their first concern was survival.

The farming techniques used by the people of Henderson County determined the economic success of their community. The initial task of the farmer was to prepare his fields for cultivation by clearing unwanted obstructions, such as trees, brush, and rocks. This often proved to be difficult work.<sup>10</sup>

Plowing the fields came next. Usually plowing began sometime in January. First, the farmers plowed long rows approximately six feet apart; thereafter, they used lighter plows to make shallow furrows on top of the rows. This was known as setting the seed bed. Usually this process continued until February or March. After placing the seeds in the furrows, the farmer covered them with a harrow. R.D. Palmer recalled his early days working with his father on their family farm:

[The] ground had to be cleared and fenced for farms, and this was very hard work. The bushes undergrowth and small trees had to be cut down and burned. All farms were fenced by rails, generally eight feet long. They were split from large trees, cut up into right lengths, using iron wedges, gluts, and heavy mauls to split the rails, and they had to be put up so as to keep out hogs and cattle. ... Georgia plow stocks and straight shovels and bull tongues were the farming implements. Oxen were used for plowing and it was mighty hard, slow work.<sup>11</sup>

Cultivation began when the crops started breaking through the ground. Using a lightweight plow, the farmer broke the ground between the rows to remove the grass and weeds. A hoe was used closer to the plants for the same purpose. This process went on through June. If corn was the crop planted, it would be harvested in June or July. If the crop was cotton, then harvesting began in August and continued through December.<sup>12</sup> If his crops were not damaged from the weeds, worms, drought, or floods, a farmer might produce enough to earn a profit.

The main staple crop grown in Henderson County was corn. The eastern part of the county, known as the "Egypt of Henderson County," produced the largest volume of corn in the area.<sup>13</sup> But corn was only one of many foods grown. The county also produced wheat, sweet potatoes, Irish potatoes, peas, beans, okra, and squash, with sweet potatoes second only to corn in production.<sup>14</sup>

Livestock was another important product to the people of Henderson County. For the most part, the livestock ran wild in the woods near the farms. Though the animals held little market value, they were a valuable source of food.

Aside from game, the primary animals eaten by the settlers were cattle, hogs, and peccaries. Most frontier settlers mistakenly called the peccary, or javelina, a wild hog. Both peccaries and hogs, mostly razorbacks, ran wild in the woods and were hunted during the fall season.<sup>15</sup> Pork, like other frontier areas of the Old South, was the dietary mainstay of Henderson County. Palmer recalled that "hogs and cattle were plentiful, raised in the woods on the range . . ."<sup>16</sup>

Though subsistence farming dominated the economy of Henderson County in the 1850s, cotton production became important to the county's economic growth. As mentioned above, the cultivation of cotton in the county increased each year during the decade. Money earned from the county's exports helped strengthen the local economy. The amount of money attributed to cotton production grew from \$1,240 in 1850 to \$84,200 in 1860.<sup>17</sup> Partially this occurred because of an increase of 2,074 acres planted in cotton.<sup>18</sup> Interestingly, this increase in money flow may not have stayed within the county. Because farmers sold their cotton to markets outside of the county, a substantial portion of their profits went to pay the fees of agents located in Houston, Galveston, and Shreveport.

It was a common practice for small farmers to market their crops through such "factors," or commission merchants, in larger towns.<sup>19</sup> These agents helped the farmers in a variety of ways. First, they stored the farmer's cotton in a warehouse until it could be sold for a good price. After selling the cotton they sent the income to the planter minus their fee. Second, the "factors" sometimes purchased goods for the planters which were deducted from the farmer's income. Third, the agents made secured loans to the planters and usually accepted the next cotton crop as collateral. Finally, agents often took care of the farmer's business in town by mailing letters, placing advertisements in newspapers, and arranging meetings with lawyers.<sup>20</sup>

Another option that was popular, especially with the small planters, was to sell their crops to a local merchant. The merchants processed the cotton on their own accounts.<sup>21</sup> The small cotton producer also could sell his cotton to owners of larger farms who owned their own gins or produced enough cotton to justify having it processed at one of the local gins. This was probably the case with farmers who lived along the southern county line near the larger farms in northern Anderson County.<sup>22</sup>

There were several reasons why cotton was not a major factor in Henderson County's economy until late in the 1850s. First, in the 1850s East Texas suffered a long drought. Because of the drought, more time had to be spent tending subsistence crops and less with commercial output. Second, many of the area's best soils were overlooked because of the belief that only the wooded areas were fertile enough for cotton production. Naturally, these areas had to be cleared before planting could begin. Finally, the county's location made it hard to transport crops to market. Though the county had the Trinity River on its western periphery, it was not navigable the entire year.<sup>23</sup>

The only other method for transporting crops was overland. It is evident

was fairly popular in Henderson County. Such men carried the county's harvest to Shreveport, Louisiana, the closest market. This annual trip began as soon as the cotton was baled. Oxen, having more endurance than horses, pulled the wagons on this tortuous journey. In Shreveport, Texas farmers usually received between eight and ten cents a pound for their cotton.<sup>24</sup>

Cotton production, though limited, did make a contribution to the economy of Henderson County. It increased the wealth of the county and allowed at least a few individuals to acquire moderate landholdings. But perhaps its greatest impact was that it tied the county to the Old South both economically and politically. Hope for future profits in cotton production was no doubt a primary reason why the Confederacy received so much support from the county when the Civil War began.<sup>25</sup>

Aside from farming, there were other economic opportunities available to the people of Henderson County. Blacksmith shops, brick and pottery companies, tanning yards, mills, general merchant stores, and hotels were located in the county during the 1850s. Usually these ventures were small and operated by single families.<sup>26</sup>

Blacksmith shops and mills were mainly located near the farming centers. The primary job of the blacksmith was to make, mend, and repair the tools farmers used to grow crops. A good blacksmith was important for the economic success of every farming community.<sup>27</sup>

Milling was another important industry. Farmers depended on the mills to process the grains they produced. Many of the county's mills, like its cotton gins, were powered by mules or horses, but some mills took advantage of the swift moving creeks located on the watershed of the Trinity River for their power source. J.B. Hogg's mill, located seven miles southeast of Athens on Mine Creek, was one of several in the county. It was reported that Hogg's mill ground all of the corn of the farmers in that area.<sup>28</sup>

Another type of mill was the saw mill, such as the one housed in Brownsboro. It was owned by the Reiersons, a prominent Norwegian family, whose mill supplied most of the processed lumber used in the county in its early period.<sup>29</sup>

Tanning leather was also a common business throughout the East Texas area. The tan yards were responsible for treating raw animal hides. This process involved soaking the hides in tubs of specially prepared water. This water-based solution, made by soaking the bark of oak or sumac trees, tanned and softened the leather. To preserve the leather, the tanners salted the raw side of the skin as soon as it was removed from the animal.

Tanned leather was used for a variety of products in the 1850s, most commonly clothes, upholstery, and rugs. The most frequently used hides came from bear, buffalo, deer, and cattle.<sup>30</sup> One man remembered that his father and brothers "used to hire [themselves out] to old man Carroll who ran a tan yard at Carroll Springs;" his brother "Jim learned to make saddle trees and he was detailed during the Confederate war to make saddles for the soldiers."<sup>31</sup>

A small number of other businesses appeared in the county before the 1860s. These included the general merchant stores and hotels. A. W. Meredith, who had lived in Athens during the 1850s, described the town's general stores in a letter to local historian J. J. Faulk:

... dry goods, plows, and farming implements on the same shelves near each other. It was thought that a merchant should carry everything for sale from a cambric needle to a cannon, and they generally had in the back room a barrel with a tin cup to quench the thirst of their customers.<sup>32</sup>

The first hotel was built in Athens by Joab McManus. It was a simple boarding house and tavern located on the northeast corner of the square.<sup>33</sup> The hotel was probably one of a kind in the county during this period. Such a hotel, however, was not the only place where one could find room and board. Many people opened up their homes to travelers, offering food and shelter in return for work or money.

Other industries were more specialized. Among these were brick kilns and pottery workshops. The first potter in the county was Levi Cogburn. He located his shop on the outskirts of Athens near a spring. His business was operational in 1857 and remained open until his death in 1866.<sup>34</sup> W. C. Bobo opened the first brick kiln in Athens about the same time. From this kiln came much of the brick used to build some of the early structures in Athens.<sup>35</sup>

During the 1850s Henderson County's economy expanded rapidly. Mills, small craft shops, and country stores sprang up in most communities, and the cotton industry gained momentum. With the coming of the Civil War, this emerging commercial economy almost disappeared. The main reason for the economic shutdown was the loss of manpower. The war required the fittest men for military service and left the rest, along with the women, children, and what few slaves lived in the county, to plant and cultivate the fields.

Any discussion of Southern economic development would be incomplete if it did not examine the effects of slavery on the economy. The "peculiar institution" in Henderson County was in its early stages in the 1850s, thus it did not have a strong economic hold on the county. Yet there would be an appreciable increase in the number of slaves within the county, suggesting that slave-based agriculture was on the rise. Between 1850 and 1855, the slave population increased from eighty-one to 411. By 1860 the slave total reached 1,109. Though the percentage of increase for the last five years of the decade was smaller than the first five years, it represented a noticeable increase.<sup>36</sup> The percentage of increase in the slave population, when compared to the total population of the county, far exceeded that of free inhabitants. In 1850 slaves made up about seven percent of the county's population; by 1860, they constituted twenty-four percent. During this ten-year span the free inhabitants increased by about 296 percent, while the number of slaves increased approximately 1,269 percent. Clearly slavery within the county was steadily gaining in importance.<sup>37</sup>

In a way, the county was fortunate to be in the early stages of a slave-based economy when the Civil War started. After the war, the economy

recovered more rapidly than many other Southern counties with larger investments in slaves. The lives of the yeomen farmers continued much the same as before the war. The urgency to replace a lost labor system was not as intense in Henderson County, and new ways of farming, such as sharecropping, were more easily adopted.

According to the Census of 1860, eighty-two of the county's 161 slaveowners owned fewer than five slaves. Some small slaveholders were in businesses other than farming, such as Levi Cogburn, the potter in Athens. But the majority were yeoman farmers. These slave-owning yeomen helped the area to evolve into more of a plantation society. Some of these farmers seem to have developed their land only to sell it later to wealthier planters. After purchasing several smaller farms, the planters merged them into single agricultural units. This process was in its initial stages at the beginning of the 1860s. Nat Coleman, the largest slave owner in the county, was a case in point. In 1860 Coleman's real estate holdings, approximately 1,416 acres, were valued at \$3,400, and his personal value was \$34,000. Most of his personal value came from the fifty bondsmen he owned. A man who owned this many slaves would not be content with only \$3,400 worth of real estate. Coleman, a new arrival to the county who had not fully established himself by the time of the census, was one of the men ready to expand their operations.<sup>38</sup> Their goal, it seems, was to build on the foundations already established by yeoman farmers by buying them out.

Three generalities can be used in describing slavery in Henderson County. First, most slaveholders were small farmers. Second, most of the chattels in the county arrived with their masters; few slaves were auctioned within the county, although some might have been sold at the county courthouse under terms of a probated will of a slaveowner. Third, the heaviest population of slaves was found in the Fincastle community; more grain and other foodstuffs were produced there than any other part of the county.<sup>39</sup>

Slaves in Henderson County, like those in many other areas within the South, endured terrible lives. Their basic needs were met by their masters. Owners supplied them with food, shelter, and clothing. The main diet of slaves was corn, the most commonly grown staple crop within the county. Even though the slaveowners went to great lengths to ensure their slaves' survival, they had little time to worry with their psychological or physiological condition. An owner's need for maximum production on his farm caused him to push his slaves as much as possible. In addition, slaves belonging to yeoman farmers remained under close supervision in much the same way that slaves working as domestic servants remained under the direct control of the large planters and their wives. In such a world, slaves became prisoners in a economic system which could not afford to give them their freedom.<sup>40</sup>

Although the number of slaves increased dramatically between 1850 and 1860, slavery still was not a vital part of Henderson County's economy by the end of the decade. Cotton production was minimal, and large plantations within the county were few. However, slavery, even on such a small scale,

could have devastating effects for both slave and master. The slaveowners' fear of slave revolts stirred lurid and irrational passions. Slaves, being the most helpless and despised individuals in Southern society, were often victims of imagined fears and public panic.

The economy of Henderson County in the 1850s resembled the economies of earlier frontier communities of the Old South. Though "King Cotton" and slavery were on the rise, subsistence agriculture dominated the county's economic system. It is probable that Henderson County would have become characterized by large and middle-size planters had not the Civil War interrupted its economic growth and development. Nevertheless, in 1860 the county was far less mature economically, socially, and politically than other, more established counties found in the states of the Lower South. In essence, the county was part of what had become the new Southern frontier, which extended into the East Texas region.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Walter L. Buenger, *Secession and the Union in Texas* (Austin, 1984), p. 294.

<sup>2</sup>Richard Lowe and Randolph B. Campbell, *Planters & Plain Folk: Agriculture in Antebellum Texas* (Dallas, 1987), p. 114.

<sup>3</sup>U. S. Census Office, *Statistics of The United States in 1860 Compiled from the Original Returns of the Eighth Census* (New York, 1976), Table No. 3; J.J. Faulk, *History of Henderson County, Texas* (Athens, Texas, 1929), pp. 154-55; Leila Reeves Eads, ed., *Defenders: A Confederate History of Henderson County, Texas* (Athens, Texas, 1969), p. 1. Most Southern frontier regions were settled sparsely. Henderson County ranked fiftieth in population among eighty counties of Texas.

<sup>4</sup>Faulk, *Henderson County*, p. 246.

<sup>5</sup>Seventh Census, 1850, Schedule I. A majority of the citizens of the county held real estate valued under \$500, approximately 208 acres, and owned no slaves.

<sup>6</sup>Lowe and Campbell, *Planters & Plain Folks*, p. 114.

<sup>7</sup>Seventh Census, 1850, Schedule I.

<sup>8</sup>U.S. Census Office, *A Compendium of The Seventh Census of the United States 1850* (New York, 1976), Table XI; Faulk, *Henderson County*, p. 152; Berta Lowman, "Cotton Industry in Texas During the Reconstruction Period" (M. A. thesis: University of Texas at Austin, 1927), p. 179.

<sup>9</sup>*Compendium of the Seventh Census, Table XI: Agriculture of the United States in 1860: Compiled from the Original Returns of the Eighth Census* (Washington D.C., 1864), pp. 140-149. Counties to the east and immediate south of Henderson County showed greater increases in cotton production. Smith County went from 415 bales in 1850 to 9,763 in 1860; Cherokee County 1,083 to 6,251; Anderson County 734 to 7,517; and Freestone County produced 6, 913 bales in 1860. Counties to the north and west of Henderson County showed smaller increases in cotton production. Van Zandt County increased from fifty-seven bales in 1850 to 654 in 1860; Kaufman County six to 381; Ellis County none to 359; Denton County none to two; Collin County one to sixteen; Hunt County five to twenty-two; Limestone County 603 to 1,303. The only exception in these western counties was Navarro County where production was about the same as in Henderson County.

<sup>10</sup>Faulk, *Henderson County*, p. 246.

<sup>11</sup>Faulk, *Henderson County*, p. 246.

<sup>12</sup>Randolph B. Campbell, *An Empire For Slavery: The Peculiar Institution in Texas, 1821-1865* (Dallas, 1989), p. 118.

<sup>1</sup>Faulk, *Henderson County*, p. 151.

<sup>2</sup>Lowe and Campbell, *Planters & Plain Folks*, p. 23; *Compendium of The Seventh Census of the United States 1850*, Table XI. The Census of 1850 reveals that 4, 453 bushels of sweet potatoes were grown in Henderson County. As far as staple crops, sweet potatoes did indeed rank second behind the 31,350 bushels of corn grown.

<sup>3</sup>Elizabeth Silverthorne, *Plantation Life in Texas* (College Station, 1986), p. 176.

<sup>4</sup>Faulk, *Henderson County*, p. 246.

<sup>5</sup>*Compendium of The Seventh Census of the United States 1850*, Table XI. A bale of cotton is listed as weighing 400 pounds; Faulk, *Henderson County*, p. 283. Faulk states that cotton sold for eight to ten cents a pound in Shreveport, Louisiana.

<sup>6</sup>Silverthorne, *Plantation Life*, p. 117.

<sup>7</sup>Lowman, "Cotton Industry," p. 36.

<sup>8</sup>Lowe and Campbell, *Planters & Plain Folks*, pp. 18-19.

<sup>9</sup>Lowe and Campbell, *Planters & Plain Folks*, p. 17.

<sup>10</sup>Lowe and Campbell, *Planters & Plain Folks*, p. 17; Faulk, *Henderson County*, p. 207.

<sup>11</sup>Allen C. Ashcraft, "East Texas in the Election of 1860 and the Secession Crisis," *East Texas Historical Journal*, 1 (July 1963), p. 7.

<sup>12</sup>Faulk, *Henderson County*, p. 283.

<sup>13</sup>Lowe and Campbell, *Planters & Plain Folks*, p. 189.

<sup>14</sup>Faulk, *Henderson County*, pp. 65-280.

<sup>15</sup>Faulk, *Henderson County*, pp. 65-280; Silverthorne, *Plantation Life*, p. 105.

<sup>16</sup>Faulk, *Henderson County*, p. 246.

<sup>17</sup>Faulk, *Henderson County*, p. 66.

<sup>18</sup>Ralph A. and Robert Wooster, "A People at War: East Texans During the Civil War," *East Texas Historical Journal*, 28 (Spring 1990), pp. 8-9; Kathryn Brown, unfinished manuscript on the history of Henderson County. Located at the Henderson County Historical Commission Office in the Old Henderson County Criminal Justice Building, Athens, Texas.

<sup>19</sup>Faulk, *Henderson County*, p. 247.

<sup>20</sup>Faulk, *Henderson County*, p. 75.

<sup>21</sup>Faulk, *Henderson County*, p. 66.

<sup>22</sup>Faulk, *Henderson County*, p. 74; Ralph A. Wooster, "Life in Civil War East Texas," *East Texas Historical Journal*, 3 (October 1965), p. 97.

<sup>23</sup>Faulk, *Henderson County*, p. 69.

<sup>24</sup>*The Texas Almanac for 1857* (Galveston, 1856), p. 69; Eads, *Defenders*, p. 6; Campbell, *Empire For Slavery*, p. 256; Seventh Census, 1850, Schedule I and II; Eighth Census, 1860, Schedule I and II.

<sup>25</sup>Eighth Census, 1860, Schedule I and II; Seventh Census, 1850, Schedule I and II.

<sup>26</sup>Eighth Census, 1860, Schedule I and II.

<sup>27</sup>Winnie M. Reynolds, "The History of Henderson County" (M.A. thesis: Texas A&M University – Commerce, 1952), pp. 18, 120.

<sup>28</sup>John W. Blassingame, *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South* (New York, 1972), pp. 249-83.