Bowie County in Transition: From 1860 to 1870

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In the early nineteenth century, Bowie County, nestled between the Sulphur River to the south and the Red River to the north, lay quietly on the fringes of Northeast Texas. Once the home of the sedentary Caddo Indians, the land between the rivers welcomed a new wave of immigration as the Mexican, and later the Texas government allocated land for colonization in the 1830s. As settlers began driving plows into Bowie County's topsoil, an Anglo society began taking shape. Rapid growth made the 1860's a period of great transition for Bowie County.

As migration increased in the mid-nineteenth century, Bowie County's population revealed their Deep South roots. According to the United States Census of 1860, only three percent of the adult population of Bowie County was born in Texas, with ninety-four percent born in southern states. As farmers relocated from Virginia, Georgia, and the Carolinas into the Tennessee and lower Mississippi River valleys, and eventually into the state of Texas, they took with them their family heritage, political viewpoints, and most importantly, their commitment to slavery.

Bowie County had a hierarchical social system characteristic of a slave society. Wealthy landowners dominated society and politics. One Bowie County family, the Runnels, originally from Mississippi, sat atop the social ladder and influenced state politics during an explosive era. Hardin Richard Runnels, the third of four brothers, served ten years in the Texas House of Representatives before defeating Sam Houston in the 1857 gubernatorial election. Runnels, replaced in the House by his younger brother Howell, was an avid defender of slavery and drew criticism for his efforts to reopen the African slave trade. Runnels, owned a plantation in central Bowie County, and headed a family that exempli-

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fied the southern aristocracy, a class Unionists became determined to eliminate. The Runnels family, along with other prominent Bowie County slave-holding families (Elliots, Moores, Janes, Colloms, Rochelles, Elliss, Daniels, and Hooks), brought an antebellum aristocracy to Bowie County and built a slave society as strong as any county in the South. When debate began on secession in 1861, Hardin Runnels, a delegate to the convention, supported leaving the Union as ardently as anyone in Texas. Bowie County voters supported secession 208 to 15.5

Between 1860 and 1870 the population of Bowie County changed little, but the decade brought other demographic changes.6 Men made up fifty-eight percent of the adult population among white residents in 1860, while a decade later they comprised only fifty-two percent.7 Moreover, the number of adult males declined, leaving a number of Bowie County women as heads of households. Women headed seventeen percent of Bowie County families in 1870, a thirty-three percent increase from 1860.8

Bowie County’s African-American Community underwent the greatest change during the 1860’s. African-Americans, for the first time in the county’s short history, were no longer the majority by 1870.9 Following emancipation many Bowie County Freedmen fled to escape violent whites, resulting in a sixteen percent decline in black population.10 In contrast, the African-American population in Red River County grew from 2,513 in 1860 to 4,148 a decade later, while the number of blacks in adjacent Lamar County also increased.11 Moreover, in Marion County the Freedmen population remained virtually unchanged during the same period.12

The change in Bowie County population coincided with a dramatic transformation in the county’s economy. With the loss of the slave labor force, the cost of the war, and the collapse of the Confederate dollar, the county’s agricultural economy faltered. Bowie County recorded 32,633 acres of improved farmland in 1860, but by 1870 that number had fallen to 18,360 acres, a forty-four percent decline. Bowie County growers ginned 6,874 bales of cotton in 1860, whereas the 1870 production was only 2,990 bales, a fifty-seven percent drop. Production of sweet potatoes and Irish potatoes also declined, as well as those of peas and beans. Wheat production dropped from 2,238 bushels in 1860 to none in 1870. Even the value of orchard crops fell off fifty-eight percent.13 Other agricultural commodities experienced similar declines, and livestock numbers also followed suit.14
Not all Texas counties experienced such a decline in agricultural production. Smith County (Tyler), for example, saw virtually no drop in cotton production from 1860 to 1870. Crops such as sweet potatoes, peas, beans, and corn had little or no decrease in the number of bushels harvested, and Smith County livestock totals remained steady as well. What was the difference between Smith County and Bowie County? Bowie County was more a slave society than Smith County; while Smith County had more slaves than Bowie County, free inhabitants outnumbered bondsmen two-to-one. With the end of slavery, Smith County farmers struggled to survive the first couple of years after the war, but they soon returned the county to an economic level that rivaled ante-bellum days. Most Smith County farmers had not tied themselves to slavery and were able to recover more quickly from the post-war calamity. Spurred by the arrival of Freedmen laborers into the area to work the land, Smith County farmers began to reestablish a healthy economy based on cotton and corn. Bowie County, on the other hand, struggled with rehabilitation due in large part to the exodus of much of its black labor force.

While economic changes affected all Bowie County farmers, two groups felt the impact more heavily than others. Aristocratic families faced ruin by 1870. The Runnels family, for example, experienced tremendous financial losses. The four Runnels brothers, E.S., H.A., Hardin, and Howell, held a net worth of $327,700 in 1860, but by 1870 their combined worth was only $17,000, a ninety-five percent reduction. Former governor Hardin Runnels, the owner of a plantation worth $85,000 in 1860, owned a store valued at $15,000 in 1870. His brother, Howell, worth $108,560 in 1860, was, in 1870, a penniless clerk in his brother’s store. Howell and his wife Martha, who acted as first lady in her brother-in-law’s gubernatorial administration, did not own a home and instead lived with the former governor.

The other group most affected by the changes was Freedmen. Emancipation brought little economic progress as tenant farming and the crop-lien system continued to bind African-Americans to the land and to their creditors. Only four of the 388 Freedmen families listed in the census of 1870 held real estate, with those four families holding a combined worth of just $1,550. In fact, the 1870 census listed only one African-American male, a carpenter, as something other than a farm laborer. Whites operating small family farms were among the least affected by the economic changes of the decade. Money did not buy as much in
1870, but most white residents of Bowie County operated subsistence farms. Two such farmers, Alfred Phillips and Moses Day, neither of whom were slave owners, exemplified the stability of the majority of whites. The 1870 census recorded Phillips’ wealth at $900, slightly less than the $1,150 on the previous census, yet still enough to maintain his pre-war way of life. Day also saw little change in his economic status as his wealth went from $1,800 in 1860 to $1,700 following the decade. These small farmers did not rely on slavery for their economic survival so emancipation caused little change to their lifestyle.\(^{22}\)

Even though these subsistence farmers were not on the level of the aristocratic planter class of antebellum society, they still viewed themselves as part of the white superiority social hierarchy. As long as slavery kept the African-American on the plantation, and the United States Courts considered slaves less than human, whites had little reason to feel threatened by blacks. However, with emancipation came a new concern. The Radical Republican government in Washington accorded Freedmen equal citizenship, and the end of slavery meant an end to a large portion of the southern labor system. Whites who owned enough land in 1870 still placed a value on African-American labor and were likely, and more able, to allow Freedmen to remain on their land as tenant farmers. Keeping the former slaves as landless tenants buried in debt satisfied most whites that Freedmen were in their proper place in society, but many small farmers felt threatened by the presence of emancipated African-Americans, which often resulted in racial intolerance at best and quite often overt racial violence. Poor whites, worried that Freedmen had attained equal status within society, often relied on terror and violence to insure that Freedmen stayed in their place.\(^{23}\)

Even though African-Americans comprised forty-eight percent of the population of Bowie County in 1870, whites did not welcome Freedmen in all parts of the county. The poorest precincts in Bowie County also had the lowest percentage of former slaves among the inhabitants. Precinct Five, in the southwestern part of the county, had an average farm value of $597 and an eighty-three percent white population.\(^{24}\) In the southeastern part of the county, Precinct One had an average farm value of $1600 and a seventy percent white population.\(^{25}\)

In addition to the hostility of local whites, two other factors influenced the county’s racial imbalance. First, Cass County to the south, was the home of the outlaw Cullen Montgomery Baker who led attacks against Freedmen and their sympathizers. Lieutenant William G. Kirk-
man, the agent for the Fifth Military District stationed at Boston in Bowie County from 1867 to 1869, filed numerous reports of citizens who hindered his attempts to apprehend the desperado. Many white residents viewed Baker as a hero and assisted him by providing cover for the murderer and his men. This white conspiracy terrified Bowie County Freedmen, who sought sanctuary in the northern regions of the county or left their home county entirely.

Second, opportunities in central and northwestern Bowie County attracted Freedmen. Precinct Two, comprising most of east central Bowie County, was the richest section with an average farm value of $4,830. The precinct’s seventy percent African-American population showed that these wealthier farms provided Freedmen with work as tenant farmers. Precinct Four, in the northern and western part of the county, had a farm value averaging $2,397 and a sixty percent African American population. In antebellum years, these precincts were home to many of the large plantations, including the one owned by former governor Runnels.

Whites experienced drastic changes in career opportunities during the Civil War decade. Even in 1860 employment options were numerous in Bowie County, particularly in trades that supported the everyday operation of plantations. Blacksmiths, wagon makers, stock raisers, and teamsters were abundant, along with carpenters, bricklayers, mechanics, and weavers. Tradesmen located their businesses near the plantations they served. Eight of the eleven blacksmiths set up shops in the east-central and northeastern part of the county amidst some of the larger plantations, and this same section was home to all nine of the county’s carpenters. Nine of Bowie County’s twelve physicians and all of the druggists practiced near the larger plantations, as did twenty-one of the twenty-six merchants. The plantation region was also home to Bowie County’s only high school and dance instructor, two examples of the fabric of antebellum plantation culture and society.

The end of slavery and the collapse of the cotton plantations ruined plantation-related businesses. Not one blacksmith, teamster, mechanic, carpenter, bricklayer, stock raiser, or weaver, listed in 1860, operated the same type of business by 1870. In fact, after a decade of Civil War and Reconstruction, only six physicians, seven merchants, and one attorney, all located in either Boston or DeKalb, continued in their vocations. Emancipation also took the job of all of Bowie County’s thirty-nine overseers.

Bowie County schools also underwent change. The county boast-
ed seventeen school teachers in 1860, but by the end of the decade not one of them taught in Bowie County. Twelve new teachers attempted to reorganize education under the Freedmen’s Bureau. A few Bowie County residents, along with some from Cass County, harassed the Bureau and violence escalated until the murder of the Freedmen’s Bureau agent, William Kirkman. Shortly thereafter, the Bureau abandoned its post in Boston and left the burden of education to the county’s residents. Schools remained small and scattered until public education became a priority for post-Reconstruction legislators in Austin.

Churches, an integral part of antebellum social life, experienced change as well in Bowie County during the 1860s. Many slaveholders found justification for owning slaves in the sermons that flowed from southern pulpits. Texas had 341 organized churches in 1850, and a decade later immigration had expanded that number to over one thousand. But by 1870 the number of churches in Texas dropped to 843 as many communities were unable to support preachers. The 1870 census listed no ministers, and church buildings sat empty in at least two Bowie County communities in 1869 (Boston and Myrtle Springs) because parishioners’ could not financially support a preacher.

The changes Bowie County experienced during the decade of the 1860’s had an enormous effect on the population, economy, and social life of the county, but failed to wrest control of local politics from the grasp of pro-slavery Democrats. While many Texas counties, such as Harrison County, remained in the hands of Republican scalawags until 1878, Bowie County Democrats never loosened their grip on home rule. Bowie County voters sent antebellum secessionist Hardin Runnels to the 1866 Constitutional Convention, and some delegates actually nominated Runnels for president of the convention, although he failed to win the seat. Bowie County residents resisted Radical Reconstruction by silently supporting the efforts of men like Baker and assigning their political proxy to the antebellum aristocrat, Runnels.

In the 1860’s the Civil War, the demise of slavery, the death of the Confederacy, and the collapse of the southern economy changed the face of Bowie County. With the help of the Freedmen’s Bureau, blacks sought opportunity while many angry, frustrated whites initiated a campaign of terror against blacks and their white sympathizers. Unknown at the time, the residents were in an interregnum. “King Cotton” had given way, but a new king would emerge in the 1870’s. The railroad was coming to Bowie County and once more change was in the forecast.
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BOWIE COUNTY, TEXAS 1870
ENDNOTES

1. *Bowie County Texas Historical Handbook*, page 8
2. Bowie County was cut from Red River County, Texas in 1840, www.tshaonline.org.
3. 1860 United States Census Bowie County, Texas.
7. In 1860 there were 668 white men listed on the census. In 1870 there were 631.
8. In 1860 there were 58 families headed by a woman in Bowie County. There were 77 in 1870.
14. The production of honey dropped 43%; butter fell 68%; cheese fell from 463 pounds in 1860 to only 25 pounds in 1870. Wool fell from 4,155 pounds to only 1,259 pounds as livestock ownership dropped. The number of wool producing sheep fell from 1,331 in 1860 to only 578 a decade later, a 56% decrease. Other livestock numbers also showed drastic decreases; horses (32%), swine (45%), mules (54%), milk cows (54%), and oxen (29%). 1860 and 1870 Agricultural Schedule to the United States Census.
15. 1860 (9,763 bales) and 1870 (9,322 bales).
17. According to the 1860 census, Smith County had a total population of 13,392; 4,982 of whom were slaves. www.cets.sfasu.edu/SmithCo.html.
20. 1870 United States Census Bowie County, Texas.
21. A man named George Jackson listed his occupation as a carpenter.
22. 1860 United States Census; 1870 United States Census.
24. 1870 United States Census Bowie County, Texas - 82 total families - 31 of whom did not own real estate.
25. 1870 United States Census Bowie County, Texas - 30 total families - 11 of whom did not own real estate.
27. Letter dated November 13, 1867 from William G. Kirkman to Lieutenant Richardson, Assistant Commissioner of the 5th Military District stationed in Austin.
28. 1870 United States Census Bowie County, Texas - 23 total families - 9 of whom did not real estate.
29. 1870 United States Census Bowie County, Texas - 38 total families - all of whom reported owning real estate.
30. 1860 United States Census; map entitled “First Landowners, Bowie County, Texas”
34. Berwanger 8.
35. There were 1,034 organized churches in Texas in 1860.
36. 1870 United States Census Table XVII (A) and (B).
38. *Handbook of Texas Online - Bowie County.*