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**THE ORIGIN AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE
AFRICAN SLAVE TRADE IN GALVESTON,
TEXAS, AND SURROUNDING AREAS
FROM 1816 to 1836**

FRED ROBBINS

The African slave trade in Texas represents an interesting phase of Texas history that has been discussed all too sparingly, if at all, by historians. The purpose of this paper is to trace the origins and the development of the African slave trade as it related to Texas history in the early nineteenth century. It must be understood from the outset that this trade in Texas never reached the significant importance, in terms of total numbers of Africans brought into this area, that it did in other areas of the New World. But the African slave trade did have a degree of importance first for the pirates who indulged in this trade and later for the Anglo-American colonists who established themselves along the coastal plains of Texas in the nineteenth century.

The African slave trade in Texas formed part of the Atlantic slave trade that began in the sixteenth century and flourished during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Because the Texas portion of the trade lasted less than fifty years, 1816-1860, Texas did not experience a large nor profound influx of Africans. During the Atlantic slave trade, more than ten million Black Africans were transferred from Africa to the New World.¹ Texas' share of this number only reached as many as one thousand.

The slave trade in Texas before 1836 can be divided into two periods. The first period extended from 1816 to 1821, when pirates and revolutionaries roamed the Texas Gulf Coast plundering merchant shipping. After 1821, the African trade languished in Texas until increasing demands for labor and greater opportunities for quick wealth encouraged some of the new Anglo-American colonists to enter this traffic. This second phase of the trade began around 1835 and ended with the independence of Texas in 1836.

In the first two decades of the nineteenth century, pirates, privateers, and revolutionaries used extensively the area along the Gulf of Mexico between Matagorda Bay and Pensacola, Florida for their work. Many of these people were exiles escaping the turmoil of European politics in the early nineteenth century. Before 1815, Napoleonic exiles settled on Baratavia just fifteen miles west of the Mississippi River below New Orleans. Later, in 1818, a few of these exiles established a French commune called Champ d'Asile on the Trinity River at the north end of Galveston Bay.²

Another significant group of exiles included Spanish-American patriots, who sought independence from Spanish domination in Latin America. During the Mexican Revolution, from 1812 to 1821, these men conducted a series of filibustering expeditions for independence and personal aggrandizement. Many of these intrigues had the moral, if not financial, support of the Americans and the English. In a few instances the activities of these Latin American patriots were somewhat less than the idealistic goals which they claimed to the world.

The pirates and rogues who first used Galveston Island were looking for adventure and quick profit, while they passed as Mexican patriots seeking

independence from Spanish oppression. The main objective of these men was the establishment of a safe port from which they could plunder vessels in the Gulf of Mexico and initiate raids on other smugglers. Most of the goods captured by them eventually wound up in the United States, particularly on the black market in New Orleans.

The Texas coast presented an excellent area for the establishment of a base of operations for the privateers. This area was close to the shipping lanes in the Gulf of Mexico and to the slaving ports of Cuba. Cuba was a major depot for the African slave trade into Latin America in the early nineteenth century. Since the island was only 800 miles from Galveston, it became the major source of African slaves for the Anglo-American colonists after 1821. A short distance northeast of Galveston, about 60 or 70 miles, was the Louisiana border of the United States. With the relatively short distances to travel on the Gulf of Mexico, the smugglers did not need to spend a great deal of time on the open seas, thereby avoiding prolonged exposure to any authorities that might be patrolling the Gulf.

The natural surroundings of the area near Galveston, as well as the island itself, also encouraged the expansion of the African trade into Texas. The coastline is composed of layers of limestone, clay, and sand that rise only a few feet above the sea level for many miles inland.⁴ Many points along the coast did not even emerge above the water, thereby giving the coastline an uneven appearance or the illusion that a chain of islands existed in particular areas of the coast. Certainly this made navigation risky for the unsuspecting seaman; but the pirates, who were familiar with this area of the coast, used this situation to their advantage. Also, many rivers and streams emptied into the Gulf of Mexico along the coast. A few of these rivers were navigable for a short distance inland, providing a convenient hiding place for storing contraband slaves. It did not take long for Galveston to emerge as the favorite location for pirates who occupied the island in 1816.⁴

Galveston Island was "a sand bar or small island about thirty miles long and two to six miles wide" on the upper Texas coast.⁵ The island had an excellent natural harbor. There were twelve to fourteen feet waters, depending on the tides, as ships approached the island from the Gulf of Mexico. Anchorage on the Gulf side of the island proved suitable for vessels of the period. After passing beyond the east boundary of the island, into what today is known as East Bay, the water reached a depth of from four to six fathoms, or between twenty and thirty feet. To the north of the island was Galveston Bay. On the northern side of the bay two large rivers emptied into it. At the mouths of these rivers lay large sand bars making navigation at the entrances of the rivers hazardous, thus providing natural protection where smugglers could hide the booties of slaves and other contraband.⁶

Similar conditions existed farther down the coast at Matagorda Bay. Good anchorage inside the bay, with eleven to thirteen feet waters according to the tides, made this area a likely port for smugglers of African slaves. But very poor anchorage existed outside the bay in contrast to the anchorage at Galveston Island. Large rivers also emptied into Matagorda Bay again affording good protection for slavers. In addition to the rivers emptying into the bay, many small inlets and coves dot the area, further increasing the desirability of the area for the pirates.⁷

The first establishment of a privateer government on Galveston Island occurred in September, 1816. At that time Manuel de Herrera and Louis de Aury arrived at Galveston Island. Upon their arrival, Aury immediately began the work of establishing a privateer government. He organized various governmental departments to expedite the progress of the privateers on Galveston. A collector of revenue and customs was created for the purpose of receiving and distributing money and stolen merchandise of the privateers. Aury also established an admiralty court to settle any disputes that might arise between the pirates. And, finally, a notary public was empowered to authenticate documents and instruments for the privateers.⁸ The insurrection of 200 Black seamen in Aury's camp temporarily halted the work on governmental affairs, but on September 17, 1816, Herrera decreed a newly independent government with Aury as governor.⁹

On November 24, approximately two months after Aury's arrival in Galveston, Don Xavier Mina joined the Herrera-Aury expedition. Mina's arrival on Galveston with 140 recruits brought the total number of men on the island to over 500. Among these men was a detachment of discontented American soldiers commanded by Colonel Guilford Young. Young was a native of Connecticut, who had been honorably discharged from the United States Army in 1815. Following his discharge, Young, lured by delusions of grandeur and the prospects of rapid fortune, gathered together like-minded Americans and joined the insurgent forces already on Galveston in 1817.¹⁰

There were two reasons for the establishment of Galveston by these men. The first involved the idea of securing a base of operations from which revolutionaries could mount attacks on the government in Mexico. The other objective entailed the less altruistic goal of establishing privateering operations which included authorizing vessels to cruise the Gulf against the commerce of any unsuspecting nation, particularly those sailing under the Spanish flag. This dichotomy of purpose between the Aury group, who wanted to conduct privateering activities, and Mina's forces, who were interested in the invasion of Mexico, caused the rapid deterioration of unity on the island. Harmony returned when Aury decided that Matagorda suited his purposes better than Galveston Island.¹¹

Aury decided to leave Galveston on April 5, 1817, at which time he sold some 300 Africans to Mississippi planters Joseph Erwin, James Still, and Christopher Adams. A few days after Aury departed for Matagorda Bay, Captain Guy Champlin arrived at Galveston with two prize ships. One, the *Patronille*, contained 174 Africans, while the second vessel, *L'Enrequita*, held 113 slaves on board.¹²

During the summer of 1817, Aury again grew dissatisfied and returned to Galveston with the hope of re-establishing himself on the island. On his return from Matagorda, Aury brought with him two vessels of African slaves. One of the ships contained 300 slaves in a fever-ridden state. This vessel was set adrift in the Gulf off Galveston for fear that the fever might spread to the pirates. The second ship contained 400 Africans. According to the customs collector at New Orleans, Beverly Chew, this brought the total number of Africans on Galveston Island to over 650 awaiting entry into the United States. Collector Chew also reported the plans of the privateers for the construction of slave barracks along the Sabine River which would be used for storing the

Africans during the winter months. This caused the customs collector on several occasions to ask the federal government for additional ships and men to control the increasing activities of the smugglers along the Texas-Louisiana border.¹³

With the final departure of Aury in July, 1817, and the earlier evacuation of Mina in April for Soto La Marina, Galveston Island was again ready for a new strongman to establish himself.¹⁴ Sensing this opportunity, Jean Lafitte and his followers quickly took control of the island. After placing his men in charge of the various activities, Lafitte commenced four years of privateering on Galveston Island.¹⁵

Lafitte's arrival at Galveston meant an immediate increase in smuggling activities. Regular deliveries of Africans to the island were made by Lafitte and his men. One of the men who made deliveries to Lafitte was Captain Champlin. During one visit to the island Champlin sold Lafitte over 200 Africans.¹⁶

Lafitte's operations on Galveston proved highly successful for several years. One reason for his success was the manner in which he disposed of the African slaves brought to the island. Lafitte used intermediaries, who would contract with interested planters in the United States, for purchasing slaves on Galveston. After the intermediary filled a number of contracts, he was free to go to Galveston and secure the necessary number of slaves. Three unusually successful men who acted as intermediaries for Lafitte were the Bowie brothers—John, Resin, and James. During the period between 1818 and 1820, John boasted that they made \$65,000 from smuggling Africans into the United States and selling them to planters in Louisiana and Mississippi.¹⁷

The Bowie brothers devised an ingenious method for smuggling the Africans into the United States. Upon arrival in Galveston, they purchased about 40 Africans for approximately one dollar per pound of the slaves' weight, which averaged almost \$140 per person. After purchasing the slaves, the Bowies brought them into the United States and delivered them to a customs official; thus becoming the informers of the illegal entry of the Africans and entitled to half the value of the slaves. Once the Africans were put up for sale by the United States Marshal, the Bowies purchased the slaves back at half the price since they were already entitled to half the value of the Africans. This made the possession of the Africans legal since a bill of sale had been issued by the federal Marshal. Thus the Bowies were free to sell the slaves in the United States. This incursion of the law proved highly valuable, both financially and legally for the Bowies, and at the same time it allowed them to import over 1,500 Africans into the United States.¹⁸

Before long, however, this activity on Galveston came to the attention of the American authorities. In 1821, American patrols in the Gulf of Mexico forced Lafitte's retreat from Galveston Island. Following his departure, a hiatus developed in the African slave trade along the Texas coast until the mid-1830's. There were several reasons for the disappearance of the trade during this period.¹⁹

In 1821, Mexico declared her independence from Spain.²⁰ This brought an end to the attempted filibustering movements. Also, the United States government increased its efforts to control the activities of the pirates in the Gulf of

Mexico. One result of this new effort was the expulsion of Lafitte from Galveston Island in 1821. Thus the free wheeling buccaneering days of the first two decades of the nineteenth century along the Texas coast was followed by a period of settlement and colonization.

Shortly after the formation of the Republic of Mexico, the Mexican government approved the petition of Moses Austin to settle American colonists in the province of Texas. When the Mexican government granted the petition, there was no mention of slaves; consequently, many of the colonists brought slaves with them to Texas. But as time passed, Mexican distaste for the domestic importation of slaves led to the passage of laws prohibiting this activity. The first such restriction appeared in the new colonization laws passed January 4, 1823. Article 30 of these laws provided that there was to be no sale or purchase of slaves which might be introduced into the empire.²¹

In the following years the Anglo-American colonists succeeded in getting the Mexican government to acquiesce in allowing them to bring slaves into the province. The colonists found other ways of evading the existing prohibitions against the importation of slaves if the laws were not changed. One method of avoiding the laws was to declare that the slaves were really indentured servants. But this loophole quickly closed when Article 36 in Decree 190 of April 28, 1832, prohibited further introduction of indentured servants or contract labor by foreign colonists. Thus, after colonization began in Texas, with the emerging civil and political order, people's attentions turned to domestic matters rather than to the pursuit of external aberrations.²²

Two conditions emerged by the mid-1830's which encouraged the renewed activity in the African slave trade. First, colonization by the Anglo-Americans brought new problems for the Mexican government besides the question of slavery in Texas. Cultural differences between the Spanish and American colonists, such as language and religion, produced bitterness on both sides. During this period of agitation and stress, several Americans living in Texas seized the opportunity for acquiring quixotic fortunes from the African slave trade. This anticipation of large profits also caused a resurgence of this trade. American colonists interested in this traffic could easily sail to Cuba and buy Africans for \$300 or \$400. Once the dealers returned to Texas, the Africans could be sold for as much as \$1,500. Thus enormous profits could be made by interested colonists.²³

One of the first American settlers who made a habit of slave trading in Georgia before coming to Texas was James Walker Fannin. Fannin arrived in Texas during the autumn of 1834, and settled near Velasco on a large plantation with his wife and two daughters. It was not long before he became involved in the struggle for Texas' independence as well as the African slave trade.²⁴

Fannin's first experience with the introduction of Africans into Texas occurred in the summer of 1835, when he returned from Cuba with 152 Africans.²⁵ In the fall Fannin became involved in a dispute over the handling of an American schooner, *Hannah Elizabeth*, chartered by the American colonists to bring ammunition and supplies to Texas. But the boat was intercepted by the Mexican Navy near Matagorda Bay. Hearing of the capture of the valuable cargo, a small band of Texas patriots quickly recaptured the vessel from the

Mexican Navy. After this incident, Fannin accused the customs collector at Matagorda, Samuel Phoades Fisher, of certain irregularities in the way he disposed of the cargo after the ship had been returned to the Texans. In replying to Fannin's charges, Fisher accused him of "the introduction of slaves, native of, and immediately from, Africa."²⁸ Obviously, Fisher was making reference to Fannin's slaving expeditions to Cuba. But Fannin's flamboyant career as slave trader and revolutionary came to an end at Goliad, Texas, in March, 1836.²⁷

Another colorful figure in Texas history involved in the illicit "Black ivory" trade during this period was Monroe Edwards. He came to Texas looking for the proverbial "pot of gold" and found it in the African slave trade. Edwards was probably the only American colonist in Texas to go directly to Africa on a slaving mission. But this occurred before he decided to settle in Texas. The opportunity to sail to Africa came in 1832, when Edwards joined several other men in Latin America for the voyage across the Atlantic. After completing this trip to Africa, Edwards returned to the United States with money to invest. In the fall of 1833, he purchased a plantation on the San Bernard River with the profits from the sale of the Africans in Latin America.²⁹

After Edwards settled along the San Bernard River, he also became entangled in the events related to the struggle for Texas' independence. The advantages of the confusing and turbulent times permitted him to order a cargo of 185 Africans from Cuba in February, 1836. As it turned out, only 170 slaves were landed near Velasco on February 28.³⁰ The timing of this transaction allowed Edwards to claim the Africans as domestic slaves before the establishment of the Texas Republic and the possible prohibition against this trade. With the introduction of this and other cargoes of slaves, Edwards erected a slave mart near present-day San Leon on Galveston Bay.³⁰ On one occasion Africans were seen in the general area of this mart being driven by Major Benjamin Fort Smith, planter and slave dealer, along the Brazos River.³¹ Edwards' career as slave trader in Texas ended abruptly in 1837. Because of his greed, Edwards became involved in a case of forgery and swindle over earlier dealings in the African trade which forced him to leave Texas.³²

Other adventurers in this trade remained anonymous or proved of a lesser importance. Colonel James Morgan in 1835 sent his agent to Cuba to investigate the opportunities in this trade. That same year a camp for "newly landed Africans" was constructed near Thomas McKinney's store in Quintana. McKinney used that camp for the slaves he bought and sold in Quintana and in Galveston.³³

During the 1830's the McNeil brothers—Sterling, Pleasant, and Leander—operated plantations along the Brazos River. Early in 1836, Sterling McNeil landed 40 Africans at Caney Creek below Velasco despite the efforts of the customs collector, William S. Fisher, to seize the vessel. Later in the summer, the McNeils ferried a group of Africans across the Neches River. The McNeils frequently advertised in the late 1830's for runaway Africans. They described the slaves as men who spoke little English, had tribal markings on their faces, and were hard to handle.³⁴

In the autumn of 1836, an unusually large cargo of Africans was landed along the Sabine River, probably for importation into the United States. The ship, commanded by a Spaniard named Moro, and owned by an American who

was known as Coigly, landed 200 Africans. During 1836, additional small cargoes of 20 to 40 slaves were landed on the Brazos River, the San Bernard River, and Caney Creek.¹⁶ This increased activity came to the attention of American authorities in 1837, when Memucan Hunt, special envoy in Washington for the Texas Republic, requested aid from the United States Navy in patrolling the Texas coast.¹⁷

The exact number of Africans imported into Texas after colonization is impossible to determine. One person who kept a close watch on this trade, British Consul William Kennedy at Galveston, estimated that between 1826 and 1836 over 500 Africans were smuggled into Texas "from all places except the United States."¹⁸ This number is a conservative estimate, since only limited evidence confirms the fact that a majority of the 500 or more slaves were imported during a two year period, 1835-1836. Certainly the slaving activities during the preceding eight years might raise the total Africans imported into Texas between 1826 and 1836 over the 500 level, but better evidence exists to confirm the fact that only a limited African slave trade existed during the 1820's in Texas. The best evidence of a limited African migration into Texas during that period resulted first, from the fact that few people had settled along the Texas coast by 1830, and secondly, the people brought with them most of their slave labor from the United States. Therefore, a greater domestic slave trade was carried on from the United States into Texas during the 1820's.¹⁹

With the coming of the Texas revolution and the promulgation of Section Nine of the General Provisions of the Texas Constitution on March 17, 1836, another phase in the African slave trade in Texas drew to a close. Section Nine provided that "admission of Africans or Negroes into the republic of Texas excepting from the United States of America, is forever prohibited, and declared to be piracy."²⁰ This law added a measure of certainty to the hitherto undefined position of the Texas Republic on this issue.

Thus the African slave trade in Texas between 1816 and 1836 subsided for the most part with the creation of the Texas Republic and the establishment of laws regulating this trade. Both phases of the trade derived their impetus from the instability of the times. The major reason prompting men to participate in this trade was the knowledge that enormous fortunes could be made with little effort and a minimum of risk. Also most of the participants in the African slave trade already possessed the necessary skills required for success. These included sailing, smuggling, and domestic slaving. Therefore, a confluence of factors gave rise to the development of the African slave trade in Texas before 1836.

FOOTNOTES

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³Harriet Smith and Darthula Walker, *The Geography of Texas* (Boston, 1923), 10.

⁴*Message from the President of the United States communicating information of the proceeding of certain persons who took possession of Amelia and Galveston Islands, During the summer of the present year and made establishment there (December 15, 1817), House Docs., 15 Cong., 1 Sess., No. 12 (Serial 6), 35; Documents Related To the Illicit Introduction of Slaves into the United States (January 19, 1819), House Docs., 15 Cong. 2 Sess., No. 100 (Serial 22), 11 & 12.*

⁵*Documents Related to the Illicit Introduction of Slaves into the United States (January 19, 1819), House Docs., 15 Cong., 2 Sess., No. 100 (Serial 22), 12.*

⁶*Ibid.*, 11-12.

⁷*Ibid.*, 12.

⁸*Daily National Intelligencer*, November 21, 1816.

⁹*Ibid.*; Lancaster E. Dabney, "Louis Aury: The First Governor of Texas Under the Mexican Republic," *Southwestern Historical Quarterly*, XLII (October, 1938, 114.

¹⁰William Davis Robinson, *Memoirs of the Mexican Revolution* (Philadelphia, 1820), 60-61.

¹¹*Ibid.*, 68-70; *Message from the President of the United States . . . of certain persons who took possession of Amelia and Galveston Islands, House Docs., 15 Cong., 1 Sess., No. 12 (Serial 6), 18-24.*

¹²*Message from the President of the United States . . . of certain persons who took possession of Amelia and Galveston Islands, ibid, 10 & 14.*

¹³*Ibid.*, 12.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, 34.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, 15.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 10.

¹⁷Dr. Kilpatrick, "Early Life in the Southwest-The Bowies," *DeBow's Review*, XIII (October, 1852), 381.

¹⁸*Ibid.*

¹⁹George A. Pierce, "Life and Time of Lafitte," *DeBow's Review*, XI (October, 1851), 385 & 386; Jean Lafitte, *The Journal of Jean Lafitte: The Privateer and Patriots Own Story* (New York, 1958), 117.

²⁰William Langer (ed.), *An Encyclopedia of World History* (Boston, 1968), 843.

¹¹Hans P. N. Gammel, *The Laws of Texas, 1822-1897* (Austin, 1898), I, 30.

¹²*Ibid.*, I, 303.

¹³Francis C. Sheridan to Joseph Garraway, July 12, 1840, Ephraim Douglas Adams (ed.), *British Diplomatic Correspondence Concerning The Republic of Texas - 1838-1846* (Austin, 1912-1917), 24; "By a Texan," *Life of the Celebrated Monroe Edwards, Convicted Before the Court of Oyer and Terminer, June 6, 1842 for Forgery and Swindling* (Boston, 1842), 7.

¹⁴Walter Prescott Webb (ed.), *The Handbook of Texas* (Austin, 1952), I, 582.

¹⁵J. W. Fannin, Jr. to Major Belton, August 27, 1835, "Notes and Fragments," *The Quarterly of the Texas State Historical Association*, VII, (April, 1904), 320.

¹⁶Broadside, Samuel Rhoades Fisher - "To The People of Texas 1836," University of Texas at Austin Archives (Austin, Texas).

¹⁷Ruby C. Smith, "James W. Fannin, Jr. in the Texas Revolution," *South-western Historical Quarterly*, XXIII (April, 1920), 281-282.

¹⁸*Life of the Celebrated Monroe Edwards*, 1-28.

¹⁹Return to a Despatch Marked, Slave Trade No. 1 — dated May 30th, 1843, Adams, *British Diplomatic Correspondence*, 256-257; W. S. Fisher to Henry Smith, March 2, 1836, William C. Binkley (ed.), *Official Correspondence of the Texas Revolution 1835-1836* (New York, 1936), I, 477.

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²²*Life of the Celebrated Monroe Edwards*, 8.

²³Thomas Lee Smith to James Morgan, November 21, 1835, Morgan Papers Rosenberg Library, Galveston; Mary Austin Holly Diary, June 10, 1835 (typescript, University of Texas Archives).

²⁴Binkley, *Official Correspondence* I, 447, II, 663; *Houston Telegraph & Texas Register*, August 5, September 16, December 9, 1837; September 18, 1839; *Houston Morning Star*, April 6, November 14, 1839; July 7, August 22, 1840.

²⁵Adams, *British Diplomatic Correspondence*, 256-257.

²⁶"Copy of General Hunt's Correspondence with the Secretary of State of the United States," George P. Garrison (ed.), *Diplomatic Correspondence of the Republic of Texas* (Washington, 1908), I, 248-251.

²⁷Adams, *British Diplomatic Correspondence*, 257-258.

²⁸*Ibid.*; Also see the following references for estimates of the Black population of Texas between 1825 and 1836. Eugene C. Barker, *The Life of Stephen F. Austin* (Dallas, 1925), 98, 244-245; William Kennedy, *Texas: The Rise, Progress and Prospects of the Republic of Texas* (London, 1841), I, 79-80; Dudley Wooten (ed.), *A Comprehensive History of Texas 1685-1897* (Dallas, 1898), II, 759.

²⁹Gammel, *Laws*, I, 1079.