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Protestant Churches and Slavery in Matagorda County

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Religious independence came to Texans in 1836 along with their political independence from Mexico. Although Roman Catholicism was the official religion during the colonial period, Protestants had been preaching and witnessing from the beginning of the Anglo-American-occupation. From Matagorda County's inception as a colony in Stephen F. Austin's colonization plan, religion was an important part of the lives of Matagorda residents, both white and black. With the new freedom came Protestant missionaries from the United States. The Methodists and Presbyterians were first in the field. Two Presbyterian ministers visited Matagorda before 1838, but no organization of a church congregation resulted.

Religious meetings were first held in private homes, then as attendance increased, church congregations were established. The slaves attended the church services and became members along with their owners. Sunday Schools, often non-sectarian, met in many places even before a church was organized. Camp meetings were also popular and different denominations cooperated in sponsoring them during these early days of the Republic.

The missionary work of the Methodists in Texas was assigned to the Mississippi Conference at its session on December 3, 1838 in Grenada. One of the itinerant preachers appointed to that Missionary District was Jesse Hord. On January 3rd he arrived in Matagorda with a letter of introduction from his Presiding Elder, Littleton Fowler, to Colonel A. C. Horton, later the first Lieutenant Governor of Texas, in whose house he was graciously received. On Sunday, January 6, 1839 the minister attended morning services at the Episcopal Church. Hord preached in that church at 3 o'clock that afternoon and again at an early candlelight service. He "opened the door of the Church" and four persons came forward. This was the beginning of the first Methodist congregation in Matagorda.

In 1839 at the Mississippi Conference meeting at Natchez, Robert Hill was assigned as minister to the Methodists at Matagorda. Texas ministers at the conference reported that there were 750 white and 43 "colored" members of the Methodist Church in their district. By 1860 the Methodists had one church in Matagorda with accommodations for 150 and property valued at $1200. That same year Texas Methodists could count 410 churches, accommodations for nearly 104,000 members, and properties valued at $319,934.

The Baptists were equally active. In 1829 Connecticut-born Thomas J. Pilgrim arrived in Matagorda with a group of New York Baptists in route to San Felipe de Austin where they planned to provide religious education for the villagers. Several members of Pilgrim's party remained in Matagorda to establish a Sunday School. The American Baptist Home Missionary Society of New York provided most of the missionary aid to the Texas Baptists.

One prominent Texas Baptist layman was A. C. Horton, who came to the Matagorda area from Alabama in 1835, and bought several leagues of land on Old Caney Creek. He helped organize the Texas State Baptist Convention at Anderson on September 8, 1848, and served on the committee which drafted

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that body's constitution. Horton, a deacon in his local church, had a "tender
and deep interest for the comfort and religious welfare" of his 300 slaves, many
of whom were also Baptists. The slave-owner built a "church house" for his
slaves and employed a minister to preach to them. Noah Hill, Horton's pastor,
remembered that Horton and his wife often read the Bible and prayed with their
servants. R. C. Burleson, president of Baylor University in 1851, wrote that
while visiting the Horton Plantation, his host invited him to preach to the slaves.10
Such concern with the spiritual needs of the slave population was typical, and
although early church records are scarce, those extant relate several incidents
of Negroes being baptized into the white Baptist Churches.11

At the first Baptist State Convention in 1848, Elder Noah Hill delivered a
report entitled "the Religious Condition of the Colored People" urging the
congregations to send missionaries to the blacks and to appropriate a part of
every Sabbath to preach to the slaves.12 In his report the Elder justified slavery
from a Biblical standpoint, but "pled earnestly and sincerely for aggressive work
to evangelize the slaves."13 By 1852 Hill was employed jointly by the State
Convention and the Southern Baptist Convention as a missionary to the Negroes.
His territory encompassed Wharton, Brazoria, and Matagorda counties, and his
duties were equally extensive. He reported to the State Convention that he had
traveled 1654 miles, preached 62 sermons, delivered 24 exhortations, and bap-
tized 36 servants. Planters, anxious to co-operate with Hill in improving the
moral condition of their slaves, built houses of worship and contributed as much
as $50 annually. The two conventions paid Hill an annual salary of $300.14

A "colored Baptist church" first petitioned membership in a district organi-
zation of Baptists in 1854. A Negro church on the plantation of J. H. Jones in
Matagorda County made the request and was received into the Colorado Asso-
ciation, a group of Baptist churches organized in 1847 and composed of all
Baptist congregations east of the Colorado River. Elders Noah Hill and J. J.
Loudermilk, both white preachers, were the chosen messengers to the blacks.
In 1855 the Colorado Association recommended "separate churches for the
colored people." The Association, the parent of many similar associations, was
composed of twenty-one churches in 1859 and contained 172 Negro members.15

The Baptists usually accepted responsibility for their slaves' religious lives.
Planters encouraged their slaves to attend religious services. Apparently, the
slaves found the Bible as understood and taught by the Baptists very appealing;
more slaves were Baptists than all other denominations combined.16 The slaves
also were eager to contribute to missionary work. When the Matagorda Church
submitted its contributions for Foreign Missions to the State Baptist Convention
in 1848, it included $11.50 donated by the "colored" Christian slaves for mis-
sonary activities in Africa.17 The Texas Baptist Conventions continued to urge
Baptist ministers to give special attention to the colored people. The 1856 Con-
vention declared that the "design of God in introducing slaves into America was
to Christianize them, and accordingly urged the employment of the three mis-
sonaries for this work."18

Prior to the Civil War there were very few separate Negro churches. Special
seating was arranged for slaves in the white churches. Before the close of 1860,
however, serious agitation arose concerning the slavery question; hence many
Baptist district associations strongly urged that in all services held for the Ne-
groes a number of white men should be in attendance to prevent disturbances.19

The Episcopalians were the third Protestant denomination to work among
the early Texans. On Christmas morning in 1838, a small group of eight men
and women knelt before an improvised altar in a schoolroom to receive Holy Communion. This was the first time that the Lord's Supper, according to the Liturgy of the Protestant Episcopal Church, had been observed in the Republic of Texas.  
There were only six members in the Episcopal Church at Matagorda in 1838, but these few appear to have been influential citizens. They had petitioned the first Congress of Texas in 1837 for the incorporation of a Protestant Episcopal Church in Matagorda. A. C. Horton, a Baptist, introduced a bill of incorporation which passed the Senate but not the House. Forward-looking Episcopalians also wanted a school. By 1838 they had procured the services of the Reverend Caleb Ives, a native of Vermont, as a missionary to Texas based in the Matagorda area. Ives first opened his school, and then was elected pastor of the new Christ Church. This church is believed to be the first Protestant Episcopal church organized in Texas. Later in 1839, two Matagorda residents, A. C. Horton and Abner Lee Clements, donated a lot for a church building. About five hundred people live in Matagorda; Ives became one of its leading citizens. He organized a weekday school and preached and conducted Sunday School on the Sabbath. In 1840, Mrs. Ives opened a female department in the school that was called the Matagorda Academy.

Worship services of the Episcopal Church were well attended; the Sunday School itself had five teachers and thirty-one pupils. Ives' influence was greater than these numbers suggest, however, for he was the only minister in Matagorda and his was the only school. No other Episcopal church structure stood in Matagorda, nor, so far as Ives knew, in Texas. A suitable place to hold the services was sorely needed. Money was scarce and the currency of the Texas Republic severely depreciated. Residents of the town urged Ives to tour the United States to solicit building funds, and he did so. When he collected enough money, Ives contracted for a church building to be pre-cut in New York and shipped to Matagorda. Despite financial difficulties the new church building was opened for services on Easter Day, 1841. Christ Church was consecrated in 1844 by the Right Reverend Leonidas Polk, Bishop of Louisiana.

Slaves were actively included in the services of the Church. Mrs. Ives organized and taught a special Sunday School session for the slaves in Christ Church. Ives' Common Journal describes his work with the slaves:

June 5, 1842
Commenced this afternoon to preach a short extemporaneous sermon to the negroes.

September 4, 1842
Baptized 6 colored children this afternoon.

November 6, 1842
Began familiar instruction of the negroes.

Negroes owned by such prominent Matagorda planters as John Rugley, J. B. Hawkins, J. H. Selkirk, and Judge Mathew Talbot frequently accompanied their masters to worship services.

Texas remained a missionary district for several years; however a meeting was held at Christ Church, Matagorda, on New Year's Day 1849, to consider organizing the parishes and missions of Texans into a Diocese. At the General Convention in Cincinnati, Ohio, October 1850, the new diocese became a reality. The Right Reverend George W. Freeman served as Missionary Bishop of Arkansas and Provisional Bishop of Texas until 1859 when the Right Reverend Alexander Gregg became Texas' first resident Bishop.

A slaveowner himself, Bishop Gregg was concerned about the spiritual
welfare of the Negro slaves and ministered regularly to them. The new prelate's ambitious plans included a missionary program designed to reach all the people. One of his objectives was to send missionaries to the slave population in Brazoria and Matagorda counties where there was a heavy concentration of Negroes. Gregg did not favor separate Negro congregations or separate services as a general rule. More than once he urged that seating be provided for the slave population so that they might attend services with their masters. Regarding the obligations of the white members to their slaves, Gregg remarked:

May the church, in all her members, awake to the magnitude of the trust and responsibility [of ministering to the slaves] . . . . The Christian master is bound by every motive of duty to provide for the spiritual interests of his slaves. 29

The bishop also maintained that there should be no radical barrier in the Church, and he disagreed with those who argued that the Episcopal Church was not adapted to all classes of the white population. 30 The Episcopal Church continued to serve the slave population throughout the war years. The Reverend John Owen of Matagorda baptized fifty-four Negro children in 1862. In 1865 he reported that he had "preached to large congregations of colored servants on plantations and elsewhere about a dozen times." 31

With emancipation of the slaves, Bishop Gregg did not relax his efforts on behalf of the Negro people. He, along with others, believed that the Negroes' greatest need was for education to enable them to benefit from their new freedom. The Bishop called on the Diocese to provide schools for the freedmen, and made a trip to the East to try to obtain funds for such schools. Although the Easterners responded generously to Gregg's appeals for other needs, they offered no financial assistance for the Negro schools. 32 Several congregations did make efforts to establish schools for the Negroes. For example St. Mark's Parish in San Antonio reported the organization of a special Sunday School for "colored" children in June, 1868, and two years later the Bishop commented that the school was doing well. Several parishes continued to report colored communicants, baptisms, and confirmations. Presumably the Negro children in those parishes studied in the Sunday Schools along with the whites. 33

The efforts of congregations to retain their Negro members after the war met with indifferent success. Bishop Gregg brought forward a new proposal to the Church Council of 1874. Gregg thought that one Bishop for the four million Negroes scattered over the South would be inadequate to the task. He asked the General Convention to authorize the election of an assistant bishop to work among the freedmen of Texas. Gregg apparently had changed his former convictions; previously, because of his belief in the equality of all people before God, he had objected to separate congregations for the Negroes. Now in the interest of securing results, he was willing to try another plan. 34

Work with the Negroes remained a difficult task and met with little success. In the postwar years, economic hardship prevailed and there was little or no money to meet the needs of the freedmen. The newly-freed Negroes preferred ministers and congregations of their own race, and Church work for the Negroes had to be deferred until more favorable times. 35 Some few of the older Negroes preferred to remain in the white congregations in which they had long worshipped. Old "Aunt Hannah," in her white apron and cap was an esteemed member of the congregation of Christ Church, Matagorda, until well after the turn of the century. 36
NOTES


2Lawrence L. Brown, *et. al.*, “Christ Church, Matagorda, Texas, 1838-1963,” a booklet prepared by the Historical Committee of the 125th Anniversary Commission of the Protestant Episcopal Church of Texas, 3.

3Smith, *Heroes of the Saddle Bags*, 3-5.

4Hord’s *Journal* as quoted in Homer S. Thrall, *A Brief History of Methodism in Texas* (Nashville, 1894), 59.


6Statistics of the United States, (including Mortality, Property, etc.) in 1860; Compiled from the Original Returns and Being the Final Exhibit of the Eighth Census, *under the Direction of the Secretary of Interior* (Washington, 1866), 473.


14Carroll, *Texas Baptists*, 256.


16Carroll, *Texas Baptists*, 259.


20Dubose Murphy, *A Short History of the Protestant Episcopal Church in Texas* (Dallas, 1935), 1.


25Manuscript Common Journal of the Reverend Caleb S. Ives; March 29, 1844, in the Archives of the Diocese of Texas at the Seminary of the Southwest, Austin. No pagination.
Brown, *Episcopal Church in Texas*, Appendix B.

Brown, *Episcopal Church in Texas*, 44, 94.

Bishop Gregg's address to the Diocesan Convention of the Texas Episcopal Churches meeting at Matagorda in 1860 as cited in Brown's *Episcopal Church in Texas*, 104.

Journal of the Diocese of Texas, 1860, p. 18 as cited in Murphy's *History of the Episcopal Church*, 74.

Brown, *Episcopal Church in Texas*, 104.

Murphy, *History of the Episcopal Church*, 74.


Brown, *Episcopal Church in Texas*, 137.