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Liberty and Slavery: The Peculiar Institution
In Liberty (and Chambers) County, Texas

By Ronald D. Traylor

As a historian and a resident of Liberty County, Texas, my research in primary and secondary source materials regarding the institution of slavery in Texas revealed few if any references to the institution in my home county. More often than not slavery studies focused on counties other than Liberty County, which led me to ask a fundamental question: Did slavery as it existed in Liberty County take the same form as it did in other Texas counties? If it did, why was Liberty County not included in the meager scholarly examinations of the topic. If it did not reflect the norm, then why not?

My research led me to this conclusion: Until the arrival of a modern transportation infrastructure, Liberty County slaveholders raised crops, such as sweet potatoes, corn, cattle and swine, not normally associated with plantation slavery. Those crops were, in the case of corn and sweet potatoes, either dedicated to local consumption, or, in the case of cattle and swine, herded overland to distant markets. The percentage of Liberty County slaves, when expressed as a portion of the total population, nevertheless closely tracked the slave population of plantation counties. What set slavery in Liberty County apart from the institution in the cotton, rice and sugar counties was the impact of transportation on crop determination. When the primitive, sometimes non-existent transportation infrastructure improved through the introduction of steamboats and the railroad, Liberty County slavery quickly made the transition to

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the plantation crops. Had the Civil War not intervened and had slavery continued to exist, slave-based agriculture in Liberty County would have likely completed the metamorphosis to a "typical" plantation economy.

Arriving at such a thesis, however, was in the future. The as yet unanswered questions led me to the Liberty County courthouse in the town of Liberty, Texas. When informed of my desire to conduct historical research by examining certain of their archived documents, the assistant Clerk of Court offered her assistance.1 Her pleasure at playing a part in the process quickly changed to dismay when informed that the topic of the project was slavery. She leaned across the counter and in a conspiratorial whisper said, "Honey, slavery was not important in Liberty County during those times."

Slavery existed in Texas, but academic examinations of bondage in the Lone Star state approach neither in number nor in detail those existing for other slave-holding states. Historian Randolph B. Campbell's *An Empire for Slavery: The Peculiar Institution in Texas* took a major step in 1989 to rectify such a problem. He said, "in spite of its obvious historical significance, slavery has received virtually no attention as a part of Texas' heritage." What applied to the state of Texas as a whole also seemed to be playing out in Liberty County,2 and my courthouse episode indicated that Campbell's assessment applied not only to the academy but to the public as well. As a result, I ignored the clerk's well-meant caveat, heeded Dr. Campbell's admonition, and continued the research. It was the proper decision, for I soon determined that twenty years after Campbell's ground-breaking work his judgment remains valid, especially for certain counties of the Lone Star state, of which Liberty County is one. It is also because of the dearth of historiographical sources addressing slavery in Liberty County that this paper, an initial step in correcting such neglect, is based more on primary than on secondary data.

Among the first counties of the Republic of Texas, Liberty County constituted a huge portion of what is now Southeast
Texas. Subdivided into two separate counties in 1858, the state of Texas maintained the northernmost portion as Liberty County and gave to the southernmost portion the designation Chambers County. Liberty County ultimately chose cotton as its crop of choice, while Chambers County continued to use cattle as their primary revenue producer.

The location of Texas on the western edge of what became the Confederacy did not mean that the state was a backwater with regard to the growth and importance of slavery. Slavery existed to some degree in almost all Texas counties by 1860, especially in those counties generally east of the Colorado River. In that huge area, the heavily agriculturalized counties adjacent to Galveston Bay on the middle Texas coast, such as Brazoria, Fort Bend, and Wharton, as well as certain counties in North and East Texas counties such as Harrison, Red River, and San Augustine, counted the most bondsmen. Liberty County, located to the northeast of the former and far to the southeast of the latter, is never mentioned in the same breath with any of those counties and properly so, if raw slave numbers serve as the only factor in determining the importance of slavery to a county’s society and economy.

The insignificance of slavery in Spanish Texas was well illustrated in the census of 1777, which indicated twenty slaves out of a total population of 3,103. The census of 1785 enumerated only forty-three slaves (sixteen of whom resided in the Nacogdoches area) out a total population of 2,919 Texans. The 1809 census for the Nacogdoches region recorded the presence of only thirty-three slaves. The numbers of slaves in Texas, however, as well as the ownership of Texas itself, soon underwent a massive change.³

Mexico won its independence from Spain in 1821, by which time a small number of settlers from the United States already resided in Texas. More Americans followed when Stephen F. Austin received permission from Mexico City to establish a colony near the Brazos and Colorado Rivers. Additional settlers moved into the Atascocita District, that area of the lower Trinity
River basin located between Austin's colony and the Sabine River. The portion of the Atascocita District that later became Liberty County contained its share of slave holding settlers. Factional politics within the Mexican central government resulted in contradictory slavery laws confusing to settlers and government officials alike. Because of the lack of a concrete policy, the slavery question remained unresolved, and slave owners took advantage of the legal void by importing additional slaves.

In 1826, settlers in the Atascocita District petitioned the Mexican government through Stephen F. Austin for recognition as a part of Austin's colony. No record exists of Mexico's action on the request, but a census taken by the settlers and included with the petition offers critical pieces of information. The census covered an area from which the Republic of Texas later carved the counties of Jasper, Jefferson, and Liberty. The 1826 Atascocita Census showed the settlement of the district by slaveholders to be well underway. Of the 331 people enumerated as residents in the area, sixty-nine, or almost twenty-one percent of the total population, were slaves. Of those slaves, forty were older than fourteen years of age and twenty-nine were younger than fourteen. Of fifty-five families (defined for this study as any group of two or more people exhibiting marriage or kinship) only ten, or eighteen percent of the total families, owned slaves. Those ten families, out of proportion to their numbers, owned sixty-one of the sixty-nine slaves in the district, or seventy-eight percent of the total. Three single persons owned the remaining eight slaves. Without exception, every settler identified as a farmer or stockman owned slaves.

Of the thirteen slaveholders included in the Atascocita Census of 1826, nine owned five or fewer slaves (see Table 1). Most of the slaveholders likely used their slaves both as laborers in clearing the virgin timber and in cultivating the subsistence crops grown during the colonial period. As herdsmen, slaves also watched over the hogs and cattle roaming free in the forests and on the prairies.
Table 1

Number of Slaves per Farm

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th># of Slaves</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6-7</th>
<th>8</th>
<th>9-12</th>
<th>13</th>
<th>14</th>
<th>15</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td># of Farms</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In early 1827, the government of the State of Coahuila, of which Texas was a part, approved a new constitution that placed additional restrictions on slavery. The constitution freed all children born in Texas of slave parents and banned the further importation of slaves. Both changes went into effect six months after the constitution’s creation. Austin agonized over the effect on Texas of such an importation ban, but records from East Texas demonstrate that most immigrants, as well as many Mexican government officials, showed little concern for laws made in a seat of government so far away. Slaves continued to flow into Texas.

Contemporary with the Atascocita Census of 1826, a record exists that documents the migration of settlers into Nacogdoches, then the largest settlement in East Texas and a common entry point from Louisiana and points east. Settlers who entered there likely shared many similarities with those already settled in the Atascocita District to the south. Obviously incomplete but nonetheless instructive, the records consist of citizenship applications submitted to the Mexican government by settlers, most of whom were from the United States. These documents, from the years 1827 to 1834, are a chronicle of how one became a new citizen of Mexico. Each single man or head of household swore to be of good character and promised allegiance to Mexico, including a willingness to bear arms in Mexico’s defense.

Among those applying for Mexican citizenship, seemingly oblivious to the confusion engendered by the slavery question and the growing opposition by certain factions within the Mexican government to the institution, were numerous slaveholders. They made little or no attempt to hide the fact of their slave ownership, and periodically and casually mentioned the number

* 113
of slaves they owned, sometimes by name. American settlers insisted on their right to own slaves, and arrogantly ignored the fact that such "rights" ceased at the Mexican border. Slave owners seemed blissfully unaware of the incongruity of citing United States law to protest Mexican law, or of their audacity at assuming the rightness of an illegal institution within the boundaries of the banning nation. The incomplete records show that ninety-one heads of household applied for citizenship between 1827 and 1830. Of those ninety-one, seven declared their status as slave owners. Those seven settlers, representing almost seven percent of the settlers mentioned in the records, owned forty-two slaves.  

In early 1828, the government of the Mexican state of Coahuila made its own constitution even more confusing by legalizing the importation of indentured servants while continuing the ban on slaves. Nevertheless, some new immigrants continued to forthrightly and brazenly refer to their servants as slaves. In 1830, as the flood of immigrants into Texas threatened to replace Mexicans and Mexican culture, the Mexican central government abolished all immigration from the United States for both whites and blacks. White Americans reacted to the ban as they had to the other previous restrictions—they ignored it and continued to move into Texas. The immigration ban (and the colonists' ignoring of it) lasted until 1834. The issue of slavery, however, had consequences.  

Writing on the causes of the Texas Revolution, Randolph B. Campbell suggested that one major cause was the clash of traditions between Mexicans and Texans, and that one of the main differences between the two cultures was the institution of slavery. Unlike their indecisive Mexican counterparts, the framers of the Constitution of Texas gave their absolute approval to slavery when they created the Republic in 1836.  

Tax records exist from the early days of Liberty County, one of the original counties of the Republic of Texas. Those records clearly demonstrate the growth of the institution of slavery in the area. As noted previously, the Atascocita Census of 1826, which
enumerated the citizens of all or part of fourteen modern Texas counties, listed 331 settlers and divided them into fifty-five families. Ten of those families owned sixty-one of the sixty-nine slaves in the district.

In 1838, the second full year in the existence of the Republic of Texas and the first year for which complete, undamaged Liberty County tax records exist, 166 heads-of-household traveled to the county seat to pay their property taxes. The ledgers used to categorize the property upon which citizens paid taxes asked for limited information. Fortunately, the data gives detailed numbers concerning land, horses and cattle, and slaves, the fourth major category.

Of the 166 taxpayers in the county, fifty-nine of them, or more than thirty-five percent, paid taxes on slaves. They owned 231 slaves valued at a total of $90,950, for an average of a little less than $400 per slave. The value of the slaves to their owners was second only to the value of the land on which they toiled. In 1838, no slaveholder in Liberty County in 1838 owned more than fifteen slaves, and only one citizen owned that number. Thirty-nine of the fifty-nine slave owners in the county, or more than sixty-seven percent, owned three or fewer slaves (see Table 2).¹⁰

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Slaves</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
<th>8</th>
<th>9</th>
<th>10</th>
<th>11</th>
<th>12</th>
<th>13–14</th>
<th>15</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Farms</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

At about this time one of the earliest private references to the slave trade specifically involving Liberty County appeared. The Atascocita Census of 1826 enumerated William B. Duncan as the eight year-old son of the elder William Duncan, one of the earliest settlers in Liberty County. In 1839, Meridith Duncan,
the older brother of the young William, made reference to the division of their recently deceased father's estate. He said in a letter, "I rec[eive]d your letter by Charles on this day in which you spoke of the offer Green has made you for your Negroes. I have no objection to you selling to Green." The elder Duncan's death obviously affected the two men, and their concerns over the division of their father's property needed resolution. Since slaves represented a major portion of a slaveholder's wealth, the subject consumed much of the sons' thoughts.

The Liberty County tax rolls for 1840 indicate that migration into the county continued at a high rate. The lists showed 437 taxpayers, up from 166 only two years earlier, an increase of 263 percent. Of that number, 134, more than thirty percent of the total taxpayers, owned 562 slaves. Those 562 slaves represented an increase of 243 percent from the 231 slaves enumerated in 1838. As Liberty County gained in total population, the percentage of growth for whites and blacks remained constant. As with the 1838 tax records, the 1840 tax records demonstrated a propensity in Liberty County toward small slave holdings. Of the 134 slave owners, 102, or seventy-six percent of the total, owned five or fewer slaves, and fifty-eight slave owners, or forty-three percent, owned only one or two slaves (see Table 3).  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of Slaves per Farm</th>
<th>1840</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td># of Slaves</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td># of Farms</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As an adult, the aforementioned William B. Duncan became a prominent Liberty County cattleman and slaveholder. Beginning in 1843, he kept a diary with daily entries that spanned the Republic period, antebellum statehood, the Civil War and Reconstruction, and continued to his death in 1866. Included
in the diary are informative descriptions of how he moved his cattle from Liberty County to market, often to cities in Louisiana and Mississippi. On an 1843 drive to Natchez, Mississippi, Duncan made several diary entries that contained some of the first references to slavery other than the public records involving a Liberty County citizen. Although short, the entries addressed the casual nature of the slave trade in Liberty County and East Texas, and shed light on the value of slaves in the area during the period.\textsuperscript{14}

Probably finding himself shorthanded on the cattle drive, Duncan wrote, "Thursday—[I] Let Crips have thirty-one beeves for a negro."\textsuperscript{15} Four days later he penned, "Monday—Commenced trying to sell beeves: sold three 3 y[ear] olds at $7 [per head]."\textsuperscript{16} Almost two weeks later, he said, "Sunday—Booth and I rode out to Louis Garver's, the Dutch butcher, and finally sold our beeves. Booth sold to Garver at $8.50 and I to Michael Hail for $9."\textsuperscript{17} Valuable as a record of beef prices during the Republic period, these entries also gave a clue to the dollar value of a slave in the county. Duncan purchased a slave on August 10, 1843, for thirty-one head of cattle. Less than three weeks later he sold his herd for between seven and nine dollars per head. That settles the value of the slave at somewhere between $217 and $279, or an average (at eight dollars per head) of $248.\textsuperscript{18} There is no evidence to suggest that Duncan appreciated the irony of the fact that the sale of the cattle paid for the cowboy who drove them.

The 1850 United States Census and its attendant Slave and Agricultural Schedules offer a wealth of information not contained in the earlier Colonial and Republic records. The 1850 Slave Schedule reveals a continuation of growth of the slave population, albeit at a slower rate both in number and as a percentage of the population, when compared to the population figures for slaves and slaveholders from the Tax Rolls of 1840. Slave numbers increased from 201 in 1838 to 889 in 1850. Natural increase cannot explain this growth rate of 442 percent.\textsuperscript{19}

After Texas entered the Union as a slave state, significant
numbers of slaveholders from across the South made their way to the former republic. Many owners of worn-out land came to Texas to take advantage of the available virgin soils, and their slaves accompanied them. Former slave Jacob Branch, born in about 1851, recalled, “I was bought and fetched here to Double Bayou when I was jes’ t’ree year’ old. When dey split up us fam’ly dey buy my mama and de two chillen. I ain’ neber see my daddy no mo’ and don’ ‘member him at all.” It is likely that many of those slaves came from the older southern states, such as Maryland and Virginia, which supplied surplus slaves for ready buyers in other parts of the South.\textsuperscript{20} A final source of the increase came from illegal participation in the outlawed African slave trade.\textsuperscript{21}

The ownership of more than twenty slaves usually conferred plantation status on a property. That being the case, the Slave Schedule of 1850 indicates that only seven Liberty County property owners qualified for that standing. The number of slaveholders increased from fifty-two in 1840 to 125 in 1850, and several large slave owners resided in the county. Edward Gillard’s holding with fifty-one slaves was the largest, but the largest portion of the county’s slaves found themselves on properties containing twenty or fewer souls. Indeed, 100 slaveholders, or eighty percent of the total, owned ten or fewer slaves, and seventy-four of those, or fifty-nine percent of the total, owned five or fewer slaves (see Table 4). While the growth of slavery in the county continued unimpeded, apparently the growth of large agricultural plantations did not follow pace.\textsuperscript{22}

\begin{table}[h]
\centering
\begin{tabular}{|c|c|c|c|c|c|c|c|c|c|}
\hline
\textbf{Number of Slaves Per Farm} & \textbf{1850} \\
\hline
\textbf{\# of Slaves} & 1 & 2 & 3-5 & 6-10 & 11-15 & 16-20 & 21-25 & 26-30 & 31-40 & 41-50 & 51+ \\
\hline
\textbf{\# of Farms} & 17 & 18 & 39 & 26 & 12 & 6 & 4 & 1 & 1 & 0 & 1 \\
\hline
\end{tabular}
\caption{Table 4\textsuperscript{23}}
\end{table}

In 1850, the production of crops such as cotton, rice and sugar
cane—crops perhaps more common in other portions of the South in general, and in Texas in particular—was low in Liberty County. The county’s failure to grow such staple crops and the dearth of large plantations go hand in hand, since the economies of scale required by such crops demand large land holdings. Liberty County farmers depended on more traditional forms of husbandry such as corn, cattle, and swine to make their living. Of the 199 farmers enumerated on the Agricultural Schedule in Liberty County, only seventeen reported the production of cotton. Those seventeen raised a total of 331 bales for an average of nineteen bales per man. Of the 199 farmers, six raised a total of 6,692 bushels of rice, or an average of 1115 bushels per farmer. Even fewer raised sugar cane. Five farmers produced 140 hogsheads of sugar, or twenty-eight hogsheads per farmer. Clearly, Liberty County farmers in 1850 did not produce the crops traditionally associated with plantation slavery. The county, however, seemed poised to move in that direction.

Of the twenty-six farmers who raised the staple crops normally associated with plantation slavery, only two, Edward Gillard and his wife Norma, raised both cotton and rice. Three of the six rice farmers were members of the extended Gillard family, the largest slave-holding family in the county and recent immigrants from Louisiana. The production of each staple farm seemed tied to the number of slaves working for each owner. Although only twenty-two (eleven percent of all Liberty County farmers) raised staple crops, the group owned 356 slaves, or forty percent of the county’s bondsmen. The potential for Liberty County’s inclusion in the ranks of those other, better-studied counties existed. In fact, considering that 891 (thirty-five percent) of Liberty County’s 1850 population of 2,522 were slaves places the county among the most heavily slave-populated Texas counties when slaves numbers are expressed as a percentage of the total population; only seventeen of the eighty-six slave holding counties in Texas had higher percentages. Valid reasons exist explaining the failure of the county to join the larger staple crop producing counties.
In 1854, journalist and urban architect Frederick Law Olmsted crossed the Trinity River at the town of Liberty during his tour of Texas. While no friend of slavery and prone to write in a negative vein of the institution, Olmsted had no reason to exaggerate his descriptions of Liberty County’s geography in the last decade before the Civil War. He mentioned:

...level prairies...everywhere broken by belts of pine forest...imperfectly drained, and in a wet season a large proportion is literally covered with water....The roads through them are not such as one would choose for a morning ride....No wheeled vehicles traverse the region.

It is obvious that the terrain of the county worked not only against clearing land for plantation agriculture, but was an impediment to transporting crops to market as well. In a letter to an early local newspaper, an unknown Liberty County resident painted a more optimistic picture than did Olmsted when he assessed the strengths and needs of the area. He said that steamboat service and good roads would guarantee the prosperity of the country, for all other necessary factors were in place. The soil was rich and of a slight sandy nature, making cultivation simple and enabling farmers to plant large acreage and to grow more cotton and sugar cane than they could gather. He further claimed the land had the ability to produce twenty-five to sixty bushels of corn to the acre. Again reiterating the county’s greatest need, he repeated, “Liberty is an old settled county, and has remained until recently without much improvement.”

Both Olmsted and the unnamed correspondent agreed on one key point. The lack of a transportation infrastructure in the form of roads, railroads, or steamboats made the transportation of crops to market a near impossibility. Since dependable routes remained in the future, most Liberty County farmers turned to crops unaffected by hard terrain or lack of roads. In this segment of the agricultural population toiled most of the sixty percent of Liberty County slaves not involved with staple crop production.
Olmsted, in describing the lifestyle of many Liberty County residents, unintentionally described the impact of an almost non-existent infrastructure on county society. He remarked that the [white] people were herdsmen and cultivated no other crop than corn. "They live(d) in isolated cabins, h(e)ld little intercourse with each other, and almost none with the outside world....A traveler, other than a beef-speculator, was a thing unknown."27 As Jacob Branch recalled, "Mos' farms was so scatter out dey can't git from one to anudder and hafter live by deyse'fs."28

Olmsted recognized the importance of cattle to the underdeveloped county, as did the previously cited Liberty Gazette letter writer. That writer said of the typical Liberty County farmer, "While he is engaged in...preparing his crop for market, his stock, with no expense from his arm, are running at large in the prairie, growing and increasing rapidly."29 Herdsmen branded and marked their stock and then permitted them to run wild across the county. When the time came to gather cattle and hogs (a staple of the East Texas diet), cattlemen simply separated their stock from that of their neighbors. By 1850, Liberty County contained 39,777 head of cattle owned by 177 cattlemen, for an average of 222 head per owner. Additionally, 173 farmers owned the 9,500 hogs that joined the cattle on the prairies and woods of the county, for an average fifty-five hogs per farmer.30

Unlike crops that required transportation of some type to get to market, cattle drives did not depend on good roads, railroads, or steamships; cattle transported themselves. Cattlemen such as William B. Duncan gathered cattle in Liberty and surrounding counties and drove them to markets in Louisiana and Mississippi. While his diary contains no specific mention of slave herdsmen on the trail, he infers their presence with his previously cited description of the purchase of a slave in exchange for cattle while on the trail. If the majority of slaves in Liberty County lived on non-staple crop farms, they surely served an important purpose to their cattlemen owners. They provided labor for the
preparation of the cattle for the long drive, as well as on the drive itself. Additionally, they proved instrumental in raising the most common crops produced in the county, corn and sweet potatoes, crops that fed both man and beast.\textsuperscript{31}

Cattlemen also drove livestock other than cattle to market. Jacob Branch recalled how his former master raised hogs for market:

He was a great one for to raise pigs. He sell sometime 500 hawgs at one time. He tek he dogs and drive dem hawgs 'cross the Neches Riber all by hisse'f to sell dem. Dat's how he git de money to buy he niggers, selling hawgs and cowhides.\textsuperscript{32}

Sweet potatoes and corn, rather than cotton, rice, or sugar cane served as the crops of choice in Liberty County. Because of the difficulty in transporting other crops to market, farmers turned to sweet potatoes and corn for both consumption and the market. In 1850, 155 of the 199 farmers in the county raised corn and generated a total of 54,715 bushels of the grain, or about 353 bushels per producer. According to Randolph Campbell, the average ratio of corn bushels to cotton bales on Texas slaveholding farms possessing one to nine slaves was 155:1 during the 1850s. The average number of slaves on Liberty County farms for the same period was seven, and the ratio of corn to cotton was 165:1. A comparison of the state and county ratios show a marked similarity of Liberty County with the remainder of the state of Texas with regard to corn production and supports the notion that, for all its bad roads, Liberty County shared at least some characteristics with the mainline plantation slavery counties. In addition to the large amount of corn produced in the county, 112 farmers produced 19,700 bushels of sweet potatoes, or about 176 bushels per farmer.\textsuperscript{33} Olmsted claimed that the diet of East Texans consisted of an unvaried combination of bacon or salt pork, cornbread and sweet potatoes. The numbers and the memories of the slaves support his contention. According to Sally Banks Chambers, "Dey have lots of syrup, co'n bread,
sweet ‘taters and home-cure’ meat w’at dey salt down and hang in de smokehouse to dry.”

Slaves performed much of the labor required to produce those crops, and many started their labor at an early age. Jacob Branch recalled that his first task as a child was to gather firewood. As he grew older, he tended livestock. By the time he matured physically, or in his words was a “good sprout,” he was set to picking cotton, pulling corn and cutting cane. He was never idle. Betty Simmons agreed with Branch. She remembered, “I sho’ was glad w’en freedom come. I’s jes’ gittin’ ready den to put my li’l t’ree year ol’ boy in de field. Dey take dem young. He was to help keep de caffs.”

Of the 199 farmers in 1850 Liberty County, eighty-four of them, or forty-two percent of the total, owned slaves. If many whites in the county existed near a subsistence level, how much more primitive were the lives of slaves? Frederick Olmsted described slave quarters he saw near Nacogdoches, whose counterparts likely existed in Liberty County. He said:

The negro-quarters here, scattered irregularly about the [master’s] house, were of the worst description, though as good as local custom requires. They are but a rough enclosure of logs, ten feet square, without windows, covered by slabs of hewn wood four feet long. The great chinks are stopped with whatever has come to hand—a wad of cotton here, and a corn-shuck there.

George Rivers remembered his slave cabin in the Liberty County village of Grand Cane. One can almost hear the shudder in his voice when he remembered, “Dey was jis’ ‘bout ‘nuff to keep de rain out. De frogs and snakes uster git in—I ’members dat.”

The abysmal conditions that accompanied slavery lent themselves to runaways. Freedman J. A. Robinson remembered, “Many times I see houn’s chase niggers. I clim’ up on d’ fence t’
watch 'em go by. Dey run aw'ile an' trot aw'ile. Uncle Nathan say dey was runaway niggers." Advertisements announcing rewards for the return of runaway slaves, or news of the apprehension of such slaves, appeared soon after the Liberty Gazette began publishing in early 1855. Typical of such articles is one from August 3, 1856, which announced the capture in the Hill Country county of Gillespie three runaway slaves from three different Liberty County owners. The article claimed that "The negroes were evidently making tracks for Mexico, and a few days travel would have enabled them to reach that country." Jacob Branch agreed with the newspaper's assessment of their goal. He said, "All de slaves in dis part de country when dey runned off dey headed for de Rio Grande Riber. Iffen dey could reach de riber and swim ha'f way 'cross dey was free.”

That three slaves from three different Liberty County plantations successfully planned and implemented their escape together toward Mexico indicates a certain ability among slaves to meet and plan. This was possible due to the limited freedom of movement enjoyed by some slaves. The reasons for the mobility vary, but certain ones appear common. Couples sometimes lived on different plantations, with the husband normally visiting the wife and children on weekends and holidays. George Rivers recalled, "Dey was one cullud man on de place w'at uster go to see he wife on de nex' plantation lots." Masters often loosened travel restrictions for holidays such as corn-shuckings and Christmas, permitting the slaves to introduce themselves to their slave neighbors. Freedwoman Laura Cornish said her master permitted visiting between plantations. She claimed, "Dey has dat time off to do what dey wants to, mebbe visit 'round de neighbor plantations, an' we don't have to have no pass like de cullud folks do on de other plantations." If so, her master gave his slaves a precious right, for it was the rare master who permitted slaves to travel without written permission. As travel from farm to farm was important for slaves, so was transportation from farm to market important for slaveowners.

A new transportation era began in June 1855 with the
The establishment of steamship service to newly constructed docks at Liberty on the Trinity River, which followed the dredging of the Trinity River, then and still notorious for snags and the overnight appearance of treacherous sandbars, especially from its mouth at Trinity Bay northward to the town of Liberty. Such improvements provided quick transport for county produce not only to the nearby port of Galveston, but to cities such as New Orleans as well. The Texas and New Orleans Railroad was constructed through Liberty County in 1860. The eastern leg of the line ran only to Orange. More importantly, it continued from Liberty County to Houston in the west, and from Houston it made connections with trains bound for Galveston and thence to world markets. The lack of reliable access to markets had stifled plantation agriculture in Liberty County, and forced a dependence on other crops. With the coming of steamboats and the railroad, plantation agriculture began to resemble more closely the older plantation counties of Texas where staple crops were the norm.

The census of 1860 was the first federal enumeration after the separation of Chambers County from the mother county of Liberty. It was also the first census conducted since the arrival of steamboat and railroad service, and indicates how improved infrastructure led to the growth of staple crop production. The Slave Schedules for the two counties showed a combined total of 1,527 slaves. The county had a population of 4,697, of which the 1,527 slaves represented 33.8 percent of the total, slightly down from 35.3 percent of the total county population in 1850. This represents an additional 636 slaves over the 891 enumerated on the 1850 Slave Schedule, or an increase of fifty-eight percent. The owners of those slaves numbered 205, up from the 126 owners in 1850—an increase of sixty-one percent. The average slaveholding in the two counties was 7.4, up slightly from 7.0 in 1850.

As in 1850, most of the slaves in the two counties lived on farms of twenty or fewer slaves. In fact, 160 slave owners, or seventy-eight percent (slightly down from eighty percent in
of the total, held ten or fewer slaves, and of those, 110, or fifty-three percent (down from fifty-nine percent in 1850) of the total, owned five or fewer slaves (see Table 5). Only thirteen plantation owners, or six percent of the total (also six percent in 1850), owned more than twenty slaves. Of 482 farmers in the two counties in 1860, 180, or thirty-seven percent (down from forty-two percent in 1850) of the total, owned slaves. The growth of slavery in the two counties, in terms of percentages, seems static for the decade between 1850 and 1860. But appearances, in this case, are deceiving.46

With trustworthy transportation finally in place, the production of staple crops typical of Texas counties that had earlier turned to plantation agriculture and plantation slavery began to grow almost exponentially. By 1860, the year of the appearance of the railroad and only five years after the coming of steamboats to the county, cotton was already the staple crop of choice among Liberty County farmers. The Agricultural Schedule reveals no production of rice and the production of only twenty-three hogsheads of sugar. However, ninety-six farmers (up from seventeen in 1850) raised 1,707 bales (up from 331 in 1850) of cotton.47 Evidence indicates that some farmers permitted their slaves to farm for themselves in their spare time on land set aside for that purpose. One of the crops raised in this manner by the slaves was cotton. After paying back the master for expenses, the slaves kept the remaining cash and spent it as they saw fit. Sally Banks Chambers commented on this arrangement:

Dey 'low de cullud folks Sattiday and Sunday off from de fiel'. De wimmen folks was s'pose to do dey own washin' cause dey ain't got so many diff'rent clo's. De menfolks dey ten' to de gardens 'roun' dey own house....De menfolks raise cotton and sol' it to de marster for dey spen'in money.48

All comparisons of the 1850 and 1860 slave numbers show little significant change, especially in areas such as the average
size of the slaveholdings, percentages in each size category, and percentage of farmers who held slaves. Nevertheless, production of cotton grew dramatically. The obvious reason lies in the drastically improved methods by which farmers sent their crops to market. The advent of steamships and the railroad convinced farmers who previously spurned cotton to begin its cultivation. By 1860, ninety-six, or forty-six percent (up from eleven percent in 1850) of the 205 farmers in the two counties raised cotton. Those ninety-six cotton farmers owned 555 slaves, or thirty-six percent (down somewhat from forty percent in 1850) of all the slaves in the two counties.49

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th># of Slaves</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3-5</th>
<th>6-10</th>
<th>11-15</th>
<th>16-20</th>
<th>21-25</th>
<th>26-30</th>
<th>31-40</th>
<th>41-45</th>
<th>46-50</th>
<th>51+</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td># of Farms</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

When farmers turned to cotton production it did not mean that they ignored sweet potatoes and corn, the traditional crops of the county. Improved transportation permitted those crops, as well as cotton, an easier journey to market. By 1860, 196 farmers in the two counties produced 117,740 bushels of corn, for an average of 398 bushels per farmer (up from 353 in 1850). The ratio of corn bushels to cotton bales in the two counties was 69:1, well in line with Campbell's figure of 62:1 for a farm of fewer than ten slaves. The average slaveholding in the two counties was 7.4 slaves. The two counties did not follow the statewide trend during the 1850s toward decreased corn production and increased cotton production on slaveholding farms. The average holding of improved land by property owners increased to 38.5, up from thirty-seven in 1850. Rather than clearing more land
for cotton production, farmers farmed more intensively on their existing cleared land. In addition to the corn production, sweet potatoes remained an important crop. Potato production for 1860 totaled 27,273 bushels, or an average of 150 bushels (down from an average of 176 bushels in pre-steamboat and pre-railroad 1850) for each of the 181 farmers who planted them. In this case, potato production did follow the widespread downward trend. Generally though, what happened in Liberty County agreed with Campbell’s insistence that Texas slave owners never increased cotton acreage at the expense of food crops. He maintained that they sustained the self-sufficiency they needed to feed themselves and their dependents.51

As was the case for corn and potatoes, cattle and hog production also maintained their strength in the economy of the two counties. A total of 334 farmers raised 70,518 head of cattle, for an average of 211 (slightly down from 222 in 1850) per farmer. At the same time, 349 farmers owned 22,901 hogs, an average of sixty-five (up from fifty-five percent in 1850) per farmer. The necessities of feeding such numbers of cattle and hogs suggest an obvious reason why corn and potato production remained high in the two counties.52 Slaves remained busy with the cattle, a job skill that served them well after freedom came. Hiram Mayes, just a small child at the beginning of Reconstruction, recalled how his father supported his family: “I knowed us move up de prairie a ways and my daddy hire ~

Table 6 54

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of Slaves per Owner</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1864</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td># of Slaves</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td># of Farms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

By 1864, the last full year in which slavery existed in Liberty...
and Chambers Counties, tax records indicate continuing increases in the numbers of slaves and slave owners alike. Of the 568 heads-of-household who paid property taxes in that year, 255 (up from 205 in 1860), or 44.8 percent of the total taxpayers, identified themselves as slave owners. Those 255 people owned 2,295 slaves (up from 1,527 in 1860) for an increase of 768, a 66.5 percent rise in only four years (see Table 6).\(^55\) Only migration into the counties can explain such a phenomenal expansion of slavery in only four years. Many slave owners ran to Texas, the westernmost of what became the Confederate states, prior to and during the Civil War. These owners brought their slaves with them. According to freedwoman Sally Banks Chambers:

> When de ol' marster decide to come [from Louisiana] to Texas he brung two men, two women, my mudder and her chillen fus'. He leave mos' de slaves back in de ol' home state. De nex' year he find a place on de river bottom. He come and brung us all there and go back to Louisiana and brung de res' of dem too.\(^56\)

Many Liberty and Chambers County slaves probably had similar stories to tell. However, by the next full tax year, with the end of the Civil War and ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment, no slaves resided in Liberty and Chambers Counties.

Slavery in Liberty County and Chambers counties underwent change until the very moment of its demise. It is impossible to separate the dynamic of slavery from the evolution of agriculture in the counties, for slaves labored at whatever their masters produced. As the products changed, so did the work of the slaves. Although never a major slave county in terms of absolute numbers, the institution remained a major factor in the two counties, and compared well in terms of percentage of the total population with other, more well-known counties. With apologies to that Assistant Clerk of Court, "Honey, slavery was important in Liberty County during those times."
**APPENDIX 1860**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>LIBERTY COUNTY</th>
<th>CHAMBERS COUNTY</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>10419/265</td>
<td>Improved Land</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>214814/218</td>
<td>Unimproved Land</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2787/324</td>
<td>Horses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>450/63</td>
<td>Mules</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>845/189</td>
<td>Oxen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40718/244</td>
<td>Cattle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17126/251</td>
<td>Swine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>84400/198</td>
<td>Corn</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>Rice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1556/89</td>
<td>Cotton</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12849/109</td>
<td>Potatoes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8423/57</td>
<td>Butter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23/2</td>
<td>Sugar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4046/110</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>214814/218</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1704/110</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>71/25</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15/91</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29800/90</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5775/98</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>33340</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>151/7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14424/72</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7605/52</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*The number following the slash represents the number of farmers engaged in that activity.*

**Endnotes**

1 My enthusiasm at the prospect of examining the Liberty County probate records, tax records and proceedings of the District Court received a blow the same day as my visit with the Assistant Clerk of Court when I discovered that two fires in the 1870s completely destroyed all such records. However, a visit to the Sam Houston Library and Research Center (hereafter referred to as SHLRC) in Liberty rekindled my zeal. There I unexpectedly found the Liberty County tax records from the antebellum period, saved through a quirk of good fortune. It seems that during those years, the Liberty County Sheriff, with an office separate from the courthouse, served as the Liberty County Tax Collector. Thus, the tax records survived the fire through being archived in a separate location. The SHLRC houses additional records for Liberty County and nine adjacent Southeast Texas counties from the colonial, Republic and antebellum statehood periods. Additionally, the library serves as a repository for the William B. Duncan papers, an important primary source for the study of slavery in Liberty County.


4 The Atascocita District contained within its boundaries all of present-day Chambers, Hardin, Jasper, Jefferson, Liberty, Newton, Orange, Polk, San Jacinto and Tyler counties, as well as portions of present day Galveston, Harris, Montgomery and Walker counties.


7 R.B. Blake, translator. “Book of Foreigners Settled at Nacogdoches with Date of Application and Action of the Authorities on Such Applications from 1827 to 1834,” R.B. Blake Collection, Vol. XXX, transcription, SHLRC, Liberty, Texas.

8 Blake, “Book of Foreigners Settled at Nacogdoches with Date of Application and Action of the Authorities on Such Applications from 1827 to 1834,”. The applications for six of those seven slave-owning applicants specified the number of white and slave immigrants, indicating a total of 42 slaves between them. On October 18, 1827, the seventh settler, Jacob Garrett, avowed “my family consists of twenty-five souls, white and blackish,” leaving the numbers for each race in doubt. It is presumed that the majority of his “family” of twenty-five consisted of slaves.


11 Tax Rolls, 1838, Liberty County, Texas.

12 Tax Rolls, 1838, Liberty County, Texas
13 Gifford White, (ed.), The 1840 Census of the Republic of Texas (Austin: Pemberton Press, 1966) 99-107. The Republic of Texas, during its existence, failed to conduct a nation-wide census. White created such an enumeration by reviewing the 1840 tax records of each county (the records for six counties are missing) and transcribing each, the result of which is this "census."

14 William B. Duncan, in Duncan Papers, Journal, August 10, 1843, SHLRC, Liberty, Texas.

15 William B. Duncan, in Duncan Papers, Journal, August 14, 1843.

16 William B. Duncan, in Duncan Papers, Journal, August 27, 1843.

18 Campbell, An Empire for Slavery, 73. Randolph Campbell determined $494 as the mean value of a Texas slave in 1843. The reason for the lower price paid by William Duncan for the new slave is unknown, but the age or the health of the slave might have been factors. Perhaps the seller rid himself of a chronic runaway or a slave perceived to be a troublemaker.

19 Campbell, An Empire for Slavery, 73.


21 Campbell, An Empire for Slavery, 51-53.

22 U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1850, Slave Schedule, Liberty County, Texas.

23 U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1850, Slave Schedule, Liberty County, Texas.
24 U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1850, Agricultural Schedule, Liberty County, Texas.


29 *Liberty Gazette*, February 26, 1855.

30 U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1850, Agricultural Schedule, Liberty County, Texas.

31 U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1850, Agricultural Schedule, Liberty County, Texas.


33 U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1850, Agricultural Schedule, Liberty County, Texas.


40 *Liberty Gazette*, August 3, 1856.


45 U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1860, Agricultural Schedules, Liberty County and Chambers County, Texas.

46 U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1860, Agricultural Schedules, Liberty County and Chambers County, Texas.

47 U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1860, Agricultural Schedules, Liberty County and Chambers County, Texas.


49 U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1860, Agricultural Schedules, Liberty County and Chambers County, Texas.

50 U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1860, Slave Schedules, Liberty County and Chambers County, Texas. The data for the two counties is combined in Table 5 in order to make valid comparisons between the old Liberty County records and the new records from the two new, smaller counties. The individual data for each county is contained in the Appendix.

51 Campbell, *An Empire for Slavery*, 75-76.

52 U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1860, Agricultural Schedules, Liberty County and Chambers County, Texas.


54 Tax Rolls, 1864, Liberty County and Chambers County, Texas.

55 Tax Rolls, 1864, Liberty County and Chambers County, Texas.