

# **The Underground Railroad: A Study of the Routes From Texas to Mexico**

*Georgia Redonet*  
Long Middle School

## **INTRODUCTION**

The Underground Railroad gave the hope of freedom to enslaved people living in the American South. Most Americans are familiar with the basic workings of the Railroad and most know the story of Harriet Tubman, one of its famous conductors. The intricacies of the plans for escape are not as familiar to most people. Few are aware that not everyone ran away to the northern states and Canada. Texas was too far to the west to make escaping to the American North a practical choice. Texas slaves were more likely to runaway to Mexico.

Whether the term “Underground Railroad” was actually used to describe the pathways followed by those escaping to freedom in Mexico is not clear. I have chosen to use it in my title because it is recognizable to most people as an identification of escape routes from servitude in the United States. The lesson plans for this curriculum unit will be centered on geography, the process of planning, and research. There will be a contemporary connection to this unit of study. Many of our students at Jane Long Middle School in Houston, Texas are refugees. Their families also had to make plans for escape. They have also gained freedom at a price. Like those who escaped slavery, they too have been separated from family and friends and may never see them again. Any projects involving my students’ experiences will be on a voluntary basis. For some, the memories may be too recent to share with others.

I hope that by studying the efforts made by African American slaves to gain freedom my students will have a greater appreciation of their own freedoms. I want them to learn the meaning of commitment from those who preceded them and recognize that they too have a role to play in history.

## **BACKGROUND**

The region we today refer to as Texas was claimed by the Spanish in the 1500’s. The area remained sparsely settled by Europeans until the spring of 1718 when San Antonio was established. Even after that date there was little interest on the part of the Spanish or the Mexicans in moving north of the Rio Grande. For this reason the Spanish instituted an *empresario* system in the early 1800s to attract settlers to Texas. The *empresario* was granted a tract of land and was to bring colonists in to settle. He could charge a fee for his services in giving title to the land. It was hoped that having settlers in Texas would provide a buffer between French and later, American Louisiana and the silver mines of northern Mexico. It was also hoped that having settlers in the northern frontier area might help to block the attacks of the Apaches and Comanches in the areas around

Saltillo. This did not happen and the Native Americans continued to attack settlements both north and south of the Rio Grande (Mutley 14).

In 1821 Mexico won its independence from Spain. Still desirous of establishing a permanent and productive population in Texas, the *empresario* system was continued. Stephen F. Austin brought 300 settlers from the United States beginning in early 1822. Because of its proximity to Texas, most of the immigrants came from the American south, and they brought their slaves with them. By the eve of the American Civil War one third of the population of Texas was enslaved (Baker, Till IX). From 1830 to 1860 there was a continual movement of runaway slaves into Mexico and although not as publicized, it was just as common as the movement of runaways into free northern territory and Canada (Barriffe 1-2). While there are no reliable estimates as to the number of fugitive slaves escaping to Mexico during this time period, it is safe to say “that the movement was considerable enough to have caused great irritation and financial hardships on Texas slave-owners” (*Ibid* 78).

## **Mexican Law**

When Stephen F. Austin brought American settlers to Mexico in 1822, Mexican law stated that there could be “neither sale nor purchase of slaves who are brought to the empire; their children born in the empire shall be free at the age of fourteen” (Lockhart 12). Mexico had outlawed slavery but made this concession for Texas in its desire to populate the northern province. It put the new immigrants on notice that slavery was to be a temporary institution. In regards to the American slaveholders immigrating to Mexican Texas, *Article 21 of the Law of October 14<sup>th</sup>, 1823* stated “foreigners who bring slaves with them, shall obey the laws established upon the matter, or which shall hereafter be established” (Lundy *Texas* 3). *Article 21* reminded the Texans that the laws could change and they would be expected to obey them. This would prove to be a dilemma for the former Americans who were not used to rapid changes in a national government (Lockhart 13).

Mexico’s central government was constantly changing and laws were constantly being rewritten with the overthrow or change of each new government. With the writing of a new constitution for Mexico in 1824 a new law appeared. Under the *Decree of July 13, 1824*, the “commerce and traffic in slaves, proceeding from whatever power, and under whatever flag, is forever prohibited, within the territories of the United Mexican States” and “slaves...shall remain free in consequence of treading the Mexican soil” (Lundy *Texas* 3). During this time the provinces of Coahuila and Texas were joined together as one state. The new state *Constitution of March 11, 1827* stated that “in this state no person shall be born a slave after this Constitution is published in the capital of each district, and six months thereafter, neither will the introduction of [new] slaves be permitted under any pretext” (*Ibid* 4). Stephen F. Austin was able to convince the state legislature to change the provision to read “that children of slaves born after the publication of the constitution should be free from birth, and the introduction of slaves

should be prohibited after six months (Lockhart 14). This guaranteed the status of the slaves already in Texas. A census was to be taken and a register made of all slave births and deaths, but local Mexican authorities put little effort into the project and the status quo continued (*Ibid* 15).

On May 5, 1828, the state legislature of Coahuila - Texas passed the following law: “contracts made in foreign countries between immigrants and servants or day laborers or working men whom they introduce shall be legal” (*Ibid* 15). This provided the Anglo Americans with a loophole for all of the previous laws. Before entering Texas, slaves were told to sign an indentured servitude contract. This was similar to the peonage system which was common throughout Mexico (Newsome 21). The authorities, for the time being, overlooked the fact that many of the contracts were for 99 years. In 1828, Mexican general Mier y Teran did make note of the fact that the Texas slaves were aware of the Mexican government’s attitude toward slavery. “The slaves are beginning to learn the favorable intent of the Mexican law toward their unfortunate condition and are becoming restless under their yoke” (Tyler *Slave Narr.* xxxvii). Even before independence, Texas slaves were escaping south of the Rio Grande to the freedom offered in the rest of Mexico.

In 1829, President Guerrero, himself of African, native Mexican, and Spanish ancestry, declared the abolition of slavery in the republic (Lundy *Texas* 4). This pronouncement caused quite a stir in Texas. Eventually Governor Jose Maria Viesca, of Coahuila – Texas, was able to convince the central government that such a decree “would be a breach of faith and contracts with the original [Texas] colonists and disturb the peace and good order of the colony” (Lockhart 17). Austin’s empresario contract with the Mexican government had allowed an extra 80 acres per slave for each immigrant, giving tacit approval to slavery (Newsome 10). While the government deplored slavery, Governor Viesca argued that the property rights of the citizens could not be disregarded (*Ibid.* 11). Texas was again exempted. A measure of prosperity had been achieved since the arrival of the American colonists. Governor Viesca felt that protecting the interests of the colonists protected that prosperity. Land fees from the Texas region helped to support the state government. “The slaveholders were seen as stable colonists” (Schwartz 16). If they were forced to leave, then a more irresponsible group of immigrants might move into Texas.

Americans continued to immigrate to Mexican Texas and by 1830 it was apparent to the Mexican government that they were exerting too strong an influence in the Texas region. The *Decree of April 6, 1830* forbade the immigration of any more Americans to Mexican Texas and the importation of any new slaves. In the future, foreign immigrants to the area would have to obtain a passport. The laws had been loosely followed up until this time. The *Decree of April 6, 1830* greatly upset the Americans in Texas. They saw their very livelihood threatened. Fears of the loss of slavery would help lead to the Texas Revolution. During the 1830s, Texans were further made aware of the attitude of the Mexican government towards slavery through the actions of David Bradburn, who ran

the customs house for the government at Anahuac. When three runaway slaves appeared at the customs house seeking asylum under Mexican law, Bradburn refused to surrender them to their owners. The men were enlisted into the Mexican army and sent to the interior of Mexico (Barriffe 38).

It was the loose interpretation of the laws which prompted the Mexican government to write the *Colonization Laws of Coahuila and Texas in 1832*. One provision removed the possibility of misusing indentured service contracts:

The new settlers, in regard to the introduction of slaves, shall be subject to laws which now exist, and which shall hereafter be made on the subject. The servants and laborers which, in future, foreign colonists shall introduce, shall not, by force of any contract whatever, remain bound to their service a longer time than ten years (Lundy *Texas* 5).

Texas was the only area in Mexico where slavery was still “allowed.” The Mexican government had been very lenient in the enforcement of these laws in Texas due to its desire to have the territory to the north settled and productive. The slave owning Texans felt it was only a matter of time before the Mexican government would decide to strictly enforce its laws.

### **The Republic of Texas**

In the early 1830s the Texans, as well as the rest of Mexico, had good reason to protest the rule of Santa Anna. His presidency was both brutal and inconsistent. It is popular to see the Texas Revolution as a battle against the tyranny of his rule. But another view was held by abolitionist Joseph Sturge: “General Santa Anna’s real crime in the eyes of the American slave-owner is his enforcing the abolition of slavery throughout the Mexican Republic when they were looking to seize Texas as a market for their slaves” (Lundy *Texas* 28). It was true that many American slaveholders saw Texas as a marketplace for their growing slave populations. In many areas of the South, the soil was becoming depleted. The belief in Manifest Destiny allowed Americans to see Texas and other sections of northern Mexico as the next logical extension of the cotton kingdom and a good place to earn much needed cash by selling off excess slave populations. The state of Louisiana was eager to see Texas separated from Mexico. If Santa Anna carried out his threat to totally abolish slavery, then slaves from Louisiana and the rest of the American south “could easily have absconded to [Mexican] Texas and to safety and freedom” (Junkins 7).

Starting on March 1, 1836, a group of Texans (mostly Anglo-American) met at Washington-on-the-Brazos and wrote the *Texas Declaration of Independence*. This was quickly followed by the election of an *ad interim* government and the adoption of a *Constitution for the Republic of Texas*. All of this happened as the Alamo fell on March 6, 1836. Sam Houston, a recent arrival in Texas, attended this meeting and was named Commander in Chief of the Texas Army. Houston was a close political ally of U. S.

President Andrew Jackson, a staunch proponent of Manifest Destiny. There is some thought among historians that Houston may have been sent to Texas by Jackson to help spur on the revolutionary movement in Texas. The Texas Revolution was over in several months. The Texans won their freedom from Mexico at the Battle of San Jacinto on April 21, 1836. Texas was not immediately admitted to the United States and became an independent republic for ten years, with Sam Houston serving as the first president. The American government did not wish to risk a war with the Mexican government, which had not officially recognized Texas, and the abolitionists also tried to block its admission to the Union.

Under the constitution of the new nation “all persons of color, who were slaves for life previous to their emigration to Texas, and who are now held in bondage, shall remain in the like state of servitude, provided the said slave shall be the bona fide property of the person so holding said slave as aforesaid” (Lundy *Texas* 5). The constitution went on to stipulate that immigrants from the United States would be allowed to bring their slaves into the Republic. Congress would not be allowed to emancipate slaves, and owners could only do so with the permission of Congress. Freed slaves could only remain in the Republic with the consent of Congress (*Ibid* 5). The Texas government was already aware of the influence that free Negroes might have on their enslaved populations. Thus they forbade the emancipation of slaves and tried to force those few freedmen out of the country. That policy was instituted in spite of the fact that freedmen had fought in the Texas Revolution.

In relationship to the growing problem of fugitive slaves, the Republic passed the following law: “Every person who shall steal or entice away any slave, out of or from the possession of the owner or owners of such slave, shall be deemed guilty of felony, and on conviction thereof, shall suffer death” (Lockhart 22). Free persons of color who attempted or were successful at helping slaves escape were to be “fined in the sum equal to the value of such slave or slaves, and on failure to pay the said fine shall be sold as a slave for life” (*Ibid* 24). Rewards were to be offered to those apprehending runaway slaves.

The number of runaways increased during the years of the Republic. During the Texas Revolution, Jose Maria Tornel, Mexican Secretary of War, “denounced slavery and called attention to the astonishment of the civilized world at the support given to the maintenance of the institution by the United States.” By contrast, he said, “Mexico considered all men brothers, created by our common father” (Schwartz 24). Mexico refused to return any fugitive slaves after the revolt and based part of its refusal to recognize Texas independence on the slavery question (*Ibid* 25). Knowledge of the Mexican attitude towards slavery probably encouraged Negroes to escape (*Ibid* 26).

## **The State of Texas**

In early 1846 Texas was formally admitted to the Union as a slave state. According to the first official Texas state census in 1847, the state's population counted 38,753 slaves and 102,961 whites (32). The plantations along the lower Colorado and Brazos rivers and those scattered throughout East Texas held the largest concentrations of enslaved persons (Newsome 39). Runaway slaves had been a continual problem throughout the duration of the Republic and the new state sought to write laws aimed at curbing the exodus. In 1848 laws were passed by the state legislature aimed at punishing those who might help escaping slaves. Anyone helping slaves plan a rebellion would be punished with death. Ship captains assisting runaways would receive from two to ten years in the penitentiary. Anyone who would steal or entice away a slave from his or her owner would receive three to fifteen years of hard labor. Free persons of color who aided a slave in escaping would receive from three to five years in the penitentiary (Lockhart 46).

Because Texas was further west than the rest of the Confederacy it suffered less during the American Civil War. Only a few battles took place in Texas and the state did not suffer the devastating destruction experienced in the rest of the South. "For this reason, Texas during the war was viewed as a haven for safeguarding the institution of slavery through a system called "refugeeing" which allowed masters to send their bondsmen from other southern states to Texas" (Baker *Till Freedom* XXI). Southern slaveholders were afraid that Union soldiers would free slaves as they advanced into the South. Thousands of African Americans were sent, or taken by their masters, to Texas between 1861 and 1865 (XXI). Although no accurate numbers exist, many of these slaves eventually made their way to freedom in Mexico.

## **RUNAWAY SLAVES**

### **Reasons for Running Away**

"Some day, some day, some day, this yoke is going to be lifted off of our shoulders" (Tyler *Slave Narr.* 83.) Songs were often used to express the feelings of the enslaved. They expressed their sorrow at their lot in life and their hope of freedom to come. "Some day" could become a reality for those who found the courage to run. Typically, fugitive or runaway slaves were male, between the ages of sixteen and thirty-five (Campbell 106). They usually escaped singly or in small groups of three to five (Barriffe 35). Their escapes also seemed to have been seasonal. Cotton was planted from February through March, and harvested during July and August. These were the times when the largest numbers of slaves escaped to Mexico from Texas (36). Women were not as likely to runaway. Women were more involved with the rearing of the children. Women and small children were often sold off as a group. It was more typical for fathers to be sold away from wives and children (Campbell 106). As a result the majority of runaways were male. "In antebellum Huntsville, Alabama, of the 562 fugitives listed in

newspapers between 1820 and 1860, only 87 were female” (*Ibid* 106). These types of figures appear to be consistent throughout the rest of the south.

Why did slaves run away? Aside from the obvious desire for freedom, each person had his or her reasons. “Cruel treatment [and punishment] or the fear of it, fear of sale or the sale of a loved one, or simply the desire to be free” encouraged some to run (*Ibid* 107). “To these slaves Mexico offered the best opportunity to live a free life” (Barriffe 36). As stated above, some escaped to avoid work. Slaves worked from “can see” to “can’t see” - sunrise to sunset. They were responsible for clearing land, growing cotton, corn, potatoes, vegetables, a little tobacco, sugar, and for building roads, digging ditches, building structures, blacksmithing, cutting timber, caring for the animals, building fences, caring for the master’s children and doing the domestic chores, cooking for the master’s family, caring for their own family, and finally, in the case of the women, breeding more slaves (Beeth 15).

Others would have run to escape the degradation of the slave auction or to reunite with loved ones. “They had seen slaves yoked like steers and sold in pairs or put in chains like cows and mules. Family members, separated by auctioneers, were dragged away in tears. Babies had been sold from mothers’ breasts” (Schwartz 38). One young girl remembered being stripped naked and put on the block. Her master refused to sell her for the low price of \$350, however, because she was so good and fat (*Ibid*). “No wonder slaves sought freedom in Mexico. The reality of this commercialized existence contrasts markedly with the traditional long-term, paternalistic, and affectionate model of the master-slave relationship” (*Ibid*). The fact that Texas slaves did attempt to escape counters the opinion that they were content to remain in bondage.

Many unfortunate Negroes chose to show their dissatisfaction by some overt act of violence, a decision which usually resulted in the death of the slave. Despite [that] fact, slaves continued to rebel throughout the ante-bellum period pleading their case against oppression. (Junkins 55)

There are instances of discontented slaves attempting, sometimes successfully, to poison their masters with strychnine or the seeds of Jameson Weed (Junkins 36). Others chose murder by burning houses or stabbing. The punishment could be hanging or burning at the stake (*Ibid* 51). The fear that one might eventually be forced into committing such a crime for reasons of revenge could have driven others to escape.

According to the state’s penal code, slaves were not to be punished by fine or imprisonment. Four types of punishment were permitted for slaves: death by hanging, branding, standing in the pillory, and whipping (Lockhart 52). Included in the penal code were several justifiable reasons for the homicide of a slave. Death was acceptable for slaves who were in insurrection or who forcibly resisted a lawful order by a master or overseer. The act of insurrection was defined as a slave who was acting in concert with at least four others, and they were armed with the intention of freeing one or more of their

number from a state of slavery. The same was true for a runaway who threatened bodily harm to anyone attempting to make an arrest (*Ibid* 54). The act of running away, except when in a state of insurrection, did not justify homicide as a punishment (*Ibid* 54).

Frederick Law Olmsted traveled through Mexican Texas in the 1850s. His experiences are recounted in *A Journey Through Texas: or a Saddle Trip on the Southwestern Frontier*. This is a wonderful book to read. Olmsted traversed a large portion of Texas and gave an intimate glimpse of pre-Civil War Texas. He recounted a conversation he heard concerning an escaped slave for whom several men were searching:

“What made him run?”

“The judge gave him a week at Christmas, and he made a good deal of money, and when the week was up, I s’pose he didn’t want to go to work again.”

[Slaves were sometimes allowed to hire themselves out on their own time to make spending money].

“He got unruly, and they was a goin’ to whip him.” (Olmsted 257)

The gentlemen went on to discuss how silly the slave was for giving up his easy life with a kind master. If he had just stayed around he would have been cared for and had another week off when Christmas returned “but to enjoy himself again. These [slaves], none of ‘em knows how much happier off they are than if they was free. Now, very likely, he’ll starve to death, or get shot” (Olmsted 257). The money earned by slaves in part-time jobs gave them a chance to build a nest egg with which they could begin their new lives in Mexico (Schwartz 44).

### **Punishments for Attempting to Run Away**

Advertisements from the slavery period gave proof of the types of punishment inflicted on those in servitude. “Said Negro is about 48 years of age, 5 feet 8 or 9 inches high, and head a little bald. His back is marked with the whip, and marks of cupping on both temples and back of the neck” (Olmsted 508). On some plantations a type of wooden harness was placed around the shoulders and neck. An arched piece went above the slave’s head from which a bell was hung (Tyler *Slave Narr.* 67). This allowed the master to hear the movements of a troublesome slave who had attempted to run away. Included in Olmsted’s book are copies of newspaper advertisements for runaway slaves.

Huntsville, April 14, 1855

\$100. REWARD

I will give the above reward for my boy BILL, who ran away on the 7<sup>th</sup> instant, from my plantation in Walker County, if taken up by any person west of the San Antonio River; fifty dollars, if taken up west of the Brazos; and twenty-five dollars to any person taking him up east of the Brazos River. The above reward will be paid on delivering said boy into the hands of any jailer convenient to



where taken up, and who can securely keep him until I can get him. Bill is what would be called a bright mulatto, of rather dull expression of countenance his hair might be called straight, and, when long, very bushy. Was very long when he left home. His age is about 28 years, height 5 feet 10 inches. Took with him from home a double barrel shot gun.

WM. B. SCOTT (Olmsted 507-508)

Bill knocked down his overseer, ran to the house to steal a gun, and then took off. A severe punishment undoubtedly awaited Bill upon his capture (*Ibid* 508). Dogs were often used to track and attack fugitive slaves. Escaped slaves were also described as having missing fingers, toes, ears, and teeth (Barriffe 9). These types of punishments would later be substantiated in the slave narratives that were taken in the 1930s by the WPA Writers Unit of the Library of Congress.

The WPA (Works Progress Administration) Texas Slave Project interviewed former enslaved persons during the 1930s. It should be noted that these are the recollections of people who were children during the years of slavery. The interviews were made almost seventy years later when most of the participants were between the ages of seventy and ninety. As a child, Esther Easter was “refugeed” to Texas at the start of the Civil War. She recalled the punishment given to a recaptured runaway slave.

I done see [sic] one whipping and that enough. They wasn’t fooling about it. A runaway slave...was brought back, and there was a public whipping, so’s the slaves could see what happens when they tries to get away. The runaway was chained to the whipping post, and I was full of misery when I see the lash cutting deep into that boy’s skin. He swell up like a dead horse, but he gets over it, only he was never no count for work no more. (Baker *Till Freedom* 11-12)

Slaves were not always standing when whipped. Sometimes they were stretched out on the ground and their feet and hands were tied to posts driven into the ground. After the whipping, salt was usually applied to the wounds. It would take months for the wounds to heal and the scars lasted a lifetime. Other masters, or overseers, would tie a runaway to the posts in the ground and drip hot liquids onto the slave’s back.

He got a piece of iron which he called the “slut” which is like a block of wood with little holes in it, and filled the holes up with tallow and put that iron on the fire till the grease was sizzling hot and held it over the poor [slave’s] back and that hot grease drop on his hide. Then he took the bullwhip and whipped up and down, and after all that he threw the poor [slave] in the stock house and chained him up a couple days with nothing to eat. (Tyler *Slave Narr.* 64)

Frederick Law Olmsted met a man in Texas who recited how a friend in Georgia punished runaway slaves.

He would bind [the slave's] knee over a log, and fasten him so he couldn't stir; then he'd take a pair of pincers and pull one of his toe-nails out by the roots; and tell him that if he ever run away again, he would pull out two of them, and if he run away again after that, he told them he'd pull out four of them, and so on, doubling each time. He never had to do it more than twice – it always cured them. (Olmsted 105)

As a young girl, Lou Smith remembered seeing field hands who were forced to work with a ball and chain attached to their leg as punishment for, and prevention against, trying to run away. “They'd hoe out to one end of the chain and then drag it up a piece and hoe on to the end of the row” (Baker 97).

### **Actual Plans for Escape**

For slaves running away to the American North and Canada the Underground Railroad offered an extensive network of people and places to assist in their efforts to gain freedom. Quilts were designed to provide maps for the slaves to follow. Quilts were also hung on the porches of safe houses to signify whether or not it was safe to approach. Code words were used in spirituals to pass secret messages and information on to those escaping. For more information on escaping to the North go to the Houston Teachers Institute web site at <[http://www.uh.edu/hti/curriculum\\_units.htm](http://www.uh.edu/hti/curriculum_units.htm)> and refer to my 2002 curriculum unit entitled *Music: A Stepping Stone to History and the Art of Writing* (The Underground Railroad).

Persons who escaped to the Northern states could relate their experiences to the abolitionist press. The abolitionists themselves would later write of the methods used along the Underground Railroad. Southern states, including Texas, would not have allowed the existence of such a press. Whether an organized underground network existed in Texas is unknown. White abolitionists were definitely at work in Texas. But it is unclear as to whether there were established routes to follow and safe houses to visit. Many of the slaves in Texas were illegally imported from the Caribbean Islands or from the African continent, so they would not have come to Texas from the Old South with the knowledge of an external source of help. Because of the lack of an abolitionist press in Texas or first hand accounts from the fugitives themselves, it is not possible to find great detail as to their plans and eventual escape.

In Texas, fugitive slaves often counted on the kindness of other slaves as they ran away. Walter Rimm met a runaway slave in the woods one day. “He came to the cabin, and mammy made him a bacon and egg sandwich, and we never saw him again. Maybe he got clear to Mexico, where a lot of slaves ran to” (Tyler *Slave Narr.* 68). Slave children were sometimes used to deliver supplies to runaways. A young boy might be sent off to hunt or fish. He would take along a couple of blankets and a lunch.

The boy, acting on instructions, would become ‘scared’ when he heard a prearranged sound, such as an owl’s hoot. Dropping the food and blankets, he would run back to the quarters. With this plan, the boy could not be forced to admit to having seen or helped a runaway. (Silverthorne 45)

L. B. Barnes was born in Palestine, Texas and was nine years old when emancipated. “The slaves also would carry pepper with them to rub on the bottom of their feet at nights [sic] when they skipped off so that the dogs couldn’t scent them” (Baker *Till Freedom* 3-4). Taking off his shoes, the slave would put the pepper in his socks and leave a trail that left the dogs sneezing and teary-eyed (Silverthorne 45). John Barker was also a child when slavery ended. He recalled another trick used to throw tracking dogs off of the scent of a runaway.

In those days the horned toads ran over the world, and my grandpa would gather them and lay them in the fireplace till they dried and roll them with bottles until they were like ashes and then rub it on the shoe bottoms. You see, when they wanted to run away, that stuff didn’t stick all on the shoes, it stuck to the track. Then they carried some of that powder and threw it as far as they could and then jumped over it and did that again till they used all that powder. That threw the common hounds off the trail altogether. (Tyler *Slave Narr.* 66)

Barker went on to explain that while the common hounds were fooled by this trick, the bloodhounds, or “hell hounds” were not (*Ibid*). Another method used to foil the tracking dogs was to step repeatedly in fresh cow dung (Silverthorne 45). Vines were often tied across a road to trip the horse of a patroller in pursuit of a runaway slave (44).

In 1854, the following escape plan and money making scheme was uncovered. Two white men sold several Negroes to a slave owner, then helped them escape and sold them again. The group would move southward, repeating the scam. Finally, the slaves would be freed at the Rio Grande. The white men returned northward and repeated the process. “A group of citizens in Navarro County in north central Texas finally caught the schemers” (Tyler *Slave Owners* 36). An insurrection and probable escape was uncovered in Lavaca County in late 1856. “In preparation for their attack on the whites, the Negroes poisoned all the dogs” (Junkins 62). Dogs would have been used to track runaways. But the deaths of all of the dogs roused the suspicions of the whites and the plot was uncovered (*Ibid*). As a result of these types of activities, “southerners resorted to armed patrols to restrict slave activities which might occasion uprisings” (*Ibid* 3). These patrols would eventually extend all the way to the Rio Grande where bounty hunters would lie in wait for escaping slaves, hoping to receive cash rewards for their recapture.

### **Running Away**

Due to the lack of written records from those who escaped from Texas to Mexico it is not possible to know how much actual pre-planning went into the escapes. While help would

have been obtained from fellow slaves for the initial escape, one can only guess as to how much prior knowledge was held as to the difficulty of the terrain to be crossed and the pathways to follow. Because commerce took place between Texas and Mexico there would have been wagon tracks to show the way. There were slaves who accompanied their masters on trips to the Mexican border. Their knowledge of the routes to follow and a description of the terrain would have undoubtedly been passed on to those back at their plantations. While the wagon tracks gave a visual route to the border, they would also have been a more likely place to run into patrols. For this reason some slaves would have chosen to travel cross-country. The number of slaves who perished in the arid regions of South Texas will never be known. According to Olmsted, who traveled in the areas approaching the Rio Grande:

A fugitive fears to make a fire lest it should draw attention to his lurking place. During the day, he ascends a tree or hides silent in a thicket. At night he often follows the roads upon any horse he can lay his hands upon regardless of ownership. Negro cabins he generally approaches with confidence, and in hovels of the Mexicans, while he is in the settled country, he often obtains food and shelter. (Olmsted 327-328)

The country they needed to traverse was rugged. The Rio Grande formed the boundary between the United States and Mexico and was 1,300 miles long. They would have to be able to swim or figure a way to cross rivers. The terrain on both sides “consists of level plains, prairies and low hills. In the period between 1830 and 1860, a thick growth of chaparral covered the land adjacent to” both sides (Barriffe 35). The chaparral offered good cover for runaways to hide in, but there were few trees for shade. Water would not have been plentiful, except when near the few rivers in the area. Olmsted described the approach to Fort Duncan, which was opposite the town of Piedras Negras on the Mexican side of the Rio Grande.

The nearer we approached the great river...the more dreary, desolate, dry, and barren became the scene; the more dwarfed and thorny the vegetation, only the cactus more hideously large. Within six miles of the Rio Grande the surface of the ground surges higher, forming rugged hills, easy of ascent on one side, but precipitous on the other. (Olmsted 314)

He stated that another “dreary, hilly desert” extended south of the Rio Grande. The distance from San Antonio, which was on the edge of settlement in the south central region of the state, to Eagle Pass, on the border, was 150 miles. This is an arid region. Temperatures in the winter can range from fairly mild to quite cold. Summer time temperatures are hot, usually in the 90sF or 100+F range. Creatures encountered would have been tarantulas, scorpions, centipedes, horned frogs, rattlesnakes, deer, rabbit, quail, antelope, wolves, coyotes, wild cats, and mountain lions (Olmsted 312-313). The region was sparsely inhabited by Anglos, it still being the range of the Comanches and Apaches.

The fugitives could not be sure of the reception they would receive from the Native Americans.

In 1835 James Hobbs was living with the Comanches. Scouts brought six runaway Negroes into the encampment. They were captured while en route to Mexico. “Hobbs writes that after satisfying their curiosity about the color and texture of hair of the Negroes, the Indians finally decided to release them. The Comanche chieftain did this after ordering a party of Indian braves to escort them into Mexico” (Barriffe 38). Encounters with Native Americans were not always friendly. In 1850, Captain R. B. Marcy related the story of two young Negro girls who were the only survivors of a party of escaping slaves massacred by the Comanches. “They had scraped through the skin into the flesh to see if they were black inside as well as outside. Then, among other things, they burned them with live coals to see if they experienced pain as other humans.” (Marcy 30-31)

Runaways constantly had to be on the lookout for bounty hunters in pursuit of escaped slaves for monetary rewards. In his *History of Bell County*, George W. Tyler relates the following incident:

A black figure darted behind a clump of bushes; another sprawled, face down, into the dirt—the bloodhounds could almost smell the panic. The Negroes’ chances of escaping grew immeasurably smaller as the dogs came near. If discovered, the unarmed blacks could offer only passive resistance; if taken, they faced harsh words, harsher handcuffs, a long, hot walk, and severe punishment. But this time the dogs did not pick up the scent and the hunters passed on. Immensely relieved, the fugitives perhaps now would make it to freedom, although danger was ever present. Forced to travel by night, and to exist on the barren scrub land, they could depend only upon themselves. (Tyler *Slave Owners* 1)

Some of the plantations in Texas were also cattle ranches and slaves who herded the cows became expert horsemen. Their ability to ride was useful during their escapes. On January 15, 1845, a Houston newspaper reported the escape of twenty-seven Negroes. They had escaped from Bastrop “mounted on some of the best horses that could be found, and several of them were well armed. It is supposed that some Mexican has enticed them to flee to the Mexican settlements west of the Rio Grande” (Barriffe 40). The acquisition of horses would make for a much easier and faster escape. Slaves trying to escape to the northern states would have been spotted immediately on horses. But west Texas was sparsely populated and when watching for pursuers one could see for miles. In 1842, American Colonel Andrew Neill was held prisoner in a Mexican jail. While there he met a fugitive slave who told him of the theft of horses which enabled the runaway and his companions to escape to Mexico (Tyler *Slave Owners* 7-8). In 1837, this group of runaways had been discovered near Victoria by Sheriff Claiborne Stinnett of Gonzales. The slaves killed the sheriff, hid his body, took his provisions, and his horses. The horses

enabled them to quickly make their way to Mexico. No one knew the fate of Sheriff Claiborne until Neill returned to Texas with the tale of escape (*Ibid.* 7-8).

Upon reaching the Rio Grande the runaway slaves often received assistance from the Mexicans who situated flatboats in the middle of the river. Ropes connected the boats to both sides of the shore. “When the colored people got to the rope they could pull themselves across the rest of the way on those boats. The white folks rode the Mexican side of that river all the time, but plenty of slaves got through anyway.” (Tyler *Slave Narr.* 101)

## **LIFE IN MEXICO**

### **Fugitive African American Slaves**

After traveling through Texas in the 1830s, abolitionist Benjamin Lundy went south to Monclova, Mexico. He hoped to establish a free colony for American slaves. While there he encountered persons who had escaped slavery and noted their acceptance by the local population. “There appears to be no distinction in this place as to freedom, or condition, by reason of colour [sic]. One complexion is as much respected as another” (Lundy *Life* 63). In early 1834, Lundy traveled through Laredo, Tamaulipas, near the Texas border. “It contains about 2,200 inhabitants. The people look like mulattoes. They are friendly and clever; but not one of them can speak English” (*Ibid* 95). Lundy does not report whether the inhabitants of Laredo were the descendents of Africans brought to Mexico as slaves by the Spanish or runaway slaves from the United States. Lundy’s dream of creating a colony in Mexico was never achieved.

Texas President Sam Houston lost two of his slaves to Mexico. “He did not [attempt to] reclaim the slaves, he said, because they were smart, intelligent fellows...[who] would help to civilize and refine Mexico” (Schwartz 26). During the failed expedition against Mier, Mexico, in the early 1840s, Texas General Thomas J. Green was imprisoned near Matamoros, Mexico. Green recorded his encounter with Houston’s former slaves.

While at this place, many citizens of consequence came out from Matamoros to congratulate General Ampudia upon his victory. Among these were two of our acquaintance, Tom and Esau. These gentlemen, now of so much consequence as to ride three leagues in a coach to congratulate General Ampudia upon his splendid victory, were General Sam Houston’s two barbers, so well known to the public of Texas. Tom treated us with marked respect and attention, spoke of his prospects in that country, his intended nuptials, invited us to the wedding, and said that General Ampudia was to stand godfather on the occasion. (*Ibid* 26).

Some fugitive slaves ended up leading a life not unlike the one they had escaped from. “Many runaways became hacienda laborers, not better than peons” (*Ibid* 43). Cora

Montgomery lived in the Texas border town of Eagle Pass during the 1840s and 1850s. She reported that the runaway slave was “at once accepted as a favorite [in Mexico], an equal, and there is no impediment to his popularity or success, and yet by far the greater number soon get ‘accommodated’ with the peon bonds” (Montgomery 138). Peons were the Mexican equivalent of an indentured servant. Others were more successful. “One runaway from Texas named Dan married the daughter of a judge in Monterrey, Mexico, and renamed himself Don Dionisio de Echavaria after his father-in-law. He opened a small store and was a successful merchant” (Schwartz 43). Frederick Law Olmsted reported meeting a fugitive slave while traveling through Mexico in 1856. The gentleman had learned Spanish and stated that he had traveled extensively throughout Mexico and held a variety of jobs. He had been a trained mechanic in Texas. When not employed in that position, he served as a muleteer or servant in his new homeland. “He had joined the Catholic Church and seemed well satisfied with his life in Mexico” (44).

### **The Seminole Culture**

During the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, slaves from the Carolinas, Georgia and Alabama escaped to freedom in Spanish Florida. Spain and the Seminole Indians welcomed them as allies in the struggle against Anglo expansion into northern Florida. Due to the similar cultural backgrounds of the Seminoles and Africans, an affinity between the two peoples soon developed (Williams 96). The fugitive blacks were considered to be the property of the Seminoles. This was partially a protective measure. As slaves of the Seminoles, they could not be enslaved by other parties. They adopted Seminole customs and Muskogee, the Seminole language. “In sharp contrast to blacks’ experiences under Anglo slavery, however, the Seminole-Negroes were allowed to live in separate villages from their Native American masters, and enjoyed a considerable degree of autonomy” (*Ibid.* 96).

By 1819 all of Florida was ceded to the USA as a result of the *Adams – Onis Treaty*. No longer would Florida be a refuge for runaway slaves (Schwartz, 6). The Seminoles along with their Negro allies fought against the encroachment of their lands. They were eventually forced to leave. “When the U.S. Army relocated the southeastern tribes to the Oklahoma Indian Territory from the 1820s to the 1850s, the Seminole-Negroes went with the Seminoles” (Williams 96). Eventually many of the Seminole-Negroes would escape through Texas to Mexico in the hope of staying out of the reach of American slave traders.

### ***Chief Wild Cat***

In the winter of 1849, Seminole chief Wild Cat (Coacooche) and Black Seminole leader John Horse set out from the Oklahoma Indian Territory for Mexico with a large band of discontented Seminoles, Creeks, Kickapoos, and Seminole-Negroes (Williams 97). Wild Cat had been having disagreements with rival chiefs and wanted to protect his black brethren from slave catchers and Creeks who attempted to enslave them (Tyler, *Slave*

*Owners* 17). Texas slave owners feared that some of their slaves might have been enticed to runaway and join the Seminoles as they migrated to Mexico. Wild Cat, or Gato del Monte, as he was known to the Mexicans, agreed to form a military colony along the border in the Mexican state of Coahuila. There the Seminoles would assist the Mexican government in protecting the area from roaming bands of Comanches, Kickapoos, and Apaches (*Ibid.* 11). The Seminoles agreed to protect the area from Indian attack and to abide by the laws of Mexico. “By a treaty signed on October 16, 1850, the band settled on land near the Rio Grande, . . .northwest of Eagle Pass. Upon renouncing their allegiance to the United States, both Negroes and Indians became Mexican citizens” (*Ibid.* 12). Mexican government officials applauded the work ethic of the industrious colonists and their effectiveness in curbing the destructive activities of warlike Indians in the area (Schwartz 40).

By 1860, most of the Native Americans had rejoined their tribes in the Oklahoma Indian Territory. The Black Seminoles remained in Mexico at their settlement of Nacimiento, Coahuila, not wishing to return to the land of slavery. They came to be known as the Moscosgos in Mexico (Wittich). After the Civil War a majority of the group moved back to the American side of the Rio Grande and worked as highly praised scouts and fighters for the American Army (Williams 97). These scouts should not be confused with the Buffalo Soldiers who worked in other parts of the West. The Black Seminoles accepted the jobs of scouts while they were waiting for government assistance to return to the reservation in Oklahoma. The United States government kept postponing their aid and finally decided to deny any funding or help. It was decided that because they were not Indians, the Black Seminoles would not be entitled to the rights of Indians (Wittich). This was a deciding factor in the decision by the group to return to Mexico because many of the families, who had not been able to settle down while waiting for government action, were starving.

The Black Seminole community of Nacimiento, Mexico is today facing more hardships. As of 2001, an eight-year drought had devastated the agricultural community. “The young people are being forced . . . to go inland to the bigger Mexican cities where they will be absorbed into the mainstream culture and lose their unique blend of African American, Native American and Mexican cultures” (Wittich). In response to their plight, a resolution was passed at the 59<sup>th</sup> *Annual Professional Agricultural Workers Conference* at Tuskegee University in Alabama on December 4, 2001. It stated that the Mexican Kickapoos had been granted the right of dual citizenship “solely because they were originally from the U.S. and should have the right to return to their reservation if they please” (Wittich). The Conference requested that the United States government bestow the same rights upon the Mexican Black Seminoles “so that they can cross into the U.S to work and still return to Nacimiento to keep their culture strong” (Wittich). At this time there does not appear to have been any response to that request. Large concentrations of Black Seminoles are found today in Northern Mexico, Texas and Oklahoma. A Seminole Day Celebration is held every September in Brackettsville, Texas (Wittich).



## SLAVE CATCHING EXPEDITIONS

It was estimated that by 1851, nearly 3,000 fugitive slaves lived in Mexico (Tyler, *Slave Owners* 22). Most lived in an area located between the Sierra Madres and the Rio Grande and were within easy reach of the slave owners, except for the protection extended by the Mexican government. Outspoken Austin newspaper editor, John S. “Rip” Ford, estimated the loss to Southern slaveholders at \$2,400,000 (*Ibid.* 22). “By this time escape to Mexico was becoming so common that slaveholders were offering higher rewards the nearer to Mexico the slave was caught” (*Ibid.* 23).

Texans continually sought aid from the federal government for the return of their “property” from Mexico. Several attempts at adding extradition agreements to treaties with Mexico were unsuccessful. The response of the Mexican Senate to one of the earliest attempts in 1828 clearly stated the Mexican position. “It would be most extraordinary that in a treaty between two free republics slavery should be encouraged by obliging ours to deliver up fugitive slaves to their merciless and barbarous masters of North America” (Schwartz 14). This was in response to an American request to help stop the flow of American slaves running away to southern Mexico through Mexican Texas. Senator Sam Houston of Texas brought the problem of slaves escaping into Mexico to the U.S. Senate’s attention during the debates on the *Compromise of 1850*. He referred to Texas as a border state, not any different from Kentucky, but no assistance was given in returning fugitive slaves. “The object of the *Fugitive Slave Law* was the Underground Railroad North. Virtually unaffected was the Underground South,” (Tyler, *Slave Owners* 4).

Throughout Texas, communities established companies of minute men, or vigilante patrols, whose duty it was to pursue runaway slaves (*Ibid.* 39). Slaveholders in some areas considered contributing to a fund which would be used to reward those who returned runaways (*Ibid.* 40). Eventually they would resort to sending armed expeditions into Mexico. This would result due to the lack of help from the U. S. government. “Believing that they were right, these men would be doing what the government...failed to do for them – protecting their rights and reclaiming their own property” (*Ibid.* 42).

In 1855, Texas Governor Elisha M. Pease authorized Captain James Hughes Callahan, formerly of the Texas Rangers, to form a volunteer force to protect the western areas of the state from Indian marauders (*Ibid.* 45). It was decided that Callahan and his band would pursue attacking Indians across the border into Mexico. Under international law it was permissible to follow marauding Indians into Mexico under the doctrine of hot pursuit (Mutley, 96). Pursuing the Indians provided an excuse to capture runaway slaves and return them to Texas. On October 1, 1855, Callahan and his men began crossing the Rio Grande near Eagle Pass, Texas. The expedition was a failure. No slaves were apprehended and the Mexican army and its Indian allies repulsed the American invaders. In response, the Callahan group burned the Mexican town of Piedras Negras before

crossing the Rio Grande back to Texas (Tyler, *Slave Owners* 53-54). The raid did nothing to improve the relationship between the Mexican and American governments. It did however seem to stem the flow of fugitive slaves into Mexico for several months. Both governments increased their patrols along the border.

In the following months very few advertisements concerning runaways appeared in the state's newspapers. Slave owners were on the alert, many Mexicans, fearing another invasion, were hostile to Negroes, and slaves knew that they would be pursued even into Mexico. (66)

By the Civil War the number of slaves running away had again increased.

## **THE ABOLITIONIST MOVEMENT**

### **Free Negroes**

Emancipated slaves who remained in Texas presented ideological problems for those who supported the institution of slavery.

Every free Negro practically seemed to deny the principle that slavery was a boon for the Negroes, and every thriving one seemed to disprove the argument that if the Negro were set free he would starve rather than support himself. As one Texas Senator expressed himself, these facts swept away the strongest ground of slaveholders used in refuting the abolitionists. (Schoen 108)

There were those in Texas who were opposed to slavery. Some were even former slaveholders. The *Constitution of the Republic of Texas* required the permission of Congress for an owner to free a slave. Free slaves needed the permission of Congress to stay in Texas. Fifteen slaveholders requested permission from the Republic to emancipate [manumit] their slaves. All but two were refused (Newsome 44). This law, however, was often ignored. "So long as a free Negro remained in a place in which he was known by whites he was secure, but when he went beyond the limits of his acquaintance, he was more than likely to find himself jailed as a runaway slave" (Muir 8). Other owners freed their slaves in their wills. Stephen F. Austin foresaw a potential for abuse in this form of emancipation when he "engineered an amendment to a law of Coahuila -Texas to insure the prevention of the manumission of slaves of a master who 'died in any unnatural way,' an apparent admission that slaves might murder their masters in order to achieve freedom" (Junkins 7). "Not all owners who manumitted slaves did so out of abhorrence for the system of slavery, but it can be assumed that they harbored at least a modicum of antislavery sentiment" or guilt when it came to the freedom of favorite slaves or the mothers of their offspring. (Newsome 45)

Individual freedmen might be accepted by the white population, but free Negroes as a group were viewed with suspicion. “This was especially true following any period of intense rumors – which usually included allusions to ‘abolitionists’” (*Ibid.* 45). Free slaves were seen as setting a bad example for those who were still in servitude. They were suspected of trying to help slaves escape.

Slave owners were hostile to the free Negro because they felt that his greater freedom of movement, wider experience, and keener intelligence enabled him to furnish the inspiration, organization, and weapons in an insurrection [or escape attempt]. Whites also feared that the free Negro would undermine slavery through passive resistance by causing the slaves to become dissatisfied, disobedient, and restless. Since passive resistance was harder to fight than armed rebellion it was equally if not more feared by the slave owners (Junkins 10).

In 1856 the action of a free Negro demonstrated to the white community of Galveston how easily a free Negro could assist in the escape of an enslaved person. After purchasing a railroad ticket, a free Negro gave it to a slave who boarded the train in his place. The ease of the act demonstrated to the slave owners the threat the free Negro posed to slavery (*Ibid.* 24).

### ***Sylvia Routh***

On January 25, 1837, James Routh, a well-to-do settler on Galveston Bay, bequeathed “full freedom to my negro woman, Sylvia and her six children and her further increase” (Newsome 44). Routh, who appears to have been the father of Sylvia’s children, died on July 19, 1837. In his will, he also deeded 320 acres to Sylvia and her children (*Ibid.*).

Sylvia eventually sold the acreage left to her and acquired a house on the edge of Houston. At that time there were dry gullies and inlets which ran through what is today downtown Houston and emptied into Buffalo Bayou. Sylvia’s house was one block from Buffalo Bayou and ran along one of these dry gullies where Caroline Street is located (Aulbach). Basements are not common in Houston, even today. Sylvia’s house had one that was brick lined. While all of the evidence is circumstantial, it appears that Sylvia may have been assisting slaves in their efforts to run away (Brown). The basement would have provided an excellent hiding place during the day. At night, the fugitives could have made their way to the ships docked at Buffalo Bayou under cover of the gully. Ms. Routh also owned several ships (Aulbach). There are recorded cases of slaves escaping from such ports as New Orleans, Galveston, and Houston via ships to Mexico. One of her sons drowned off of the coast of Mexico, although the circumstances of that event are unknown (Brown). While there is no record of her being asked to leave, Sylvia moved to California in the late 1850s (Brown). If she had been involved in the Texas Underground Railroad, that could explain her departure.

## White Abolitionists

The more serious threat came from Anglos who were a part of the abolitionist movement. It was believed that some abolitionists came to Texas under the pretense of seeking employment. Once here they were believed to encourage rebellion and secretly supply the slaves with guns, ammunition, and poison for use in their uprisings. “As a result, Texas treated the abolitionists with hostility, and in some localities as criminals. Rewards were offered for their arrest and conviction” (Jenkins 10-11). Sometimes the arrest never took place. The testimony of slaves would be required for conviction. Negroes were not allowed to testify against Anglos or Mexicans in Texas courts. So, some communities resorted to the lynch law (*Ibid.* 27). “William H. Crawford, a white man, was lynched on suspicion of being an abolitionist . . . Two map salesmen were arrested in Fort Bend County on ‘suspicion of being abolitionists.’ One was horsewhipped; both were banished” (Newsome 74). Newspapers of the time give evidence of the suspicion of abolitionist activity in Texas. Clasky P. Morrow of Rutersville ran the following advertisement during the winter of 1840 in the *Houston Morning Star*.

\$50. reward—Absconded from my premises Rutersville on the 9<sup>th</sup> inst., a Negro man named Bob, aged from 30 to 35 years, about five feet high, thin visage; his right thumb has been injured and the nail nearly entirely wanting; wears a small bunch of hair at the top of his head as a cue . . . tied with a bit of ribbon or string. Also, a girl accompanied this fellow, who is about 14 years of age, tolerably well grown, and rather slender built, she will call her name Pen or Penny. I will give the above reward of fifty dollars in the promissory notes, to any person who will detain both of said Negroes so that I get them again, or half that amount for either one of them. It is possible some white man is at the head of this affair, as several other Negroes in this community absconded about the same time. (Newsome 46)

An editorial in the *Telegraph and Texas Register* dated September 15, 1841, warned of suspected abolitionist activity.

The citizens of several of the eastern counties of the republic, have lately been thrown into some alarm on account of the suspicious movements of many of their slaves. In San Augustine, several slaves have run away from their masters; and circumstances indicate that they have been decoyed away by some lurking scoundrels, who have been prowling about that section for several months, without any ostensible means of subsistence. It was at first supposed that these rascals were merely gamblers, and their indolence excited but little alarm; but the singular disappearance of these slaves, and the conduct of others who have evidently been bribed by them, have justly excited suspicions that they are either abolitionists or Negro thieves. (Newsome 46-47)

A slave rebellion aimed at evacuating slaves to a free state was uncovered in Garlandville in August of 1855. The leader of the group was an elderly conjuror or healer. An overseer, tipped by a loyal slave, went into a local swamp late one night and witnessed a meeting of at least one hundred slaves (Junkins 58-59). The conspiracy extended throughout a large area and was united through several organizations called “schools” in the neighborhood. The plan was to organize a large force and march to a free state, presumably Mexico, increasing their number as they went (Junkins 59). “No arms and ammunition were found, but the slaves claimed that they were to meet at Garlandville the following Sunday night to begin building an arsenal” (Junkins 59). Sunday was the slaves’ day off. The conspirators claimed that two white men were involved, although they could not identify them. Whether abolitionists were involved was never made clear. The slaves may have made the implication to soften their blame. “Such activities prompted the *Galveston Weekly News* to recommend that a ‘vigilant system of patrols’ be set up at once in order to protect the slaves of the country from the ‘vile influences’ of the abolitionists reportedly in the country” (*Ibid.* 59-60).

*The State Gazette* of Austin reported in July of 1856 that three white men in Chapel Hill were investigated for having abolitionist leanings. “It was proved that the three had said several times ‘that they were abolitionists, that there were over 3,000 abolitionists in the state, and that they sympathized with the Negroes.’ The men were forced to leave the state” (*Ibid.* 60-61). In 1856 a plot by slaves to kill their masters and seize all of their guns and ammunition for a flight to Mexico was discovered in Hallettsville and Guadalupe.

Three white men were said to be involved in the revolt. One, an Ohio abolitionist named Davidson, was caught and confessed to the committee that the insurrection was planned. Davidson was sentenced to 100 lashes. He escaped death by naming five other white men involved...they in turn implicated other white men...thirty Negroes were whipped for participation in the scheme, and some of the whites were supposedly to pay for their villainous deeds by the forfeiture of life itself. (*Ibid.* 61)

The slaveholders of Texas blamed outsiders for the planned slave insurrections. It was believed that the slaves would never have conceived of such plans by themselves (*Ibid.* 61).

The feelings of the slaveholders towards the abolitionists were expressed in the Lockhart *Southern Rights* in 1857:

Abolitionists who with the wisdom of serpents and apparent harmlessness of doves, are poisoning the minds of the people, and of our servants; who are striving to lay the foundations of the free on our borders; who are ever ready to excite insurrections among us. These emissaries must be silenced and the

insidious encroachment checked, by external vigilance and solid arguments. (*Ibid.* 63)

Guilty or not of actually helping slaves escape, those who expressed abolitionist leanings had no way of defending themselves and often paid for their views with their lives (*Ibid.* 63). By “crediting most of their Negro problems to abolitionists” the Texas slaveholders could overlook the fact that their slaves simply were not happy with their condition in life (*Ibid.* 64).

The largest slave insurrection was to have taken place on August 6, 1860 – Election Day. All through the summer, plots, both planned and carried out, were discovered in almost every Texas county. All involved the burning of towns and the murders of owners (*Ibid.* 67). On July 8, practically all of Dallas was set on fire. Fires were also set in Denton, Pilot Point, Latonia, Milford, Honey Grove, Black Jack Grove, Millwood, Waxahachie, Jefferson and other places. More than one-half million dollars damage was reported (Newsome 73). According to slaves involved in the plot, “the scheme had been planned by [Northern Methodist] ‘abolition preachers’ who had been expelled the previous year” (*Ibid.* 73-74). Throughout the summer more fires were set. Slaves were discovered in possession of poison, guns, and ammunition all over the state. “In each case the slaves implicated white people as the instigators” (Jenkins 68). Supposedly there was an abolitionist supervisor in each county to direct the progress of the revolt (*Ibid.* 69). After a summer of fires and killings, a statewide general revolt was to take place on Election Day, August 6, 1860 (*Ibid.* 75).

The plan involved poisoning as many whites as possible the night before the election. Then on election day, when the slaves were to revolt across the state, the insurrectionaries [sic] planned to burn the houses and kill the women and children who had escaped poisoning while the men were voting. They intended to kill the men as they returned home. (*Ibid.* 76)

Because so many fires occurred and due to the numerous attempts at poisoning which were discovered, the plot was revealed and not finalized.

The desire for freedom continued. In Georgetown, a young Negro boy admitted setting fire to the stable and kitchen of L. Gans. When caught he confessed that “he had been persuaded to do so by three white men. He reported that one of them had promised to take him safely to Mexico if he would fire the town and do other mischief.” The young boy was hanged by a lynch mob (*Ibid.* 79). A group of approximately two hundred slaves from Lyons had planned on meeting with another large band from La Grange “and from thence proceed to Mexico” (*Ibid.* 80). Their plot was discovered and never came to fruition. It is possible that the plans for some of these revolts may have been exaggerated by Texans who were trying to elicit help from the United States government in obtaining the return of their runaway slaves from Mexico.

As a result of all of this activity, citizens formed committees of safety, increased slave patrols, formed vigilante groups, military companies, and the Knights of the Golden Circle, an organization similar to the Ku Klux Klan of Reconstruction days (*Ibid.* 84). The formation of these groups would have serious implications for the future. The formation of so many new vigilante type groups would have probably made escape to Mexico more difficult. But 1861 saw the beginning of the Civil War and most of the group members went off to fight for the Confederacy. Therefore escapes and abolitionist activity were able to continue throughout the war years.

### **The Germans**

By 1857, about 35,000 Germans had immigrated to Texas, most living in the south central region of the state (Newsome 62). Most of the German population was against slavery. New Braunfels and Fredericksburg were founded by Prince Carl of Solms-Braunfels. He expressed the attitude of many of his countrymen: "To me personally it is not evident why these men to whom Almighty God gave a black colored skin, should belong to others to whom He gave a white skin, treat as a horse, a dog . . . . What man of honor or feeling will allow himself to engage in this business . . . ?" (*Ibid.* 63). In 1853 a German political society, the *Freien Verein*, was formed. Among several reforms suggested by the group was the removal of slavery as an evil institution (*Ibid.* 64-65). While these views were not well accepted by the slaveholding population there does not appear to be any evidence that the German community as a whole was active in actually helping slaves escape. It appears that the Germans may have also been opposed to slavery because the slaves filled jobs they would have liked for themselves. Of course there were exceptions.

Sarah Ford's papa ran away, but would occasionally return to secretly check up on his family. "I recollect papa saying there was one place special where he hid with German folks, on the sly like, and they fed him, and lots of mornings when we opened the cabin door, on a shelf just above was food for mama and me and sometimes store clothes. No one had seen papa, but there it was." (Tyler, *Slave Narr.* 65)

Pioneers from Norway, Poland, Czechoslovakia and France seemed to share the same sentiments (Newsome 68-69). Few members of these groups became slaveholders.

### **The Mexicans**

"They [the Mexicans in Texas] consort freely with the Negroes, making no distinction from pride of race . . . most of them regard slavery with abhorrence" (Olmsted 163). The poor Mexican laborers or peons were seen as a danger to the slaveholders. They were often accused of giving aid to runaway slaves. Whether this was always true did not seem to matter and would lead to serious repercussions for the Mexican population of Texas. "The Mexican peons were unskilled laborers who traveled about Texas hiring

themselves out to work. Because most of them were hired to perform the most menial of tasks, they often came into contact with Negro slaves” (Barriffe 41). The peons recognized similarities between their lives and the plight of the slaves. It would not have been unusual for them to sympathize and help in planned escapes. But this would not have been true of all Mexicans residing in Texas. This distinction made no difference to the slaveholders. If the slaves were escaping to Mexico, it was surmised that the Mexicans must have been helping them (*Ibid.* 41). Eventually reprisals were taken against Mexicans who were thought to have abolitionist leanings. “Slaveholders . . . began to take retaliatory measures against all Mexicans suspected of aiding slaves in their escape. This was done in the hope that it would cut the runaway from his life-line into free Mexican territory” (*Ibid.* 57).

In 1854 about twenty Mexican families were forced out of their Austin homes after being accused of horse thievery. An article in the *Texas State Gazette*, however, gives a better understanding as to the reasons for their removal. This article stated that:

We regard the existence of Peon Mexicans among us, as decidedly injurious to our slave population, and if anything, worse than so many free Negroes, for they are at the command of the slave for a small bribe, and the latter relies upon a peon capable of running him successfully to Mexico. (*Ibid.* 57)

The harassment of Mexican peons continued into the fall of 1856 when a slave insurrection was discovered in Columbus, Colorado County. The slaves had obtained arms and planned to kill the entire white population before escaping to Mexico (58). “While over two hundred Negroes were eventually punished and the ringleaders hanged, there was also a great deal of suspicion towards Mexicans in the area, who were accused of having plotted the uprising” (58). The Colorado County Vigilante Committee investigated the causes of the failed escape. The committee published its findings in the *Galveston News* and accused the Mexican population of planning the slave uprising. “It charged that the plan called for the Negroes to kill all the whites, take their horses and arms, and fight their way into a free state [Mexico]” (58). The newspaper went on to state that:

Without exception, every Mexican in the county was implicated. They were arrested, and ordered to leave the county within five days, and never again to return, under the penalty of death...we are satisfied that the lower class of the Mexican population are incendiaries in any county where slaves are held, and should be dealt with accordingly. And, for the benefit of the Mexican population, we would here state, that a resolution was passed by the unanimous voice of the county, forever forbidding any Mexican from coming within the limits of the county. (Olmsted 503-504)

“It was in the region of south San Antonio, however, that the harshest treatment was meted out to the Mexican population” (Barriffe, 59). A colony of Mexicans had settled



close to the San Antonio River in an area known to be frequented by runaway slaves. The Texans suspected complicity with the fugitives even though there was never any evidence of assistance on the part of the Mexicans. "To remedy this situation a vigilante committee was formed, and it was not too long before bands of masked men began a campaign of terror in which over seventy-five Mexicans were lynched and their survivors driven out of the area" (*Ibid*). This incident was protested by the Mexican government. Manuel Robles Pezuela, Mexican Minister to the United States sent a letter of complaint to U. S. Secretary of State, Lewis Stone. "Sundry families, the victims of these unheard of persecutions, had commenced reaching the Mexican territory in utter destitution after suffering the hardships of a weary march on foot, compulsorily undertaken for the salvation of their lives" (*Ibid*). Despite these protests, by the end of 1860, west Texas counties had all but barred Mexicans from living in the area (*Ibid*). All of this was done despite the fact that the *Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo*, which ended the Mexican War, guaranteed all rights of citizenship to the Mexicans who chose to remain in the United States.

Mexicans were generally despised by the Anglo population and a desire for the land they occupied may have also had something to do with the removal of the Mexican families. The possibility that some may have given aid to the runaways simply supplied an excuse for their removal. Frederick Law Olmsted met a woman on a plantation between Victoria and Seguin during his travels through Texas in the 1850s who expressed opinions commonly held by Anglos in Texas.

White folks and Mexicans were never made to live together, anyhow, and the Mexicans had no business here. [This woman seems to have had no knowledge of Texas history.] They were getting so impertinent...that the Americans would just have to get together and drive them all out of the country. (Olmsted 245)

During this same time period the newspaper in Matagorda, which is located on the Texas coastline, ran an article which expressed similar sentiments:

Matagorda. - The people of Matagorda County have held a meeting and order every Mexican to leave the county. To strangers this may seem wrong, but we hold it to be perfectly right and highly necessary; but a word of explanation should be given. In the first place, then, there are none but the lower class or "Peon" Mexicans in the county; secondly, they have no fixed domicile, but hang around the plantations, taking the likeliest Negro girls for wives; and, thirdly, they often steal horses, and these girls, too, and endeavor to run them to Mexico. We should rather have anticipated an appeal to Lynch law, than the mild course which has been adopted. (Olmsted 502)

The lack of an abolitionist press in Texas leaves us with questions as to how active the abolitionists were in the state among any of the various groups discussed above. The slaveholders would naturally find it easy to blame someone else for their slaves' escape

attempts. It could be said that the slaves fell under a bad influence. The whole institution of slavery fell into question if the desire to run away came from the slaves themselves.

## CONCLUSION

Due to the lack of accurate records it is impossible to say how many enslaved persons escaped from Texas to Mexico: definitely several thousand. The purpose of this unit is to first introduce students to the other Underground Railroad. I hope that they will also begin to see the symbiotic relationship between the United States of America (especially Texas) and Mexico. In the 1820s and 1830s Americans immigrated to Mexican Texas in search of a better life. During that same time period, and up until the end of the Civil War, American slaves immigrated to Mexico in search of a better life. The American slaveholders, however, never regarded the runaway slaves as legal immigrants to Mexico: they were property. The American government made many diplomatic attempts to force the Mexican government to return the fugitive slaves. Mexico's government consistently refused any terms of extradition. The slaves were allowed to remain in Mexico where they were assimilated into the culture in a way that would never have happened in the USA at that time. Today Mexicans immigrate (both legally and illegally) to Texas and the rest of the United States, also in search of a better life. There is much debate as to whether our southern border should allow free movement between the two countries. For students studying contemporary issues this is a topic that will provide interesting debate.

Because the Mexican census is not taken along racial lines, there is no way to know how many people of African heritage are in Mexico today. The Costa Chica region on the Pacific coast is one community that is known to have a population with African lineage. But this community dates back to the period when Spain was importing slaves to Mexico (Vaughn). It is unclear as to whether African American slaves would have made it to this area. Mexican historian Aguirre Beltran was speaking of the people living in the Costa Chica region when he said "although there are still African features among the people . . . the people did not know they descended from Africans" (Rodriguez, 39). Today there is a museum, Museo de las Culturas Afromestizas, dedicated to the contributions of Africans to Mexican culture located in this area south of Acapulco. Anthropologist, Bobby Vaughn has noted that the houses in this area are round huts, *redondos*, which trace their roots back to Ghana and the Ivory Coast (Vaughn).

There are also communities outside of Veracruz with roots in African culture. Due to its location on the eastern coast of Mexico it would seem more likely to have descendants of American slaves. It is definitely known that the people who live in this area are descendants of those slaves brought to Spanish Mexico between 1521 and 1821. This may have been an attractive destination for American slaves, if they learned of it; but there is little American research into this aspect of Mexican history. An in-depth study of what happened to the American slaves who moved south of the border would require someone with a command of the Spanish language to continue research in Mexico. Hopefully the doctoral research of Mr. Bobby Vaughn will shed more light on this topic.

Mr. Vaughn is currently comparing the Afro Mexican communities of Costa Chica and Veracruz. His web site is located in the bibliography.

It is my desire that my students will realize the connection between what they are studying historically and what is happening in their own world today. As stated in the introduction to this unit, many of the students at our school are refugees. They have experienced events which will become the history for coming generations. By comparing their experiences to those of the fugitive slaves, I hope to encourage them to consider history and their contemporary world in humanitarian terms.

## **LESSON PLANS**

### **Lesson Plan I**

#### ***Objectives***

Plan an escape. Students will use problem solving and decision making skills. Students will create written and oral presentations.

#### ***Activity***

Divide the class into groups of 4 or 5. As enslaved persons they are to plan an escape from servitude in Texas. The teacher should assign a location to each group. Example locations would be a sugar plantation near the coast in Brazoria, a cotton plantation north of Rosenberg, a farm where corn and cotton is grown near Nacogdoches, or a hotel in Houston.

A form with the following questions should be filled out by each person in the group. All questions should be discussed by the group. Each student should answer the questions individually as to how they would handle each situation. Do not forget that there will be a severe punishment if caught.

1. Will you go with others or travel alone?
2. What will you take with you? These may be items which you have saved money for and stashed away or they may be items you will have to steal. Where will you steal them from and how will you keep from being caught?
3. Who would you tell about your trip? Why?
4. Will you have money with you? Where did you get it? (Slaves were sometimes allowed to work for their own money on their day off).
5. How will you escape?
6. How will you keep your master or slave bounty hunters from catching you?
7. How will you find your way?
8. Where and how will you hide?
9. If you needed help, food, or water, would you approach the dwelling of an Anglo in Texas? What about the dwelling of a Mexican in Texas? Would you approach an encampment of Native Americans?

10. Would you kill someone pursuing you?
11. During what time of year would you make your journey?
12. How do you think you will react the first time you encounter someone speaking Spanish?
13. Do you swim? How will you cross rivers, especially the Rio Grande?
14. Do you think you will be able to adjust to living forever in a foreign land (Mexico)?

Each question should be discussed by the group. For homework the students should finish answering the questions for whichever situation they have chosen. Each group will make a presentation to the class.

## **Lesson Plan II**

### ***Objectives***

Learn the geography of southwestern Texas. Understand the effects of the interaction between humans and the environment. Students will apply critical thinking skills to organize and use information acquired from a variety of sources. Investigate the natural resources of Texas. Create written, oral and visual presentations.

### ***Activity***

This is an extension of Lesson Plan I. Tell the students that they must plan a journey through the southwestern region of Texas toward the Rio Grande. Unlike the fugitive slaves, they will have prior knowledge of the area. This will be important as they will be traveling on foot and will have little, if any, supplies with them. Divide the class into several groups. Each group will research one of the following topics.

1. Maps. Group I will study topographical maps of the area between San Antonio and the Rio Grande. Their task is to decide several factors. They should look for a route that will provide ease of travel. But they should also consider that slave catchers may be pursuing them. For this reason they may want to plan a route in rougher terrain where pursuit would be hampered and hiding places more available.
2. Water. Group II will study the availability of water sources in the same area. They will also need a topographical map on which to mark the water locations. Here again they should consider sources which are out of the way if they feel they are being pursued. How will they carry water? What can they do to insure that the water is safe to drink? What are the sources of water in a semi desert locale?
3. Plants. Group III will study the edible plants of the area. They will have to draw sketches of the plants or provide pictures. Are all parts of the plant edible? Could a plant have other uses? Native Americans used the Sotal and Yucca plants for food and the fibers to make sandals, ropes and baskets. The long flower stalk was used as a spear shaft.

4. Animals. Group IV will study the animals, reptiles, insects, and birds which are native to this area. Which creatures should be avoided and why? Which are edible and how will they catch and cook them? This group will also have to provide sketches or pictures.

The groups will be rearranged after all research is done. Each person should have a copy of all work done by their group. Each new group should have at least 2 people from each of the above groups.

During this phase the teacher will mark each group's topographical map with a different set of symbols representing military outposts, encamped Comanches or Apaches, Mexican homesteads and a traveling group of bounty hunters. The symbols will be placed at different locations on each group's map.

All research information should be combined with the information on the topographical map. Each group using their pictures and maps will present an oral report on their strategies for escape.

### **Lesson Plan III**

#### ***Objectives***

Do research using the Internet and the library system. Identify cultural origins.

#### ***Activity***

This project would make an excellent extra-credit assignment for Spanish speakers. I found it difficult to locate much information on the communities of Afro Mexicans in Mexico. When I did find information it was invariably in Spanish.

1. Through Internet or library research students could locate known communities of Africans and place them on a map of Mexico.
2. Investigate these cultural groups and identify African contributions to Mexican culture.
3. How were the former African American slaves assimilated into Mexican culture?

The majority of my students are from Mexico and they often return home to vacation and visit family. Several are from the state of Guerrero where there is a museum dedicated to the Afro Mexican culture:

Museo de Las Culturas (Museum of Afro Mestizo Culture)  
Cuajinicuilapa, Guerrero, Mexico  
<[http://www.coax.net/people/lwf/mex\\_mamc.htm](http://www.coax.net/people/lwf/mex_mamc.htm)>

It should be noted that the best known Afro Mexican communities in Mexico date back to the colonial era when the Spanish imported African slaves directly to Mexico. Check the Spanish Bibliography at the end of this unit for suggestions to start this research.

## **Lesson Plan IV**

### ***Objectives***

Compare and contrast the experiences of today's refugees to those of slaves running away from servitude. Identify economic and political causes of human migration.

### ***Activity***

As stated in Lesson Plan III, the majority of our students have ties to Mexico. In spite of that, we usually have students enrolled from 40 to 50 different countries. Each year the number of refugees enrolling in our school increases. If the students are willing, and with parental approval, I will ask them to recount their experiences in escaping from their homelands. In preparation for this discussion, the entire class should research the political, economic and humanitarian climate of each country to be discussed.

The class should compare these experiences with those of the Africans who experienced the middle passage to North and South America, and the Underground Railroad North and South. Follow this with a discussion comparing the escape of the slaves to the escape of today's refugees. An extension to this discussion would be a comparison of the efforts of people to enter this country illegally.

High school economics and political science students could extend this study into an examination of economic and political solutions which would allow people to remain in their own countries. The criteria for economic and political development would first have to be established.

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