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**“Texas Must Be a Slave Country:”
Slaves and Masters in the Texas Low Country 1840-1860**

BY JOHN R. LUNDBERG

When the Anglo settlers aboard the schooner *Lively* set sail from New Orleans for the Texas coast in November, 1821, they brought with them more than just their possessions; they also brought with them the culture of the lower South and they brought with them their slaves. Stephen Austin chose the mouth of the Colorado River as the site of his new colony but when the *Lively* went ashore at the mouth of the Brazos River instead, it set into motion a chain of events that would transform that area of the Texas coast into a haven for slavery and a slave culture that differed little from the slave culture that dominated the South Carolina low country or the Louisiana cane country. Austin stated perhaps more than he knew twelve years later when he wrote: “Texas must be a slave country.” After the Texas Revolution, Austin decided to make his home with his sister Emily and her husband James Perry at Peach Point Plantation, a large sugar plantation near the mouth of the Brazos. Peach Point and other plantations like it became the epitome of the culture that defined the Texas low country.¹

The idea that Brazoria County constituted a neighborhood that differed little from the South Carolina low country or the Louisiana cane country is not to suggest that no differences existed between these places separated by time and space. Every neighborhood of the old South contained many factors and differences that made that particular place unique. Other historians who have examined slavery and the antebellum culture of Brazoria County have located the Gulf prairie within the context of a borderland society influenced by

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Spanish and Mexican customs and law, German immigrants and slaves imported directly from Africa. There is no question that Texas existed within a unique paradigm in the old South; that the above-mentioned factors contributed to a unique culture. However, other historians have located the region squarely in the center of a culture borrowed almost completely from the lower South. Both of these schools of thought are partially correct; the lower Brazos River region did initially contain all the hallmarks of a borderland society, but as time passed, the culture became more and more a part of the lower South and less and less a borderland society. Texas constituted an empire for slavery, and by 1860 Brazoria County had become the most like the South Carolina low country or the Louisiana cane country of any region in the state. Texas historians have long battled against the erroneous idea that slavery in Texas differed dramatically from slavery elsewhere in the South. Locating Brazoria County primarily within the context of a borderlands society helps to further this mistaken impression. The larger point of exploring the antebellum culture of Brazoria County is not to show what that society looked like under Spanish or Mexican rule, but to demonstrate how that society evolved in the twenty years prior to the Civil War. Slavery in Texas had not reached its natural limits by 1860, and as such was continuing to expand even while the older sections of the state like Brazoria County shed the characteristics of a borderlands society and became more like the society of the lower South. In the twenty years prior to the Civil War, the Gulf prairie transformed from the culture of a borderland society to a society similar to areas of South Carolina and Louisiana. The point of this article is to focus on the ways that Brazoria County society imitated other regions of the lower South in the way it evolved in the two decades prior to the Civil War and to show how the area evolved beyond the concept of a borderland society.²

The government of the Republic of Texas organized the area around the mouth of the Brazos and San Bernard Rivers into Brazoria County in 1836. This area provided a subtropical climate where the temperature rarely dropped below freezing and rainfall exceeded fifty-four inches a year in some areas. The prairie, dominated by peach trees, huge live oaks festooned with Spanish moss, oxbow lakes and the rich alluvial soils in the river and creek bottoms provided the perfect setting for the establishment of huge sugar and cotton plantations. These plantations, with the large gangs of slaves that worked them in

turn created the Texas low country. Although other nearby areas such as Matagorda and Fort Bend Counties produced a similar culture, because of its climate, soils and large sugar plantations, Brazoria County became the epicenter of this low country.

In addition to the subtropical climate and heavily rainfall, by the late 1840s, the Texas low country shared nearly all the characteristics of the South Carolina low country and especially the Louisiana cane country. Palatial plantation houses dotted the landscape with their accompanying slave quarters and large fields of sugar and occasionally cotton. These plantation lords almost invariably came to Texas from the lower South and brought with them their large gangs of slaves. By 1852 the twenty-nine sugar plantations in Brazoria County produced more than 7,000 hogsheads of sugar per year and roughly twelve times that amount in barrels of molasses. To work these plantations the Texas sugar planters collectively employed more than twelve hundred slaves in 1850, and by the end of the decade bondsmen comprised more than seventy percent of the population of Brazoria County. The sugar planters themselves increased their slave holdings by seventy-five percent in the 1850s. The Texas planters often remained absent from their plantations, traveling to further their business interests, and left their overseers to manage their plantations. Like the cotton and rice planters of South Carolina and the sugar masters of Louisiana, these Texans often sent their children away to some of the finest colleges and universities in the country and they also continued to import and buy African slaves far into the 1830s, long after the outlawing of the international trade.

Slavery played a central role in the antebellum history of Brazoria County. Although other Texas counties contained larger total numbers of bondsmen before the Civil War, Brazoria County by 1860 had the largest concentration of slaves relative to the white population. The nature of slavery in Texas has always been the subject of debate among historians. Prior to the last two decades, historians of Texas and the Old South maintained that somehow slavery was milder or more humane in Texas than in the rest of the South. Interestingly enough the debate among historians has centered on the study of a single plantation, Peach Point, in Brazoria County. Nothing could be farther from the truth. Slavery in Brazoria County was just as harsh and unforgiving as anywhere else in the South.

One of the primary differences between slavery in South Carolina

or Louisiana and the Texas low country was the mortality rate. From existing records it appears that the mortality rate in Brazoria County remained much lower than in these other areas, only about three percent per year. Several factors probably contributed to the lower mortality rate. First Brazoria County, despite its fairly constant temperature is still vulnerable to cold fronts from the northwest or hurricanes from the Gulf of Mexico that served to occasionally kill enough of the mosquitoes to prevent widespread malaria, unlike South Carolina or Louisiana. Second, for reasons that remain obscure, Texas planters in the low country tended to build their slave quarters from brick, with mostly wooden floors instead of the more unhealthy wooden shacks with dirt floors prevalent through much of the rest of the South. However, other than the mortality rate, plantation slavery in Brazoria County had become virtually identical to that in the rest of the South by the time of the Civil War.³

Most of the slaves in Brazoria County lived on the large sugar plantations and as such faced a life filled with constant work and abuse. To escape this existence they resisted slavery in every way possible, from religious expression, reliance on family and constant attempts to escape. These African Americans endured forced breeding, harsh punishments for escape attempts, and year-round back-breaking labor planting and harvesting sugar, cotton and corn, as well as tending to the small plots of land often allocated to them to grow their own crops. In many instances the slave quarters were separated from the big house by a skirt of trees, allowing the slaves to build their own community largely in private, away from the prying eyes of the master and overseer. Religious tolerances on the part of the planter differed from plantation to plantation, but the evidence suggests that at least a plurality if not a majority of planters allowed their slaves to attend church on the plantation. At times the planters also employed African American slaves as overseers, and like the most of large planters in the Old South, often fathered children by their female slaves, although in one case a Brazoria planter openly kept one of his slaves as his mistress and carried on a marriage-like relationship with her. Finally, punishments for resisting slavery varied in form from whipping, more severe torture, the wearing of slave collars and even on occasion murder.

The culture and outlook of the Texas sugar planters informed nearly everything about white society in Brazoria County. The

importation of the plantation culture of the lower South into Texas began almost as soon as Anglo settlement began and although separated by just a few hundred yards stood in stark contrast to the world inhabited by their slaves. At the urging of Stephen F. Austin, James Perry and his wife Emily, Stephen's sister, moved to Brazoria and began one of the earliest cotton, later sugar plantations in Texas. In December 1832, with slaves and family in tow, James Perry moved to Brazoria and established Peach Point plantation west of the Brazos River and only seven miles from the Gulf of Mexico. By the fall of 1838, Perry employed fifteen slaves as cotton pickers in his three fields, and Perry had commenced raising sugar cane by at least 1848. In 1850, Perry added a sugar mill to his considerable holdings. In that year, Perry owned forty slaves worth fourteen thousand dollars and a sugar mill worth eight thousand dollars. In 1852, Perry produced 260 hogsheads of sugar (approximately 1,100 pounds apiece), a few bales of cotton and four thousand bushels of corn. Perry spent most of his time attending to the needs of the plantation, using wagons to haul his crops the nine miles to Aycock's store in the settlement of Brazoria. From there the crops went to Crosby's landing where slaves loaded them on steamboats for transport to New Orleans. Perry purchased the supplies for his plantation from James Reed & Company in New Orleans, and the firm of Robert and David Mills in Columbia, Texas. He also constantly tried to purchase new slaves for his enterprise. He appears to have purchased most of his bondsmen in either Houston, Galveston or in the Upper South and by 1860 he had increased his labor force to sixty-five bondsmen. There is also some evidence to suggest that Perry engaged in the African slave trade.⁴

The Perrys planted fruit trees and raised a variety of vegetables near the plantation house. Emily (Austin) Perry insisted on maintaining the culture and education of her family. She had attended "The Hermitage," a women's finishing school in New York, and her son by her first marriage Guy Bryan graduated from Kenyon College in Gambier Ohio, where his half-brother Stephen Perry also attended. The youngest son of the family, Henry Perry, graduated from Trinity College in Hartford, Connecticut. While attending Kenyon College, Guy Bryan befriended one of his classmates, Rutherford B. Hayes, who visited Peach Point in 1849 and recorded the details of his visit. Hayes wrote in his journal: "The House was beautifully situated on the edge of the timber, looking out upon a prairie on the south, extending five

or eight miles to the Gulf, with a large and beautiful flower garden in front. Social life here afforded no end of entertainment—balls and parties rapidly followed one another, the guests riding ten, fifteen or even twenty miles, arriving in the early afternoon and remaining for nearly twenty-four hours, the great plantation house supplying room for all." Hayes also described riding to the mouth of the Bernard River to "fish and eat oysters." Peach Point was neither a large nor a small plantation by Brazoria County standards, and the lifestyle at Peach Point, however lavish, did not come close to the finery exhibited by other planters in the county.⁵

Jared Ellison Groce became the first planter to come to Texas, establishing Liendo, on the Brazos in what is now Waller County, in 1822. On December 5, 1827 Groce's daughter, Sarah Ann, married John Harris Wharton, an attorney and graduate of the University of Nashville. In 1829 William and Sarah Wharton established Eagle Island Plantation on land given to them by Jared Groce, on the Brazos River, seven miles from the Gulf of Mexico. William Wharton, and after his death in 1839 his son John Austin Wharton, established Eagle Island as one of the best sugar plantations in Brazoria County. Wharton had two sets of the machinery for his sugar mill manufactured in Philadelphia in case of breakdowns. He also had the sugar mill, slave quarters and overseer's residence constructed of brick and employed some slaves solely to hunt game for his dinner table. Later in the antebellum period the Whartons built a large frame house a story and half in height with at least fifty-five hundred square feet of floor space. They also constructed an office in the yard, and the family was known to entertain at least thirty guests at a time for weeks on end and kept a large library in the plantation house. In 1850 the Whartons owned fifty-eight bondsmen and in 1852 the sugar mill turned out 240 hogsheads of sugar. By 1860 the family held 138 slaves and produced 185 hogsheads of sugar, 16,000 barrels of molasses, 100 pounds of wool and 150 bales of cotton.⁶

Other examples of the plantation owners of Brazoria County included Abner Jackson, who owned three plantations, the largest of which was Lake Jackson, on the banks of the lake by the same name, with a large plantation house said to have cost \$25,000 and an artificial island for parties in the middle of the lake that cost \$10,000 to construct. Jackson also possessed 285 bondsmen. He sent his sons to Norwich University in Vermont, and in 1853 his three plantations produced 1,157 hogsheads of sugar.

Greenville McNeel's Brazoria plantation, Ellerslie, was a palatial estate that possessed twenty-two rooms in the plantation manor alone, a house adorned with Italian marble furnishings from Paris. At the gates of Ellerslie carved oak greeted the visitors in the shapes of a heart, diamond, spade and club. One hundred and seventy-six slaves worked the plantation's brick sugar house and lived in the brick slave quarters. George W. McNeel, the son of Greenville McNeel, also attended a northern university, Rutgers. George McNeel graduated from Rutgers in 1860 and began graduate study at Princeton. At the outset of the Civil War, George returned home, only to die in battle fighting for the Confederacy in 1864.⁷

The sugar planters of Brazoria County were above all businessmen, epitomized by Robert and David Mills, who owned a large mercantile business that sold almost every type of goods imaginable to the planters from their large warehouse in Columbia. In addition to their mercantile business, the Mills owned three plantations with a combined 343 slaves that produced, at their height in 1855, 1,280 hogsheads of sugar along with 23,000 bushels of corn and 56,720 barrels of molasses.⁸

Economically, these planters fared extremely well for themselves. Even the smallest sugar plantation required a minimum of anywhere between \$43,000 and \$50,000 in startup money. The average bondsman, for instance, owned by the Mills' brothers was valued at \$600 in 1860, but with sugar selling for \$40 per hogshead in the 1850s and cotton selling for eleven cents per pound, the planters made big profits. Taking an average of seven cents per pound of granulated sugar, the production on the three plantations belonging to the Mills' brothers would have yielded \$51,200 in sugar in 1860 alone. The Whartons, who grew both sugar and cotton, by the measures given above, in 1860, would have made \$9,600 in sugar and \$7,425 in cotton, for a total of \$17,025. With the plantations producing enough corn, other vegetables, hogs and even cattle to sustain themselves, nearly all of this profit could go into maintenance, leisure and of course expanding their holdings in land and slaves.⁹

However, these profits, like all profits, were wages stolen off the backs of the workers, in this case the human chattel who occupied the sugar plantations of Brazoria County. The enslaved workers on the Brazoria County sugar plantations arrived there from a number of different places. In the beginning, the earliest planters brought their slaves with them from the lower South but as time wore on, plantation

owners either traveled themselves or sent agents to purchase bondsmen from the slave markets in Houston, Galveston, the upper South, or illegally obtained them from Africa via the Caribbean. Perhaps the most common way to obtain workers came from the slave markets in Houston and Galveston. A number of firms and auctioneers in these cities kept bondsmen constantly on hand for prospective buyers to inspect and these dealers advertised that their prices were as low as those in New Orleans. Most of these slaves appear to have been imported from Virginia and North Carolina. In 1859 Sally McNeill, the granddaughter of Levi Jordan, one of the large plantation owners in Brazoria County, wrote that her grandfather entrusted an agent named John Evans with \$10,000 to purchase slaves. In September, 1860 Evans returned from North Carolina with "a dozen negroes. Grandpa will take ten or eleven...." Jordan also took a number of trips to Galveston to procure new slaves.¹⁰

The fact that many of the slaves living in Brazoria County came from the upper South obscured the fact that in the 1830s, up until the last cargo arrived in 1840, the large plantation owners of Brazoria smuggled in hundreds of African-born bondsmen who constituted at least half of all slaves living in the county in 1838. Leander and Sterling McNeel, Benjamin Fort Smith and James Fannin all traveled to Cuba in 1835 and brought back hundreds of Africans to their plantations in Brazoria County. In February, 1836 Monroe Edwards and his business partner Christopher Dart brought roughly 170 Africans up the Brazos River to their plantation, Chenango. Nancy Antwine, a freedwoman told an interviewer from the WPA in 1938 that her father had been captured in battle in Africa and brought to Texas via Cuba one hundred years earlier. A Freedman's Bureau worker in 1867 wrote to his superior, reporting that he had found five hundred African-born men in Brazoria County, most of them in their fifties or older. In 1913 J.P. Underwood of Brazoria County interviewed a freedman named Ned Thompson, a native African, "who remembered well the battle in which his tribe had been defeated by a rival tribe and he had been taken prisoner, only to be sold by his captors to a slave trader. He remembered the trip over, first to Cuba and then straight to the mouth of the Bernard [River.]" Ned claimed to have been twenty years old when captured in Africa and in his nineties when Underwood interviewed him. Ned Thompson was a part of what has been claimed as the last shipment of Africans to arrive in the United States, in Brazoria County, in 1840.

Cinto Lewis, a freedman who had belonged to James G. McNeel, one of the large sugar planters, told a WPA interviewer that the slaves his master had recently acquired from Africa needed watching the most due to their propensity to frequently run away. Most of the Africans remained concentrated on Chenango, in the central part of the county, the Mims plantation on the San Bernard River, and on almost all of the plantations within just a few miles of the Gulf of Mexico. This heavy concentration of Africans, found nowhere else in Texas, also clearly delineates Brazoria County as the Texas low country.¹¹

Texas sugar planters also had other methods for attempting to increase their workforce. They encouraged marriages between their slaves and also practiced forced breeding. Sarah Ford, an enslaved woman who lived on the Columbus Patton plantation (what is now known as the Varner-Hogg Plantation), recalled that "they just put a man and a breedin' woman together like mules. If the woman didn't like the man it didn't make any difference, she better go or they [would] give her a whipping." Likewise, Pinkie Kelly, who lived on Greenville McNeel's plantation, recalled that one day her mother pointed out a man whom she told her was her father "because children then didn't know their pappys like children do now." Planters also encouraged marriages. On the Levi Jordan plantation Sally McNeil recorded in her diary on January 16, 1860 that there was "quite an excitement... among the Blacks, by the marriage of Jane and Bos, Saturday-night. The Bride appeared pleased and the Groom elated. How easily they are made happy in their simplicity." Likewise, on March 30, 1861 she wrote: "Tonight Sam & Irene, a girl of hardly fifteen, are to be married. This is the fourth marriage since Christmas. The ice once broken & others follow in rapid succession! Several of the lately married have already had matrimonial quarrels."¹²

The rhythm of life on these sugar plantations left little time for leisure and required constant back-breaking labor on the part of the enslaved. In addition to sugar cane, these plantations also produced corn, livestock and cotton. On top of all of this, the planters allowed the enslaved to plant and maintain small gardens to supplement their diets. Work began in January with the planting of sugar cane, weather-permitting. Coopers (mostly slaves) remained busy making barrels and could average two to three barrels per day for either the hogsheads of sugar or the molasses. Cleaning ditches, chopping wood, clearing the cane, painting the plantation buildings and a number of

other activities occupied the enslaved from “can” until “can’t” see six and sometimes seven days a week. Most planters (but not all) allowed their slaves to take off Sundays, attend religious services, rest, and tend to their own gardens, but some only allowed their workers to take off until noon on Sunday. In February they planted corn and nourished it until ready for harvesting in August and September. March brought the planting of the cotton, which they tended until late August and early September when they harvested it, finished harvesting the corn, and prepared to harvest the sugar as well. From October to late December, during sugar harvesting season, no one got any time off as the slaves rushed to get the sugar cane in before the first freeze. There were exceptions to this rule. According to Sarah Ford on the Patton plantation women with small children did not have to work as hard during this time. Typically from 11 a.m. to 1 p.m. they took off to care for their children, went back to work, and took off for the day at 3 p.m. Texas sugar planters operated more like neo-capitalists than farmers and ran their plantations more like factories than farms. Like factory workers, all of the slaves had a role to play as cogs in the machine. Sarah Ford recalled that her father was a tanner, her uncle a “sugar man,” (meaning he worked the kettles in the sugar mill) and another relative a shoemaker. During the harvest season, even after nightfall when the work for the day was officially “done,” Pinkie Kelly recalled that on Greenville McNeel’s plantation all of the slaves, even the children, had to shell a bushel of corn before they slept and that they were so tired they did not have time for anything else.¹³

Life in the slave quarters reflected the realities of life for African Americans in Brazoria County. Although the slaves on the plantations generally seemed to have been well-fed, and the annual mortality rate only approached three percent, one former slave who lived on the Patton Plantation pointed out that even if your stomach was full and you had good clothes, “dat bullwhip on your bare hide make you forgit the good part...” The probable explanation for the low mortality rate lay in the fact that almost all of the planters in Brazoria County had brick slave quarters constructed with wood floors; a far more healthy environment than found in the Louisiana cane country or the South Carolina low country. In addition, the same weather elements (hurricanes and the occasional freeze) that prevented the Texas sugar country from ever becoming as well-developed as the Louisiana cane country also cut down on the mortality rate because this occasional cold weather served to kill off bacteria and protozoa that induced

increased death among other slave populations.¹⁴

Despite the relatively low mortality rate, illness still remained a problem. Cholera was the most common complaint, although measles, influenza and worms also ran rampant among the enslaved. One former bondswoman reported that if you got really sick they would call the doctor, but for minor ailments a fellow African American woman would tend to you with tea made from local vines. On the Greenville McNeel plantation a woman named "Aunt Becky" tended to the fellow slaves in a building they called the hospital with chamomile tea or turpentine, depending on the ailment. At least one doctor advised John Adriance, one of the planters, to treat cholera among his slaves with "congiac brandy, good cayenne pepper and mustard." Whether or not this cure worked remains unknown.¹⁵

Religion also played a role in the life of the enslaved on these plantations. Religious practices differed from plantation to plantation, but it appears that a majority of slave owners allowed their slaves to practice Christianity. Several planters even constructed permanent churches on their plantations. John Adriance constructed Ethiopia Baptist Church on his plantation, Waldeck, where white ministers preached to a crowd of both whites and slaves, often encouraging the latter to do their Christian duty and remain faithful to their masters. On the Patton plantation they held church services in an arbor, and even allowed a slave of advanced age named Lew to preach. Sarah Ford recalled that one Sunday Lew made the mistake of stating that the Lord had made both whites and blacks equal to each other. Enraged, Charles Patton ordered his overseer Jake to put Lew to work in the fields the next day. Church was not allowed on the McNeel plantation, but occasionally the slaves stole off into the woods to have a worship service anyway, at great peril to their well-being.¹⁶

The slaves in Brazoria County fought back against slavery in every way possible, although the most common ways seem to have been running away or working slowly. For both of these offenses they often received severe treatment, primarily from the overseers, some of whom were fellow slaves. All of the eyewitnesses to slavery in Brazoria County recorded running away as a common occurrence, usually as a result of severe whippings on the part of the masters and overseers. Other punishments for running away included being chained up for days after being caught, sometimes in the slave quarter themselves, or somewhere else on the plantation. Sally McNeil recalled that on February 17, 1859 a fire broke out in one of the slave cabins belonging

to Jacob, and that "Calvin rescued old Lydia who was chained to the chimney." Some slaves ran away so often they were fitted for metal collars with high spikes attached to make it more difficult for them to maneuver through the underbrush and under low-hanging branches. One such man named Lew had the collar permanently put on him so that the others began calling the contraption "Lew's horns." When an enslaved individual did run away, packs of dogs pursued them, including one pack that belonged to an African American man named Kelly. Most slave catchers, though, were white, and some, such as F.M. Snead listed their occupation on the 1860 census as "Negro catcher." Sally McNeill reported that her grandfather often gave the best horses and saddles to those men chasing the runaways and on one occasion described the use of hounds to track down a man named "Mose." "The hounds caught 'Mose the runaway' she reported on October 12, 1861, "who was fettered with a stiff-leg of iron, so that he could neither outrun the dogs or climb out of the way, consequently was bitten in several places....he is idle at work & runs to escape it and the lash. And is treated with severity when he is caught, besides being half-starving in the woods. Our negroes are treated well in general, much better than those of the surrounding Plantations they say themselves, yet discipline must be maintained. The tears rose indignantly to my eyes, when 'Mose' was led up that evening ragged and bleeding. I could say or do nothing, for he brought the pain & trouble on himself. Words of abuse & ridicule only were given him. Mr. S.[nead] highly elated at 'catching' him....I learned the next day that he was severely whipped to make him tell the truth...--moaning and confined in the stocks without food or water."¹⁷

In addition to whipping, other punishments for running away on the Columbus Patton plantation were extremely harsh. Patton appointed "Jake," a slave of apparently large stature, as his overseer, and Jake appeared to take a particularly sadistic pride in his work. Sarah Ford recalled that her father, a tanner, ran away often, and once, when he returned to the plantation after some time, Jake staked his hands and feet to the ground, rendering him immobile. At that time he brought out a piece of iron that looked like a block of wood with holes in it which he filled with grease and place in the fire. When the fire had heated the grease to the boiling point, he dripped the grease slowly on the back of the man staked to the ground. After that he whipped him up and down and placed him in the stock house, chained up with nothing

to eat for several days. The occurrence of this event and others like it is confirmed by the testimony of at least two other slaves who lived on the Patton plantation. Punishments like these lowered the morale of the enslaved on all of the plantations and made running away an even more frequent occurrence.

Fears of slave rebellion and insurrection also stalked the white residents of Brazoria County. On August 14, 1860, in the midst of the report of the Texas Troubles, Sally McNeill related in her diary that the wife of one of the planters allowed nightfall to come as she traveled home in a carriage with her four small children and African American driver. She got spooked because of the reports of slave rebellion, sent her servant to a nearby house for help, and hid herself in the woods, although it turned out to be a false alarm. Thinking of the impending Civil War in November, 1860, McNeill also wrote "Our worst foes are in our midst. Negro insurrections will be constant and bloody, under the guidance of the abolitionists." No major rebellion ever developed in Brazoria County, but the fear and constant threat of it often kept the white residents of the county afraid, very much like the South Carolina low country and the Louisiana cane country.¹⁸

Although the relationship and attitudes between plantation owners and the enslaved were mostly antagonistic, at least one relationship scandalized the county and shed an interesting light on the often complicated relations between masters and slaves. Columbus Patton, the owner of a large plantation, remained single throughout the antebellum period, but he did take for himself a consort from among his slaves known as Rachel. Although not legally married Columbus and Rachel certainly carried on like a married couple. From all accounts Rachel accompanied Columbus to church on Sundays, sat with him on a pew for whites only, lived in the plantation house with him, and gave orders to the other slaves on the plantation. She also held accounts in all of the local stores in Columbia and apparently functioned in every way as the wife of Columbus Patton. Charles Grimm, Columbus Patton's one-time overseer, testified that:

"The Negro woman Rachel occupied the position of a white woman as much as any I ever knew...I should say she was the mistress of the plantation. I never saw her do anything more than pour out coffee and wait on the table...I thought they lived more like

man and wife and that she had more control over him than I ever saw a lady have over her husband or as much so."¹⁹

Similarly, Isaac Tinsley, a white resident of Brazoria County, recalled, regarding Columbus Patton and Rachel that:

"We had a slight misunderstanding which lasted for about three months...This Negro Rachel was in the habit of attending church and upon one occasion she took her seat with the ladies near my family. She had done so several times before, but upon this occasion took up more room than usual. It was in the Methodist church at East Columbia & I spoke to Mr. Duncan (the pastor). I asked him to speak to her and let her know which seats was intended for slaves. I understood from Mr. Duncan that he had spoken to her on the subject & after that Mr. Patton & I were not friendly..."²⁰

Anthony Christopher, one of the enslaved on the Patton plantation, recalled that Rachel was his sister, and that because of this he and his parents often escaped the punishments and work regimens prescribed to other slaves. Needless to say Patton's relatives and neighbors looked down on this pseudo-marital arrangement, although he was not ostracized from the community.

In 1853, due to an apparent tumor of the brain that was first treated in 1851, Columbus went insane and his family placed him in an asylum in South Carolina. On September 29, 1856 Patton died of typhoid dysentery, and long drawn-out litigation over his estate began. In his will dated July 1, 1853, Patton stipulated, among other things, that four of his slaves including Jacob Steel (Jake, the overseer mentioned above), Solomon, Rachel and Maria should "remain the property of my estate and let them live with whom they wish without hire and one hundred dollars per year given to each of the women out of my estate so long as they live." He also instructed that \$5,000 should go to Henry Patton, who was apparently his son from his union with Rachel.²¹

Patton's family attempted to have his will overturned, citing his insanity and the idea that his relationship with Rachel sprang out

of that insanity. His brother Charles Patton took over running the plantation, and to the delight of the other slaves, put "Miss Rachel," as they called her, to work in the fields. Ultimately in 1858 the family agreed to uphold Patton's will after a protracted legal battle and it appears that at least Rachel received her pension of \$100 per year and was allowed to live with a family on the plantation. Rachel stayed at or near the Patton plantation until 1860 when she relocated to Cincinnati, Ohio. She remained in Ohio during the Civil War, but moved back to Brazoria County in 1867 and on the 1880 census listed herself as "Rachel Patton," a widower, sixty years of age. The story of Rachel and Columbus Patton, although somewhat unusual in most of the slaveholding south, was not all that uncommon, particularly on large plantations in South Carolina, Louisiana, or Texas.²²

The culture that developed in Brazoria County between 1840 and 1860 shared most of the characteristics of the Louisiana cane country or the more famous low country of South Carolina. Three elements prevented the Texas low country from spreading much beyond Brazoria County or from developing as fully as in South Carolina or Louisiana. First, time militated against the further development of the Texas low country. With only twenty years before the Civil War simply not enough time passed to allow Texas to develop a low country as widespread as South Carolina. Secondly, the climate also played a role with only Brazoria County possessing the environmental elements necessary to sustain large sugar plantations and the culture that accompanied them. Finally, the last remnants of a borderlands culture also prevented the Texas low country from expanding much beyond the boundaries of Brazoria County. German immigrants, some of whom opposed slavery, large numbers of slaves who had come directly from Africa and Mexican law and customs all combined to provide a unique culture on the lower Brazos River, although, compared to the neighborhoods to the north and west, Brazoria County contained the fewest hallmarks of such a borderlands society. The most prominent characteristic of Brazoria County by 1860 remained the county's striking resemblance to other areas of the lower South. Anglo settlement in the county, which began just forty years prior to the outbreak of the Civil War, had rapidly transformed what was once a borderlands society into what can be fairly characterized as the Texas low country.

ENDNOTES

1 Randolph B. Campbell Gone to Texas: A History of the Lone Star State (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 104; Stephen F. Austin to Wiley Martin May 30, 1833 in Eugene C. Barker (ed.) The Austin Papers Vol. 2, (Washington: The Government Printing Office, 1928), 981; Gregg Cantrell Stephen F. Austin: Empresario of Texas (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 240.

2 For the argument that the lower Brazos region constituted a borderland see Sean M. Kelly Los Brazos de Dios: A Plantation Society in the Texas Borderlands 1821-1865 (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2010). For the position that Brazoria County fit squarely within the context of the lower South see Randolph B. Campbell An Empire for Slavery: The Peculiar Institution in Texas 1821-1865 (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1989) Under the argument presented by Kelly the Louisiana cane country could be counted as a borderland society with its strong Spanish colonial, French creole, African and Caribbean influences, as could the South Carolina low country with its heavy Caribbean, African and American Indian influences. These areas of the lower South more closely resembled the Caribbean than they did the rest of the United States.

3 On the mortality rate in Brazoria County see Schedule 4 of the 1850 United States Census, Mortality Rates for Brazoria County Texas. For those in Louisiana, see Richard Follett Sugar Masters: Planters and Slaves in Louisiana's Cane World 1820-1860 (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2005) 74. Abigail Curlee fired the first shots in the historiographical debate over slavery in Brazoria County and on Texas plantations in general in her article "The History of a Texas Slave Plantation 1831-1863." Curlee claimed that James and Emily Perry went above and beyond to treat their slaves fairly. In her doctoral dissertation "A Study of Texas Slave Plantations 1822-1865," Curlee repeated her allegations, using Peach Point as the center of her argument, and went so far as to characterize the Perry's slaves as "the free slaves of Peach Point." In his seminal work A History of the Old South, Clement Eaton picked up and repeated Curlee's allegations. Even though Randolph B. Campbell in his An Empire for Slavery: The Peculiar Institution in Texas 1821-1865 successfully refuted the idea that slavery was somehow milder in Texas, as late as 2009 Light Townsend Cummins in his Emily Austin of Texas 1795-1851 repeats the arguments of Curlee and Eaton regarding Peach Point. Abigail Curlee, "The History of a Texas Slave Plantation 1831-1863," The Southwestern Historical Quarterly Vol. 26 No. 2 (October, 1922) 79-127; Abigail Curlee, "A Study of Texas Slave Plantations, 1833-1865," (doctoral dissertation the University of Texas at Austin 1932) 65; Clement Eaton, A History of the Old South (New York: Macmillan Company, 1975)

253; Randolph B. Campbell An Empire for Slavery: The Peculiar Institution in Texas 1821-1865 (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1989)

257; Light Townsend Cummins Emily Austin of Texas 1795-1851 (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 2009) 163.

4 Curlee, "The History of a Texas Slave Plantation," 92-113; ad valorem tax rolls, Brazoria County, Texas, 1852, 1860.

5 Hayes as quoted in Curlee "The History of a Texas Slave Plantation," 113-14.

6 Abner J. Strobel The Plantations and their owners of Brazoria County, Texas, (Lake Jackson Historical Association: 1930), 48-52; ad valorem tax rolls, Brazoria County Texas, 1852, 1860.

7 George W. McNeel enlisted in Company B, Terry's Texas Rangers (later 8th Texas Cavalry) on September 7, 1861 in Houston, and was elected first lieutenant of his company. Subsequently he transferred to the staff of Brigadier General Thomas Hindman. On January 8, 1863 McNeel resigned his post and joined the staff of Brigadier General John A. Wharton, his neighbor from Brazoria County. By early 1864 McNeel had obtained the rank of major and Adjutant Inspector General on the staff of Brigadier General Hamilton P. Bee. He was Bee's Aide de Camp but temporarily serving on the staff of Major General John A. Wharton again as Acting Assistant Adjutant General when he was killed on May 7, 1864 while reconnoitering the lines of the Union 13th Corps on Middle Bayou near Alexandria, Louisiana. Compiled Service Records of Confederate Soldiers Who Served in Organizations from Texas. National Archives Publication M323, Microfilm Roll 0051; Robert N. Scott (ed.) The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1891) Series I, Vol. 34, pt. 1, 277.

8 Abner J. Strobel The Plantations and their owners of Brazoria County, Texas, (Lake Jackson Historical Association: 1930), 54-56; ad valorem tax rolls, Brazoria County Texas, 1853, 1860. The Smithsonian Magazine Final Farewells: Singing a Yearbook on the Eve of the Civil War, Fall, 2010, is devoted to the signatures and messages in George W. McNeel's 1860 Rutgers yearbook.

9 James A. Creighton A Narrative History of Brazoria County (Angleton, Tex.: Brazoria County Historical Society, 1975), 207. On February 9, 1860 Sally McNeil, the granddaughter of Levi Jordan, one of the large plantation owners in Brazoria County, recounted that a man came to her grandfather asking for a loan of \$5,000, but that her grandfather refused, as he intended to use all his means "to purchase negroes." In April, 1860 she

recorded in her diary "Grandpa is taking in so much land! Intends to buy more (land) & negroes also." Ginny Raska and Mary Hill (eds.) The Uncompromising Diary of Sally McNeill 1858-1867 (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2009), 54, 100.

10 Curlee, "A Study of Texas Slave Plantations," 52-56; Raska and Hill (eds.) The Uncompromising Diary of Sally McNeill, 45, 100. Sally McNeill was another product of opulent lifestyle afforded her family; she attended and graduated from Baylor University before returning to her grandfather's plantation.

11 Sean Kelly "Blackbirders and Bozales: African-Born Slaves on the Lower Brazos River of Texas in the Nineteenth Century," Civil War History, Vol. LIV, No. 4, 2008: 406-423; scrapbook of J.P. Underwood, Brazoria County Historical Society Archives, Angleton, Texas; Creighton, A Narrative History of Brazoria County, 171; Cinto Lewis interview in Benjamin A. Botkin (ed.) Slave Narratives: A Folk History of Slavery in the United States from Interviews with Former Slaves (Washington, D.C., 1941), Vol. XVI, pt. 3, 1-3. The presence of these bondsmen, imported directly from Africa, has been used as proof that this area represented a borderlands society, but this type of illicit trade took place in Louisiana and South Carolina in earlier decades. The presence of these Africans served to further tie the culture of Brazoria County to that of the Louisiana cane country or the South Carolina low country. For the idea these slaves created a borderland society see Sean Kelly Los Brazos de Dios, 3.

12 Sarah Ford interview in Benjamin A. Botkin (ed.) Slave Narratives: A Folk History of Slavery in the United States from Interviews with Former Slaves (Washington, D.C., 1941) Vol. XVI pt. 2 pp. 41-46; Pinkie Kelly interview in Benjamin A. Botkin (ed.) Slave Narratives: A Folk History of Slavery in the United States from Interviews with Former Slaves (Washington, D.C., 1941), Vol. XVI pt. 2, 253-254; Raska and Hill The Uncompromising Diary of Sally McNeil, 50, 100.

13 Few, Sugar, Planters, Slaves and Convicts, 181-188; Sarah Ford interview "Slave Narratives"; Pinkie Kelly interview "Slave Narratives."

14 Sarah Ford interview "Slave Narratives."

15 1850 U.S. Census mortality schedule Brazoria County Texas; Sarah Ford interview "Slave Narratives"; Kelly Pinkie interview, "Slave Narratives"; E.D. Nash to John Adriance dated "Columbia July 21, 1850." Adriance Papers Box 2A127 Dolph Briscoe Center for American History, The University of Texas at Austin.

16 Creighton, Narrative History of Brazoria County, 190; Sarah Ford interview "Slave Narratives"; Cinto Lewis interview in "Slave Narratives."

17 Raska and Hill The Uncompromising Diary of Sally McNeill, 42, 110-111; The 1860 Census for Brazoria County, Texas; Levi Jordan plantation archives; Sarah Ford interview "Slave Narratives." A man named J. Portice placed an advertisement in the Brazoria Texas Planter, the local newspaper for the county, for a "pack of negro dogs," and advertised his rate as \$25 or \$5 a day. Brazoria Texas Planter February 1, 1854.

18 Raska and Hill The Uncompromising Diary of Sally McNeill, 82-83, 89.

19 Testimony of Charles Grimm, Brazoria County Probate Records, Case #453, File 2, 1857 (Brazoria County Clerk's Office, Angleton, Texas).

20 Testimony of Isaac Tinsley, Brazoria County Probate Records, Case #453, File 2, 1857 (Brazoria County Clerk's Office, Angleton, Texas).

21 Anthony Christopher interview in George P. Rawick (ed.) The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography: Supplement (Greenwood Press, Westport CT, 1979), Series 2, Vol. 3 pt. 2 pp. 719; Case #690, Probate Records of Brazoria County; Case #453 Probate Records of Brazoria County; Will of Columbus Patton, dated "July 1, 1853," Brazoria County Clerk's office, Angleton, Texas; "Varner Historical Narrative," Varner-Hogg Plantation Archives, Brazoria County, Texas.

22 Case #690, Probate Records of Brazoria County; Case #453 Probate Records of Brazoria County; Will of Columbus Patton, dated "July 1, 1853," Brazoria County Clerk's office, Angleton, Texas; "Varner Historical Narrative," Varner-Hogg Plantation Archives, Brazoria County, Texas; 1880 U.S. Census, Brazoria County Texas.