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The Unheard Stories of Former San Antonio Slaves

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While the end of slavery in America was a huge step to provide equality to all, the livelihood of former slaves after the Civil War took many different paths, some of those paths ended up in San Antonio, Texas.

After the end of slavery many new free African Americans had to establish their own path. A path that gave them very little to work with, either due to their lack of skills and education or the lack of opportunity the country gave them. One option for men was to join the Army, this provided them with steady pay, food, and usually some shelter. Some former slaves felt more inclined to stay working for their former masters due to already knowing their job and the provisions they were accustomed to.

Under the Works Progress Administration in the 1930s, a project was greenlighted to collect the true stories of former slaves who were still alive, called the Slave Narratives of the Federal Writer's Project, later renamed Work Projects Administration (WPA). After completion of these narratives the transcripts were put on microfilm called *Slave Narratives: A Folk History of Slavery in the United States from Interviews with Former Slaves*. In 2000 and 2001 all the Slave Narratives and photos were digitized and put out for the public on the Library of Congress website. Making these materials accessible to the public has been a great tool for historians to learn about the life of these people. In the San Antonio, Texas area we have come across about a dozen people who were former slaves. Adeline Cunningham, Felix Haywood, James Martin, Martin Jackson, William Branch, and William Watkins are several of the former slaves who lived in San Antonio when the WPA conducted the interviews. In these interviews we learn about their lives during and after

slavery. It gives us a huge piece of African American History here in San Antonio that has not been shared before.

The WPA slave narratives help us understand firsthand what slavery life was like. These narratives have many unique stories that bring light to what life was really like for them. Some of the stories paint us a different picture, one of brutality and injustice that we have never heard before or want to hear. Each person from these narratives have completely different life stories. Stories might be similar, but each person brings their own puzzle piece of history to us. These narratives have been used in other research and they have been examined by many wonderful people, but to me these narratives are just pieces of someone's history. With using information from different archives, such as Ancestry.com, I plan to put these puzzle pieces together for a to help uncover the ex-slave community in Bexar county during the 1930s.

Harsh times during slavery

The events they went through during their time in slavery depict gruesome treatment of human beings just because of skin color. As I mentioned before with James H. Martin and his statement on slave auctions. Here is the quoted statement from his slave narrative interview: "And we sees others sol' on the auction block. They're put in stalls like pens for cattle and there's a curtain, some tines just a sheet in front of them, so the bidders can't see the stock too soon. The overseer's standin' just outside with a big black snake whip and a pepper box pistol in nis hand. Then they pulls the curtain up and the bidders crowds 'round' the overseer tells the age of the slaves and what they can do. One bidder takes a pair of white gloves they have and rubs his fingers over a man's teeth, and he says,

'You say this buck's 20 years old, but there's cups worn to his teeth. He's 40 years if he's a day. So, they knock that buck down for \$1,000 'cause they calls the men 'bucks' and the women 'wenches.' Then the overseer makes 'em walk across the platform, he makes 'em hop, he makes 'em trot, he makes 'em jump.¹² As we learn from Mr. Martin that they were treated just like an animal at the auction even before they were bought.

Adeline Cunningham who was about eighty-five years old of her interview also describes the harsh times during slavery. Her owner at the time was a wealthy landowner named Washington Green Lee Foley. Foley and his family had thousands of acres in Lavaca and Colorado county in Texas. Her story tells us that the owners were very rough with all the slaves and living conditions were cabins with dirt floors that had two families living in them at a time. Adeline like James Martin tells a tale of a slave auction as well. Her story includes of a stockman (someone who travels selling slaves and livestock) who would come by their plantation showcasing slaves to Foley. She also describes how slaves who tried to run away were treated. In her interview she tells us that she saw a man hung up by one arm, had hot irons put on his knee and feet, then pull him down without his feet still not touching the ground. Most of the former slaves that lived in San Antonio all said their masters were nice men, but the overseer (who was in charge of the slaves) were mean and did not mind using the whip on the slaves.

¹ "Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 16, Texas, Part 3, Lewis-Ryles," Library of Congress, <https://www.loc.gov/item/mesn163/>

² The use of dialect was in this way was instructed by the writers to ensure accuracy of the narrative, <https://www.loc.gov/collections/slave-narratives-from-the-federal-writers-project-1936-to-1938/articles-and-essays/note-on-the-language-of-the-narratives/>

Food, clothing, and shelter were usually always taken care of for the slaves. The ones interviewed in San Antonio all came from big farms or plantations where food was always available for them to always have something to eat. Shelter was very basic and consisted of the slaves building their own cabin or hut. The roof was usually made from dried corn husk or shingles. The cabins very closely built next to each other did not allow for much privacy as well. For clothing, most farms had spinning wheels where the slaves would have to make their own clothes. William Branch, a buffalo soldier veteran, also had amazing stories tell us. Branch used to pick the cotton for his clothes, "How'd us slaves git de clothes? We carded de cotton, den de women spin it on a spinnin' wheel. After dat day sew de gahment togeddah on a sewin' machine. Yahsur, we's got sewin' machine, wid a big' wheel and a handle. One woman tu'n de handle and de yuther woman do de sewin'".³

Religion was also a common question asked by the interviewer. Adeline and others through the narratives give us insight about how they practiced religion, sometimes they had to hid in the forest to practice. According to former slave William Watkins they had to build the church in the forest themselves. Marriages were also performed during slavery. These marriages were often performed by a priest and with the blessing of the owner.

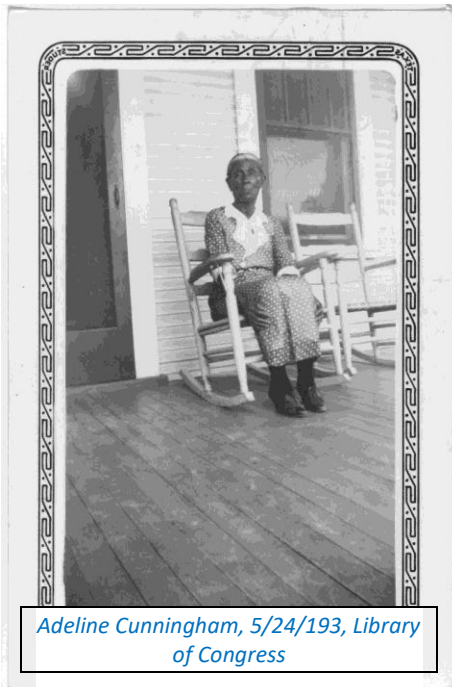
Life after Slavery

Once the Civil War ended, the former slaves all had huge choices to make. Choices they most likely were not prepared for and less than a handful of choices to pick from. In the case of the San Antonio former slaves, there were basically three choices for them after

³ "Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 16, Texas, Part 1, Adams-Duhon," Library of Congress, <https://www.loc.gov/item/mesn161/>

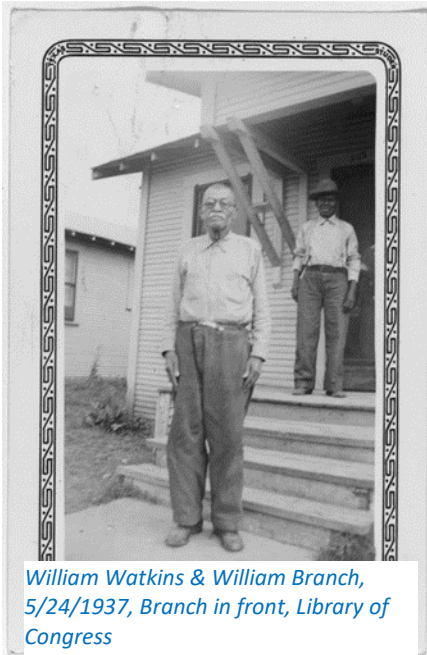
emancipation. A few were able to join the Army, a couple were able to start farming on their own, and some continued doing the same jobs as they did before the war. The people interviewed here in San Antonio all had something in common even if they did not know they did. After being set free, they all made the same choice to do something with their lives. They had dreams and they all set out to accomplish them. Adeline married after being a slave and became a midwife for fifty-one years. James Martin used to saddle his owner's horses for work and dreamed of being a soldier with a horse and rifle. He joined the Army and became a fine soldier in Calvary, thus getting his own horse and rifle like he dreamt. Felix Haywood and his farther were such good at ranching that after the war they were given some cattle and they started their own herd. Felix's father even has his own brand (7B).

Of the six former slaves, three of them were all born in Texas and the other three came from Virginia. Adeline Cunningham, Felix Haywood, and Martin Jackson all from



Texas did their respective work for 50 years before moving into San Antonio city limits to be with family or to have help in their old age. By the time they moved into the San Antonio city limits they were already in the 80's. Adeline lived to be 86 years old, Felix Haywood lived to be 92 years old, and Martin Jackson lived to be 93 years old. The long life that these people lived speak about their powerful drive through tough circumstances.

The other three men from Virginia (William Branch, William Watkins, and James Martin) all joined the army and fought in the Indian wars through out Texas and neighboring states. Branch and Watkins themselves have an incredible story about them together. Both men came from rural farms in Virginia that might have been 20 miles apart. They both joined the Army and were in the same unit, 25th infantry K unit, and both ended up in San Antonio. James Martin, also from Virginia, worked on a farm about 175 miles from the William men. The army gave these men a path that they could make something of



William Watkins & William Branch,
5/24/1937, Branch in front, Library of
Congress

themselves and for their families. Without having an education or a skill like ranching, these men embarked on some surreal adventures that should be told in a western novel.

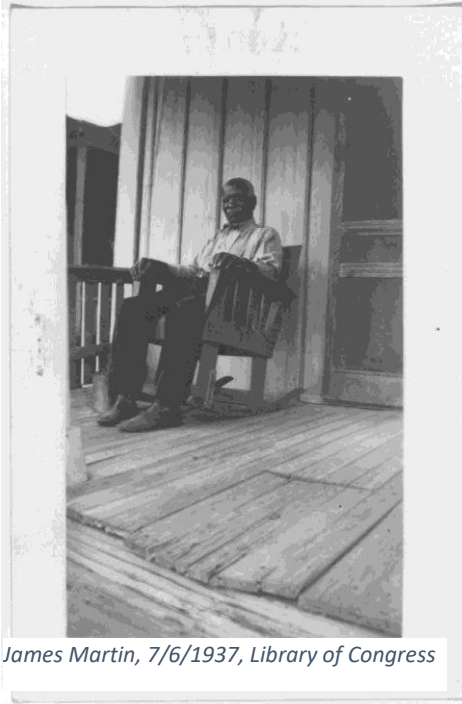
Several authors have written books on these Buffalo Soldiers, William A. Dobak, as an example, has mentioned the William men in several of his books, *On the trail of the Buffalo Soldier* and *Voices of the Buffalo Soldier*.

On the way to West Texas to fight Indians, William Watkins and his company stopped in San Antonio to lend a hand. They helped keep guard at the Alamo to keep the Indians away. Once to Fort Davis, both Branch and Watkins describe the dangerous encounters they have with the Indians through out that part of Texas. Their main role was to make sure travelers and stagecoaches were not being targeted by Indians. James Martin, of the 9th Cavalry, was in two battles with the Indians in the Guadalupe mountains. He received an honorable discharge in 1872. The William men had some more gruesome stories, as William Branch describes they had fought with

Comanche, Apache, and Cheyenne Indians during his service. Mr. Branch and Mr. Watkins both tell us the Cheyenne Indians were 7ft tall. During one of those battles, Mr. Watkins got shot in the wrist. After he is healed his white Sergeant has it in for him and gets him dishonorable discharged, which makes him unable to receive pension. Mr. Branch stays in and does two enlistments. After Mr. Branch leaves the Army, we find him coming to San Antonio to make a life. We also find James Martin heading to San Antonio after his Army discharge, as well as William Watkins coming back to San Antonio as well.

After serving in the Army, these three men needed to find work quick and they did. Using census records I was able to find out many of the hobs they had after the Army.⁴ Mr. Branch, for instance, worked for the railroad briefly as a brakeman, then was hired on as Porter/Laborer at Texas's first jewelry store called Bell Bro's Jewelry. He worked here from at least 1887 to 1903. The grandson of the owner of Bell Jewelry was Sam C. Bell, who was a mayor of San Antonio from 1917-1921 and Bexar County Treasurer for many years. I have a huge hunch that William Branch followed Watkins to San Antonio. In San Antonio, he becomes a driver for many years. One company he worked for was A.B. Frank Company, a wholesale dry-goods company located at 201 Navarro St. in San Antonio. Mr. Watkins drove for several wholesale dry-goods companies in San Antonio. Our last soldier, James Martin, had some interesting line of work as well. After the Army, he came to San Antonio and worked for SP railroad as a spiker. He helped build the railroads to Indianola, Cuero, and Corpus. He then helped drive cattle from South Texas to the Dakotas. He drove cattle for some big Texan men like John Lytle and Bill Sutton to name a few.

⁴ San Antonio city directory records, Bexar county death and marriage certificates



James Martin, 7/6/1937, Library of Congress

The easy life after slavery?

In these new jobs after slavery and after the Army, we do not see life getting easier for the six people I have mentioned. They had hardships were every they went, for instance having the Sargent of William Watkins getting him a dishonorable discharge without a proper hearing made collecting a military pension impossible. Watkins found work in different places around San Antonio. Once was a carman for SP railroad lines. Then worked for a couple wholesale companies like A.B. Frank Co and Chas. Davis Co. as a driver and porter. William Watkins did not always have a steady job or a place of his own to live. Using historical city directories in San Antonio, several of his address were boarding houses and rooms to rent from others. Like Watkins, James Martin also worked for SP railroad as a spiker, laying new tracks all around the San Antonio and Corpus Christi area. Martin also drove cattle for many years from Texas to the Dakotas, only age made him quit the tough job and work back in San Antonio.

What about their personal life do we know?

Martin Jackson spent most of his life in Victoria, TX with his wife Sarah, who he was married to for forty-five years. Together they had thirteen children and many more grandchildren. In his slave narrative he describes a lot of wisdom his father shared with him as emancipation was taking place. One quote was "A clear conscience opens bowels,

and when you have a guilty soul it ties you up and death will not for long desert you.”⁵

Jackson's life included working as a cook for his father during the civil war and working as a cook at Camp Leon Springs during World War I. In the 1920s Jackson moved in with his son Williams family, as William was off serving in World War I. Unlike Jackson, William Branch had four wives during his lifetime, but his son also served in World War I.

Other interesting facts gathered from the slave narratives is how religion was involved in slavery. Adeline Cunningham described her experience different from the others, she explained they had to sneak in the woods to pray and if they were heard the overseer would come and whip them. Going to church was not always a Sunday activity for slaves and holding a bible was forbidden due to the owners did not want the slaves learning how to read. Marriage ceremonies were held often between slaves as well. James H. Martin describes why they “jump the broom” at weddings in the 1860's.

What did San Antonio provide them?

By the 1930s we find all our ex-slaves living in San Antonio and relatively close to each other, especially Branch and Watkins who live together in 1937. For our three native Texans (Haywood, Cunningham, and Jackson), San Antonio was a familiar place where they had grown up around and it grew up around them. Maybe San Antonio was not where they thought they would end up but getting older we see these three moved to San Antonio to be with family that can help them take care of them. The three men from Virginia (Branch, Martin, and Watkins) could have ended up anywhere after their time in the service, but

⁵ "Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 16, Texas, Part 2, Easter-King," Library of Congress, <https://www.loc.gov/item/mesn162/>

they all ended up planting roots in San Antonio. They married, had children, and worked in the local community that all gave them their place. Branch and Watkins had a friendship that started in the Army, it is speculated one followed the other to San Antonio. In their old age they even ended up living together. A more interesting fact is that they also passed away within three weeks of each other.

The lessons we learned

These stories of these ex-slaves showed a history that we did not know too well in San Antonio. One incredible fact about them is they all lived beyond eight-six years of age (Cunningham 86, Watkins 91, Branch 91, Haywood 92, Jackson 93, and Martin 95), without the modern-day health understanding we have now. They had no proper health system available to them, they were not given easy jobs, they worked until they physical could not, they just an incredible will. A time where life gave them few roads to follow and with each road was just as difficult, they seemed to stun everyone.

The slave narratives gave us a platform for us to discover more history of the ex-slave community in San Antonio. Finding info and data from other sources has helped us build upon this history to help give us a better understanding of the life they had after slavery. These former slaves had gone through events that impacted their lives just like how in the year 2020 we are being impacted by a flu virus. Going through emancipation, Reconstruction, Indian wars, World War I, the Great Depression, and some World War II all are events of the past that had greatly impacted our social history. These individual life stories impact our social history of San Antonio, TX.

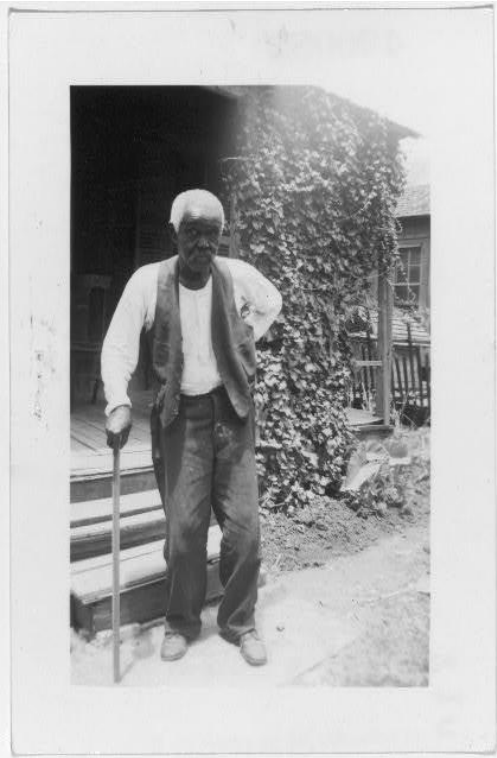


Figure 1 Felix Haywood, 7/6/1937, Library of Congress

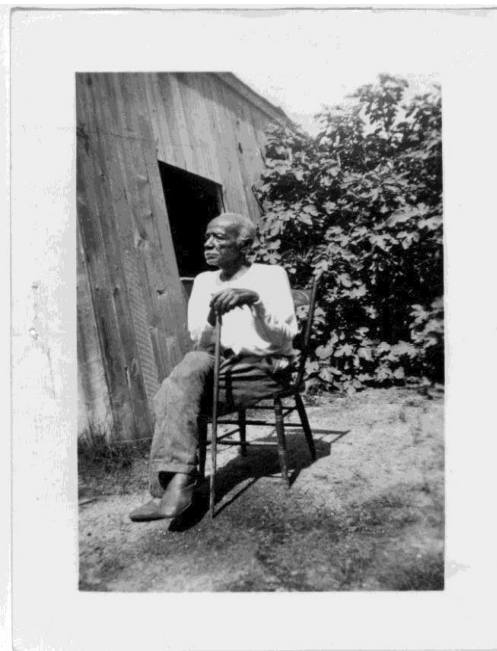


Figure 2 Martin Jackson, 7/6/1937, Library of Congress

The link below is an interactive map to where the six former slaves have lived in San Antonio. It is not a complete map of where they lived, but it gives a unique visual. It is also sorted by layers, where you can

view one person at a time or all of them at once. One discover, was learning that William Watkins and Martin Jackson lived at the same house but in different years.

<https://www.google.com/maps/d/drive?state=%7B%22ids%22%3A%5B%221aETS9TsmEC7kQeTW-83koq4SKbfq4RvW%22%5D%2C%22action%22%3A%22open%22%2C%22userId%22%3A%22106741804957880670360%22%7D&usp=sharing>

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