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SLAVERY IN THE ECONOMY OF
MATAGORDA COUNTY, TEXAS 1836-1860



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PRAIRIE VIEW AGRICULTURAL AND MECHANICAL COLLEGE STUDIES
IN HISTORY

Hal Robbins, Jr.

History of Slavery in Texas and the Southwest

Number II

A Thesis in History Submitted in Partial
Fulfillment of the Requirements
For the Degree of

Hal Robbins, Jr.

Master of Arts

"Slavery in the Economy of Matagorda County, Texas"

Graduate Division

of

Prairie View Agricultural and Mechanical College

Prairie View, Texas

The W. R. Banks Library
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Prairie View, Texas

SLAVERY IN THE ECONOMY OF MATAGORDA COUNTY, TEXAS

1836-1860

By

Hal Robbins, Jr.

A Thesis in History Submitted in Partial
Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in the

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Prairie View Agricultural and Mechanical College

Prairie View, Texas

August, 1952

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BIOGRAPHY

May City, Texas, present county seat of Matagorda County, Texas, is the birthplace of the author. After having received his elementary education in the Live Oak Elementary School of the said county, he was sent to [unclear] Texas, where he received his secondary education in the [unclear] High School of that city. Upon completion of high school, he entered [unclear] Agricultural College, [unclear] Texas.

APPROVED

Date

Signature

Field Represented

August 1, 1952 George B. Woolfolk History

BIOGRAPHY

Bay City, Texas, present county seat of Matagorda County, Texas, is the birthplace of the author. After having received his elementary education in the Live Oak Elementary School of the said county, he was sent to Beaumont, Texas, where he received his secondary education in the Charlton-Pollard High School of that city. Upon completion of high school, he entered Prairie View Agricultural and Mechanical College, from which he received the Bachelor of Arts Degree in August, 1947, and entered graduate school of that college in the Summer of 1950.

mention the following names of those whose contribution he considers priceless acquisitions.

Dr. George Rubie Woolfolk, professor of history, Prairie View Agricultural and Mechanical College; Mr. D. B. "Jack" Hinton, county clerk of Matagorda County and his entire office staff; Miss Daisy L. Bell, secretary of Matagorda County Chamber of Commerce; Mr. Carey Smith, owner, publisher, and editor of the Matagorda County Tribune; Attorney Arthur Harris, Jr. of the Harris and Harris law firm; Mr. Jack Pether, county civil engineer; W. R. Banks Library, Prairie View Agricultural and Mechanical College.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

In response to the author's request, he received friendly, courteous and invaluable aid in the preparation of this thesis.

It is only by such generous help as this, that a task of this nature can at least become, as nearly perfect, as a conscientious writer would wish, and the present writer to whom that adjective, can, at least, he hopes, be applied, expresses his warm gratitude for the assistance thus offered.

He wishes that he may, without insidiousness, mention the following names of those whose contribution he considers priceless acquisitions.

Dr. George Ruble Woolfolk, professor of history, Prairie View Agricultural and Mechanical College; Mr. D. B. "Jack" Hinton, county clerk of Matagorda County and his entire office staff; Miss Daisy L. Bell, secretary of Matagorda County Chamber of Commerce; Mr. Carey Smith, owner, publisher, and editor of the Matagorda County Tribune; Attorney Arthur Harris, Jr. of the Harris and Harris law firm; Mr. Jack Rother, county civil engineer; W. R. Banks Library, Prairie View Agricultural and Mechanical College.

DEDICATION

To

Pinkie Mae, my wife,

Hal Robbins, Sr., my father,

Catherine, II, my daughter,

and

Willie Gee, my nephew.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Narrating the history of the slave in the economy of Matagorda County, Texas, faces the problem of conflicting theories that have run the gamut of national, southern, and state, as well as county history, unbridled for many years. Many of these theories range from superstition to hearsays, with little or any factual supporting evidence. Out of a desire to learn the true perspective and a natural curiosity for seeking the truth, the writer takes on himself the task of digging into the mysteries of slavery in the county.

This study attempts to present philosophies and facts with a minimum use of technical terms and with scholarly impartiality. It promotes no theories, harbors no racial, social, or political bias and indulges in no prophecies. It is the author's belief that its best purpose is served by telling what happened and in so far as possible, how, when, where, and why it happened; thus leaving the reader to draw his own conclusions in matters of a controversial nature on the basis of the presentation of the evidence.

Problem

The problem of this study arises out of the

dissatisfaction of this writer with the explanation of the economic role of the slave in the plantation economy as set forth by students of the institution of slavery.¹ The labor-investment-prestige interpretation of the economic role of the Negro slave was set by U. B. Phillips and Frederick Bancroft. Phillips said that "the economic virtues of slavery lay wholly in its making labor mobile, regular and secure;" and Bancroft's classic comment, "mortgage their crop to buy more slaves to make more cotton to buy more slaves" has slipped easily into the economic thinking on the institution. This type of approach admits that the slave has a value secondary to that of land, and that some of the motives that entered into his acquisition and retention were not economic at all. Indeed, the labor thesis becomes extremely difficult to understand in light of the fact that the literature insists that the slave was an undependable worker, could be lost through sickness or flight, was difficult to obtain, and was a risky investment. One begins to wonder why the planter bothered with so precarious a labor supply. A new economic answer seems to lie elsewhere.

¹Frederick Bancroft, Slave Trading in the Old South, (Baltimore, 1931) pp. 343-47; Ralph B. Flanders, Plantation Slavery in Georgia (Chapel Hill, 1933) pp. 213-14; U. B. Phillips, American Negro Slavery (New York, 1929) p. 395; Lewis C. Grey, The History of Agriculture in the Southern United States to 1860 Volume I (New York, 1941) pp. 470-74; William B. Hesseltine, A History of the South, 1607-1906, (New York, 1936) p. 539.

Purpose

To provide a comprehensive presentation of the role of the Negro slave in the economy of Matagorda County, and the extent to which he penetrated social and semi-social phases of the county's economy is the expressed purpose of this thesis.

This study will seek to answer the following questions in an attempt to verify the function of slavery in the economy of the county:

1. What was the economic role of the slave in the acquisition of land?
2. What was the economic role of the slave in the productiveness of the land?
3. What was the economic role of the slave in probate action?
4. Did the slave have a role in social intercourse?
5. Did the slave have a role in the economics of civil life.

Scope

The range of this study is from the year of 1836, the year that the Mexican province of Texas became the Texas Republic. However, some dates, for the sake of clearness, precede this date.

From the initial beginning of the county under the Texas Republic, the county began keeping excellent and rather detailed records. The earliest records are written in long hand Spanish, but now have been translated and transcribed to the English language. Both, Spanish and English corresponding records are shelved together to facilitate comparison if necessary.

Termination of this study is the year of 1860, which denotes that period in the history of the American slave known as the beginning of the end.

The material begins with the year 1685, when the ill fated LaSalle missed the mouth of the Mississippi River and got lost in the Matagorda Bay.

Method

In an attempt to make certain that unity, preciseness, and coherence were not jeopardized, the development of this study by the topical method was considered more feasible. This decision was also justifiable on the grounds that the vast amounts of assorted materials tended to classify itself, without too much possibility of inserting the same material in several chapters unconsciously.

Sources

As to sources of materials used in this study, the

Matagorda County archives under the supervision of the office of the county clerk and the office of the Mata-gorda County Tribune in the county, along with the county chamber of commerce and the office of the county civil engineer accounted for the majority of primary information. Secondary sources of information were histories, special histories, and interviews.

Definition of Terms

To facilitate an understanding of this thesis and to enhance its interpretation, definitions of the following terms are given:

1. Deed--a conveyance.
2. Quit claim deed--conveyance protecting the buyer against the seller only.
3. Bill of sale--an account of goods sold.
4. Mortgage--conveyance upon condition.
5. Probate--official proof through court action.
6. Dowry--property a bride brings to husband in marriage.
7. Empresario--a contractor.
8. Amelioration--to improve conditions.
9. Specie--coined money.

Hypotheses

This writer accepts in part the thesis of other students of the institution of slavery that the economic importance of the slave lay in the fact that he was a source of labor and an avenue of investment which combined tended to add prestige to the plantation owner as well as provide him with a livelihood. However this writer's investigation in the records of Matagorda County, Texas, suggests that there might be an additional and far more significant economic role which the other students of the problem may have overlooked.

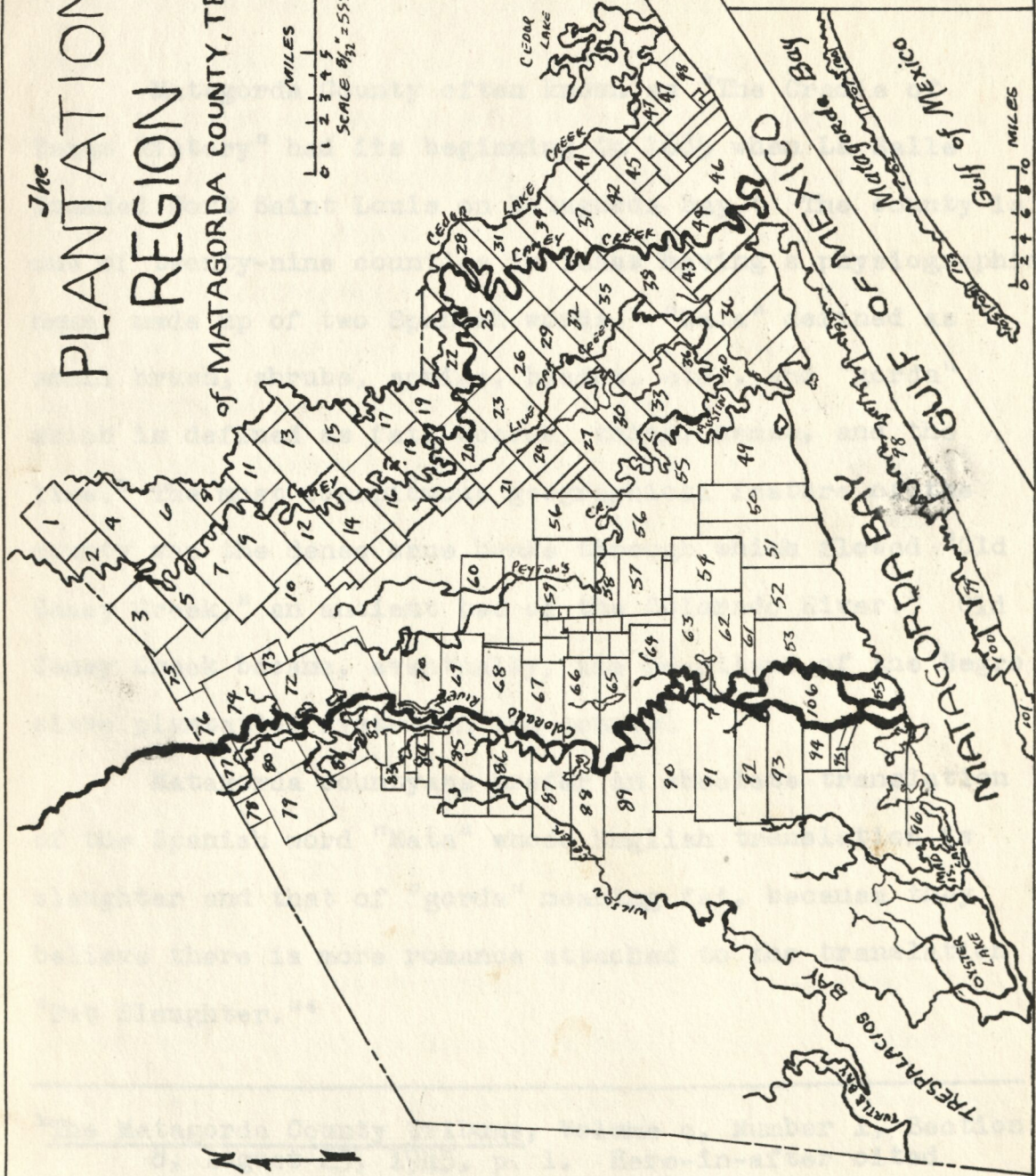
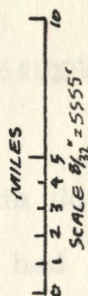
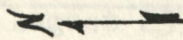
The writer is of the opinion that the Negro slave was the primary source of liquid capital in Matagorda County during the slave era. Since land, because of its abundance, was not readily convertible, since personal property and cattle carried such little valuation, and since speculation on staple crops could have been at best quite risky, the slave had the highest negotiable value and entered into all transactions recognizable at law.

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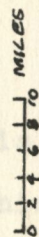
1 - L. Ramey	61 - Nelson	91 - Sheppard
2 - F. Woods	62 - Lesassier	92 - Criswell
3 - C. De Moss	63 - Dempsey	93 - Downer
4 - P. De Moss	64 - McFatland	94 - Eaton
5 - B. Rawls and O. Stout	65 - M. Williams	95 - Camon
6 - I. Foster	66 - J. More	96 - S. Fisher
7 - D. Rawls	67 - Smalley	97 - B. Wightman
8 - P. Austin	68 - J. Reese	98 - Duncan
9 - A. Rawls	69 - Bertrand	99 - S. Love
10 - Cummins	70 - E. Hall	100 - S. Fisher
11 - F. Pettus	71 - Bowman and Williams	101 - H. N. Grove
12 - Sojourner	72 - J. Betts	102 - Cook
13 - F. George	73 - Not Given	103 - Green
14 - T. M. Duke	74 - Fenton	104 - Alich
15 - Banis, Berry and Williams	75 - S. Larche	105 - Decrow
16 - Presit	76 - Smith and McKenzie	106 - Selkirk
17 - Nuckels	77 - Crowmover	
18 - Brotherton	78 - Bell	
19 - H. Williams	79 - Hurd	
20 - Wm. Rabb	80 - Grier	
21 - Fowler	81 - League	
22 - Jamison	82 - Cayoe	
23 - Wm. Rabb	83 - H. Harrison	
24 - Fry	84 - Bowman and Reese	
25 - Buckner	85 - Keller	
26 - S. Williams	86 - Cotton	
27 - Dwyer	87 - Cox	
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42 - Curtis		
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53 - Wightman		
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55 - S. F. Austin		
56 - S. R. Fisher		
57 - Jacques		
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59 - Peyton		
60 - J. Silvey		

The PLANTATION REGION

of MATAGORDA COUNTY, TEXAS



PROPERTY IS CODED
BY NUMBER
SEE LEGEND PAGE



CHAPTER II

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF MATAGORDA COUNTY, TEXAS

Matagorda County often known as "The Cradle of Texas History" had its beginning in 1685 when La Salle founded Fort Saint Louis on Matagorda Bay.¹ The county is one of twenty-nine counties in Texas having a physiographic name, made up of two Spanish words. "Mata" defined as small brush, shrubs, sprigs, blades, etc., and "gorda" which is defined as fat, coarse, thick, dense, and the like.² The most conspicuous geographical feature of the county was the dense cane brake through which flowed "Old Caney Creek," an ancient bed of the Colorado River.³ Old Caney Creek became, eventually, the heartland of the Negro slave plantation system in the county.

Matagorda countyans prefer an obsolete translation of the Spanish word "Mata" whose English translation is slaughter and that of "gorda" meaning fat, because they believe there is more romance attached to the translation "Fat Slaughter."⁴

¹The Matagorda County Tribune, Volume c, Number 1, Section 8, August 23, 1945, p. 1. Here-in-after cited Matagorda County Tribune (date).

²Ibid., p. 1.

³Bay City Lions Club, Historic Matagorda County, (Matagorda County Chamber of Commerce Bulletin, 1952), p. 3.

⁴Ibid., p. 3.

There are twelve distinct soils in the county varying from the non-productive to the most productive in Texas.⁵ The Pledger silt loam is probably the most productive in the county and is characterized by an average depth of fourteen inches and consists of a black or dark brown silty loam, containing large quantities of organic matter. Under a plow it breaks up into a mellow loamy seed bed which leaves nothing to be desired. This type is confined to Caney Creek. It is well adapted to cotton and under favorable conditions a high yield is produced. The Pledger silt loam was originally wooded, and some of it is yet uncleared. The native growth consists of the oak, hickory, and other hard woods, but the most characteristic tree on this soil and the one from which it took its local name of "peach land,"⁶ is the wild peach. It is the ideal corn soil of the county. The average yields are high reaching nearly forty bushels to the acre, while yields of sixty bushels or more have been secured by the best farmers.

Second is the Victoria loam. It varies considerably in texture, but is usually a dark brown to a black heavy loam. The soil is from eight to twelve inches deep and grades into a dark gray or dark clay to make it

⁵Matagorda County Tribune, August 23, 1945.

⁶Ibid., p. 1.

slightly sticky when wet, and compact when dry. This type has been formed by the admixture of fine sand with the heavy material which forms the Victoria clay. The topography is level to gently rolling or undulating. The greater part of this type is a grass covered prairie, although in places it supports a small growth of mesquites, chaparral, and cactus, A considerable portion of the Victoria loam is in cultivation. It is a strong soil and produces good yields of truck, cotton, corn, and other crops.

The soil of the Miller silt clay is a heavy reddish brown, with an average depth of fourteen inches. Both soil and subsoil contains numerous small snail shells, and from this fact the land is locally known as "shell land."⁷ Miller silt clay was deposited at the same time as the Miller silt loam, and consists of materials derived from the same source. The general surface of these alluvial lands is very nearly level. The former type lies some distance above the streams' beds slong which it is found, and is rarely ever overflowed. Growths on the uncleared land consist of heavy forests of hardwood, the oak, hickory, ash, pecan and the elm, with the usual growth of heavy underbrush. The cultivated land of this type is restricted to areas near the railroads. Cost of clearing the land

⁷Ibid., p. 1.

has kept this soil in forest to a great extent. Cotton, corn, and sugar are the principal crops. Miller silt loam in regards to texture and productiveness, is one of the most desirable soils in the county. To a depth of fourteen inches it is a reddish silt loam. Small snail shells are common throughout. The soil is of alluvial origin and consists of the sediments brought down by the Colorado River, from the red soils of the northwestern parts of the state. Considered in a broad way the Miller silt loam occupies a very gentle sloping plain, but almost on every farm of any size the surface is cut by the old meandering stream channels. Where uncultivated this type is covered with a heavy growth of oak, ash, pecan, and other trees. This type of soil was selected by early settlers of Texas and has been farmed under an extensive system since that time. Cotton, corn, and sugar cane have in the past been the general crops. The price of this soil has increased greatly in the last few years and now ranges from sixty to one hundred and fifty dollars per acre.^a

Trinity clay is the most extensive bottom land soil in the county. It consists of a black or a very dark gray clay, with an average depth of twelve inches. In some

^aIbid., p. 8.

places the surface is pitted with "hog wallow"⁹ in much the same way as the Victoria clay. The topography is generally level and the highest land is generally nearest the streams. It is a very strong and productive soil, especially adapted to cotton, corn, alfalfa, and sugar cane. Cotton was formerly the chief crop, sometimes yielding as high as a bale per acre.

Soil of the Lomalta clay consists of twelve or sixteen inches of dark drab clay. In the areas of most elevated positions the surface soil is nearly black. It has been formed by the disposition of material by streams in the shallow bays along the coast. As a result the drainage is poor and a large part of the area is somewhat marshy. This soil is confined to the bay shore. The characteristic native vegetation is salt grass. This type of soil is not cultivated, but is utilized for grazing and is best suited for this purpose under present conditions.

The Lomalta fine sandy loam consists of four to eighteen of gray very fine sandy loam. Occasional small mounds of sandy materials occur. The type has been formed by deposits of sandy materials over areas of the clay, either in shallow water or by the wind after elevation above the gulf. The surface of this area is level to slightly undulating. A very small part of this soil is in

⁹Ibid., p. 8.

cultivation. A large proportion of its area is still used for grazing.

Edna clay loam consists of a flat prairie soil of a grayish color, ranging in texture from a clay loam to a clay. This soil is plastic and sticky when wet and clods when plowed unless it is in the most favorable moisture conditions. This soil has been formed by the weathering of the noncalcareous clay deposits, which were laid down in the gulf waters during an earlier geographical age. It has a generally level or undulating surface, and is covered with a growth of prairie grass, principally sedge, while in low wet areas a legume called "coffee bean"¹⁰ is characteristic. A large portion of this type that is in cultivation is planted in rice, for which it is well adapted. Some portions of this type is known as "crawfish land,"¹¹ on account of the large number of crawfish that burrow through it. These pests are a source of much annoyance to the rice farmers, since they are constantly tunneling the levees that are placed to keep the water on the rice.

Next is the Edna consisting of ten or twelve inches of gray or dark gray loam or silty loam. Sometimes small mounds of fine sandy loam are found on the surface. A

¹⁰Ibid., p. 8.

¹¹Ibid., p. 8.

characteristic feature of this soil consists of numerous white spots which support little or no vegetation. Sometimes these spots are one fourth acre in extent, and was formed by the weathering of sedimentary calys of the coast prairie. Its topography is usually, nearly level, being prairie and covered with sedge and other grasses. Some of this type is cultivated, although the greater part is still used in pasture. When cultivated adequately, corn, cotton, and rice do fairly well. It is better adapted to rice growing than to any other crop.

One of the most extensive and important soils of the county is the Victoria clay, which is not to be confused with the Victoria loam mentioned earlier in this work. Owing to the numerous small depressions over the surface, it is locally known as "hog wallow land" or when the depression disappears under cultivation as "black land." The surface soil consists of eight to twelve inches of black clay. This soil shrinks and swells to a marked degree with changes in moisture content, and this causes large cracks to be formed during the dry weather. Victoria clay has been formed through weathering from calcareous prairie further north in Texas. The surface of this soil is almost level, although the gentle slop of the large bodies is toward the southeast. The greater portion of the Victoria clay is open prairie covered with a heavy

growth of grasses. This type is a very strong and productive soil. It is utilized for the growth of cotton, corn, and rice, but a great deal of it still lies in pastures. The yield in cotton, corn, and rice is high under ideal conditions.

In typical areas the Edna fine sandy loam consists of a gray to dark gray, fine sandy loam, with a depth ranging from eight to twenty inches in some extreme areas the surface soil contains a relatively large quantity of silt making it somewhat heavier than typical. In other areas the soil is rather light and loose. Small sand mounds are a characteristic feature. This soil is locally known as "prairie Sandy land." In the larger areas where it is silty and very poorly drained, it is often spoken of as "Crawfish land" or "run together sand." Edna fine sandy loam is rudimentary in origin, having been formed from deposits laid down in shallow gulf waters. Small sand mounds found over the surface have been formed by the action of the wind. Its topography is almost level throughout large areas. Near some of the larger streams it is slightly sloping and rolling. Nearly all of this soil exist as a broad flat prairie supporting a heavy growth of sedge grass. Near streams a fringe of forest consisting principally of live oak and post oak, extends out into the soil for distances ranging from one fourth to two or three miles. Occasionally near the coast small spots free from

vegetation are found. Although a very large portion is still used for pasture, there is a considerable amount of it in cultivation. The principal crops are cotton, corn, and sorghum. Small quantities of a number of other crops and small acreages of rice have been grown on areas of the heavier phases of this type.

The Galveston fine sand consists of a grayish white fine sand many feet deep. When not protected by vegetation, the surface soil is constantly shifting because of the wind that piles it up in dunes from a few feet to many feet high. The soil is composed largely of water-worn quartz fragments and fragments of sea shells. This sand has been washed by the waves of the gulf and blown by the wind into the dune like forms. The type is confined to the Matagorda peninsula. There are gently rolling areas of this sand, but usually it is in the form of large dunes. A considerable portion of the soil is without vegetation; although on the more level areas, a coarse grass is found. Grazing is the principal use to which this soil is adapted.

The total area of the county is 1141 square miles.¹² Letters of acceptance which Governor Martinez wrote to Moses Austin in 1821 referred to the fact that some of the immigrants might come by sea and called attention to a port on the Bay of San Benardo, which the Spanish govern-

¹²Texas Almanac, 1949-1950, p. 543.

ment had recently opened. Martinez advised Austin that this port be used as a place of entry.¹³ While Stephen F. Austin was in San Antonio, Governor Martinez gave him a formal letter under date of August 14, 1821, giving meager instructions as to the country Austin might explore. The letter stated that Austin should proceed to the Colorado River, examine the lands on its margins and inform Martinez of the place selected. The instruction indicated that in as much as the settlers may come by sea, they must be landed on the Bay of San Benardo where a port had been opened by the superior government. The letter continued giving Austin authority to take surroundings of the Colorado to its mouth. The inference was that this port was at the mouth of the Colorado River and the San Benardo Bay referred to must have meant Matagorda Bay.¹⁴

The first expedition of Austin's colonist by sea left New Orleans on the ill fated schooner "Lively." It sailed for Texas on the morning of November 22, 1821. The next day Austin left New Orleans by boat for Natchitoches to join the overland party with which he came on the Brazos.

The "Lively" had instructions to go to the mouth

¹³Clarence R. Wharton, The Republic of Texas, (C. C. Young Printing Company, Houston, 1922) p. 16.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 17.

of the Colorado River and into the mythical port of entry which had been so highly recommended by Governor Martinez. After many days of floundering in the gulf, the vessel unloaded its cargo and passengers at the mouth of the Brazos River in December, 1821, some days before Stephen F. Austin's overland group pitched camp one hundred and fifty miles up the same river. Some reports say the "Lively" then found the entrance to Colorado River and reported a fine harbor. Others differ. The disgorged passengers made their way up the river to what is now the town of Richmond, Texas on the Brazos River. The town may well lay claim to the honor of being the first settlement in Austin's colony, and the first Anglo-American town in Texas.¹⁵

This being true, had the schooner "Lively" not missed its original and initial destination, Matagorda County, perhaps, would have possessed the historic honor now held by Richmond.

Austin in the meantime left his overland colony on New Years Creek and came over to the Colorado River and went down the river to meet the schooner which never arrived. After waiting nearly three months he returned to his colonies on the Brazos and New Years Creek, then went to Mexico to have his land grant confirmed.

¹⁵Ibid., p. 25.

Austin's colonists in Texas, under Spanish authorities received land under the headright system.¹⁶ When Mexican authorities took control of the Spanish empire, distribution of land followed a similar pattern, whereby the empresario was granted a certain amount of land on the basis of the size of the settlement he expected to establish¹⁷ and the distribution of land was left up to him. Under the Mexicans the sale and purchase of slaves were forbidden, and children born of slaves were to be free when the age of fourteen years was reached.

It has been wisely stated that to know a place is to know its people.

Bills of sales, records of slaves sold in Matagorda County by Decrow, a descendant¹⁸ of one of Austin's original "Three Hundred" gave the best and most complete description¹⁹ of slaves sold by him, to be found in the records of the county archives.

¹⁶Under the headright system each head of a family was allowed 640 acres of land, his wife 320 acres, each child 160 acres and for each slave 80 acres. A single man twenty-one years old was allowed 640 acres. -- George P. Garrison, Texas, (Houghton-Mifflin Company, Riverside Press, Boston, 1903) p. 143.

¹⁷Spanish land measurements were as follows: Varra, 33 1/3 inches; Labor, 177 1/8 acres; 1 square league or sito 4428 402/1000 acres; 1 Hacienda = 5 sitios or 22,142 1/10 acres--Lewis W. Newton and Herbert P. Gambrell, History of Texas, (Southwest Press, Dallas, 1932) p. 84.

¹⁸Matagorda County Tribune, August 23, 1945.

¹⁹Matagorda County, Deed Record, G, Bill of Sale Number 2484, p. 250.

Bailey Hardeman, one of the largest plantation owners in the county during the slave era and one of the counties' most substantial men was also one of the signers of the Texas Declaration of Independence. Further information concerning him will be treated later in this study. In 1854, Frederick W. Robbins brought shell up the Colorado River with the help of Negro slaves, a distance of several miles, from near Dog Island, and built one of the queerest and strangest houses, not only in county history, but Texas as well; for it has never been known to be duplicated. It is located on the west bank of the Colorado River, four miles above its mouth and is known as Robbins' castle.²⁰ Constructed of concrete and lime, the lime being made of burnt oyster shell, it is sixty feet across, octagon shaped, two stories high with an observatory on top. Its outside walls are eighteen inches thick and the inside ones are twelve inches. There are eight rooms upstairs and eight down, with a spiral staircase in the center. The historic old mansion still stands.

Date of the earliest arrival of slaves in Matagorda County is not known. Illegal slave trading in and through Galveston scattered slaves throughout Texas years before the Austin enterprise.

Quite often one white man found wandering about

²⁰Matagorda County Tribune, August 23, 1945, Section 2, p. 2.

owned one or two slaves in what is now Matagorda County. Records indicate that a cargo of slaves came directly from Africa by way of Galveston and went to Richmond in the adjoining county. Every indication lends credence to the belief that small farmers who could not compete with the aristocratic planters in southeastern and southern United States drifted westward bringing with them a few slaves prior to Austin's advent in the county.

After the settlement of the county, the decreasing fertility of the soil in the original agricultural sections of the south and a fear that Union soldiers might free their slaves led large planters to drift west and into what is now Matagorda County fringing multitudes of Negro slaves, in the thirties, forties, and fifties.²¹ This brought the slave population to within one hundred and seven of doubling the white population in the county in the late fifties.

The great influx of slaves into the county began in 1841 when five planters from Alabama and elsewhere purchased land in the county and brought in an aggregate of two hundred Negro slaves. The cotton crop on "Old Caney Creek" and the Colorado River in the county was estimated at about 5,000 bales, about 150 per cent more than the

²¹Ibid., p. 2.

year before. The sugar industry began in 1838 and 1839 and by 1841, practically all the planters had patches of cane. Abram Sheppard, E. Rugley, and James B. Hawkins were among the largest growers in the county. James B. Hawkins built in the county one of the largest if not the largest sugar mills in Texas. Between 1836 and 1860 slave labor increased rapidly. Most of the planters who came from other states were men of wealth and brought from a dozen to a hundred slaves.²² Dr. Rhodes who arrived on the "Galveston" from Alabama in 1849 had about seventy Negroes on board. Two died during the voyage and four after the arrival. Their death was attributed to cholera, but Dr. Rhodes charged it to the exposed condition on the ship and brought suit against the ship company in the United States' court to recover the value of the slaves lost.

In Matagorda County a policy of amelioration was instituted prior to 1849 in the management of Negro slaves. The policy proved beneficial to both the planter and slave.²³ The plan provided a cook who prepared, well, the food for all the slaves. Two hours rest at noon was allowed. The results were less idleness; slaves worked better, were more healthier, looked better, were happier

²²Ibid., Section 9, p. 1.

²³Ibid., Section 9, p. 1.

and the length of time of good health for the overall picture was unprecedented. Cotton, the county's chief export made it necessary to make slaves last as long as possible, due to the inflated prices of Negro slaves in the forties and fifties in proportion to that of cotton. Because of fear of slave insurrection in Matagorda County the following ordinances were passed, April 19, 1850:²⁴

1. Be it ordained by the mayor and aldermen of Matagorda that the city constable be required to ring the bell at nine o'clock.
2. That all slaves or persons of color be required to be at their respective houses within fifteen minutes of the ringing of the bell.
3. That every slave and free person of color found in the street after nine o'clock at night without a pass, shall be punished with not more than twenty stripes nor less than five.
4. That the constable, in case he finds any number of male slaves to exceed three, together at any one house, who do not belong to the same person, and there should be any appearance of disorderly conduct, the constable shall be authorized to disperse

²⁴Ibid., Section 9, p. 1.

them; and in case of resistance he shall have power to summon assistance to carry into effect the provisions of this ordinance.

Approved: T. C. Stewart, Mayor

Attested: Jas. H. Selkirk, Secretary.

The table below gives the increase in number and value of slaves for the following years in Matagorda County:²⁵

Years	Number	Value
1850	1,208	\$ 500,420
1856	1,580	707,680
1859	1,810	1,012,750
1860	1,875	1,095,400
1861	2,114	1,163,100
1862	2,265	1,130,300

Fifty-three of Austin's original "Three Hundred" settled in Matagorda County.²⁶ These first settlers selected the cane land on "Old Caney Creek" because of its rich alluvial soil. All of them were very poor and depended upon each years crop for subsistence.

²⁵Ibid., Section 9, p. 1.

²⁶Ibid., Section 8, p. 4.

The first serious attempt at American Colonization in Matagorda came in March, 1822.²⁷ When the schooner "Only Son" arrived in the Matagorda Bay loaded with adventures seeking homes in Stephen F. Austin's new colony. A few days later another vessel arrived with more colonists. Along with the passengers both ships carried provisions, household effects and farming implements. The supplies were left under guard of five men, while the rest of the colonist went to stake out claims. Since there were no vehicles to carry the supplies inland. When the colonists returned to the mouth of the Colorado River they found that the Karankawas Indians had murdered the five guards and plundered the supplies. Captain Jessie Burnham and an armed body of men marched against the Indians and thus began hostilities that lasted until the Indians were finally driven from the county. On August 2, 1826, Austin granted the colonist's consent to establish the town of Matagorda and set aside a league of land for that purpose in 1827 the Mexican government granted a title to the land. In 1836 along with twenty three others, Matagorda county was not organized until 1837.²⁸ The town of Matagorda was

²⁷Miss Daisy L. Bell, "Bay Citians Have a Belief: Seek Here and Ye Shall Find," South Texas, September, 1951, South Texas Chamber of Commerce, Publisher, San Antonio, Texas.

²⁸Bay City Lions Club, Loc. Cit., p. 4.

incorporated by special act of the house and senate of the Texan Republic in 1838. Two years later a chamber of commerce, one of three in Texas at that time was organized in Matagorda the "capital" of the county the other two being at Houston and Galveston, and on June 26, 1860 the first step was taken to participate in the civil war.

Following the restoration of peace between the Texans and the Mexicans, the planters, farmers, and merchants returned to their plantations, farms, and stores and began the work of rehabilitation. The planters of Caney Creek and the cattlemen of the prairie built their homes in the town of Matagorda, many of them palacial in extent and appearance. Up to the time of the Civil war there was health and style in the county unexcelled by any part of the new empire. Men of limited means settled on rolling interior lands and became either stock raisers or small farmers. Those of more wealth made their homes in the thickly settled portions of the county and became cotton and sugar planters on the rich lands of the Colorado River or "Old Caney." They also ran the administration of the county. The major difficulty that confronted the county during its early history was that of transportation. "Old Caney Creek," the life blood of this agricultural empire, was located in the eastern section of the county, while, Matagorda, the metropolis, of towns, where all major business,

local, state, and national were transacted, was located in the extreme south. Overland transportation of farm products and supplies was practically impossible; therefore, these articles were boated down "Old Caney Creek" by slave labor where they were placed on lighters, carrying fifty to eighty bales of cotton to the harbor of Matagorda. This difficult method of marketing products raised in the eastern part of the county was not overcome until early in the eighteen fifties, between 1850 and 1855, when Major Abram Sheppard, who will be treated more fully, in the further development of this thesis, and one of the big planters on "Caney," conceived the plan of digging a canal across the isthmus at the mouth of Caney Creek, as a means of marketing his crops of cotton, sugar and molasses. He offered John McDonald four hundred head of cattle if he dug the canal. McDonald accepted the proposition and in a short time he made a channel one mile long, connecting "Old Caney" with the head of Matagorda Bay.

As early as 1841 the planter in Matagorda and especially those on the Matagorda Peninsula became interested in sea island cotton. The project was finally abandoned, but the county proved that the cotton could be grown along the Texas coast. In 1853, Texas grew 39,686 bales of sea island cotton, most of which was grown in and about Matagorda County. Many of the early settlers who settled on the prairie chose the Matagorda Peninsula

because of its healthful location and its natural barrier qualities that prevented the people's of the prairie's cattle from mingling with the countless numbers of wild cattle that roamed the grasslands. The peninsula is seventy-five miles long and from one to two miles wide. It connects the mainland at Caney Creek and comes to a focus at Decrow's point.

CHAPTER III

SLAVERY'S PERMEATION OF COUNTY'S BASIC ECONOMIC
TRANSACTIONS

Like the tentacles of a giant octopus, the institution of slavery, gradually entwined, engulfed, and enveloped the basic economic transactions of Matagorda County. From the acquisition of the land during the origin of the county to the outbreak of the Civil War, Negro slavery seemed destined to dominate the economy.

The debut of slavery's permeation had its origin in the headright system of acquiring lands. Under this system, as has been mentioned before in this work, for each slave, a planter received eighty acres of land per slave.

The fifty-three settlers of Austin's famous first "three hundred" settlers that came to Texas settled in Matagorda County and received grants of land, under the headright system ranging from one to two sitios. A planter under this system, receiving one sitio of land, perhaps, owned forty-two slaves approximately providing that his family consisted of a wife and one child. Land at this time was a drug on the market that could be acquired practically for the asking. The price range per acre was from twelve and one half cent to four dollars.

When Austin prepared to bring his second group of

colonists to Texas he was authorized to charge 12 1/2 cents per acre if he desired.¹ The purpose of this fee was to defray expenses incurred through colonization. Two ship loads of this group of settlers came from New Orleans, Louisiana and made their home in, what is now Matagorda County. The highest price recorded in the inventory records of the county archives was \$4.00 per acre. The land had been improved and was located on the bank of the Colorado River. Land located in the interior of the county could be bought at a price anywhere between these two price ranges. The general price level per acre centered around fifty cents and one dollar. If an argument ensued over the price, the buyer paid only twenty-five cents per acre, provided he was insistent..

Livestock was practically valueless.² Vast numbers of wild Spanish cattle roamed the prairies and timber lands unmolested. The most valuable product was the hide and tallow of the cattle. It was a common practice to kill the wild cattle for their hides and leave the carcass to be eaten by wolves or vultures.

¹Lewis W. Newton, Op. Cit., p. 81.

²One Spanish mare was valued at twenty-five dollars and twenty head of cattle at one hundred and twenty dollars.
Matagorda County, Inventory, Book A, p. 100.

As time went on and more settlers came in ordinances were eventually passed requiring all hides brought in for sale to be identified by a brand, for oftentimes, early settlers' cattle mixed with the wild herds on the open range.

Planters in the county suddenly became aware of the fact that the Negro slave carried a higher property valuation than any other item in the county's economy.³ A solution to the economic dilemma had been discovered.

Following the settlement of the land, agrarian pursuits formed the basis of existence, and in order to extract a livelihood from the soil capital in some liquid form was necessary. As a result of this urgency, the Negro slave, who tended the soil, found himself on the market as the chief item for sale of any appreciable value, changing owners quite frequently and sanctioned by a legitimate bill of sale. This legal devise was used in case of small sales, where small groups of slaves were involved in a sale, usually from one to five in the county. Its use denoted bargains that a planter casually walked into, casually made an on the spot deal, paid on the spot and closed the trade on the spot with a bill of sale written on any convenient writing material at hand.

³One Negro woman name Elay, age 28 years carried a property valuation of \$800, while the same planter's first rate cow and calf was valued at \$15.
Matagorda County, Inventory, Book A, p. 49.

Larger sales were sanctioned in the county by a warranty deed or a quit claim⁴ deed.

The method of mortgaging the crop to purchase supplies to make the crops was generally accepted policy during the early history of this agricultural empire. As is natural in most endeavors fallacies developed. Contemplations that had not been expected developed, characterized by the gruesome weapon "crop-failure." Both farmer and financier found themselves in an almost inextricable predicament. The financier or backer received no compensation and the planter had to accept bankruptcy as his lot. Whatever possession the planter owned, including his slaves were sold out at sheriff-sale. The purpose was twofold. First, the proceed from the sale was applied on the debts incurred and the farmer was declared legally bankrupt; hence, he was then free from all encroachments of farmer debts and could start life again debt free. At sheriff-sale, slaves sold, usually for only a small fraction of their purchase price.⁵ Outright sales, in nearly all cases examined in the county archives, generally,

⁴Sydon, et al, sold to Charles Towers seventeen Negro Slaves and gave a quit claim deed.
Matagorda County, Deed Record, Book G, p. 371.

⁵One lot of seven slaves whose ages were 24, 45, 12, 10, 50, 31, and 12 years were sold at sheriff-sale for \$13 each on \$91 for the lot.
Matagorda County, Deed Record, I, p. 317.

brought the market price of slaves for the particular period. A policy of mortgaging the slaves was later adopted, a method that, in case of failure, left only the farmer in a precarious condition.

An examination of authorities on slavery in the United States revealed this procedure was somewhat unorthodox in contrast with existing standards. There is evidence of mortgages on plantations and the property, including the slaves, but the county archives of Matagorda County gives evidence of wholesale mortgaging of slaves separately. Often slaves were purchased on time. In order to protect the vendor and vendee, a deed of trust⁶ was given by the buyer to the seller. When the buyer had completed payment in full the seller then gave him a deed of relinquishment denoting that he, the seller, had relinquished all claims to the property.

Slaves were transferred through stipulation in wills in many cases examined. These wills, after the death of the one responsible for them being written, through probate action of the court, became legal and slaves were divided as directed, the same as other property. The disposition of the slave and, too, their possibility of

⁶Samuel Boggess gave to A. C. Horton a deed of Trust for fifteen Negro slaves bought at a cost of \$5,157.84. The rate of interest on the unpaid balance was 12% per annum. Matagorda County, Deed Record, Book, I, p. 584.

earnings figured in the action of administrators of wills or trustees of property.⁷

An analysis of business transaction, in which the Negro slave in Matagorda County was involved, was numerous and varied. Following are phases examined:

Mortgage

Twenty-one mortgages to Negro slaves were found recorded in the county archives. In an agrarian economy it was necessary for the planter to provide himself with a source of, either, cash money⁸ or its equivalent. The equivalent was, usually, an agreement with a merchant or a company to furnish the supplies needed to carry him from one year to another until his crop had been harvested and sold. The proceeds therefrom was used to pay the debt. Sometimes it was adequate, sometimes inadequate. Rarely was there enough left over to suffice until the next crop had been made.

To cope with this unfortunate situation, various credit instruments were used, the most important being the mortgage. Its use required collateral. Studies reveal

⁷Trustees or guardians of minor heirs' property gave a receipt of guardianship of slave property.
Matagorda County, Probate Record, Book C, p. 137.

⁸D. Hardeman mortgaged thirteen Negro slaves to Nelson Clements and Company for \$10,000 cash in hand paid.
Matagorda County, Deed Record, Book I, p. 485.

that the usual collateral in the slave system in the United States was the prospective crop, but the county archives of Matagorda County revealed the slaves were put up for collateral.

Nineteen of the total number of mortgages were between two individuals. The remaining two were between one individual and a company.

The answer seems to lie in the fact that small deals were taken care of in the county, but in cases involving huge amounts, large outside financing firms were contacted.

Examples of small and large transactions are as follows:

-Small-

Mortgage number 4072, February 2, 1856. William F. Wilson to William S. Baker's estate the following named Negro slave girl: Malinda. Amount \$1150.^e

-Large-

Mortgage number 4404, April 16, 1858. Abram Shepard and Elizabeth E. Powell to T. W. Pierce of Boston, Massachusetts the following named Negro slaves:

Blacksmith Jim,	Age 35	Fatuma	Age 30
Jack	Age 30	Albert	Age 24

^eMatagorda County, Deed Record, I, p. 277.

Mobady	Age 28	Manuel	Age 20
Phillis	Age 35	Emily	Age 12
Katy	Age 25	Remus	Age 27
Bob	Age 35	Mars	Age 18
Effen	Age 32	Rose	Age 12
Susan	Age 15	Colyabout	Age 35
Carter	Age 22	Dennis	Age 15
Addison	Age 25	Odu	Age 30
Georgian	Age 15	Henry	Age 20
Bolen	Age 30	Solomon	Age 13
Ben	Age 50	Dafnawa	Age 33
Yellow Bunnell	Age 20	Hall	Age 25

Amount \$15,000, to be paid at counting room of Pierce and Bacon, city of Boston, Massachusetts, June 5, 1859.¹⁰ The William S. Baker estate, in Matagorda County, held eight of the twenty-one Mortgages, more than any other person or business involved.

Small group mortgages involving from two to five slaves were dominant. The cream of the planter's slaves was put up for collateral. The most acceptable ages ranged from nineteen to thirty-five years. An examination of the illustration of a large mortgage will justify this contention. Of the total twenty eight slaves numerated, seven are below the age of nineteen, the youngest being Rose, a girl of twelve. Above thirty-five was only one Negro slave

¹⁰Matagorda County, Deed Record, I, p. 577.

man named Ben, fifty years old. He was possibly thrown in to make up a certain number or perhaps, possessed some special skill and may be was just put in for good measure.

Female slaves, in the writer's opinion, had the edge on males. In all small transactions where an individual slave was involved, and in the small groups, women and girls dominated. In the medium groups involving from six to ten, males and females were about equally distributed; but, in large group mortgages, males made up, possibly two-thirds of all groups.

In all cases examined, due consideration was given the slave family, whether it was a family composed of father, mother, and child or children, or whether it was mother and child or children. This is indicative that man must have been more reliable if his family was kept together, that is he was a better business risk.¹¹ Small group mortgages and the individual slave deals, suggest that females were more desirable, perhaps, because of possibilities of serving to replenish the dwindling slave population.

The large number of families, composed of a slave mother and her children indicates that fathers were sold away from the father type family, but the mother and child was kept together until the child reached, the age of

¹¹Mary Bradshaw mortgaged to William S. Baker one Negro slave, Robert and Lucia, his wife, for \$2600. Matagorda County, Deed Record, Book, I, p. 282.

about ten years of age. However, a mortgage, in all instances, does not provide for a separation; it is only indicative of the fact provided a slave owner could not meet his obligations. Bills of sales will best illustrate the separation of Negro slave families and will be treated later in this study. Some planters received cash in hand,¹² while others were furnished the equivalent in supplies.¹³ Interest rates ranged from ten to twelve per cent per annum. While better developed in "Bills of Sale," there is some indication that a certain soundness of property was requisite in these transactions.¹⁴

-Bills of Sales-

Of the vast number of transactions that transpired, the bills of sales were the most interesting. Through this instrument, the best word picture of slavery in its economic sphere in the annals of Matagorda County's history, was revealed. Unlike the mortgage, the bill of sale protected slave or human merchandise from confiscation and

¹²D. Hardeman mortgaged to Nelson Clements and Company 13 Negro slaves for \$10,000 in hand paid. Matagorda County, Deed Record, Book I, p. 485.

¹³Ira Lewis mortgaged to Charles Powers two Negro men, Bill, 25 years old and Dick, 19 years of age for \$1200 worth of supplies furnished the Lewis and Ludlow Plantation. Matagorda County, Deed Record, Book, G, p. 37.

¹⁴For \$500 Wm. B. Royall to Edward A. Pearson one Negro boy slave named Jacob, aged ten, dark complexion, sound in body and mind. Matagorda County Deed Record, Book, I, p. 544.

provided the answer as to why it was in the buyer's possession.

Forty bills of sales of Negro slaves sold, were examined in the archives of the county. The vast majority of the sales were between companies and plantations and between individuals and plantations. Whenever a slave was needed for some specific purpose, the buyer went to a plantation and purchased one. Some of the names, famous in the county, that were connected with the Negro slave plantation history, during its heyday as revealed by the records were as follows:

Bowie, Sheppard, Hardeman, Hawkins, and Thompson.

Many of the sales of slaves were purely speculative. The best example of this was the purchase of fifty-six Negro slaves at a sheriff-sale for \$1700. July 4, 1860 by J. Bowie who sold them the same day to Eleanor Sheppard for \$3,000.¹⁵

The amount of money involved in the bills of sales ranged from \$350, for a Negro man slave named Ned, aged forty-five to \$11,000, paid for 17 Negro slaves. Most of the sales were in the range of \$1500 and \$2000. As was true for mortgages, small groups of two to five dominated the sales, with individual sales second, medium groups of

¹⁵Bill of Sale number 4738, p. 319.
Matagorda County, Deed Record, J.

six to ten, third, and large group, fourth.

Individual sales were in most cases women. Authorities examined leads one to believe that the male slave were most desirable in business transactions, but unless there is a fallacy in the sales records of the Matagorda County archives, the generally accepted opinion, must be rejected until further evidence can be produced. Authorities would have one to believe that female slaves sold for three-fourths of the price of males of corresponding age, and boys and girls likewise.¹⁶ The highest price received for any male slave of any age, of the forty bills of sales examined was \$1000, the highest price paid for a Negro slave of any sex, male, or female, was \$1400, and that was for a nineteen year old black slave girl. As usual the family status was respected, especially where mother and child or children were involved.

-Bill of Sale-

The sale was surrounded by certain qualification. The merchandise had to be sound property. That is its physical condition had to be good. There were possibilities that a slave might have been hurt at some time or affected by some strange malady that might render him useless upon

¹⁶Women usually sold for three-fourths the price of men and boys of corresponding ages.

Francis Butler Sinkins, The South Old and New,
(Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1949) p. 43.

consummation of a trade. Future heirs of the slave were mortgaged with the parents. This told the mortgagee that the collateral was capable of increasing. Also the property had to be free from all incumbrances. Sometimes property could have been acquired through illegal channels or perhaps a lien against it could be held by someone else. Should these stipulations not be made before hand, and arise later, the investor had lost provided the slave holder's economic endeavor failed.

The slave was not desirable if vicious and his occupation was stated in some instances, also his ability to achieve.

-Example-

Bill of sale number 2484, March, 1848.

Elijah Decrow to George Burkhart, Jr., one Negro woman named Rachel, age 23 years and her female child, Mary, age 3 years, both slaves for life. Warrented that Rachel is free from all and every disease whatsoever and also from all vicious habits, and to be a good home servant in every respect,¹⁷ and of ordinary intellectual capacity of slaves.

The terms indicated that all the sales were cash. Most bill of sales mentioned the amount of money involved.

¹⁷Matagorda County Deed Record, G, p. 250.

Table showing the Relationship of Age, Sex, and Price as indicated by bills of sales records:

No.	Age	Sex	Price
1	14	F	\$ 575
1	15	F	900
1	19	F	1400
1	24 or 25	F	1200
1	28	F	1000
1	35	F	350

Table showing the Relationship of Age, Sex, and Price as indicated by bills of sales records:

No.	Age	Sex	Price
1	10	M	\$ 500
1	11	M	700
1	19	M	1000
1	22	M	800
1	35	M	800
1	40	M	486.35

-Sheriff Sales-

Should a planter meet with misfortune, his slaves were sold a public auction, by means of sheriff sale, to the highest bidder. The slaves were usually sold in lots numbering less than a dozen. Often the average price per slave regardless of age, sex, physical condition was as low as \$13.00¹⁸ and as high as \$550, approximately.¹⁹

In small transactions involving one or two slaves the instrument verifying the legal exchange was the bill of sale. Its use in this instance was applied the same as in livestock deals. But in larger transactions involving a score or more of slaves the warranty deed was used and the slave property was treated as if the transaction involved real estate.

-Deed-

Deeds gave rather meager descriptions of slave property. Seven were found among the archives. Wherever the deed was used in slave trades, sums of money from \$1143 to \$50,000 were involved, and Abram Sheppard paid the

¹⁸Matagorda County, Deed Record, Book, I, Sheriff Sale Number 4737, p. 317.

¹⁹Ibid., Book, G, Sheriff Sale Number 2311, p. 107.

\$50,000 to Samuel G. Powell for 61 Negro slaves.²⁰

-Deed of Trust-

This type of deed was given when partial payment was made on slaves. It was given by the vendee to the vendor until full payment was completed.

The big plantation owners such as D. Hardeman were the participants in the majority of the eight records examined. The smallest sum involved was \$100 and the greatest was \$23,000 which Abram Sheppard paid to Julius Kaufman as down payment on seventy-two Negro slaves.²¹

G. J. Copeland of the county bought of Robert Mills and David Mills of Galveston a family of four slaves and received a deed of trust. The unpaid balance of the \$1871.68 carried an interest rate of 10 per cent per annum. A Refugio County dealer bought two Negro men, ages 26 and 24, two Negro women (yellow) ages 21 and 22 and plantation for \$8,000 and received a deed of trust. A buyer from Matagorda County purchased from a merchant in Fayette County seven slaves on terms, giving the deed of trust. This indicates its use was prevalent wherever deals in or outside the county transpired not involving cash payments.

²⁰Ibid., Book, C, Deed number 2889, p. 580.

²¹Ibid., Book, J, Deed of Trust number 4519, p. 104.

-Deed of Relinquishment-

One deed of this kind was found in the archives. In this case any rights that one possessed in property with someone else is relinquished through sale or gift, as an example D. E. E. Braman gave up all rights to slaves he and his wife possessed together.²²

-Quit Claim Deed-

This deed protects the buyer only from the seller, but not from heirs or any one else. One deed of this nature appeared in the records. Charles Tower of Matagorda County bought of G. S. Sydon, et al, seventeen Negro slaves,²³ with ages ranging from thirty years down to five years. Immediately after the merchandise in this case had been paid for, someone could have put in a claim on the property, and possibly received compensation or the property.

Another, and the last type of deed found, known as the gift deed, will be discussed in Chapter IV.

The complex Negro slave institution in Matagorda County, as elsewhere in the nation, rested upon the brawny arms of the Negro, that cared for his master's children, protected his home, tilled the soil which in many instances

²²Ibid., Book, J, Deed of Relinquishment number 4488, p.71.

²³Ibid., Book, G, Quit Claim Deed, number 2639, p. 371.

he helped to acquire through the headright system, made the harvest, and above all furnished a controlled, provisioned, and mobile labor supply.²⁴ It is evident that much of the business of financing the operation of the plantation system would have been impossible had it not been possible to use the slave as collateral or merchandise.

²⁴Francis Butler Simpkins, Op. Cit., p. 50.

CHAPTER IV

REVELATIONS OF COUNTY INVENTORY RECORDS

Sanction of the writer's contention in the hypothesis of this work, stating his belief, that the Negro slave was the primary source of liquid capital, in Matagorda County and that land, the basis and foundation of all agrarian economies, was practically without value, is buttressed substantially by a close examination of the inventory records of the county archives. A comprehensive look at these records reveal, that the Negro slave was of prime importance. The listed assets of slave owners, ranged from a bottle of Spanish wine to the fabulous plantation of the planter aristocracy. The slave gave economic color to the possessions, no matter what may have been the social level of his master, in the agrarian hierarchy.

Interesting to note was the fact that the Negro slave carried a higher property valuation, than any other single item listed,¹ including works of Shakespeare and other notable collections. His valuation even exceeded that of the county pioneer's trusty rifle, upon which his very life depended in the midst of the hostile Karankawa

¹Matagorda County, Inventory, Book, A, pp. 49, 100.

Indians. An acre of improved black land bordering the banks of "Old Caney Creek," so important in the agricultural development of the county, ancient and modern, failed, by far, to measure up to the property valuation, placed upon the Negro slave. The following excerpts from the county inventory records will enhance the chance of gleaning a more comprehensive picture of the writer's argument:

-First-²

Charles P. Thompson

Inventory of property, January 27, 1838.

1 Negro boy Jim	\$ 700
1 Spanish mare	25
20 head of cattle	120
1476 acres of land, headright to	
1/3 league of land	370.25
Total assets	\$1,215.25

-Second-³

Elisha Davis

Inventory of property, April 6, 1837.

1 Negro woman name Elay, Age 28 years	\$ 800
1 First rate cow and calf	15

²Ibid., p. 100.

³Ibid., p. 49.

1 Negro boy name Charles, age 14 years	750
1 Negro boy name Tom, age 7 years	275
1 Negro woman name Mary Ann, age 45 years	475
1 Negro boy name Phil, age 7 years	400
1 Negro man name Talbot age 21 run off)	
1 Negro man name Brutus, age 25 run off)	(as such of no value
1 Negro woman name Eaker, age 22 years	750
1 Negro boy name Frank, age 6 years	350
Miscellaneous property	5,421.65
Total assets	\$9,236.65

A knowledge may be obtained, from the table that follows, of the ratio of slave valuation to that of total property valuation, taken from twenty-two inventories of deceased persons' property among whose possessions were Negro slaves:⁴

-Table-

Name of person	Date	Slave Valuation	Total Property Valuation
Thomas Woolridge	5/4/1835	\$ 2,400	\$ 4,587.15
Bailey Hardeman	2/28/1837	5,425	11,598.50
Elisha Davis	4/6/1837	3,815	9,236.65
James U. House	6/17/1837	800	6,882.50
Gates Kemp	12/27/1837	2,300	2,370.00
Charles P. Thompson	1/27/1838	700	1,215.25

-Table-4

Name of person	Date	Slave Valuation	Total Property Valuation
David Bright	4/2/1838	\$ 3,100	\$ 3,994.81
George Nicholas	7/31/1838	6,450	13,892.00
C. H. Osborne	12/11/1838	1,000	1,832.50
Jane G. Conner	2/26/1839	1,200	1,782.86
James W. Mason	3/11/1839	1 Negro man price unknown	4,388.50
G. Rhodes Fisher	4/4/1839	1,000	107,132.12
John G. Davenport	11/8/1839	1,100	1,800.00
James Moore	10/23/1840	6,262.50	17,976.00
Edward S. Holmes	6/10/1841	800	12,655.50
Jemima Johnson	8/20/1842	2,100	7,514.00
Elisha Hall	11/25/1842	1,600	7,510.00
Turner Barnes	12/5/1842	1,850	8,373.50
Isham Phillips	3/25/1843	5,325	26,014.00
George Jefferson	4/25/1843	1,250	2,147.00

Inventories were made of deceased persons' property for several reasons. Early history of the county indicate

⁴Matagorda County, Inventory, Book A, p. 24;

Ibid., p. 9; Ibid., p. 49; Ibid., p. 142;
Ibid., p. 11; Ibid., p. 14; Ibid., p. 100;
Ibid., p. 99; Ibid., p. 82; Ibid., p. 175;
Ibid., p. 242; Ibid., p. 215; Ibid., p. 241;
Ibid., p. 204; Ibid., p. 338; Ibid., p. 365;
Ibid., p. 380; Ibid., p. 412; Ibid., p. 414;
Ibid., p. 415; Ibid., p. 429; Ibid., p. 431.

that there was a lack of personnel and equipment available, for keeping adequate records in the county offices. This being true, upon the death of a citizen, the court appointed someone to make the inventory. These inventories aided in the settlement of claims, division of property as well as serving to keep tab on the population. Today the state of efficiency in record keeping in the county's offices has reached a point in organization; whereby, a complete inventory of a person's property, within the county, can be obtained in a reasonably short while and with a minimum of effort.

An ordinance in the early history of Matagorda County, required of every male white citizen twenty-one years of age and older, also of Negro slaves, five days of free labor each year.⁵ This work was for the purpose of maintaining the county's roads.

On a specified date each year the county commissioners court would meet and issue an order, stating who and what sections of the road would be worked by certain designated groups. As is true today, the county was divided into precincts. An overseer was appointed to give instruction and serve as general manager of the operation. Should those required to work, be not available, meant that each in

⁵Matagorda County, Court Minutes, Book A, p. 45.

that category would have to do ten days free work on the road next year.

Labor was recruited from the local communities, so far as the white citizens were concerned. Slaves were requisitioned from nearby plantations and estates. Often the overseer from an estate, and his slave charges were called upon to render their services at the same time.⁶ If in the road overseer's judgment, the labor force designated to perform a certain task proved to be inadequate, any and all other persons legally and liable, to work on the road could be summoned.

Historic Matagorda County's social system, as testified to by the records, was composed of gentlemen with chivalric manners, and superb political leadership, and of lordly ladies possessed with elegant social grace. Inevitably the occasion will arise, in society that demands the giving and exchanging of gifts. In an agrarian society, as in any other societies, the puzzle is, what is appropriate to be given. The final decision is to give, following that age old custom of choice and selection of gifts, which goes on to say, the best is not good enough for my friends.

During the slave era in Matagorda County, the Negro

⁶Ibid., p. 45.

slave, being the only item of property of any major worth, served the purpose of being the most commonly exchanged gift. When a slave was given for a gift, a deed of gift was given with him. The sum involved ranged any where from one dollar to one hundred dollars.⁷ In some cases no money was involved. This deed differed very little from any other deed. It usually gave as reason for the gift "a natural love and affection."⁸ Like the mortgage, which usually demanded the best of the slave stock, the gift deed gave irrefutable descriptions of the best being given, even though it was optional with the slave owner. Children whose ages ranged from eight years up were quite often given as gifts. Full families composed of father, mother, and children were sometimes given. Mother and child families were second in the frequency of those given. In order to enhance an understanding of gift deed, the following example gives the generally followed pattern:

-Example-

Deed of gift number 3703, February 8, 1854, Abram Sheppard to Elizabeth Powell, because of a natural love and affection and in consideration of one dollar in hand paid

⁷Matagorda County, Deed Record, Book H, Gift deed number 3703, p. 602.

⁸Ibid., p. 602.

a mulatto girl named Ellen, age 9 years and slave for life.⁹

Probate records show that Negro slaves were involved in wills. His status here as elsewhere was that of property. The will possessed features, in some instances, resembling those of medieval serfdom. In one case observed the slave was to remain with the estate. Like the serf, he was somewhat attached to the land, but not necessarily sold with it. Whether or not he was sold with the soil was optional with the owner. In the division of estates as stipulated in wills, such property as slaves should be divided in kind; therefore a value was placed upon each by an appraiser appointed by the court, and thus the Negro slave property was divided.¹⁰

Even the sacredness of marriage was not escaped by the spectre of the Negro slave. Before taking the marriage vows, a contract was drawn up between the man and woman as to what procedure would be followed in regards to property brought into the union by the wife. This property practice, copied from the "Old English Dowry" system, tended to forestall needless lawsuits in case of separation and added to the social prestige of families involved.

⁹Matagorda County, Deed Record, Book H, p. 602.

¹⁰Matagorda County, Probate Records, Book O, p. 5.

One interesting case on record in the Matagorda County archive is that involving a marriage contract between John Watson of Columbus, Georgia, and Elouisa Marie of Gadsen in the territory of Florida, December 9, 1844. Fourteen Negro slaves, belonging to the lady were listed in the contract along with other property.¹¹ After marriage the couple came to Texas and settled in Matagorda County where the contract was recorded, December 4, 1848.

¹¹Matagorda County, Deed Record, Book, G, Contract number 2717, p. 437.

CHAPTER V

EVALUATION OF THE STUDY

On the basis of evidence presented in this thesis, the Negro slave in Matagorda County served a twofold purpose. He served the basic purpose of a labor force; and, on the basis of a critical study of the county archives, undeniable evidence of his negotiable importance in the county's early agrarian economy cannot be overlooked. If cash money was needed, the slave was sold; if collateral was required in order to borrow money, the slave was mortgaged; should the planter be fortunate enough to possess a surplus of slaves, those in excess of his immediate needs were hired out to someone less fortunate desiring slave labor, usually, for a period not exceeding one year. Should social necessities demand a gift, the slave served the purpose; if a will was made, property stipulations included the slave, and when marriage vows were taken, the Negro slave dominated the dowry system. Each year, in the county, when white male citizens twenty-one years old and above were required to give five days of free labor, each, in the maintenance of county roads, the slave did likewise.

In the light of these findings, the author is convinced, that besides serving the purpose of a free, conditioned, mobile, and available labor force, the Negro slave in Matagorda County, Texas, was a primary source of liquid capital, during the rise and development of the slave plantation era.

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