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**AFRICAN AMERICAN FUGITIVE SLAVES AND
FREEMEN IN MATAMOROS, TAMAULIPAS,
1820-1865**

A Thesis

by

JOHN C. GASSNER

**Submitted to the Graduate School of the
University of Texas-Pan American
In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of**

MASTER OF ARTS

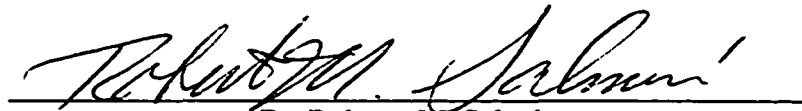
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AND FREEMEN IN MATAMOROS TAMAULIPAS,
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ABSTRACT

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In the years leading up to the American Civil War, northeastern Mexico became a destination for fugitive slaves and African American freemen seeking refuge from the oppressive conditions caused by the expansion of the slave-based cotton economy in the southern United States and Texas. The geographic position of Matamoros, as well as social, economic and political changes in Mexico and the United States, made it one of the main destinations for African American emigrants leaving the Texas and other parts of the United States. This thesis examines the factors that caused different elements of African American fugitives slaves and freemen to seek refuge in Matamoros. It describes their journey to northeastern Mexico and the conditions they found there.

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CHAPTER I.

INTRODUCTION

Between 1820 and 1865, a number of African Americans fleeing from slavery and other oppressive conditions sought refuge in northeastern Mexico. By the end of the American Civil War, substantial numbers of African Americans were living in or near the city of Matamoros in Tamaulipas, Mexico or had passed through the city on their way to other parts of the country. The African Americans that immigrated from Texas, Indian Territory and the southern United States to northeastern Mexico during these years consisted of individuals from different areas and backgrounds, but they all shared common motives for immigrating to Mexico. The growth of the institution of slavery in the southern United States and Texas in the early 19th century had created intolerable conditions, not only for enslaved African Americans, but for free blacks as well. Mexico provided a sanctuary for African Americans fleeing slavery and the accompanying oppressive conditions that it had brought on. Although fugitive slaves and immigrating free blacks could reach Mexico by traveling overland or by sea and the distance they had to travel was not great, the journey was often dangerous and difficult. For those in Texas the journey might have lasted days or weeks, but for those traveling from as far away as the Atlantic seaboard states, the journey could have taken months.

Settlers accompanying Stephen F. Austin brought slaves to the Spanish province of Texas as early as 1821. Although Mexico had abolished slavery early in their fight for independence from Spain, slaves continued to be brought into Mexican Texas, not only

from the southern United States, but also from Cuba and directly from Africa.¹ While the majority of African Americans entering Mexico from Texas and the southern United States were probably slaves escaping from the extensive cotton and sugar plantations that dominated the agricultural economy of that region, elements of African Americans that had been associated with American Indian groups living in what is now the southeastern United States also found their way into northeastern Mexico in the first half of the 19th century. These African Americans were integrated to varying extents into the Seminole, Creek, and other groups of what is commonly known as the “Five Civilized Tribes.” Sometimes they were owned as chattel property in typical slave status, but in many cases they performed important roles as advisors, interpreters and warriors and lived as “vassals” in association with their Indian allies.² Free African American men and women from Texas and Louisiana also came to Matamoros, not only to escape oppressive conditions, but also in search of economic opportunities.³

The arrival in Matamoros of the first African American fugitive slaves and freemen from Texas and the United States generally coincided with an increase in economic activity experienced by the city beginning around 1820. Fugitive slaves from Louisiana had been escaping into Spanish Texas since 1804 and it is very probable that some of them had made their way to Matamoros. Although the year that the first fugitive slave arrived in Matamoros is not known, references to possible fugitive slaves dating to 1832 are contained in the judicial records of Matamoros and fugitive slaves and freemen living in Matamoros are mentioned in primary documents from the 1830s.⁴

A series of social and political events of the early 19th century quickly transformed the Rio Grande Delta from a sparsely populated interior region of the

Spanish colonial empire to a border between two new North American republics forged from inherently different heritages and with irreconcilably different views of the role that each should play in settling and governing a large area of the continent.⁵ In the course of a few decades the string of small ranching settlements along the lower river became the destination of armies and merchants, intent on establishing political and economic dominance. In a few years, Matamoros went from being an isolated pastoral settlement to a commercial port of entry that became a center for activity for merchants, teamsters and artisans as well as the target of occupations by foreign military forces.⁶ It also became the destination of refugees fleeing the oppression of a system that brought enslaved people from Africa and continued to keep their descendants as chattel labor.

With what must have been great trepidation, diverse elements of African American fugitives sought an uncertain refuge in this turbulent setting. Some came as individuals and others came as families or in small groups. The journey was almost always made under conditions of extreme danger and many never arrived at their destination. Those who did make it brought with them traditions and customs forged during years of living under conditions of extreme oppression and slavery. They also brought skills and knowledge acquired throughout their journey that stretched back to the Caribbean islands and the shores of Africa. Although they became free by virtue of stepping foot on Mexico soil, their fugitive status was never far from their minds. They did not try to attract undue attention to themselves and were often the subject of illegal pursuit and capture by slave hunters from across the river. Even in Mexico they often existed on the margins of the social structure, building simple homes on and farming a piece of unclaimed land on the outskirts of a settlement. Some sought to blend into the

lower socio-economic class by taking common Mexican names and forming familial ties in their adopted land. A few found modest economic success, using their skills to provide needed goods and services in the frontier economy of northeastern Mexico.⁷

The year of 1836 saw the beginning of a violent conflagration in the region that began with the revolt against Mexico of the Anglo American settlers in Texas and resulted in the breakaway Republic of Texas being annexed by the United States. The dispute over whether the border between the United States and Mexico would be the Nueces River or the Rio Grande was the stated reason for the invasion of Mexico by U.S. forces in 1846. In 1848, the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo established the Rio Grande as the border between the two countries, transferring ownership of about half of Mexico's territory to the United States. The approximately 100,000 inhabitants of the area also became subject to U.S. laws and jurisdiction.⁸

The continued expansion of the cotton economy Texas and the southern United States in the 1840s and 1850s brought an increase in the slave population in that region and fugitive slaves continued to seek refuge in Matamoros and other areas of northeastern Mexico. While merchants from Europe and the United States conducted booming export and import business through Matamoros, refugee African American slaves and freemen found a society in flux where they could blend in and benefit economically from the expanding commerce and clandestine smuggling of goods and livestock that characterized the border region along the Rio Grande. The opportunity for escape that Mexico provided the slaves in Texas and the southern United States played an important role in determining the nature of slavery in the region and figured in the international

relations between Mexico and the United States during the period leading up to the American Civil War.⁹

The fugitive slaves and African American freemen that immigrated to northeastern Mexico during this period were generally given little notice by contemporary observers and commentators. Living outside the sphere of the influential and powerful, they were only occasionally mentioned in the first-hand accounts of 19th century life in northern Mexico. This can partly be attributed to the tendency of writers during that time period to dismiss such subjects as being of little importance and their mere mention could even be seen as demeaning to the writer. When mention was made of the presence of African American fugitive slaves and freemen in northern Mexico, it was usually incidental to the description of some other subject or event. Many times the fugitive slaves were described in newspaper articles telling of their escape and offering a reward for their capture. Some observers expressed sympathy for fugitive slaves escaping into Mexico, while others tried to stir up support for expeditions to go into Mexico to capture and bring fugitive slaves back to Texas.¹⁰ No letters or journals written by African Americans immigrating from Texas or other parts of the southern United States to Mexico have come to light over the years.

Most modern historians have tended to overlook the existence of fugitive slaves in Mexico or minimize their importance in the history of South Texas and Tamaulipas. The published histories of Matamoros and the Lower Rio Grande Valley make little, if any, mention of fugitive slaves and African freemen living in Matamoros in the period leading up to the American Civil War. Little attention has been given to the cultural influence that was brought to Matamoros and the Rio Grande Delta region by the African American

immigrants or any cultural elements that those returning to the United States may have brought from northern Mexico.

This work seeks to describe the social and cultural characteristics of the different elements of African refugees that found their way to Matamoros and the Rio Grande Delta region. It describes the social and cultural history of the region that gave refuge to the African Americans and the conditions that caused them to seek refuge there. It examines the conditions under which African Americans lived in Texas and the southern United States in the early 19th century, prompting them to flee to another country. The hardships that they experienced on their journey to northeastern Mexico as well as the problems they encountered upon arriving there are also described.

Numerous primary sources are used to describe the African American experience in Texas and northeastern Mexico in the years leading up to the American Civil War. Contemporary accounts of residents of and travelers through the region give first-hand observations of the conditions prevalent in these areas that caused African Americans to seek refuge in Mexico. Among these are *The Life, Travels and Opinions of Benjamin Lundy*. Lundy traveled through Texas and northeastern Mexico in 1833 and 1834, spending several months living among the African American community in Matamoros, Tamaulipas. Frederick Law Olmsted made detailed observations of the conditions of slaves in Texas and fugitive African Americans living in the area of Piedras Negras, Coahuila during his journey through the area in the mid-1850s. *The News from Brownsville: Helen Chapman's Letters from the Texas Military Frontier, 1848-1852* contains detailed observations on the cultural environment of the Rio Grande Delta around the time of the Mexican-American War as well as the details on the capture of

fugitive slaves from Louisiana attempting to enter Mexico by sea. These and other travel accounts, memoirs and newspaper articles provide descriptions of the experiences and conditions faced by African Americans seeking refuge in northeastern Mexico.

Chapter II, "The Early Integration of Africans into Mexican Society," examines the social and political conditions that existed in Mexico during the Spanish colonial period and leading up to the independence movement of 1810 to 1821 and its aftermath. Particular attention is given to the African population that arrived in Mexico during the colonial era and the process of social integration that took place over the three centuries of Spanish colonial rule. This early integration provided the foundation for the general and widespread acceptance of the African American elements that immigrated to Mexico from Texas, Indian Territory, and the southern United States from approximately 1820 to 1865.

Chapter III, "The Origins and Early History of Matamoros," describes the Rio Grande Delta region and the events that led up to the settlement of Matamoros and the evolution of the socio-economic characteristics of the area. The arrival of African refugee elements and their incorporation into the social fabric of the Rio Grande Delta is traced. The expansion of the United States into Texas and the subsequent war with Mexico and the effect this conflict on the residents of region, including the African American refugees, is examined.

Chapter IV, "African Americans in Texas and the Southern United States," examines the different elements of the African Americans living in Texas, the southern states, and Indian Territory. The origins of slavery in Texas and the living and working conditions of slaves are described. The attitudes of different elements of the population

of Texas and the southern United States toward African Americans and slavery are examined and analyzed in regard to the African American immigration to Mexico. The socio-cultural effect of significant historical events of the early 19th century on African Americans is examined.

The conclusion summarizes the experience of the African American in northeastern Mexico and examines the cultural legacy of their journey to northeastern Mexico. Although several works have told the story of the African American fugitive slaves in Mexico in the years leading up to the American Civil War, their focus has not been on the Rio Grande Delta and the unique historical events that shaped the region in the early 19th century. Matamoros was a focal point for many of these events and its location and economic activity caused it to become a destination for many of the African Americans entering Mexico from Texas and the United States.

The most comprehensive work on African American fugitive slaves in Mexico is *Across the Rio to Freedom, U.S. Negroes in Mexico* by Rosalie Schwartz. Published in 1975 by Texas Western Press, this sixty-four page monograph examines the history of fugitives slaves entering Mexico and describes the resulting diplomatic negotiations between the United States and Mexico and the effect on relations between the two countries. "Fugitive Slaves in Mexico," an article by Ronnie C. Tyler in the January, 1972 issue of *The Journal of Negro History*, examines the numerous conflicts that resulted from the escaping slaves seeking refuge in Mexico. Tyler describes the slave hunting expeditions out of Texas and the reaction of the Mexican authorities to these excursions into Mexican territory. Numerous works have examined the Black Seminoles' migration to northeastern Mexico in the 1850s and their military campaigns

in the states of Coahuila, Chihuahua and Nuevo León. Principal among these is the work of Kenneth W. Porter, which was compiled into a book after his death by Alcione M. Amos and Thomas P. Senter entitled *The Black Seminoles, History of a Freedom-Seeking People*. Interviewing elderly members of the Black Seminole community in Coahuila and Texas and researching the archives of Mexico and the United States, Porter was the first historian to document the diaspora of the Black Seminole from Florida to Indian Territory and then south to Coahuila, as well as their service as scouts in the United States Army in the 1870s and 1880s.

Much research has been done on the African American experience in the United States before the Civil War. The most comprehensive work on slavery in Texas is Randolph B. Campbell's *An Empire for Slavery, The Peculiar Institution in Texas 1821-1865*. Many books and articles have been written that describe the traditions and culture of the African American community in the southern United States. Two among those are *Roll, Jordan, Roll, The World the Slaves Made* by Eugene D. Genovese and *The Slave Community, Plantation Life in The Ante-Bellum South*, by John W. Blassingame.

Although fewer works have been written about the African experience in Colonial Mexico, two outstanding books on the subject are *La Población Negra de México* by Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán, first published in 1946 and revised and reprinted several times since, and *Blacks in Colonial Vera Cruz: Race Ethnicity, and Regional Development* by Patrick J. Carroll.

¹ Neil Foley, *The White Scourge: Mexicans, Blacks and Poor Whites in Texas Cotton Culture*, (University of California Press, 1997) 17-19. James F. Brooks, "Served Well by Plunder: *La Grand Ladroneria* and Producers of History Astride the Rio Grande" *American Quarterly* 52.1 (2000) 43-44. Randolph B. Campbell, *An Empire for Slavery, The Peculiar Institution in Texas, 1821-1865*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1989) 180-181.

² Kenneth W. Porter, "The Seminole in Mexico, 1850-1861," *The Hispanic American Historical Review* Volume XXXI, Number 1 (February, 1951) 1-2. Kevin Mulroy, *Freedom on the Border, The Seminole Maroons in Florida, the Indian Territory, Coahuila, and Texas*, (Lubbock: Texas Tech University Press, 1993) 18-24.

³ Benjamin Lundy, *The Life, Travels and Opinions of Benjamin Lundy* compiled by Thomas Earle, (Philadelphia: William D. Parrish, 1847, reprinted 1971 by Augustus M. Kelley, New York) 142-154.

⁴ Matamoros Municipal Archives, Justicia, Caja 2, Expediente 3, 4 de septiembre, 1832, (Matamoros Municipal Archives, Casamata Museum, Matamoros, Tamaulipas. R. M. Potter, "Escape of Karnes and Teal from Matamoros," *Quarterly of the Texas State Historical Association*, IV (October, 1900), 73-78. Benjamin Lundy, *The Life, Travels, and Opinions of Benjamin Lundy*, compiled by Thomas Earle, (Philadelphia: William D. Parrish, 1847, reprinted by Augustus M. Kelley, 1971) 142-154. Rosalie Schwartz, *Across the Rio to Freedom, U.S. Negroes in Mexico*, (El Paso: Texas Western Press, 1975) 5, 6.

⁵ David J. Weber, *Foreigners in their Native Land, Historical Roots of the Mexican Americans*, (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1973) 140-160. Roberto M. Salmón, "The Texas-Mexican Legacy: Puro Tejano," *The Borderlands Journal*, Volume 10, Number 1 (Fall, 1986) 39-50.

⁶ Milo Kearney and Anthony Knopp, *Boom and Bust, The Historical Cycles of Matamoros and Brownsville*, (Austin: Eakin Press, 1991) 26-55.

⁷ Kenneth W. Porter, "The Seminole in Mexico, 1850-1861," *Hispanic American Historical Review* Volume 31, Number 1 (February, 1951) 1-12. Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores, *Informe de la comisión pesquisadora de la frontera del norte al ejecutivo del artículo 3o de la ley de 30 de septiembre de 1872* (Mexico: Imprenta de Diaz de León y White, 1874) 86-92. "La constitución política de la República Mexicana," Section I Article 2, in *Leyes de reforma: Gobiernos de Ignacio Comonfort y Benito Juárez*, Volume V of *El liberalismo Mexicano en pensamiento y en acción*, edited by Martín Luis Guzmán (Mexico: Empresas Editoriales, 1947-1967) 55. Frederick Law Olmsted, *A Journey through Texas; or A Saddletrip on the Southwestern Frontier* (New York: Dix, Edwards & Co. 1857, reprinted 1981 by Time-Life Books) 323-329.

⁸ Richard Griswold del Castillo, *The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, A Legacy of Conflict*, (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1990) 62.

⁹ Foley, *The White Scourge*, 20-22. Campbell, *An Empire for Slavery*, 62-63. Arnoldo de León and Kenneth Stewart, "Lost Dreams and Found Fortunes: Mexican and Anglo Immigrants in South Texas, 1850-1900," *The Western Historical Quarterly* (July 1983) 294-297.

¹⁰ Caleb Coker, editor, *The News from Brownsville: Helen Chapman's Letters from the Texas Military Frontier, 1848-1852*, (Austin: Texas State Historical Association, 1992) 183-184, 378-379. Olmsted, *A Journey through Texas*, 323-329. *Texas State Times*, (June 2, 1855). In John S. Ford, *Rip Ford's Texas*, edited by, Stephen B. Oates, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1963) 196, 214.



CHAPTER II
EARLY INTEGRATION OF AFRICANS
INTO MEXICAN SOCIETY

The African American slaves and freemen entering Mexico from Texas, Indian Territory and other parts of the southern United States encountered social and political conditions that served to create a sanctuary from the oppressive conditions they were fleeing. Various socio-economic and political factors created an atmosphere in northern Mexico that not only aided the slaves in their escape and impeded their recapture, but also provided a means by which they could gain a meager livelihood in an area that was not known for its abundant resources. Some of these factors had their origins in Spain and colonial Mexico and others came about as a result of independence and reform movements in Mexico during the first half of the 19th century. The African Americans in northern Mexico found a society that, for the most part, welcomed their presence and created a place of refuge where they could engage in economic activities and integrate into Mexican society.

This attitude of tolerance and acceptance was reflected in various interconnected occurrences and events. They included Mexican Tejanos providing assistance to escaping slaves in Mexican Texas and the granting of land, farming tools, and seed by Mexican state governments to Black Seminoles in return for their services in military colonies established in an effort to subdue the marauding bands of Comanche and

Apache. The political ideology of the leaders of Mexico's liberal reform movement of the 1850s that resulted in the Constitution of 1857 also contributed to creating a national policy that reflected an increased respect for individual freedoms and human rights in Mexico and opposition to the expansion of slavery taking place in the United States. The diplomatic relations between the United States and Mexico in the years following the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo of 1848 reflected a desire on the part of Mexico to protect the emigrant African Americans from any attempts, be they unsanctioned raids or international extradition agreements, to return the escaped slaves to bondage. The reasons that African American emigrants were accepted into the society of northern Mexico have their roots in the gradual integration of Africans into Mexican society that occurred during the three centuries of Spanish colonial rule.¹

The Spanish attitudes toward Africans in colonial Mexico were greatly shaped by the Muslim Arab occupation of the Iberian Peninsula that lasted more than 700 years. The resulting history of cultural contact and infusion from North Africa made Spain unique among the European colonial powers in North America. The Spanish experience with the northern Africans as infidel enemies on the battlefield and as philosophers, architects and craftsmen in their society would affect the course of cultural and biological interactions of Europeans, Indians, and Africans in colonial Mexico.²

The first African slaves were brought to Mexico as personal servants of Hernando Cortes and members of his expedition and entered the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlan in 1519. The Spanish continued to bring African servants with them as they came in increasing numbers to Mexico. Some of these slaves were *moriscos*, remnants of the conquered Moorish population in the Iberian Peninsula, while others had been brought

from the western coast of Africa to the islands in the West Indies and then to Mexico. Since they arrived mainly as personal servants, the numbers of African slaves in the early years tended to be smaller than the number of Spanish conquerors entering Mexico.³

A dramatic increase in the number of African slaves being imported into Mexico began about 20 years after the initial Spanish conquest of the Valley of Mexico. There were numerous reasons for the increase in the number of slaves needed in Mexico. A decimation of the indigenous population by diseases to which their bodies had no built-up immunity and to which the Europeans and Africans had more resistance occurred throughout North and South America. The discovery of silver lodes in areas to the north and the establishment of mining operations in Guanajuato, San Luís Potosí, Durango and Zacatecas also led to a demand for African slaves on the northern frontier of Mexico to satisfy the need for laborers in the mining and processing of the silver ore. In addition to an increase in the demand for labor, the work of the Dominican friars Antonio de Montesinos and Bartolomé de Las Casas in protecting the Indian from exploitation and the enactment of the *Nuevas Leyes de las Indias* which placed restrictions on the use of Indian labor led to an increase in the importation of African slave labor into Mexico.⁴

With the increased need for slave labor, the Spanish began to import more of the slaves directly from Africa. Called *bozales*, these slaves were felt to pose less of a threat of insurrection and influence toward the Indian population than the more hispanicized slaves from Spain and the West Indies. Based on a study of several census sources, Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán estimated the number of Africans in Mexico in the year 1570 at about 20,000 and the number of white Spaniards at about 6,500⁵

The Spanish constructed a strict caste system in Mexico in an attempt to restrict intermarriage between blacks, whites and Indians and dictated the occupations in which each ethnic group could engage. The caste system started with six ethnic categories in the 1500s, but by the 18th century, some twenty or more designations for individuals of various degrees of intermixture were being used in official documents. Many of the terms, such as *cambujo* and *zambo*, took on derogatory connotations and were eventually replaced with more euphemistic terms such as *moreno* and *gente de color*. Over the 300 years of Spanish colonial rule the restrictions became so cumbersome that they could not be effectively enforced and by the end of the 18th century they had become practically meaningless.⁶

Sugar cane growing and sugar processing in the state of Veracruz created a steadily increasing demand for African slave labor beginning as early as 1530 and continuing through the 18th century. The sugar cane growing areas around Jalapa and Cordoba had high populations of Africans, both free and slave, throughout the colonial era. The ratio of male to female slaves brought to Mexico varied, but it was usually about two-thirds male to one-third female. Most of the female slaves were employed as domestic workers while the males carried out all the tasks associated with the cultivation and processing of the sugar cane. By the end of the 18th century, African Mexicans composed nearly 20 percent of the population in the area of Jalapa. The gradually increasing presence of a substantial population of free blacks and mulattos coupled with the sugar growers efforts to continue the practice of using slave labor led to slave revolts in Veracruz in the 17th and 18th centuries. In some instances slave revolts and insurrections ultimately resulted in the integration of the escaped slave communities into

Mexican society. In *Blacks in Colonial Vera Cruz: Race, Ethnicity, and Regional Development*, Patrick J. Carroll describes how runaway *cimarrones* created a settlement in the mountains and the Spanish authorities, unable to bring them under control, gave official recognition to the settlement and its inhabitants in a successful attempt to end their outlaw status and incorporate them into Mexican society.⁷

The evolution of the integration of the African into Mexican society can be traced through the parallel evolution of the meaning of two well-known words in the Mexican national vocabulary. As Aguirre Beltrán explains in *La Población Negra de México*, the word *jarocho* was derived from a word for wild pig and was originally used as a derogatory term to describe the mixture of Indian and African in the area of Veracruz. In the 19th century, with the movements for independence and reform, the word gained a noble connotation and today all the inhabitants of the State of Veracruz are referred to as *jarochos*. A similar evolution is noted with the words *chino* and *china*. Originally used to refer to the offspring of an African and an Indian, they were synonymous with the words *mulato* and *mulata*. By the mid nineteenth century the word *chinaco* was used to refer to the famous guerillas that opposed the French intervention and *China Poblana* is used to this day to describe the essence of grace and virtue in the Mexican woman.⁸

During the 18th century various socio-economic factors having their origin both in Mexico and in other parts of the world combined to make slavery less of a viable alternative to a wage incentive-based labor system. Whether through rebellion and escape or through manumission of slaves by owners, the number of Mexicans living under the condition of slavery gradually diminished. By 1805 Alexander von Humboldt would write, “The number of slaves in New Spain is next to nothing... Sugar is chiefly

the produce of free hands.”⁹ Although the European elite tried to maintain the strict caste system to their advantage, demographic and social forces, both in Mexico and other parts of the Americas and Europe, made it untenable. When President Vicente Guerrero declared slavery against the law in Mexico in 1829, there was little protest from Mexican slave owners.¹⁰ The refusal of the colonial elite to engage in any profession below their station limited them to administrative positions in government or to being owners of merchant houses and agricultural holdings. This provided the opportunity for upward mobility to members of lower socio-economic classes including the slaves and former slaves. The need for skilled blacksmiths, herdsman, teamsters and weavers provided the means for mestizos and *castas* to acquire skills and become a vital and indispensable part of the Mexican colonial economy.

Describing the population of New Spain in the beginning of the 19th century, the Bishop of Michoacan, Manuel Abad y Queipo said that the four million inhabitants could be divided into three classes: the Spaniards; the indigenous Indians; and the *castas* of varying degrees of African, Indian and European descent. He said that the Spaniards, who comprised 10 percent of the population, controlled almost of the wealth and property of New Spain and the “Indians and mixed breeds take care of domestic service, agricultural labor, and ordinary offices of trade, arts, and crafts.” Bishop Abad y Queipo may have been anticipating the coming revolution when he wrote that agrarian reform was needed to enable the Indians, mestizos, and African Mexicans to acquire property and thereby have a vested interest in the laws and government of the country. He proposed granting these vast numbers of the lower socio-economic class the unused land in possession of the large landholding *latifundios*. In this way they would put to use the

fallow lands by cultivating crops and raising livestock, thus contributing to the Mexican society and strengthening the economy. He further proposed that they be permitted to hold civil office and have the freedom to choose their place of habitation.¹¹

In 1811, during the Napoleonic occupation of Spain under Joseph Bonaparte, the Cortes of Cádiz was convened to author the first Spanish Constitution. One of the representatives sent to Cádiz from Mexico was José Miguel Ramos Arizpe, from the valley of San Nicolás de la Capellanía in Coahuila. Ramos Arizpe presented a report to the Cortes of Cádiz describing the economic and political situation in the northeastern provinces of Nuevo León, Nuevo Santander, and Coahuila, y Texas and advocating the establishment of popularly elected provincial councils and municipal councils in towns with thirty or more property owners. In his report he also pointed out the need for developing the local economies and attracting more settlers to the sparsely inhabited northeastern provinces.¹² During the debate over whether the *castas* of African descent should be granted the right of citizenship in the colonies Ramos Arizpe declared that:

I know descendents of Africa worthily honored with the priesthood. I am accustomed to seeing many engaged in all manners of careers. I have observed them serving as impartial judges and as zealous *regidores* in the town councils, especially in recent establishments which they themselves have founded....Our great interest...consists in merging all these castes, in making one nation, one people, one family.¹³

The effort on the part of Ramos Arizpe and other delegates from Mexico to gain the right of citizenship failed in the Cortes of Cádiz but it was indicative of the acknowledgement of the need to grant the right of landownership and a voice in government to mestizos and *castas* to increase vital participation in the settlement of the northern frontier provinces. As Alicia Tjarks points out in her demographic analysis of

late 18th century Texas, while colonial society was generally intolerant, the racial and social discrimination was necessarily less intense in the northern frontier regions of northern Mexico because of the need to integrate the lower social classes into the ranks of the productive and legitimate citizenry. In the census listings and military roles of San Antonio de Béjar, some mestizos and Mexicans of African descent were listed as *españoles* and a few were listed as owning farms, ranches and cattle.¹⁴

The rebellion against Spain begun by Miguel Hidalgo in 1810 was a movement for independence and against the hierarchical caste system of the Spanish colonial era. First in Valladolid on November 29, and again in Guadalajara on December 6, Miguel Hidalgo abolished slavery and the practice of demanding tribute from mestizos and African Mexicans. After the capture and execution of Hidalgo in 1811 José María Morelos continued the struggle for independence from Spain and called for the elimination of social distinctions among native-born Mexicans saying that they would “no longer be designated as Indians, mulattoes or castes, but all known as Americans.” This would eventually become law and individuals were no longer referred to or classified using racial origin in public or private documents.¹⁵

Mexican attitudes toward slavery and the policies put into effect by the Mexican government played an important part in the rebellion of the Anglo American settlers in Texas. The ownership of slaves in Texas was never secure under Mexican rule and Texan slave owners realized that it would not be long before that would not be allowed to use slave labor in Mexican Texas. In 1833 the Mexican government sent Colonel Juan N. Almonte to Texas with secret instructions to inform Texas slaves of their right to liberty under Mexican law. In July 1835 Ben Milam wrote in a letter that Mexican

General Santa Anna planned “if possible to get the slaves to revolt.” In reference to expected Mexican military actions along the Brazos River, a Texan wrote to Stephen F. Austin commenting: “Would there not be great danger from the Negroes should a large Mexican force come so near?”¹⁶

In October 1835 there was a slave revolt along the Brazos River that was violently put down by the slave owners. Although there was no evidence of direct influence by the Mexican in instigating the uprising, it was widely known that the African slaves looked forward to the liberation that would have resulted from a Mexican victory in the war of rebellion in Texas.¹⁷

Although the number of slaves that escaped by taking advantage of the war of rebellion is not known, it was large enough to warrant mention in the Treaty of Velasco, the terms of which were dictated to General Santa Anna by General Sam Houston after the Texan victory at San Jacinto. When two Texan officers were sent to Matamoros to negotiate the return of Texan prisoners and the slaves that accompanied the Mexican Army in its return march to Matamoros General José de Urrea said, “I did not recognize their authority, nor the government they represented, nor the agreements that had been concluded ... I ordered them taken prisoners.” Urrea also asserted that “All slaves within my jurisdiction continued to enjoy their liberty.”¹⁸ After over three months under house arrest in Matamoros the two Texan officers finally escaped back to Texas empty-handed.¹⁹

The slaves escaping from Texas to Mexico during the rebellion of 1836 joined an exile African American community in Matamoros that included numbers of free blacks that came from New Orleans to Matamoros by ship after 1820. Some of the ancestors of

these free African Americans had arrived in Louisiana as slaves with the first French settlers in the early 1700s. Only a few slaves managed to obtain their freedom during the half century of French rule in Louisiana before 1769. The Black Code enacted in 1724 put severe restrictions on the African slaves in French Louisiana and limited their avenues to freedom by denying them property rights and placing roadblocks in the way of owners who might wish to voluntarily free slaves. In 1769, after fifty years of European settlement, a census reported the number of free blacks at less than 200.²⁰

In 1762, King Louis XV signed over France's title to Louisiana to Carlos III. It was hoped that a Spanish presence in Louisiana would act as a buffer against English expansion. For several years the local government continued to be administered by a French acting-governor under French law and when the first Spanish governor arrived, the French planters refused to submit to his rule and drove him out, forcing the Spanish to establish their dominion with military force. From 1769 to 1803 the population of New Orleans was predominantly French and African, while Spanish military officers and bureaucrats administered the government and courts. The Spanish administration kept most of the restrictions of the French Black Code in place but removed restrictions on manumission of slaves by their masters and permitted slaves to purchase their freedom under the law of *coartación*. Under this provision of Spanish colonial law a slave could present the amount of his market value in addition to an administrative fee before the governor's court and receive a certificate of freedom called a *carta de libertad*. A third party could also purchase the freedom of a slave under the system of *coartación*.²¹

Nicolás Drouet, a free African American from Louisiana, immigrated to Matamoros, probably arriving there around 1830. Not much is known about the origins

of Drouet except that he had lived in New Orleans prior to moving to Matamoros. He may have come from St. Domingue by way of Cuba along with thousands other free blacks that arrived in Louisiana between 1790 and 1809 from the Caribbean islands.²² Drouet lived in New Orleans after the Louisiana Purchase of 1803 made it part of the United States. The name “Drouette, N. Private 7th Reg’t (Le Beuf’s)” is found on the roster of Louisiana Militia soldiers that fought at the Battle of New Orleans in the War of 1812.²³ More than 400 free African Americans fought at the Battle of New Orleans, and on the eve of the battle General Andrew Jackson addressed them saying:

Through a mistaken policy you have heretofore been deprived of a participation in the glorious struggle for national rights in which our country is engaged. This no longer exists. As sons of freedom, you are now called upon to defend our most inestimable blessing. As Americans, your country looks with confidence to her Adopted children for a valorous support as a faithful return for the advantages enjoyed under her mild and equitable government. As fathers, husbands, and brothers, you are summoned to rally round the standard of the eagle to defend all which is dear in existence.²⁴

Unfortunately, Jackson’s benevolent words did not reflect the treatment that the free blacks would receive in Louisiana in the years following the War of 1812. As the slave population increased in the southern United States with the invention of the cotton gin and the demand for cotton in the industry of the northeastern states and in the textile mills of England, the free black in Louisiana became to be seen as a threat to maintaining the slave population in bondage. Throughout the antebellum years leading up to the Civil War free blacks faced increasingly oppressive conditions in the southern United States. In the words of Eugene Genovese, “In the 1850s the position of the free Negro in New Orleans and some other cities rapidly deteriorated through increasingly harsh attacks in

the press, police harassment, and restrictions against keeping coffeehouses or entering special fields of employment.” He also points out that free blacks faced the danger of being kidnapped and sold into slavery, especially when prices and the demand for slaves to work in cotton production was going up prior to the Civil War.²⁵

A Nicolás Drouet was listed a butcher at 59 Toulouse Street in the 1811 New Orleans City Directory.²⁶ The exact year that he left New Orleans for Matamoros is not known, but on June 19, 1834, Benjamin Lundy wrote in his journal that:

I also had an interview with Madame Lafitte Brocard, Who informed me that her brother, Nicolas Dronette a dark mulatto, recently an officer of the Mexican army, had received a grant of land from the Mexican government for the purpose of colonizing it with coloured settlers from Louisiana.²⁷

Lundy, who was traveling to Mexico to look for suitable land for proposed land grant for the settlement of African Americans from the United States, later met with Nicolás Drouet in Matamoros. His journal entries for the short time that he was there provide the best existing description of the community of African Americans in Matamoros. Lundy arrived at Matamoros on November 5, 1834, and upon inquiring for Drouet, was informed that he “resided one mile out of town.”²⁸ When Lundy arrived at Drouet’s home he was invited to stay there during his visit. Lundy described two other members of the emigrant African American community in Matamoros that he met at Drouet’s residence:

Two young mulatto men, formerly of New Orleans, called at the house of Drouet to-day. One of them is an engineer on board a steamboat which runs from Matamoros to the mouth of the Rio Bravo, the other is a cabinet maker, who carries on his business in Matamoros. They both expressed great aversion to returning to the United States. One of them is about

purchasing a large quantity of bricks of Drouet, who has recently burned a fine kiln. Coloured people prosper here in pecuniary matters.²⁹

Although Lundy does not identify the two men by name, the cabinet maker who ordered the bricks may have been Bártolo Passement, a free African American who came to Matamoros in 1832. Passement later became a prominent architect and civil engineer. His obituary in the August 2, 1868 edition of the Matamoros newspaper *The Daily Ranchero* states “many public buildings and other substantial edifices mark the genius of his work. Among others, he planned and built the Cathedral on the Plaza de Hidalgo.”³⁰

In his journal Benjamin Lundy describes a meeting that was called on November 9, 1834 at Drouet’s residence:

In the afternoon we had a respectable meeting of coloured people, at Drouet’s house. They warmly approved of my plans for colonizing, and assured me that pecuniary assistance should be given if found necessary.³¹

On November 16 another meeting of African Americans was held at Drouet’s residence and Lundy observed that:

They adopted resolutions favourable to the emigration to Mexico, of their brethren in the United States. I have made some acquaintance with Henry White, a respectable and very intelligent coloured gentlemen from Philadelphia, who now resides at Brazos Santiago, a port near the mouth of the Rio Bravo.³²

Lundy also described an incident that reveals the reactions of Anglo American residents of Matamoros when they encountered members of the black community in social settings. It seems that “some white clerks to our northern merchants” were at a dance and referred to some young black men there as “d—d niggers” and said that they should not be admitted to the dance. A fight ensued between one of the blacks and the

person that insulted them with the result that both were taken to the city jail.³³ In another journal entry Lundy describes the attitudes of the Anglo American population in Matamoros toward the native Mexicans and the African Americans:

I do not find one foreign white man here, except a cooper named Morris, that is as friendly as he ought to be to the Mexicans. The sole object of the foreigners in general, who come to this place, is to make money; and they indulge in all the unholy prejudices against people of colour, which they brought with them, or have contracted from their associates here.³⁴

During his stay in Matamoros Lundy rented a house for nine dollars a month and made harnesses and other fittings for carriages and wagons to support himself. He traveled to the city of Victoria, the capital of Tamaulipas, to submit the paperwork for the grant that had been approved for the settlement of African Americans from the United States in the Mexican state of Texas. Drouet accompanied him part of the way to Victoria but they had a falling out over small disagreements that Lundy claimed stemmed from Drouet's irresponsibility and unreliability. Lundy's grant was approved by the governor of Tamaulipas and Lundy returned to Matamoros. He left Matamoros in April, 1835, returning to New Orleans by steamship. The outbreak of hostilities between Mexico and the Anglo American settlers in Texas put an end to Lundy's plan to form an agricultural colony for African Americans in northern Mexico.³⁵

The turmoil and breakdown in civil authority that continued in Texas even after the Treaty of Velasco and the retreat of Mexican forces offered opportunities for slaves to escape from their owners. The slaves that had been illegally imported into Texas from Africa during the weakened Mexican rule between 1834 and 1836 were especially prone to flee from their unaccustomed bondage and sometimes influenced the American born

slaves to accompany them in their flight.³⁶ A number of runaway slaves and Indians joined the Mexican forces under Vicente Córdova in a battle near Seguin that was fought during an attempt by Mexico to retake Texas in 1838-39.³⁷ Since the independence of the breakaway province was never recognized by Mexico, the Texan slave owners had no diplomatic recourse to recover fugitive slaves that had escaped to Mexico.

After annexation by the United States in 1845, Texas officials requested that the United States government negotiate a treaty with Mexico permitting the extradition of escaped slaves. Mexico had several motives for encouraging slaves to escape across the Rio Grande and resisting their return, but the principal reason was that the success of slavery in Texas could lead to the loss of more national territory as expansionist southerners looked for more potential slave states to increase their power in the United States Congress. The bottom line from Mexico was that no foreign government would be allowed to take any fugitive slaves that had taken refuge in that country.³⁸

Many political leaders in Mexico saw the insurrection in Texas as the first step in a continuing expansionist process on the part of the United States that was followed by the annexation of Texas in 1845. Slavery was seen as a key component of this process. Many Mexicans, as well as some Americans, saw the annexation of Texas as part of a plan to increase the slaveholding area of the United States. Since the Missouri Compromise of 1820 the southern states and the northern states had been vying for a representational majority in Congress and many politicians that favored slavery saw Texas and California as states where slavery would be legal.

In a speech before the House of Representatives in December 1835, John Quincy Adams referred to the Texas rebellion, saying:

The war now raging in Texas is a Mexican civil war, and a war for the re-establishment of slavery where it was abolished. It is not a servile war, but a war between slavery and emancipation, and every possible effort has been made to drive us into the war on the side of slavery.³⁹

Ten years later the United States would wage a war of expansion under the leadership of President James K. Polk. As a result, Mexico would lose 500,000 square miles of land, about half of its national territory. Diplomatic relations between the two countries would become a series of disagreements, some of which involved the continued sanctuary afforded to fugitive slaves crossing the Rio Grande from Texas into Mexico.

The war between the United States and Mexico offered few opportunities for escape for slaves in Texas and other parts of the southern United States. Nevertheless, slaves in the United States were aware of the effect the outcome of the war could have on their status as slaves and the potential for freedom that a Mexican victory would have. In 1847 Solomon Northup was a slave in Louisiana and later he wrote about the conversations of slaves concerning the war with Mexico:

During the Mexican War I well remember the extravagant hopes that were excited. The news of victory filled the great house with rejoicing, but produced only sorrow and disappointment in the cabin. In my opinion—and I have had opportunity to know something of the feeling of which I speak—there are not fifty slaves on the shores of the Bayou Boeuf, but would hail with unmeasured delight the approach of an invading army.⁴⁰

Far from helping the slaves gain freedom, the end of the war helped to ensure more than another decade of slavery in Texas and the other southern states.

Following the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848, Mexico's northeastern frontier was a sparsely populated region south of the Rio Grande consisting of the states of Tamaulipas, Nuevo León, Coahuila, and Chihuahua. Although the area had long history of Spanish settlement dating back to the 17th century, devastating raids made by nomadic bands of Comanche and Apache, displaced from their homelands in the southern plains and Rocky Mountain region, had made ranching and farming a dangerous and futile endeavor in northeastern Mexico and had de-populated much of the region by the mid-nineteenth century. From 1848 to 1853, more than one thousand Mexican citizens were killed in attacks by roaming Indian bands in northern Mexico and many others were taken captive to be sold, traded or returned for ransom in a system of commerce in captives and stolen livestock that extended throughout the borderland regions of both countries. Mexico blamed the United States for pushing Apache, Comanche, Kiowa and other Indian groups into the region and some Mexican leaders felt that the United States stood to benefit from continued destabilization of the northern Mexican frontier after the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo.⁴¹

On July 19 1848, less than six months after the Treaty was signed, Secretary of War and Marine Mariano Arista decreed that the new boundary between the United States and Mexico required urgent attention "both to preserve our territorial integrity and to defend the frontier states from the frequent and cruel incursions of the savages."⁴² He proposed the establishment of a series of military colonies stretching from Tamaulipas to Baja California. President José Joaquín Herrera subsequently signed into law the decree entitled *Colonias Militares, Proyecto para su Establecimiento en las Fronteras de Oriente y Occidente de la República*. The bill provided for incentives, both monetary and

in the form of land and farming supplies, for settlers who, it was planned, would form defensive towns and serve to maintain law and order in the area of their settlements. Although the bill was aimed primarily at attracting European immigrants and did not make mention of settlers from the United States, it was successful mainly in attracting remnant groups of Kickapoo and Seminole along with African Americans. These African Americans consisted of groups and individuals, both freedmen and fugitive slaves and their families.⁴³

Some of the African Americans that found their way to Matamoros and other areas of northeastern Mexico were part of an element that had been associated with Creek, Cherokee, Choctaw, Chickasaw and Seminole Indians (known as “The Five Civilized Tribes”), that originally lived in the area that roughly encompassed the present-day states of Florida, Georgia, Alabama and Mississippi. Sometimes known as “Black Creek” and “Black Seminole,” many of these African Americans had intermarried with the Native Americans since the early years of Spanish and English colonization in the area and were an integral part of the communities in which they lived, sharing some common cultural characteristics with the Indian nations in which they lived and often acting as interpreters and negotiators in dealings between the Indians and Whites. These Blacks joined the Indians by fleeing their owners or through trade and purchase. In many cases they were considered chattel property and performed agricultural and menial tasks, occupying the typical slave-master relationship, but in other cases, especially among the Seminole, their status was one of vassalage. The Black Seminole lived in small settlements apart from the Seminole, supplying nominal amounts of agricultural products and defending the community as warriors in return for protection and a place to live.⁴⁴

In the 1830s, the United States government began the forced removal of The Five Civilized Tribes from their homeland in what is now the southeastern United States. Spanning more than a decade, this was an Indian and African American diaspora that moved thousands of men, women and children westward to what was then designated as Indian Territory (the present-day State of Oklahoma and part of Arkansas). The Seminole, along with their Black Seminole compatriots, had resisted removal, fighting three wars against the U.S. Army. Even after being defeated, they refused to give up their Black allies into slavery, insisting that they be allowed to accompany them to Indian Territory. As the last group to arrive in Indian Territory, the Seminole were forced to live on land already occupied by the Creeks. In Indian Territory the Black Seminole were the subject of constant kidnapping attempts by neighboring Creek Indians and Whites from Arkansas wanting to increase their slave property. In the fall of 1849, a group of Seminole Indians and Black Seminole led by Chief Wild Cat and John Horse left Indian Territory, riding south through Texas toward Mexico.⁴⁵

In the summer of 1850, journalist Cora Montgomery observed the arrival of a group of about 300 Seminole and Black Seminole in Eagle Pass as they were about to cross the Rio Grande into Mexico. She described the travelers:

[A]s this unexpected army, which seemed to have dropped upon us from the skies, drew nearer it grew less formidable in apparent numbers; and opened upon us a more pacific aspect. Some reasonably well-mounted Indians circle round a dark nucleus of female riders, who seemed objects of special care. But the long straggling rear-guard was worth seeing. It threw Falstaff's ragged regiment altogether in the shade. Such an array of all manners and sizes of animals, mounted by all ages, sexes and sizes of Negroes, piled up to a most bewildering height, on and among such a promiscuous assemblage of blankets, babies, cooking utensils, and savage traps, in general, never

were or could be held together on horseback by any beings on earth but themselves and their red brothers. The party began to break away and vanish into the little ravines that dip down to the river edge, and we understood by these signs that they were encamping among us.⁴⁶

A few weeks later the two leaders of the group met with Mexican authorities to formally request land for their people. Kenneth W. Porter described the meeting that took place a few miles south of Piedras Negras in July of 1850:

The captains of the three tribes, numbering over 700 – Gato del Monte (Wild Cat) of the Seminole Indians, *el moreno* (colored man) John Horse of the free Negroes or “Mascogos,” and Papicua of the Kickapoo – appeared before Col. Juan Manuel Maldonado, sub-inspector of the colonies, to petition for land, tools, oxen, plows, flocks, and herds, and for the repair or replacement of their firearms. Coahuila was being over-run with unusual fury by the wild Indians and military colonies were being established along the border to cope with this menace.⁴⁷

The Black Seminole’s first settlement was at El Moral near the border but Seminole and Black Seminole were later moved to the Santa Rosa Mountains about 50 miles south of the Rio Grande. Fugitive slaves from Texas had been taken into the Black Seminole community and were being pursued by slave hunters crossing the border from Texas into Mexico. The Mexican authorities, needing a protective force for the area being attacked by Comanches and Apaches coming through the mountain passes, found a solution that would move the Blacks away from the reaches of the slave hunters and provide protection for the settlements below the mountains. The Black Seminole grant, Nacimiento de los Negros, was established on the headwaters of the Río Sábinas on land that was part of the Sanchez-Navarro *latifundia*, made uninhabitable by the constant raids by the Indians.⁴⁸

After a decade of helping the state governments of Coahuila, Chihuahua and Nuevo León combat the threat from *los indios bárbaros* and participating in several skirmishes against filibustering and separatist groups, the Seminole and Black Seminole mercenaries and their families became to be seen as more of a troublesome nuisance to the Mexican citizens of the valley of the Rio Sábinas. The Sanchez-Navarro clan wanted to reclaim the land on which they had settled and the neighboring farmers and ranchers accused the Seminole and Black Seminole of stealing cattle and using too much of the water that flowed from the mountains. In 1858 a group of the Seminole in Coahuila returned to Indian Territory after learning that the United States government had agreed to establish a Seminole Nation and grant them land separate from the Creek Nation. In 1859 the Mexican government sent most of the Black Seminole living at Nacimiento de los Negros (about 350) to Lagunas de Parras, Coahuila where settlements were being attacked by marauding Indian bands. In 1861 the remaining Seminole Indians in Coahuila returned to Indian Territory after tribal leaders there had signed a treaty of alliance with the Confederates. The Black Seminole remained in Mexico, knowing full well that they would not be treated any differently from other African Americans under slavery if they returned to the United States and would, in all probability, be considered returning fugitive slaves. With the Seminole return to Indian Territory, an alliance between the Black Seminole and the Seminole Indian Nation that dated back almost a century was effectively ended.⁴⁹

With the region in constant turmoil, first from the War of the Reform that lasted from 1858 to 1861 and then from the French occupation and the War of the Intervention that began in December 1861, the Black Seminole at Lagunas de Parras were living a

precarious existence. Without land to farm and being constantly embroiled into the surrounding conflicts, they were living in abject poverty and subject to attack from the forces they were called on to oppose. Sometime in the early 1860s, a group of Black Seminole, along with some Black Creek and fugitive slaves that had joined the Black Seminole at Nacimiento, left Lagunas de Parras to find better conditions at Matamoros. Perhaps drawn by the economic activity in the coastal border region or the companionship provided by the existing African American community in Matamoros, Friday, Aleck, Jacob and Julio Bowlegs along with Peter and Monday Bruner had moved with their families to Matamoros. Joe Coon, the grandson of John Horse, and others accompanied them. Not much is known of their life in Matamoros, but they kept in contact with another group of Black Seminole that had returned to Nacimiento de los Negros in the Santa Rosa Mountains of Coahuila. Some of the families moved to Texas after the Civil War ended slavery in the United States and worked on ranches and in other agricultural occupations. Others entered the United State Army, serving with the Black Seminole Scouts based at Fort Clark, Texas. Remnants of the Black Seminole and Black Creek community were noted in Matamoros as late as the 1870s.⁵⁰

The liberal reform movement, known as La Reforma, began in 1855 with the Revolution of Ayutla and launched a campaign for increased human rights and liberties in Mexico that were embodied in the Constitution of 1857. Provoking a three-year civil war, the reform movement was the first step toward creating a modern and progressive national government in Mexico. Mexico's domestic laws and foreign relations with the United States demonstrated opposition to slavery in the United States and resistance to efforts to extradite fugitive slaves back to the United States. Their opposition to slavery

in the United States also forced the leaders of the reform movement in Mexico to address the issue of peonage in their own country. It was acknowledged that Mexico would be hard pressed to refuse to extradite fugitive slaves from the United States while peons from Mexico were being recovered by their owners after fleeing to the United States. Three leaders of the reform movement, Melchor Ocampo, Ignacio Ramirez and Francisco Zarco, voiced strong opposition to slavery and peonage at the constitutional convention in 1856 and 1857.⁵¹

Article 2 of the 1857 Mexican Constitution stated: "All are born free in the Republic. Slaves that set foot on national territory recover, by that very act, their liberty and have the right of protection of the law." Article 15 declared that no treaty of extradition could be approved if it included the repatriation of fugitive slaves.⁵²

The declarations contained in the 1857 Mexican Constitution stood in sharp contrast with the Fugitive Slave Act, which was enacted in the United States as part of the Compromise of 1850. The Fugitive Slave Act expanded the federal role in the apprehension of escaped slaves and barred alleged slaves from testifying on their own behalf and denied them the right of habeas corpus, the traditional method for courts to review whether or not a person was being held in custody lawfully. The provisions of the Fugitive Slave Act made it more difficult for escaping slaves to find refuge in free states and territories in the United States and encouraged them to seek refuge in Canada and Mexico.

Although the social and political situation in Mexico continued unstable throughout the 1850s, Mexico's refusal to return fugitive slaves to the United States encouraged them to seek refuge in Mexico in increasing numbers throughout the decade leading up to the American Civil War. They were generally accepted, and even

welcomed into Mexican society, however the generally poor economic conditions resulting from the continuing conflicts and unsettled social conditions that plagued the northern borderlands of Mexico kept most of them from attaining much more than a subsistence level of living. Some returned to friends and family in the United States after the Civil War and the Emancipation Proclamation eliminated the threat of slavery. Many others who had married and were raising families continued to live in Mexico, accepted completely by the Mexican people as fellow countrymen.

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² Henry Kamen, *The Spanish Inquisition. A Historical Revision* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 1997) 1-7. James F. Brooks, *Captives and Cousins: Slavery, Kinship and Community in the Southwest Borderlands* (Chapel Hill: North Carolina Press, 2002) 19-26..

³ Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán, *La población negra de México. Estudio Etnohistórico* Third Edition, revised (Mexico: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1989) 19-20. Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán, "Races in 17th Century Mexico," *Phylon*, Volume 6, Issue 3 (3rd quarter, 1945) 212. Jack Forbes, *Black Africans and Native Americans: Color, Race and Caste in the Evolution of Red-Black Peoples* (New York: Basil Blackwell, 1988), 61.

⁴ Lewis Hanke, *The Spanish Struggle for Justice in the Conquest of America*, 2nd ed. (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1965) 111-112. Oriol Pi-Sunyer, "Historical Background to the Negro in Mexico," *Journal of Negro History*, 42, issue 4 (1957) 239. Alfred W. Crosby Jr. "Conquistador Y Pestilencia: The First New World Pandemic and the Fall of the Great Indian Empires" *Hispanic American Historical Review*, XLVII (August 1967), 321-327.

⁵ Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán, *La Población Negra de México: Estudio Etnohistórico*, 3rd ed. (Mexico, D.F.: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1989) 203-207.

⁶ Irene Diggs, "Color in Colonial Spanish America," *Journal of Negro History*, 38, no. 4, (1953) 403-408. Aguirre Beltrán, *La Población Negra*, 162-174.

⁷ Patrick J. Carroll, *Blacks in Colonial Vera Cruz: Race, Ethnicity, and Regional Development*, 2nd ed. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001) 79-92.

⁸ Aguirre Beltrán, *La Población Negra*, 179.

⁹ Carroll, *Blacks in Colonial Vera Cruz*, 110, quote from Alexander von Humbolt, *Political Essay on the Kingdom of New Spain*,

¹⁰ Carroll, *Blacks in Colonial Vera Cruz*, 108-111.

¹¹ Victor Alba, *The Mexicans. The Making of a Nation* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1967) 37-38.

¹² José Miguel Ramos de Arizpe, *Report that Dr. Miguel Ramos de Arizpe Priest of Borbon, and Deputy in the Present General and Special Cortes of Spain for the Province of Coahuila One of the Four Eastern Interior Provinces of the Kingdom of Mexico Presents to the August Congress*, translated by Nettie Lee Benson (New York: Greenwood Press, 1969) vii-viii, 34-40.

¹³ James F. King, "The Colored Castes and American Representation in the Cortes of Cádiz" *The Hispanic American Historical Review*, vol 33, Issue 1 (February 1953) 59, quotation from "Session of September 10, 1811," *Diario de Cortes VIII*, 234-236.

¹⁴ Alicia Tjarks, "Comparative Demographic Analysis of Texas, 1777-1793" in *New Spain's Northern Frontier, Essays on Spain in the American West, 1540-1821*, edited by David J Weber (Dallas: Southern Methodist University Press, 1979) 153, 157.

¹⁵ Justo Sierra, *The Political Evolution of the Mexican People*, translated by Charles Ramsdell, (Austin, University of Texas, 1969) 155. Moises Gonzalez Navarro "Racism and *Mestizaje*" in *Common Borders, Uncommon Paths, Culture, and National Identity in U.S.- Mexican Relations*, (Wilmington DE: Scholarly Resources Inc. 1997) 43. Wilbert H. Timmons, "*The Political and Social Ideas of Morelos*" in *Mexico, From Independence to Revolution, 1810-1910*, Edited by W. Dirk Raat (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1982) 29.

¹⁶ Eugene C. Barker, editor, *The Austin Papers*, Volume III (Austin: 1926) quotations on pages 82, and 162.

¹⁷ Wendall G. Addington, "Slave Insurrections in Texas," *Journal of Negro History*, Vol 35, No 4, (1950) 411-412. Paul D. Lack, *The Texas Revolutionary Experience, A Political and Social History, 1835-1836*, (College Station: Texas A&M Press, 1992) 241-244.

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¹⁹ R.M. Potter, "Escape of Karnes and Teal from Matamoros," *The Quarterly of the Texas State Historical Association*, (Vol. IV, No. 2, 1900) 72-84. Quotation from José Urrea, *Diary of the Military Operations of the Division which under the Command of General José Urrea Campaigned in Texas*, in Carlos E. Castañeda, *The Mexican Side of the Texan Revolution*, (New York: Arno Press. 1976) 270.

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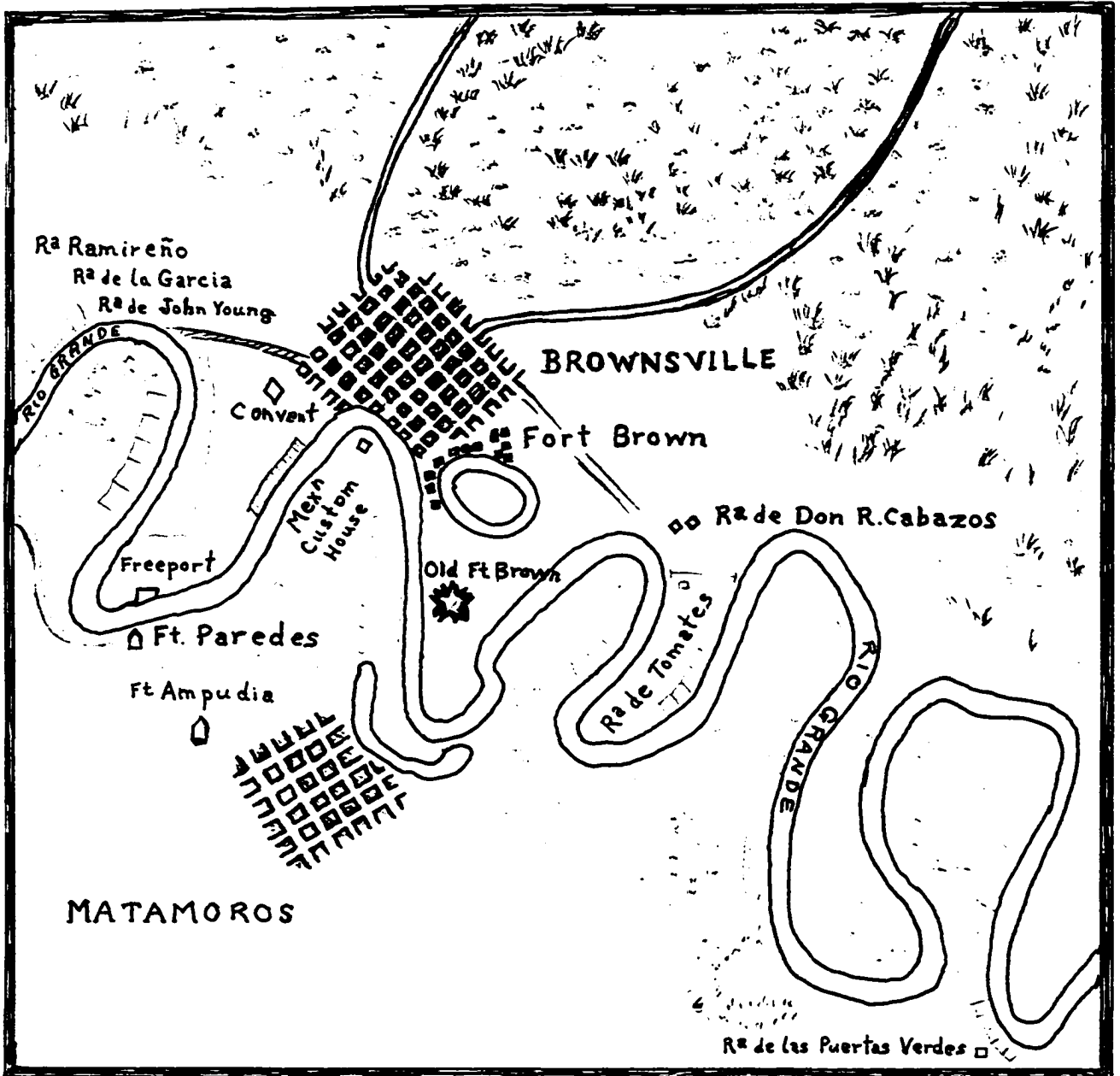
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MATAMOROS AND BROWNSVILLE IN 1853

from: "Map between the United States and Mexico, surveyed 1853, under the direction of W. H. Emory," 1857

CHAPTER III

ORIGINS AND EARLY HISTORY OF MATAMOROS

The city of Matamoros, Tamaulipas is located in the Rio Grande Delta, about 35 miles west of where the river enters the Gulf of Mexico. Known as the Río Bravo in Mexico, the river forms part of the international border of the United States and Mexico as well as the dividing line between the state of Texas and the northeastern Mexican state of Tamaulipas. As one of the major rivers of North America, the Rio Grande has provided the life-sustaining water vital for human habitation for thousands of years. The varied animal and plant life found on the coastal plain and in the estuaries along the gulf coast provided a subsistence diet for the Coahuiltecan and coastal Karankawa bands that lived in the Rio Grande Delta at the time of the arrival of Europeans in North America. Long barrier islands of sand and shell composition stretch over a hundred miles north and south of the mouth of the river following the coastline of the Gulf of Mexico. Separated from the mainland by long, shallow stretches of water running along their length, these islands formed a barrier to entrance from the sea to vast areas of the coastal plain of present day south Texas and northeastern Mexico. The mouths of rivers entering the gulf and the naturally formed passes between the barrier islands and the sea were the few places allowing ready access to the mainland for travelers from the sea. The geographical features that characterized the area around the mouth of the Rio Grande, shaped over eons by the forces of nature, greatly influenced Spanish exploration and settlement in the Rio Grande Delta.

The early European sailors found the mouth of the Rio Grande blocked to deep draft vessels by a hard sand bar covered by about four feet of water at high tide. Travel any distance up the river by sailboat was an arduous endeavor because of the serpentine course the river took as it dropped onto its relatively flat final stretch to the sea. About five miles to the north of the mouth of the river was a opening in the barrier island with an offshore sandbar with a depth at high tide that allowed ships to enter the shelter of a cove in the shallow Laguna Madre. French, Dutch and English ships would occasionally enter the pass, called *Brazos de Santiago* by the Spanish, seeking shelter from tropical storms. After a good rain, fresh water could be found in nearby ponds on the mainland. While the Spanish Colonial government required that all imports enter the eastern port of Veracruz, Brazos Santiago became the off-loading point for smuggled foreign trade goods destined for Matamoros and other parts of northeastern Mexico.¹

Over its millions of years of coursing toward the gulf, the river's course has sculpted distinctive physical characteristics in its lower delta. The remnants of two ancient riverbeds, the Arroyo Colorado to the north and the Arroyo Cajas Pintas to the south of the river, split off from the main channel and drain into the coastal estuaries. The meanderings of the main channel left oxbow lakes, known as *resacas*, on the north side of the river, while overflow from flooding formed small lakes, or *esteros*, on the south side. Where the river cut across its own loops it formed small islands called *bancos*, covered with a thick growth of mesquite, huisache and myriad other plants that characterized the *chaparral* of the Rio Grande Delta.

Spanish explorers first entered the Rio Grande Delta area in the early 1500s. As part of a failed bid to extend his power to the western Gulf of Mexico, the governor of the

island of Jamaica, Francisco de Garay, sent four ships in the spring of 1519 along the Gulf Coast from Florida to Veracruz. Under the command of Alonso Alvaréz de Piñeda, this expedition was notable in that it produced the first map of the coast between Florida and Mexico and showed many of the rivers that emptied into the Gulf.²

In 1528, an expedition sent by Nuño de Guzmán, the governor of the Province of Pánuco and under the command of Sancho de Caniego, followed the coast north from the Pánuco River proceeding up the coast to the area in the vicinity of the mouth of the Rio Grande. The expedition lasted five months and may have been a failed attempt to establish a permanent settlement along the Rio Grande. The reports made by the early Spanish visitors to the area of the Rio Grande Delta did not create great interest in settling the region. A 1529 map of the Gulf region described this area with the legend, "*en toda esta costa . . . no se espera de allar oro como la nueva españa.*"³ The Spanish would settle the mineral rich areas to the south and west before they again turned their attention to the Rio Grande Delta.

The discovery of silver on the slopes of the Sierra Madre Oriental and the surrounding plateaus led to the settlement of Zacatecas in 1548, Cerralvo (about 40 miles south of the Rio Grande) in 1583, and León (later named Monterrey) in 1586. Although the keystone of the Spanish economy in the northeastern province of Nuevo León was mining, it depended heavily on stock raising and farming for food and draft animals. The allocation of lands and Indian labor by the systems of *encomienda* and *repartamiento* supplied the mechanism for supporting the mining economy. As the Spanish established their mining operations, the local indigenous inhabitants were forced to labor in the mines or work in agricultural and pastoral occupations. As the Spanish settlements spread

northward, many of the Indian groups resisted the encroachment into their homeland and enslavement as laborers in the mines. They fled to mountain hideouts in *la sierra tamaulipeca* from which they raided Spanish settlements and attacked travelers. The Spanish countered with military campaigns against the resisting Indian bands and many fled northward. The Rio Grande Delta was in the center of the coastal region between the San Antonio River to the north and the Pánuco River to the south. It was described as *tierra despoblada* on Spanish maps and given the name of *la Costa del Seno Mejicano*: the coast of the Mexican womb. It was to this area that many of the dispossessed Indians of the Sierra Madre Oriental fled in the face of the spreading Spanish invasion. The original Coahuiltecan inhabitants, already decimated by smallpox, measles and other diseases unknowingly brought across the Atlantic from Europe and Africa after 1492, were either absorbed by the refugee groups from the south or fled northward. African slaves were brought into the mining regions of northern Mexico to replace the Indian slaves that were found to be ill suited to the heavy and dangerous labor in the mines. The Africans were also thought to be more resistant to the poisonous effects of the mercury that was used in extracting the silver from the crushed ore in the *patio* or mercury amalgam process that the Spanish first put into practice beginning in 1554. Zacatecas and Parral were the two mining centers in northern Mexico with the largest African-Mexican population and included free blacks as well as slaves.⁴

Not until the 1690s did the Spanish push north of the Rio Grande to establish settlements in eastern Texas and western Louisiana. Although extensively explored and claimed by Spain for almost 200 years, the upper Gulf Coast region held little promise of the same mineral riches that had led to the establishment of the Spanish stronghold in

Mexico. It would be a challenge to their claim of the region by the French that would again draw the Spanish across the Rio Grande and beyond to the Mississippi River. In 1685, La Salle sailed into *Bahia del Espiritu Santo*, now known as Matagorda Bay, less than 500 miles north of Tampico with about 200 soldiers and colonists. Although their short-lived colony on Garcitas Creek was a failure that ended with the death of almost the entire group, it was soon followed by French trading posts along the Mississippi to its mouth and to the east at Biloxi and on Mobile Bay. This activity by its main rival for land in North America spurred renewed Spanish interest in the area northeast of the Rio Grande.

In an effort to extend its foothold as far to the east as possible and to try to establish trading alliances with the Hasinai Indians, the Spanish effort was focused in present-day east Texas and western Louisiana. In the 1690s and early 1700s, the Spanish made several attempts to establish permanent settlements in the form of missions to the Hasinai and military presidios. The route the Spanish took from Mexico to east Texas was an inland route that began in Coahuila and went northeast toward Matagorda Bay and then followed the coastline. The mission of San Antonio de Valero and nearby San Antonio de Béxar presidio were established in 1718 along the Spanish trail to east Texas. Remnant Coahuiltecan bands were taken into the missions by the Franciscan missionaries that sought to christianize them and train them in agricultural pursuits in an effort to assimilate them into the developing Spanish frontier community.⁵ The Rio Grande Delta region continued to be known as *tierra despoblada* on Spanish maps.

Although the exact time and circumstances are not known, it was probably sometime before 1700 that fugitive Africans first found refuge in the area along the lower

Rio Grande. They may have been escaping survivors of some forgotten slave ship wrecked by a storm along the Mexican coast or they may have been African slaves from one of the ships of John Hawkins. An English corsair and slave trader, Hawkins lost a sea battle with Spanish ships near Veracruz in 1568 and half of the men from one of his ships were left on the Mexican coast north of Tampico.⁶

The first mention of the Africans, or their descendants, in historical documents came about as a result of the first expedition of José de Escandón to the lower Rio Grande in 1747. The Escandón expedition consisted of seven separate contingents originating in different parts of northeastern Mexico that rendezvoused near the river with the objective of determining the feasibility of establishing settlements along the Rio Grande and north towards the Nueces River. Arriving near the mouth of the Rio Grande in February of 1747, Escandón's expedition encountered some 2,000 native inhabitants living in the area. Some of these Indians apparently told the Spaniards about a group or band that had distinctive characteristics and whose ancestors had arrived "from the sea." The description of the group led Escandón and his men to believe that they must have been descended from Africans who had arrived in the area years before. Evidently the Africans had obtained wives from one or more of the Indian groups living in the region and had established family groups. This band of African-Indians was referred to in documents as *Negros*, not to be confused with another group of Indians also mentioned in the Spanish records of the Rio Grande Delta and known as *Mulatos*.⁷

The Africans continued to be mentioned in Spanish documents during the next half century. In a letter written at Reynosa in 1750, Escandón stated that they presented no threat to the Spanish settlements and that the Spanish were trying to get them to enter

a mission. A map drawn in 1757 indicated that the group was living between the main channel of the Río Grande and a southern distributary, perhaps the Arroyo Cajas Pintas. Around the same time the Africans were reported engaging in hostilities with some of the neighboring Indian groups. It was noted that they used spears and shields as well as the bow and arrow and they were identified as shipwreck survivors, adding credibility to the theory that they were escapees from a slave ship. In 1798 they were mentioned in a report as living east of Reynosa and it was stated that they would occasionally visit the Mission of San Joaquín de Monte, located near that settlement. It was reported that the band had a population of ninety-nine, consisting of fifty men, thirty-five women, eight boys and six girls. It was said that they were at peace with the Spanish settlers and would sometimes camp near the settlers' ranches. By the first decade of the 19th century this African group seems to have blended into the general population of the lower Río Grande region to the point that they were no longer distinguishable as a separate entity. At least one story concerning an eighteenth century encounter between a young Mexican shepherd and the "tall dark Indians with long slender shields and spears" was part of a family's oral history in the Matamoros – Brownsville area and was still being retold some two hundred years after the event took place.⁸

After the initial 1747 expedition and survey of the lower Río Grande by Escandón, a caravan of 2,500 settlers, 750 soldiers and two missionaries left Querétaro in December of 1748. Traveling northward, the caravan gained more settlers in San Luis Potosí and Tula. Six settlements and two missions were established in what is now the northeastern state of Tamaulipas, including Villa de Santa María de Llera, San Fernando de Güemes, and Villa Santander, which would become the capital of the new province of

Nuevo Santander. In March of 1749, Escandón arrived at the place where the San Juan River enters the Rio Grande. Forty families and some soldiers led by Captain Blás María de la Garza Falcón had already arrived there from Nuevo León. Here Escandón founded the first settlement on the lower Rio Grande, Nuestra Señora de Santa Ana de Camargo. Twelve leagues to the east, Escandón rendezvoused with Captain Carlos Cantú and there was founded La Villa de Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe de Reynosa with forty families and eleven soldiers, as well as the Mission of San Joaquín de Monte with over 100 Indian families. In May of 1750, the settlement of San Ignacio de Revilla was founded at the junction of the Rio Salado and the Rio Grande. Two years later Lugar de Mier was officially established when thirty-eight families from Cerralvo joined nineteen families that had been ranching in that area since 1734. The mission of Nuestra Señora de los Dolores and the town of Laredo were established even farther upriver near the present-day city of Laredo.⁹

The Escandón settlements along the lower Rio Grande were situated a considerable distance from the gulf coastline. Reynosa, closest to the river's mouth, was eighty miles upriver, a journey of several days by oxcart or on horseback. There were several reasons for establishing the settlements away from the coastline. Since the only official port of entry for the east coast of Mexico was at the port city of Veracruz, the vice regal authorities had not included a mandate to create a port at the mouth of the river or at Brazos Santiago. A settlement near the coast would also be more vulnerable to attack from French or English buccaneers. The lower elevations of the land close to the sea made it subject to extensive flooding after heavy rains, providing breeding grounds for swarms of mosquitoes and other insects. For these reasons the preferred location for

settlements were the low hills of limestone and clay found along the river in the upper reaches of the delta. While the overflow from periodic flooding watered the fields of corn closer to the river, the settlements on the higher land were usually safe from the river's floodwaters. In 1806 the settlement of Reynosa was relocated to several small hills several miles to the east of the original site because of flooding that occurred when the river overflowed its banks.¹⁰

The settlements of Reynosa and Mier were also located near ancient trails running to salt lakes located about two days travel to the north. Long a source of salt for the Coahuiltecan, the Spanish discovered the deposits in the 16th century and sent expeditions from the settlements of Nuevo Leon to mine the salt lake they named *El Sal del Rey*, the King's Salt. It was described in 1795 by vice regal inspector Félix María Calleja del Rey in his report, "Their beds are solid masses of coagulated salt that the rains do not liquefy. Blocks are taken out as from a quarry, and the salt has been know to coagulate to a depth of two varas."¹¹

Closer to the coast, along the south bank of the river the Escandón expedition had encountered two small lakes near a low hill. In 1686 and 1687 this place had been used as a *paraje*, or camp, by Captain Alonso de León on two of his expeditions to the north in search of the French settlement near Espiritu Santo Bay. In 1706, another Spanish expedition under Captain Juan José de Hinojosa was sent to investigate the report of a French shipwreck at Brazos Santiago. Impressed by the beauty of the lakes, he named the spot *Paraje de los Esteros Hermosos*. Sometime after 1750, several families from Reynosa and Camargo went to live in this place that would eventually be known as Matamoros. These families began to pasture cattle in the area and made a small ranch

settlement on the hill, naming it *San Juan de los Esteros Hermosos*. In 1793, Franciscan friars from Zacatecas arrived to gather the Indian inhabitants of the area into a *congregación*. This was a nuclear settlement that gathered dispersed groups into a central location for religious instruction and to provide for a labor force. The settlement was renamed *Congregación de Nuestra Señora del Refugio de los Esteros* and a civil government was formed for the settlement.¹²

The Spanish settlers in the Seno Mexicano were cattle and sheep ranchers. The Escandón expedition brought thousands of head of cattle and sheep into the Rio Grande Delta region in the mid 18th century. In 1757 Inspector José Tienda de Cuervo estimated that the recently settled province of Nuevo Santander contained 80,000 head of cattle, horses and mules and more than 300,000 sheep and goats. Blás María de la Garza Falcón from Camargo established a ranch named the Santa Petronila and Enrique Villarreal established the Rincón del Oso in the wild country between the Rio Grande and Nueces rivers. The land grants along the lower Rio Grande River provided frontage along the river in order to provide land that could be watered by seasonal floods for planting maize, oats, beans, chile and squash. The grants, called *porciones*, were strips of land extending away from the river to encompass irrigable farming land and grazing land for sheep and cattle. In a report dated December 22, 1814, Felipe Roque de la Portilla listed the names of twenty-eight ranches and their residents in the area of Refugio de los Esteros. He also noted that on the ranches were “275 pack mules, 56 saddle mules and 450 tame horses.”¹³

The independence of Mexico from Spain portended change for the small ranching settlements along the lower Rio Grande River. For hundreds of years the only Gulf port through which the Spanish Crown allowed goods to be imported into Mexico or exported

to Spain or Spanish possessions was the port of Veracruz. In 1811 Miguel Ramos de Arizpe urged the opening and development of seaports along the Mexican Gulf Coast as part of a plan to stimulate the economic development of the sparsely populated northeastern provinces. Although Spain officially opened Refugio de los Esteros to foreign commerce in 1820, the turmoil created by Mexico's struggle for independence between 1810 and 1821 had allowed contraband trade to flourish for many years with goods entering through Brazos Santiago and the mouth of the Rio Grande where a small seaside village would spring up that would come to be known by the incongruous name of Bagdad.¹⁴

The civil administrations of Refugio de los Esteros maintained an official stance of loyalty to the Spanish Crown. The upper class elite that held the reins of power in the settlements had a vested interest in maintaining the status quo and was probably wary of the movement started by Hidalgo and Morelos. However, by the time the news arrived proclaiming the Plan de Iguala as the governing mandate in 1821 the tide had turned so strongly against the Spanish colonial powers that to resist the overwhelming desire for change would have been detrimental to their continued prosperity and well-being. Upon receiving the notice the Alcalde and residents of Refugio de los Esteros held a ceremony pledging loyalty to Emperor Agustín de Iturbide and the Plan de Iguala.¹⁵

The settlers that came to the lower Rio Grande with the Escandón colonizing expedition in 1749 were drawn from the existing populations of the provinces of northern New Spain, including Nuevo León, Coahuila, San Luis Potosí and Querétaro. Some of the colonists, like Escandón, were *peninsulares* born in Spain. Others were *criollos*, sons and daughters of Spaniards, but born in the Americas. The *peninsulares* and *criollos*

made up the governing elite. Other settlers were mestizos and castas who were mixtures of varying degrees of Spanish, Mexican Indian and African. Included among these were a number of Tlaxcaltecan Indians whose ancestors had allied with Hernán Cortés in the conquest of the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlán and who had continued to help the Spanish in the colonization of the northern provinces and the pacification of the Indians that were found there. These latter groups would have made up the working class of herdsmen, artisans, builders and teamsters.¹⁶ A number of the native Indian groups that were encountered by the Spanish in the Rio Grande Delta continued to live in the area, some in missions near the Spanish villages. These general racial and social characteristics would have been fairly closely reflected in the population of the small agrarian settlement of Refugio de los Esteros for the first half-century of its existence. During this period the number of inhabitants increased at a relatively slow but steady rate with few new arrivals from outside the community. In 1820 a census conducted by the parish priest, José Nicolás Ballí recorded a total of 2,320 inhabitants.¹⁷ It is doubtful that the inhabitants of this small ranching settlement could have fully understood the tremendous political and economic forces that were about to cause tremendous and irreversible changes in the social fabric and institutions in the region

There was certainly no shortage of omens to portend the transformation of the world of the *vecinos* of Refugio de los Esteros. In 1823, after a reign of only nine months, Emperor Iturbide was executed and the following year the province of Nuevo Santander became the newly formed state of Tamaulipas and its capital was moved to the colonial town of Padilla. The name of the new state capital was changed to Victoria in honor of the first president of the Republic of Mexico. The Nueces River continued as

the northern boundary of the new state of Tamaulipas.¹⁸ In 1826 the name of Refugio de los Esteros was changed to Villa de Matamoros, “to perpetuate the memory of one of the martyrs of the homeland.”¹⁹

The French naturalist Jean Louis Berlandier provided the best description of early Matamoros when he visited the area in 1829 as part of the official Mexican *Comisión de Límites*. In 1827 General Manuel Mier y Terán was appointed to head the boundary commission charged with the task of accurately determining the boundary of Mexico and the United States. Berlandier, along with geologist Rafael Chovel, traveled along the Rio Grande from Laredo to the Gulf of Mexico. They visited each town and recorded their observations of the inhabitants, plants and animals, as well as giving a description of the geological features of the area.²⁰ In August 1829 Berlandier visited Matamoros and wrote:

The town of Matamoros lies on the right bank of the Río Bravo del Norte, on a terrain which the river wears away every year. . . The huts which composed the former Congregación del Refugio have all disappeared, the greater part borne away by the river, which several times inundated the town. . . When the inhabitants of the villages situated on the banks of the river saw ships arriving at Matamoros, settlers arrived from Camargo, Reynosa, and several points in Nuevo León. Mingling with foreign merchants of various nations, in a few years they raised a city of about ten thousand inhabitants. A large number of Americans, Irishman, Frenchmen, Italians, etc., are found there, carrying on a small trade or living from their industry. During the first years of the foundation of Matamoros there were neither thieves nor vagabonds, for the creoles are naturally little inclined to vice. Later on, however, the frequently repeated revolutions of the Republic multiplied the numbers of malefactors, whom the authorities – usually either incompetent or overly tolerant – have never bothered to prosecute, and who have perverted even the people of the country.²¹

Berlandier described some of the dwellings in Matamoros comparing them to those of Louisiana in that they were constructed of brick and he said, "...they present a very special contrast because of the diverse tastes of those who had them built."²²

Although the year of the first construction of a fired brick building in Matamoros is not known, the first document dealing with bricks and brick-making to be found in the Matamoros Municipal Archives is dated August, 1832 and presents a suit brought by Juan José Victoriano Sánchez demanding the delivery of 3,500 bricks from Guillermo Alsbury.²² In April, 1834 another suit was brought by Francisco Arjona y Gonzalez alleging that he paid "180 pesos y 3 reales" for 3,000 bricks that he never received from Nicolás Druet.²³ Architectural historian Stephen Fox said "building professionals from New Orleans – some of whom seem to have been African American – were instrumental in popularizing brick construction in Matamoros in the 1820s and 1830s."²⁴

Berlandier described the houses of the poorer classes as being *jacales*, which were typically constructed by burying the ends of mesquite posts in the earth and weaving smaller branches, usually of willow, between the uprights to form the walls. The roofs were usually made by laying poles between the tops of the upright posts to form a framework for a pitched roof and then thatching the frame with the stalks and leaves of cane grass or rushes. The walls could be plastered with mud to make them more weatherproof. The *jacal* was the predominant type of dwelling among the lower socio-economic residents of Matamoros and the surrounding ranches and it was used well into the 20th century as a low cost, easily constructed structure.²⁵

Berlandier also described the transportation of trade goods through Matamoros to the interior of northern Mexico:

The maritime trade of the inhabitants of Matamoros is principally with Louisiana. Some ships come from other ports of the United States and a very small number from Europe. The merchandise is transported in the interior to Nuevo León, to the fairs in Saltillo, and even to those of San Juan de los Lagos. In certain circumstances merchandise is furnished to Chihuahua, Durango, Zacatecas, and even San Luis Potosí.²⁶

The establishment of Matamoros as a port of entry and the transport of trade goods through the city led to the influx of merchants from Louisiana, New England and Europe. Clerks and salesmen were brought to keep track of goods and payments and warehouses were built and stores opened. Matamoros quickly became the gateway for trade entering the Rio Grande Delta and all of northeastern Mexico. Manufactured goods from New England and Europe were in great demand among a populace that had been limited to locally produced goods or expensive imported items from Spain under three hundred years of Spanish colonial rule. Household and farm tools, needles, thread and cloth were all things that were needed in the mining settlements and ranchos.

From northern Mexico caravans of oxcarts converged on Matamoros, bringing silver cast into coins and small bars. This specie was the method of payment preferred by the American and English merchants due to a constant demand for the precious metals in the monetary systems of the North American and European countries. Cattle hides and wool were other products exported out of northeastern Mexico in exchange for the manufactured goods brought by ship to Brazos Santiago. The hides were salted and packed into bundles to be taken onto the ships and transported to the manufacturing centers in England and the northeastern United States where they were tanned and made into shoes, saddles, harnesses and other manufactured products. Wool was shipped to textile mills in the northeastern United States and in England.²⁷

Early shipments were unloaded at Brazos Santiago and then transported by cart or wagon across the sand flats and along the river to Matamoros to be further sent to settlements along the Rio Grande or into northeastern Mexico. Trade fairs in Mexico provided a steady demand for imported goods being funneled through Matamoros. Every summer, in late August, caravans of wooden *carretas* pulled by oxen took trade goods south to the autumn trade fairs in Saltillo, Aguascalientes, Allende, y San Juan de los Lagos. Beginning in 1839 steamships brought from the United States and Texas began operating along the lower Rio Grande and the imports were transported up the river by boat. In less than a half a century, the commercial activity that began in the early 1800s transformed Matamoros from an agrarian ranching settlement of some two or three thousand *rancheros* to a cosmopolitan trading center that had drawn new residents from almost every corner of the earth.²⁸

The increased economic activity in and around Matamoros was one of the factors that attracted fugitive slaves and free African Americans to this area of northeastern Mexico beginning in the 1820s. Fugitive slaves from East Texas and Louisiana cotton and sugar plantations found a place of refuge and economic opportunity in the city of Matamoros. Among the fugitive slaves that found refuge in Matamoros around this time were two former slaves of General Sam Houston by the names of Tom and Esau. Tom was described as “a light Quadroon boy . . . he could read and write and had acquired in addition to these accomplishments quite a vocabulary of technical words and phrases.”²⁹ It seems that Houston hired out Tom and Esau to work off of his Cedar Point plantation along the Buffalo Bayou. Hiring slaves out to work for others was a common practice which was usually done when a slave’s labor was not needed by the owner or when a

slave had a particular skill that was in demand, such as carpentry or bricklaying. Tom and Esau used the occasion to leave for Mexico.³⁰ They had been in Matamoros for about two years when the Texan prisoners from the ill-fated Mier Expedition passed through the city in January 1843, after their capture by the Mexican General Ampudia.

The war for Texas independence in 1836 had changed the city of Matamoros and the rest of the Rio Grande Delta into landmarks on a political and cultural boundary. Although the Republic of Texas claimed the Rio Grande as its border with Mexico, the area between the Nueces River and the Rio Grande remained the home of the Mexican ranching families that had established small settlements throughout the area beginning in the 18th century. The closest settlement in the Republic of Texas was Corpus Christi, located where the Nueces entered the Gulf of Mexico. The Rio Grande Delta had been spared any fighting between the rebelling Texans and Mexico until the invasion of town of Mier by Texan forces in 1842.

The Mier Expedition began as retaliation for repeated attacks by Mexican forces on Texas and the attack on and temporary occupation of San Antonio by Mexican General Adrian Woll. Texan General Alexander Somervell led a force of about 700 men to take the town of Laredo on the Rio Grande west of San Antonio. After finding that the Mexican Army had left the town before their arrival and not finding even enough food to feed his men, Somervell left Laredo. About 200 of his soldiers, discontented with the results of their expedition to Laredo and intent on plundering a Mexican settlement, went down the Rio Grande and invaded the small town of Mier. The Texan force under the command of Thomas Jefferson Green took the town without encountering major resistance. Upon hearing the news of the occupation of Mier by the Texans, a Mexican

force of 700 soldiers under the command of General Ampudia marched from Matamoros, arriving on Christmas Day, 1842. A fierce battle took place in the streets and buildings of Mier and the outnumbered Texans surrendered after taking a number of casualties.³¹

The captives were taken to Matamoros where several of the prisoners recognized Tom and Esau and one of them later described the encounter:

While at this place, many citizens of consequence came out from Matamoros to congratulate General Ampudia upon his victory. Among these were two of our acquaintance, *Tom* and *Esau*. These *gentlemen*, now of so much consequence as to ride three leagues in a coach to congratulate General Ampudia upon his *splendid victory*, were General Sam Houston's two barbers, so well known to the public Texas. Tom treated us with marked respect and attention, spoke of his prospects in that country, his intended nuptials, invited us to the wedding, and said that General Ampudia was to stand godfather on the occasion.³²

During the prisoners stay in Matamoros, some residents of the city helped the Texans by collecting money for food and clothing for them. Another former slave from Texas, by the name of Noble, had fled to Mexico and was living in Matamoros. He reportedly collected several hundred dollars from residents of the city to purchase provisions for the Texan prisoners. The prisoners remained in Matamoros for five days before they were marched south toward Mexico City. About a month after they left Matamoros they managed to escape at the small *rancho* of Salado, near Saltillo. When they were recaptured the punitive order was given that every tenth man would be shot. One hundred and fifty-nine white beans were placed in an earthen crock. Seventeen black beans were mixed in and the prisoners took a bean out of the crock until all seventeen black beans had been chosen. A white bean signified exemption and a black bean signified death. The Mexican soldiers kept a written record of the names of those

who took out black beans and the seventeen unlucky prisoners were shot by a firing squad. The ugly incidents associated with the Mier Expedition would provide fuel for smoldering feelings of resentment and hatred on both sides of the border for decades to come.³³

The battle in Mier and the capture of the Texans signaled the beginning of an era of increasing conflict and lawlessness in the Rio Grande Delta. As the largest town and a military headquarters, Matamoros became a focal point in the political and social unrest that had its origins not only in the occupation and takeover of Mexican territory by Texas and the United States, but also in the internal turmoil that came with the struggle to form a Mexican nation. In 1846, the annexation of Texas by the United States and the subsequent refusal by Mexico to accept the Rio Grande as the border between Texas and Mexico brought the U.S. Army under the command of General Zachary Taylor to the left bank of the Rio Grande where an earthen fortification was hastily built among the mesquites and scattered Mexican *milpas*, or corn fields across from Matamoros. First called Fort Texas, it was later renamed Fort Brown in memory of Major Jacob Brown who was killed by an artillery round fired from Mexican gun emplacements in Matamoros. United States and Mexican forces exchanged artillery fire during five days and nights of almost constant firing of cannon and mortar rounds across the river in May 1846. However, this would not be the deciding battle for Matamoros. In an attempt to cut off and surround Taylor's forces, Mexican General Mariano Arista crossed the Rio Grande to attack the U.S. supply trains traveling between Brazos Santiago and Fort Brown. The Mexican forces were defeated in the resulting battles of Palo Alto and

Resaca de la Palma, and General Taylor's forces occupied the city of Matamoros as the Mexican forces retreated toward Monterrey.³⁴

The Rio Grande Delta was quickly transformed into a staging area for the U.S. invasion of northern Mexico. Military supplies and soldiers were transferred from steamships anchored offshore of Brazos Santiago and the mouth of the river onto smaller steam powered launches called lighters to be carried over the sandbars into the Laguna Madre or into the Rio Grande. Rows of tents soon occupied fields near Fort Brown and on the outskirts of Matamoros. A supply depot was established at the town of Camargo where the San Juan River entered the Rio Grande for military supplies destined for the campaign in northern Mexico.³⁵

Accompanying many of the U.S. Army officers were their personal servants who performed any number of daily tasks such as tending their horses or making fires and cooking their food. At the time of the war with Mexico, an officer's pay was increased seven or eight dollars a month if they had a personal servant. They were also paid \$2.50 a month extra to provide clothing for the servant. This provided a financial incentive for an officer to hire a servant or, if he owned slaves, to bring a slave as his servant. Many of these servants were free African Americans who were paid to accompany the officers. Sometimes the servant was hired by a group of officers to work for them. One of the officers that came to northern Mexico with General Zachary Taylor wrote in a letter to a newspaper back home that: "We brought a Negro man with us from New Orleans. We pay him \$20 a month."³⁶ Within days of reaching the Rio Grande, several U.S. Army officers lost their personal servants when they crossed the river and melted into the Mexican countryside around Matamoros. In a letter to his wife dated April 17, 1846, one

officer wrote from “Camp Opposite Matamoros” describing the escape of several servants:

Gault, Captain Ross, and Gatlin have all lost their black boys. Sandy was gone some time, but says that he got lost and some Mexicans carried him to Matamoros. They offered him a wife. He sat at table with the ladies and gentlemen of the town, hired himself out in the country for ten dollars a month, and then ran off and came back. It is mighty easy to lose a servant here, for if he attempts to run away, he either succeeds or is shot. There is no middle ground to occupy.³⁷

The fleeing servants may have been some of those mentioned in the *Matamoros Gazette* on April 11 in a report on forty-three deserters and six runaway slaves that had crossed the river to Matamoros.³⁸ They were again mentioned by Captain William S. Henry, a correspondent for the New York newspaper *Spirit of the Times*, writing from the army’s camp opposite Matamoros that “three or four of the officers’ slaves have run away” and one returned telling how he had been treated with “the most distinguished consideration . . . having been offered the first seat at the table, and the best bed in the house.”³⁹ On April 20 the Mexican authorities offered 320 acres of land to any deserter who would assume Mexican citizenship.⁴⁰

Attitudes toward African Americans and slavery differed among the Anglo Americans that arrived in South Texas in the 1840s. Most of the soldiers, teamsters and merchants brought with them the attitudes prevalent in a segregated society where constitutional rights to property and liberty were largely granted according to skin color and race. The inferior status that most Anglo Americans had assigned to African Americans and Indians for generations was readily transferred to the Mexican, first by the settlers entering Texas and later by the soldiers and civilians arriving in Mexico during

the war. The economic and political domination of the border region by Anglo Americans was based on the marginalization and exploitation of the Mexican, Indian and African American elements of the population.⁴¹ While many were more than willing to turn in a fugitive slave for a reward, others saw the inhumanity of slavery and sympathized with Blacks trying to escape into Mexico. Major William Chapman and his wife, Helen, lived at Brazos Santiago, Matamoros, and Brownsville between 1848 and 1852. An article mistakenly crediting Major Chapman with the apprehension and capture of four fugitive slaves from Louisiana near the mouth of the Rio Grande was the subject of a letter written by Major Chapman to the New Orleans *Daily True Delta* newspaper. Helen Chapman also commented on the incident and the mistaken identification of her husband as the person responsible for the apprehension in a letter to her mother.⁴² The letters reveal the attitudes held by some of the Anglo Americans in the Rio Grande Delta toward slavery and the fugitive slaves escaping to Mexico. The edition dated September 25, 1850 of the New Orleans *Daily True Delta* contained the report of a Brownsville correspondent on the capture of the fugitive slaves that stated:

A few days since, Major Chapman, quartermaster at this port [Brazos Santiago], succeeded in arresting four Negroes who had escaped from Calcaieue, La., and crossed the Sabine, and were in a canoe in Boca Chica. When caught, they were in a canoe pulling as hard as they could for the Mexican shore, which they would have reached in ten or twelve minutes. They were, I believe, sent to New Orleans on the *Yacht*. Great praise is due to Major Chapman for his energy as manifested in the matter.⁴³

The October 11 edition of the newspaper contained the text of a letter from Chapman concerning the report of the apprehension of the fugitive slaves. It stated:

Whatever credit is due in the transaction, belongs wholly and exclusively to Capt. Edward M. Anderson, commander of the U.S. Steamer, *Mentoria*. At the time of the capture, I was thirty miles distant, and had no possible connection with the seizure or transportation to New Orleans. . . I had no part whatever in the seizure of four slaves from Calcacieu, La.⁴⁴

Helen Chapman wrote a letter to her mother, dated October 1, 1850, in which she recounted the contents of the erroneous article and expressed her feelings on the slaves escaping to Mexico, stating that:

We, as Northern people retaining all our Northern feelings and principles, felt a profound pity for these poor creatures who had made almost superhuman exertions to obtain their freedom. . . . Poor creatures, my heart ached for their hard fates, but for those whose misfortunes it is to live in slave states, there is no help but to suffer in silence. The more I know of slavery, the more horrible it seems to me and darker and darker the clouds that hang over the future.⁴⁵

While the views of Major and Mrs. Chapman toward slavery were not typical of the majority of Anglo Americans arriving in southern Texas and northern Mexico in the 1840s, they show that some of those that arrived in South Texas during the War with Mexico were opposed to slavery and the potential for its expansion into the territories gained by the United States in the war with Mexico.

The arrival of the United States Army in the Rio Grande Delta brought numerous civilian teamsters, merchants, and steamboat operators. Most of them came from the eastern and southern United States. None of those would be as successful at taking advantage of the new trade with the U.S. government as Charles Stillman. The son of a Yankee trader, Stillman had first accompanied his father on a trading run to Matamoros in 1828 and stayed to sell the goods that his father shipped in through Brazos Santiago. Now, twenty years later, he was poised to become the richest man in south Texas. On

December 9, 1848, Charles Stillman and two partners, Jacob Mussina and Samuel Belden, formed the Brownsville Town Company on the left bank of the river, across from Matamoros.⁴⁶ Although the river that separated them was now a political boundary, the cultural interaction and exchange between the two cities would enrich the inhabitants as well as cause conflict between them. The two cities that would become to be known as “The Twin Cities of the Border” and “Border *Cuates*” were destined to experience friendship and conflict in good times and bad.⁴⁷

During the decade following the War with Mexico the bitterness and distrust between the Anglo Americans living along the Rio Grande and Mexicans on both sides of the border often resulted in violent confrontations. The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo resulted in the loss to Mexico of almost one half of its national territory and changed the Rio Grande from a waterway that drew people from both sides together to a political and social boundary where two people faced off in aggressive and defensive stances. The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, while in theory guaranteeing the right of Mexican land holdings, in practice resulted in the large-scale loss of property by legal and illegal means.⁴⁸

Brownsville became the center for land lawyers adept at contesting the title of Mexican land grant holders and obtaining a judge’s decision that was favorable to their wealthy clients. Mexican landowners were often intimidated into accepting a fraction of the worth of their land after being led to believe that they would eventually lose title to the land anyway. Mexican ranches were based on an economic system where the land provided subsistence for hundreds of families that lived and worked the land, while at the same time providing for a higher standard for the owner of the land. The Anglo

American ranching system was geared toward the owner reaping a monetary profit and paying the *vaquero* a wage and a place to build a shelter for his family. Landowners not able to adapt to the new structure became economically marginalized and eventually were unable to pay taxes and other expenses, losing their land to the sheriff's auction.⁴⁹

The concept of community ownership of land and resources on the land was different under the Anglo American system of landownership that went into effect in south Texas under the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. The land grants made under colonial Spanish authority had provided for land being set aside for common use for grazing livestock, gathering firewood or building materials, and providing land for individuals without resources to build homes and cultivate crops. The Anglo American land ownership system had a far more limited concept of providing for community land and resources. Individuals were generally awarded a "headright" grant that provided land for heads of families, usually based on the promise or completion of military service to the state and the need to extend control over lands. Anglo Americans coming into south Texas regarded the long-established Mexican communal lands as being unassigned lands that were available to anyone who could establish a valid claim to them. The loss of land to Anglo American ranchers between the Rio Grande and the Nueces River embittered many Tejanos and set the stage for armed resistance and rebellion.⁵⁰

The persistent and continual loss of land to the Anglo Americans and Europeans arriving in the Rio Grande Delta with the objective of economic benefit from the social and political aftermath of the War with Mexico finally provoked open warfare in 1859. In July of that year an incident on the streets of Brownsville sparked the beginning of what would lead to a series of border skirmishes and raids that brought United States

federal forces and Texas Rangers to battle the Mexicano and Tejano insurgents. That July morning a young rancher by the name of Juan Nepomuceno Cortina witnessed the beating of a Mexican man by town marshal Robert Shears on the streets of Brownsville. Cortina recognized the man as a former hand on his mother's ranch and intervened. After an exchange of heated words, Cortina shot Shears and rode out of Brownsville with the other man on the back of his horse.⁵¹ This incident led to a September raid on the town of Brownsville by Cortina and about seventy-five other men. Evidence suggests that Cortina and his followers were targeting specific individuals that September night. Two of those killed, William Peter Neale and George Morris, had both been accused by Cortina of killing Mexicans and going unpunished. The town jailer was also shot after he refused to turn over the keys to the jail and the prisoners were subsequently released by the raiders.⁵² Cortina was persuaded by Mexican authorities in Matamoros, including José María Carvajal, to get out of Brownsville and he crossed the river into Mexico. In October, after hearing of the jailing of one of his men in Brownsville, he crossed back into Texas and built a hasty fortification at his mother's Rancho del Carmen, nine miles up the river from Brownsville. While there at Rancho del Carmen, Cortina issued several *pronuncimientos* describing the persecution and robbing of Tejanos "for no other crime on our part than that of being of Mexican origin."⁵³

Cortina and his force of about 250 men outnumbered any forces that the Brownsville town government could muster and continued raids brought a contingent of about one hundred Texas Rangers to the border. The same night the rangers arrived in Brownsville, one of Cortina's lieutenants by the name of Tomás Cabrera was taken from the Brownsville jail and lynched. When Cortina received word he retaliated by lynching

three captives and the hostilities continued to escalate. A force of 165 United States troops under the command of Major Samuel Heintzelman arrived in the border region in December 1859 to join forces with the Texas Rangers in a campaign to kill or capture Cortina and his followers.⁵⁴

While Cortina decried the same system that oppressed the African American and denied them their basic human rights, he did not directly address the problem of slavery in his *pronuncimientos*.⁵⁵ Evidence that African Americans may have joined Cortina's forces appear in Texan newspaper reports describing his forces. The Corpus Christi *Rancho* printed a letter on January 7, 1860 with the headline "Important from the Frontier – Another Fight – Cortina on the Walk" and stating:

On the 26th [of December, 1859] we fought Cortina's forces numbering 650 men, or as near as that can be ascertained – we had about 350 men, all told. . . . Cortina and about 200 of his men crossed into Mexico About eight miles above here. In a few days it is expected that about 500 of us will cross over into Mexico with 4 pieces of artillery, and demand him [Cortina] of the authorities, as well as all the negroes, &c.⁵⁶

This could indicate either that the writer believed that African Americans were part of Cortina's forces or that they were present in Mexico as fugitive slaves and their surrender would be demanded. The skirmish took place near the settlement of Rio Grande, but according to Major Heintzelman, the reported number of Cortina's troops was greatly exaggerated. Heintzelman stated "Cortinas with 20 men crossed the river [into Mexico] just above us by swimming."⁵⁷ Later, another article in the *Rancho* said that:

Cortina, after his successful march up the Rio Grande and Peaceable entry into Rio Grande city, stated, it is believed for the first time publicly, that he should, after the country was in his power to the Sabine, liberate all the slaves.⁵⁸

Although Cortina certainly would have welcomed any fugitive slaves into his small band of fighters, there is little evidence that they joined Cortina in any substantial numbers in his battles against the dominant Anglo American political system in the Rio Grande Delta. The number of male slaves in the Texas border region does not seem to ever been more than one or two dozen, and free African Americans in southern Texas never had the opportunity to own anything but relatively small plots of marginally productive land so they did not have the same reasons for resisting Anglo American encroachment into the region. Neither would the fugitive slaves and immigrant freemen in northeastern Mexico have had overwhelming motives to risk their lives and freedom fighting against a system that they had previously found to be so pervasive and dominant that the most effective means of resistance was to flee to Mexico. Cortina retreated into the Burgos Mountains in Tamaulipas where he remained for a year, returning to the border region with the secession of Texas from the Union and fought against the Confederate forces in South Texas during the Civil War.⁵⁹

Situated on the right bank of the Rio Grande, not far from the mouth of the river, Matamoros could be reached by land or by sea. Besides its location, the political and social factors made it a preferred destination for fugitive slaves from Texas and Louisiana. While slaves had been escaping into Spanish Texas since before 1800, the independence of Mexico from Spanish rule brought with it the official abolishment of slavery in the country. The expansion of the cotton economy and slavery in the southern United States was seen as one of the main causes for Mexico's loss of Texas and Mexican leaders were well aware that weakening slavery in the United States could serve to help protect Mexico's northern territory from that rapidly growing republic. The

increasing international trade that came with Mexican independence made Matamoros a gateway for manufactured goods entering northeastern Mexico and for cattle hides, silver and other products leaving the area. This economic activity created a demand for the labor of former slaves and provided them with means to make a living. The increase in economic activity also contributed to the emigration of a number of free African Americans who found work in the expanding economy of Matamoros. African Americans were welcomed on the northern frontier as Mexico tried to encourage immigration and the establishment of settlements in an area of its country that was increasingly threatened by raiding bands of Comanche, Apache and other indigenous groups that took advantage of the power vacuum created by the loss of Mexico's northern territories in 1848.

¹ Jean Luis Berlandier, *Journey to Mexico During the Years 1826-1834*, Volume II (Austin: Texas State Historical Association, 1980) 443-444. Milo Kearney and Anthony Knopp, *Boom and Bust: The Historical Cycles of Matamoros and Brownsville*, (Austin: Eakin Press, 1991) 18-19.

² Robert S. Weddle, *Spanish Sea: The Gulf of Mexico in North American Discovery, 1500-1685*, (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1985) 95-103.

³ Quotation from map by Diego Rivera in Margaret H. Smith, *The Lower Rio Grande Region in Tamaulipas, Mexico*, Diss. University of Texas, 1961, (Ann Arbor: UMI, 1982) 55.

⁴ John F. Bannon, ed., *Bolton and the Spanish Borderlands*, (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1964) 72-73, 107-111. Albert H. Schroeder and Dan S. Matson, *A Colony on the Move: Gaspar Castaño de Sosa's Journal, 1590-1591*, (Santa Fe: The School of American Research, 1965) 6,7. Martin Salinas, *Indians of the Rio Grande Delta: Their Role in the History of Southern Texas and Northeastern Mexico*, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990) 14-16. Carlos Manuel Valdés and Ildefonso Dávila, *Esclavos negros en Saltillo Siglos XVII a XIX*, (Saltillo: Universidad Autónoma de Coahuila, 1989) 15-16. O.H.K. Spate, *The Spanish Lake*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press) 186.

⁵ Robert S. Weddle, *The French Thorn: Rival Explorers in the Spanish Sea, 1682-1762*, (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1991) 26,27, 87,88. Seymour V. Connor, *Texas: A History*, (Arlington Heights, Illinois: Harlan Davidson, 1971) 20-32. Roberto Mario Salmón, "An American 'Melting Pot' in the Coahuiltecan Homeland" in *More Studies in Brownsville History*, edited by Milo Kearney, (Brownsville: Pan American University at Brownsville, 1989) 32-35.

⁶ Herbert J. Miller, *José de Escandón, Colonizer of Nuevo Santander*, (Edinburg, Texas: New Santander Press, 1980) 12. O. H. K. Spate, *The Spanish Lake*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1979) 234.

⁷ Miller, *José de Escandón*, 9-11. Salinas, *Indians of the Rio Grande Delta*, 54.

⁸ María Luisa Herrera Casaús, *Presencia y Esclavitud del Negro en La Huasteca*, (Ciudad Victoria: Instituto de Investigaciones Históricas de la Universidad Autónoma de Tamaulipas, 1989) 24,25. Salinas, 54,55. José de Escandón, *Estado que al presente tiene la Colonia de Nuevo Santander*, Archivo General de la Nación – Provincias Internas, Box 2Q211 (Austin: Center for American History, University of Texas) 484-486. Peter Gawenda, "The Leather Shields: A Folktale" in *Still More Studies in Brownsville History*, edited by Milo Kearney (Brownsville: University of Texas at Brownsville, 1991) 153-156.

⁹ Donald E. Chipman, *Spanish Texas, 1519-1821*, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1992) 166-169. Miller, 12-16, 30-38.

¹⁰ Luis Berlandier and Rafaél Chovel, *Diario de Viage de La Comisión de Límites Que Puso el Gobierno de la República*, (Mexico: Tipografía de Juan R Navarro, 1850) 143-147. Milo Kearney and Anthony Knopp, *Border Cuates, A History of the U.S.-Mexican Twin Cities*, (Austin: Eakin Press, 1995) 25. T.R. Fehrenbach, *Lone Star: A History of Texas and the Texans*, (New York: American Legacy Press, 1983) 76. Lopez de la Cámara Alta, *Descripción de la Nueva Colonia de Santander*, Box 2Q179 (Austin: Center for American History) 125-126.

¹¹ David M. Vigness, ed. and trans., "Nuevo Santander in 1795: A Provincial Inspection by Félix Calleja," *Southwestern Historical Quarterly*, (April, 1972) 472. Tienda de Cuervo, *Historia de la Colonia del Seno Mejicano*, Box 2Q179 (Austin: Center for American History, University of Texas) 163-164.

¹² Eliseo Paredes Manzano, *Homenaje a los Fundadores de la Heróica, Leal e Invicta Matamoros en el Sesquicentenario de su Nuevo Nombre*, (Matamoros, Tamaulipas, N.P. 1976) 7-13.

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- ¹³ Jack Jackson, *Los Mesteños. Spanish Ranching in Texas, 1721-1821*, (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1986) 443-447, Quotation on 635.
- ¹⁴ Smith, *The Lower Rio Grande*, 137,138. Kearney and Knopp, *Border Cuates*, 26,27.
- ¹⁵ Raul Canseco Botello, *Historia de Heroica Matamoros*, Second Edition, (Matamoros, Tamaulipas, Mexico: Talleres Tipográficos de Litográfica Jardin, 1981) 21-24.
- ¹⁶ Peter Gerhard, *The Northern Frontier of New Spain*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982) 366. Lyman D. Platt, "The Escandón Settlement of Nueva España," *Hispanic Genealogical Journal*, (Volume 12, 1994) 4-7. Canseco Botello, 21.
- ¹⁷ Canseco Botello, 21.
- ¹⁸ Victor Alba, *The Mexicans, The Making of a Nation*, (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1967) 40. Smith, *The Lower Rio Grande*, 147.
- ¹⁹ Canseco Botello, 23,24. Quotation from "Decreto No. 12 de el Tercer Congreso de la Entidad."
- ²⁰ Handbook of Texas Online, "Jean Louis Berlandier"
<<http://www.tsha.utexas.edu/handbook/online/articles/view/bbfbbe56.html>> [accessed 19 January, 2003]
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- ²² Berlandier, *Journey to Mexico*, 435.
- ²³ Andrés F. Cuellar, *Cronología Histórica de Matamoros*, (Matamoros: Museo Municipal Casamata, n.d.) 13.
- ²⁴ Archivo Histórico de Matamoros (located in Casa Mata Museum, Matamoros, Tamaulipas), Justicia, Caja 2, Fojas Útiles 6, Expediente 26.
- ²⁵ Quotation in: Scott Cook, *Mexican Brick Culture in the Building of Texas, 1800s-1980s*, (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1998) 30.
- ²⁶ Berlandier, *Journey to Mexico*, 435. Photograph of *jacal* in: Frank N. Samponaro and Paul J. Vanderwood, *War Scare on the Rio Grande: Robert Runyon's Photographs of the Border Conflict, 1913-1916*. (Austin: Texas State Historical Association, 1992) 22.
- ²⁷ Berlandier, *Journey to Mexico*, 438.
- ²⁸ Roberto M. Salmón, "The Brownsville Protest of January 1866," in *Still More Studies in Brownsville History*, edited by Milo Kearney, (Brownsville: University of Texas at Brownsville, 1991) 221. Pat Kelley, *River of Lost Dreams, Navigation on the Rio Grande*, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1986) 16-21.
- ²⁹ Canseco Botello, *Historia de Heroica Matamoros*, 71,72. William and William Alfred Neale, edited by John C. and Virginia Kemp Rayburn, *Century of Conflict, 1821-1913*, (Waco: Texian Press, 1966) 72-78. Tom Lea, *The King Ranch*, (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1957) 51-55.
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CHAPTER IV
AFRICAN AMERICANS IN TEXAS AND
THE SOUTHERN UNITED STATES

The settlers entering Mexican Texas from the southern United States with Stephen F. Austin brought African American slaves with them. In January 1821, his father Moses Austin had originally made a colonization proposal to Spanish officials in San Antonio de Béxar that included a provision that permitted settlers to bring slaves into Spanish Texas. In the summer of that same year Moses Austin died in Missouri and Stephen F. Austin went to San Antonio where Spanish officials confirmed him as heir to his father's land grant and allowed him to proceed with the plans to bring 300 families from the southern United States. The Austin Colony lay in south-central Texas and included the valleys of the lower Brazos and Colorado Rivers, encompassing some of the best bottom-land for farming in eastern Texas. The DeWitt Colony, another Anglo American land grant that attracted settlers from the south, was situated inland from the coast along the Guadalupe River and to the west of the Austin Colony. Unauthorized Anglo American settlements also existed between the Louisiana border and the Austin Colony and in a small area on the southern bank of the Red River. One large slaveholder that came to Austin Colony was Jared E. Groce, a wealthy planter who had earlier moved from Georgia to Alabama and then traveled to Texas overland in a caravan of fifty wagons. He arrived in January 1822, bringing ninety slaves with him, and established the Bernardo Plantation along the Brazos River.¹

On September 27, 1821, after an eleven-year struggle, Mexico gained its independence from Spain. The Mexican government, while still encouraging the Anglo-American settlers to emigrate to the sparsely populated state of Coahuila y Texas, was opposed to slavery and to any further introduction of slaves into Texas. The decade following independence from Spain was marked by turmoil and frequent changes in Mexico's leadership, which prevented the enactment of strict policies that would have effectively prohibited slavery in Texas. In 1824 the state of Coahuila y Texas passed a colonization law that simply stated, "In respect to the introduction of slaves, the new settlers shall subject themselves to the laws that are now, and shall hereafter be established on the subject." When Austin requested clarification from the secretary of state in Saltillo, he was told that the decree of 1824 prohibiting the trade in slaves was the only law affecting the Texas slaveholders and that "What is not prohibited is to be understood as permitted." Emigrants from the southern United States could continue to bring slaves to Texas. By 1825, there were 443 African American slaves in Austin's colony and they represented almost 25 percent of the total population of 1,800.²

In 1827, the state of Coahuila y Texas adopted a new constitution declaring that no one could be born a slave in the state and that after six months the introduction of slaves would be prohibited. The Texan slaveholders reacted by drawing up contracts for their slaves that made them appear to be indentured servants. A land buyer from the United States traveling in Texas in 1831 noted that one slaveholder "evaded the Mexican law of emancipation . . . by getting his negroes to sign a bond promising to serve him for ninety nine years. This man advised others to pursue the same course, and aided them in

drawing up their papers.”³ Slaves continued to be sold and passed on as inheritance, things that would not be permitted if they were indentured servants.

In an effort to stop the flood of unauthorized settlers from the southern slaveholding states the Mexican government enacted the Law of April 6, 1830, prohibiting any further immigration into Texas from the United States. From the point of view of the Mexican government, the Anglo American settlers felt little obligation to obey Mexican laws and were growing increasingly restless under the laws of a nation that prohibited slavery. After observing the Anglo American settlements in Texas a Mexican official stated, “the spark that will start the conflagration that will deprive us of Texas, will start from this colony.”⁴

It did not take long for the African American slaves in Mexican Texas to take advantage of the opportunity for freedom offered by Mexico’s official disapproval of slavery. Benjamin Milam, an Anglo-American *empresario* in Texas wrote to Joel R. Poinsett, the first United States minister to Mexico, citing the history of slaves escaping from Louisiana into Spanish Texas and declaring that the Texan slave owners now faced the same problem with slaves escaping into the Mexican states of Tamaulipas and Nuevo León. Milam strongly suggested that Poinsett obtain a reciprocal type of agreement whereby the escaped slaves might be returned to their owners.⁵ Mexico, becoming more and more aware of the pending expansion of the United States into territory claimed by Mexico, realized the potential value of destabilizing the institution of slavery in Texas. When Poinsett proposed including a provision for returning fugitive slaves in the Treaty of Amity, Commerce, and Navigation, the Mexican Senate soundly rejected it, saying that, “it would be most extraordinary that in a treaty between two free republics slavery

should be encouraged by obliging ours to deliver up fugitive slaves to their merciless and barbarous masters of North America.”⁶

Although Mexico wavered in its enforcement of the nation’s prohibition of slavery, the uncertainty of continued title to their human property dissuaded many southern slaveholders from moving to Texas in the period between 1821 and 1836. Since the areas where cotton could be easily cultivated and readily transported to the coast was generally found in the river bottomland along the lower reaches of the Brazos, Trinity, and Guadalupe Rivers, the geographical area in which slave labor was profitable was limited. These two factors served to limit the number of African American slaves in Mexican Texas before 1836. When the Mexican government sent Colonel Juan N. Almonte on an inspection of Texas in 1834, he estimated the slave population at about 2,000 out of a total of about 21,000, excluding the Indian population.⁷

Not all the African American slaves in Texas were brought from the southern states. After the outlawing of international slave trade in the United States in 1808, the upper Texas Gulf Coast became the point of disembarkation for slaves being smuggled into Louisiana from the West Indies and Africa. The Bowie brothers, Jim, John J. and Rezin, bought slaves from the infamous Jean Laffite on Galveston Island and smuggled their human cargo into Louisiana.⁸ With the coming of the Anglo American settlers into southeast Texas, a new market was created for smuggled slaves along the Gulf Coast. The collector of import duties at the Port of Velasco wrote in March 1836 to Governor Henry Smith saying:

Sir: The Schooner Shenandoah, entered this port on the 28th Ult, and proceeded up the river without reporting, I immediately pursued her, with some of the regulars – belonging to Captain Turners company, we overhauled

the vessel, that night and found, that the negroes had been landed – the negroes were however found during the Night. . . . Sterling McNeil landed a cargo of negroes (africans) on the coast, I endeavored to seize the vessel, but was unsuccessful – this traffic in African negroes, is increasing daily, and as no laws has emanated directly from the Council in relation to this matter, I am very much in need of instruction, the number of negroes landed from the *Shenandoah* is 170.⁹

Visiting the Buffalo Bayou in March 1836, Colonel William F. Gray encountered “four young African negroes, two males, two females,” that may have been part of the human cargo brought to Texas on the *Shenandoah*. He described them, writing:

They look mild, gentle, docile, and have never been used to labor. They are delicately formed; the females in particular have straight, slender figures, and delicate arms and hands. They have the thick lips and negro features, and although understanding not a word of English, are quick of apprehension; have good ears, and repeat words that are spoken to them with remarkable accuracy.¹⁰

In April he was dismayed to find another group of about fifty recently arrived Africans, “living out of doors, like cattle,” near Point Bolivar.¹¹

The living conditions experienced by slaves and treatment at the hands of Anglo American slaveholder in Texas varied greatly. Although a few servants might have been treated much like family members and lived in the same house as the slaveholder, most field hands suffered from extreme neglect and often received punishment so brutal that it occasionally resulted in death or maiming, even though the owner was careful to protect property costing as much as \$2,000. First hand observations on the treatment of slaves in Texas demonstrate that conditions could vary. In 1833, abolitionist Benjamin Lundy visited the Brazos River farm of William Stafford, a Texas settler from Tennessee with “ten or twelve slaves.” Lundy said:

Stafford thinks slavery a bad thing, but he says it is no harm for him to hold slaves and treat them well until all will agree to abolish the institution, and to send the emancipated away to another country. He treats his slaves, in fact, so far as work is concerned, very much like other people.¹²

In December 1843 Englishman William Bollaert, traveling through Montgomery, Texas, wrote that:

Generally speaking throughout the Republic the Negroes are well treated, and I can bear witness that they are not over-worked, or ill-used. In the eastern counties they are principally 'family Negroes,' or brought up by their owners, and when they get old are kept upon the plantations and not sold to an indifferent master. A good worker in fine weather will pick 1,000 pounds of cotton per week. The Negro is allowed Saturday after 12 o'clock until Monday morning to arrange his or her own domestic affairs, but if they choose to pick cotton on Saturday afternoon, they are remunerated for it, and on some plantations all the cotton they thus pick is given to them and may amount to 30 dollars for the season. On well-regulated plantations, each Negro family has its log house, half an acre of land behind it for a garden to support some stock, pigs, poultry, which the Negro consumes or sells on his own account.¹³

Writing after the U.S. annexation of Texas, German immigrant Viktor Bracht observed that "aside from the thought of perpetual slavery," the slaves' lot in Texas was "undoubtedly far better than that of many servants and most factory workers of Europe."¹⁴

Other observers found slavery in Texas inhumane and cruel. General Manuel Mier y Terán thought that the potential for flight to freedom in Mexico led to increased cruelty. He wrote to the President of Mexico on June 30, 1828 saying,

[T]hese slaves are beginning to learn the favorable intent of the Mexican law toward their unfortunate condition and are becoming restless under the yoke, and the masters, in the effort to retain them, are making that yoke even heavier; they extract their teeth, set the dogs to tear them in pieces,

the most lenient being he who but flogs his slaves until they are flayed.¹⁵

The slaves themselves left vivid descriptions of the oppressive conditions and inhumane treatment that they suffered in Texas and throughout the southern United States. Some of the most grievous complaints concerned punishment. Slaves were cruelly whipped for numerous and varied infractions both real and imagined. Punishment was meted out for not working hard enough, for running away, for talking back to an owner or overseer, and for theft, particularly of food and edible crops. Slave resistance to punishment was frequent and ranged from passive work slowdowns or careless acts that caused damage to equipment or farm animals to active physical resistance, flight and open revolt. A factor that caused vast and lasting emotional suffering among slaves was the breaking up of families and the refusal of owners to allow their slaves to choose their own mates for marriage. As late as the 1930s, former slaves expressed anguish over children, parents, siblings, and spouses lost through forced separation.¹⁶

Slaves soon realized that active resistance in the form of insurrection and open rebellion, whether by individuals or in groups, invariably provoked reprisals that resulted in the death or severe punishment of the participants. The first incident of slave insurrection in Texas occurred along the Brazos River in the summer of 1835. When fighting broke out between Mexican and Texan forces the slaves saw an opportunity for freedom and attempted to overthrow the slaveholders. Reaction was swift and lethal and “nearly 100 had been taken up many whipped nearly to death some hung etc.”¹⁷ The mere suspicion that an insurrection was being planned was enough to provoke slave owners into action. In September 1841, the *Houston Telegraph and Texas Register* reported:

In Nacogdoches, the conduct of the slaves has been such as to excite fears that an insurrection was contemplated by the slave population. Negroes might be seen at all hours of night, coming in and going out of town, and going from one plantation to another, on their master's saddle or perhaps plough horse, after his having been worked in the plough all day; negro dances were regular once and sometimes thrice a week. In order to put a stop to this evil, the citizens of Nacogdoches and the surrounding settlements held several meetings; and at a very large meeting held in that town, resolved themselves into patrol companies, their vigilance has been increasing, and it has had, so far, a most salutary effect.¹⁸

In the face of drastic measures aimed at preventing and punishing insurrection many slaves opted for escape. Prior to 1836, African American slaves could find refuge within Texas by fleeing to Mexican settlements. There they were effectively out of the reach of pursuing slave owners or their agents. In March 1841, an elderly black man was captured along with two other former slaves in a battle near Seguin, Texas between Texan Rangers led by Edward Burleson and “a motley crowd of Mexicans, runaway negroes and Bilouxie Indians, under General Cordova.”¹⁹ The gray-haired man of about sixty years of age asked his captors: “What you going to do with us?” When informed that they would probably be sold back into slavery, he replied:

“You had better kill us now, for we will fight till we die before we will be slaves again. Do you see them hills?” pointing to Chapote Hills which stood out in bold relief on the south side of the river twelve miles below Seguin. . . .
 “When I was a young man I worked in a silver mine with the Mexicans in them hills, and I have been free ever sence, but before I was free I kilt women and children enough to swim in their blood if collected to one place. I kilt my master and his whole family, nine in number, to get my freedom, and I won't be a slave long at a time no more.”²⁰

The old man was tried by a court martial and shot before a firing squad, along with one of the other prisoners who also said that he would not submit to slavery again. The murder

of nine members of one family would seem to have warranted mention in newspapers or other contemporary records and may have been made up either by the former slave or his captors, possibly in an effort to justify the execution of the two prisoners. The youngest of the three agreed to accept being returned to slavery and was auctioned.²¹

There were other indications that Tejanos aided and abetted slaves in their escape during the Mexican era. In August 1833, Benjamin Lundy described the escape of a number of slaves from a farm near Gonzalez:

After continuing my route for some distance, and until sunset, I came to the house of Francis Berry, who was originally from Virginia, and came last from Missouri. He has no slaves, all he formerly had having run away, as he states, "to the Spaniards." He thinks himself best off without them.²²

No figures exist for the number of slaves that escaped in Texas during the years from 1821 to 1836. The report made by Colonel Juan N. Almonte in 1834 put the total number of slaves in Texas at 2,000. After Texan independence the secure status of slavery ensured by the new constitution caused the number of slaves to steadily increase. In 1847, the first census taken after the annexation of Texas by the United States in 1845 reported the number of slaves at 38,753, out of a total population of 142,009.²³

The Mexican government welcomed fugitive slaves crossing the border from Texas into Mexico. Anything that served to weaken slavery in Texas and the southern United States was seen by Mexico as a means to prevent what was already being declared as the "Manifest Destiny" of its North American neighbor -- the expansion of the United States from the Atlantic to the Pacific. Mexico also gained some satisfaction in seeing Texans lose some of their property after they had taken a northern province from Mexico by force of arms. There are numerous records that indicate that Tejanos helped slaves to

escape in Texas and that the Mexican government provided safe haven for slaves that reached that country's border. When Frederick Law Olmsted visited Piedras Negras, across the Rio Grande from Eagle Pass, in 1854 he spoke with a former slave who had fled to Mexico four or five years before and "was very well satisfied with the country." The man, who was born in Virginia, stated, "He was a mechanic, and could earn a dollar quite easily, by his trade, every day. He could speak Spanish fluently, and had traveled extensively in Mexico, sometimes on his own business and sometimes as a servant or muleteer." He went on to tell Olmsted about the conditions that other fugitive slaves found in Mexico, saying that many of the recently arrived were "poor and miserable" but those that learned the language, "if they chose to be industrious, they could live very comfortably." Olmsted observed that even though life was often difficult for the fugitive slave in Mexico, not more than one in a thousand, if any, ever voluntarily crossed the river into Texas to be returned to slavery.²⁴

One of the most frequent complaints Anglo Americans made about Mexicans in Texas was that the Tejanos assisted slaves in escaping from their owners. An article in a Houston newspaper reported that twenty-five slaves had escaped from their owner near the town of Bastrop on the night of December 27, 1844. The article said, "They were mounted on some of the best horses that could be found, and several of them were well armed. It is supposed that some Mexican has enticed them to flee to the Mexican settlements west of the Rio Grande." A week later another article appeared with the headline, "Runaway Negroes Captured," stating that seventeen of the slaves had been captured on the Guadalupe River near Seguin, but that "Seven or eight Slaves are still missing, and it is feared they have escaped to the Mexican settlement on the Rio

Grande.”²⁵ Matagorda County residents complained that Tejanos were “taking the likeliest negro girls for wives . . . and they often steal horses and these girls, too and endeavor to run them to Mexico.”²⁶ The tendency of Tejanos to associate with African Americans and accept them as equals was one of the factors that led to the efforts on the part of Anglo American Texans to drive the Tejano from southeastern Texas after 1836. When describing the Mexican community of San Antonio, Olmsted noted, “They consort freely with the negroes, making no distinction from pride of race. A few, of old Spanish blood, have purchased negro servants, but most of them regard slavery with abhorrence.”²⁷

Many fugitive slaves escaping to Mexico passed through or near San Antonio. The closest and most direct route to Mexico from the Brazos and Colorado River cotton farms took them southwest toward San Antonio and then west into settlements across the Rio Grande in Mexico. Although they faced the constant danger of capture along the trail, the escaping slaves could usually count on late-night handouts of food and help from other slaves as they traveled toward San Antonio. To the west of San Antonio the trail passed through a semi-arid, uninhabited expanse with few sources of water. Here the escaping slave faced the danger of becoming lost and starving to death or being attacked and killed by the nomadic Apache and Comanche bands that regularly traveled through the area.²⁸

The escaping slaves sometimes traveled alone but more often they fled in small groups. Although no accounts by any of the fugitive slaves are known to exist, accounts of the pursuit of fugitive slaves illustrate the dangers they faced on their journey of flight to Mexico. Charles W. Webber described the pursuit of a young slave in a somewhat

romanticized story entitled, “The Border Chase: My First Day with the Rangers.” In February 1839, Webber accompanied a “Brassos Planter,” identified only as “Taney,” to San Antonio to pick up a fugitive slave who had been detained there by the rangers. Webber observed, “Escaping to Mexico is a favorite scheme of the slaves of Texas, and numbers of them annually attempt, and some few effect it.”²⁹ He also remarked on the aid given escaping slaves by Tejanos, saying the “Mexican population of Texas had always exhibited a warm sympathy for [fugitive slaves], and never failed to assist them in getting off by every means in their power.”³⁰

The young slave in the story managed to escape from his chains after seeing that his master had arrived in San Antonio to reclaim him. He broke out during the night and jumping on “a splendid horse, the very finest in town,” fled across the prairie toward Mexico with a lead of several hours on the group of pursuing rangers that assembled at dawn in the plaza of San Antonio. The young fugitive slave was never apprehended and presumably made it to freedom in Mexico, aided by the protagonist of the story, a Tejano named Gonzalez. Gonzalez is portrayed as a ruthless and clever enemy of the rangers who is captured after ambushing and wounding one of the pursuing rangers. Gonzalez so impressed his captors with his cool bravado that they spared his life and freed him.³¹ As he was leaving, Gonzalez told the rangers how he came to help the young fugitive slave:

He told us, that, attracted by a human sympathy for the Boy, whom he had met accidentally in the shop of the Blacksmith, with his heavy chains on – he had furnished him with a file to cut them, and advised him to the utmost as to the manner of his escape.³²

Although Webber's account probably exaggerates the benevolent attitude demonstrated by the rangers toward their captive, it serves to illustrate the help that fugitive slaves received from the Tejano community in the years of the Republic of Texas.

A more realistic description of a running battle between a small group of runaway slaves and a posse of Anglo American settlers that took place near the Colorado River was described by Noah Smithwick in his book, *The Evolution of a State or Recollections of Old Texas Days*. After they noticed the light of a campfire in the river bottom one night, Smithwick and five other men set out in the early dawn hours to investigate. As the fugitive slaves were observed leaving the camp, dogs were let go to pursue them. Shortly, a gunshot was heard and one of the bloodhounds returned wounded. After renewing the chase, the posse became separated in two groups. Smithwick, leading with another dog on a rope, came upon the fugitives and demanded their surrender. One of the fugitive slaves responded by bringing up his rifle. As Smithwick opened fire with his pistol, the firearm exploded in his hand, probably from an overcharge of gunpowder. Thinking that the man with the rifle had also fired, Smithwick yelled to his companion to charge them with his pistol. The fugitive slave had not fired off his rifle and as Smithwick's companion ran toward them the fugitive with the rifle fired, seriously wounding him. This incident effectively ended the chase and the members of the posse and their bloodhounds limped home.³³ Smithwick, describing what probably became of the fugitive slaves, wrote,

Several days later the fugitives were heard from over on Sandy, where they held up Jim Hamilton and made him give them directions for reaching Mexico. We subsequently learned that the Negroes had escaped from the lower part of the state. They were never recaptured, though one or two parties attempted it. I hope they reached Mexico in

safety. That big fellow deserved to; he certainly was as brave a man as I ever met. Singlehanded – his companions being unarmed – he had whipped six white men, all armed, and as many fierce dogs. That was unquestionably the worst fight I ever got into. I think now, looking back over a life of ninety years, that that was about the meanest thing I ever did. Though having been all my life accustomed to such things I did not then take that view of it. The capture of fugitive slaves was a necessity of the institution.³⁴

Although Noah Smithwick never owned slaves, he felt an obligation to uphold the institution of slavery by pursuing and attempting to capture the fugitive slaves. In 1861, when Texas seceded from the Union, Smithwick received threats because of his support for the Union cause. This caused Smithwick and his family to leave Texas and move to California, where he died in 1899.³⁵

Even after reaching Mexico, fugitive slaves could still find themselves being pursued and captured for return to slavery. An investigation by the Mexican government in 1872 alleged two cross border incidents involving African Americans who were taken by force from Mexico into Texas sometime before the end of the Civil War. Anastacio Aguaso was a fugitive slave who was kidnapped by Mexicans in Matamoros and brought across the river to Texas. Mexican authorities complained to the American authorities and eventually managed to have Aguaso returned to Mexico. Another incident involved an African American in Mexico by the name of Melchor Valenzuela who had been hired to rob Mexican merchants by an individual identified only as “Captain Jack.” Mexican authorities arrested Valenzuela for robbery and released him on bond. Captain Jack, accompanied by several other men, then went into Mexico after Valenzuela and took him at gunpoint back across the river into Texas. The investigation by the Mexican government did not give further details about these individuals but alleged these and

other incidents of African American fugitives being pursued in Mexico and returned to slavery in Texas.³⁶

Several individuals were known to have participated in efforts to recover fugitive slaves from Mexico. William Neale arrived in Matamoros in 1834 and ran a stage line between the coastal port of Bagdad and Matamoros. Born in England, Neale had served on a frigate in the Mexican Navy before settling in northern Mexico. After the war between the United States and Mexico, Neale owned a residence in Brownsville and a ranch at Santa Maria, twenty-five miles up the Rio Grande from Brownsville. A long-time resident of Matamoros, Neale had established strong friendships with the prominent Mexicans and had maintained a neutral position during the war. Known as an influential businessman on both sides of the border, Neale had little trouble dealing with Mexican authorities.³⁷ A biographical sketch of William Neale written in the 1890s stated,

Mr. Neale was constantly called upon by the owners of slaves who escaped, to assist them in recovering their property from Mexico. This frontier was a favorite place for runaway slaves, owing to the facility with which they could cross the boundary into foreign territory, where they were safe from re-capture. In most cases, however, they were glad to return, when their masters followed them to their lairs and offered to take them back to the "Old Cabin Home."³⁸

In the years following the war between Mexico and the United States several filibustering incidents took place along the border established in 1848 by the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. These small-scale invasions of Mexico, organized and carried out by citizens of both countries, on several occasions involved attempts to recover runaway slaves or capture free blacks living in Mexico. In early 1850s, Texas-born José María Carvajal led a group of Americans and Mexicans on a failed filibustering invasion of

northern Mexico. American and foreign merchants in Brownsville and Matamoros had reaped huge profits during and immediately after the war because the United States had drastically lowered the import tariffs for goods entering Mexico. After the treaty, the Mexican government reestablished control over imports into the country and, on several occasions, seized merchants' goods for non-payment of import tariffs. Area merchants along both sides of the Rio Grande supported separatist factions that promised to prevent the central government in Mexico City from collecting the high import duties and facilitate the smuggling activities that had become customary along the border. The filibustering actions became known as the Merchants' War because they supposedly supported the interests of the South Texas and North Mexico merchants against the central Mexican government.³⁹

John S. "Rip" Ford participated alongside Carvajal in the Merchants' War and later described how fugitive slaves in northern Mexico figured in the filibustering efforts:

During those days slaves held in Texas, induced to run away from their masters by Mexicans, found refuge beyond the Rio Grande. It was calculated that there were, at that date, three thousand colored men north of the Sierra Madre who were owned by men living in Texas. General Carbajal acceded to a proposition to have them surrendered to their masters and, if in his power, secure the passage of a law making it a felony for a person in involuntary servitude to escape therefrom and take refuge upon Mexican territory.⁴⁰

In September 1851 a meeting of separatists at the ranch La Loba near Guerrero, Tamaulipas, just south of the Rio Grande River produced a plan that demanded reductions in tariffs and the end to the prohibition of the import of various items into Mexico.⁴¹ Carvajal led the troops assembled to put into effect the tenets of what became to be known as "El Plan de la Loba." That same month they occupied the nearby town of

Camargo for about one month. On October 20, 1851, they abandoned Camargo and began a series of attacks on Matamoros that lasted eleven days. Carvajal and his troops then retreated across the river into Texas and tried to occupy the Mexican town of Cerralvo. The Mexican authorities sent a force of forty Seminole Indians and twenty Black Seminoles to Cerralvo where they fought a battle with the insurgents under Carvajal. After a bloody battle with losses on both sides the invading force retreated back across the Rio Grande into Texas. In February 1852, joined by about 400 additional men from Texas, the group again attacked Camargo but was defeated and driven back across the river where many of them were arrested and jailed in Brownsville for violating the neutrality laws of the United States. General Carvajal was tried on these charges but was found not guilty.⁴²

Although the exact number of fugitive slaves taken back to Texas from Mexico during the Merchants' War is not known, Robert M. Utley wrote, "Many of Carvajal's American recruits had a secondary motive for joining his rebellion: it offered a convenient cover for the lucrative activity of recovering runaway slaves."⁴³

Attempts to recapture slaves in Mexico and return them to slavery probably caused many fugitive slaves to move from the border to areas further to the interior of Mexico where they would not be vulnerable to the fugitive-hunting forays that became more numerous in the 1850s.

The clandestine nature of the activities involved with helping slaves escape into Mexico has resulted in few recorded instances of individuals providing aid to fugitive slaves. Abolitionists were not popular in Texas and aiding fugitive slaves was against the law in the years leading up to the Civil War. One example of an individual helping

slaves to escape to Mexico did not come to light until years later and is preserved in his personal memoirs and family tradition. Leopold Karpeles was born in Prague, Bohemia in 1838 and in his youth he was drawn to the ideals of individual liberty evidenced by American democracy. At the age of eleven he came to Texas, joining an older brother who was an established merchant in Galveston. While working for his brother, Leopold Karpeles grew up on the Texas frontier and acquired the skills needed for survival in the rough environment. Forsaking the tedious regimen of working in his brother's mercantile business, Karpeles signed up as a mounted guard on trading caravans transporting goods south into Mexico. This experience led to a stint as a Texas Ranger in South Texas where he experienced the harsh side of the violence against the Tejanos that was characteristic of the border in the years following the Mexican – American War. Disillusioned and dismayed by the violent tactics and injustice of the Rangers, Karpeles quit the organization. He, along with a friend he met during his time with the Rangers, dedicated their efforts to helping fugitive slaves escape to safety in Mexico. Karpeles and his friend, Sam Butterfield, enlisted the aid of Tejanos and Indians living in the border region in getting the fugitive slaves safely into Mexico.⁴⁴ In 1861, opposed to Texas secession from the Union and the continuance of slavery, Leopold Karpeles left Texas and moved to Massachusetts. He enlisted in the Union forces and fought in various campaigns in the Civil War. He was awarded the Medal of Honor for his actions at the Battle of the Wilderness in May 1864.⁴⁵

Jean-Charles Houzeau was another European emigrant to Texas that opposed slavery and helped African American slaves escape to Mexico. Houzeau was born in Belgium on October 7, 1820. Although his parents were members of an old aristocratic

family, they had raised their son with the principles of liberty that inspired the French revolutionaries of 1789. Jean-Charles Houzeau studied in Belgian and French universities and began his long career as a journalist by writing a series of articles about the industrialization of Europe that dealt with explosions of steam engines, the dangers of coal mining, and child labor in factories. Since his early childhood, Houzeau had been interested in astronomy and published several articles on constellations. As a result of his publications he was appointed as an assistant astronomer at the Royal Observatory in Brussels. He continued writing articles on the plight of the proletariat and this, along with his participation in a democratic rally that resulted in a violent confrontation with Belgian royalists, led to his dismissal from his astronomer's post on April 6, 1849. He left Belgium and traveled throughout Europe, writing several volumes on astronomy and natural history. In 1856, at the age of thirty-six, he became a member of the Belgian Royal Academy. The next year he decided to visit the United States and arrived at New Orleans in October 1858. He spent about six months in New Orleans and there he met and got to know some of the free blacks and African American slaves in that city. He observed in a letter to his parents that the African Americans in New Orleans were "very decent, very kind, very polite, and generally superior to the whites in ordinary relations."⁴⁶

In the spring of 1858, Houzeau left New Orleans and spent the next four years traveling throughout southern and western Texas. He worked as a land surveyor and engaged in natural history and scientific observations that had always interested him. With the outbreak of the Civil War, Houzeau found that his strong philosophical opposition to slavery would not allow him to support the Confederate cause and he began

to help fugitive slaves and Unionists escape from Texas into Mexico. After assisting in the escape of a well-known Unionist that was about to be taken into custody, Houzeau himself was in danger of being arrested by Confederates. Going by the name of Carlos Uzo, he fled to Matamoros in a wagon, traveling as a Mexican teamster. In Matamoros he stayed at the home of a free African American from New Orleans and his wife. He wrote in a letter how they “welcomed me with a warmth that I will never forget.”⁴⁷

Houzeau later lived in Philadelphia and New Orleans and for almost four years he was the editor of the *New Orleans Tribune*, a newspaper for African American residents of that city. After living in Jamaica for several years, Houzeau returned to Belgium where he was appointed as director of the observatory from which he had been dismissed for his political activities twenty-seven years before. In 1882, Houzeau returned to Texas as part of a Belgian astronomical expedition that came to observe the transit of the planet Venus.⁴⁸

Not all of the African Americans that crossed the Rio Grande into Mexico were fugitive slaves. As previously shown, free African Americans were welcomed into Texas under the rule of Spain and later by the Mexican government. When Texas broke away from Mexico, the potential problem caused by incorporating free blacks into the new republic was immediately evident. In 1836 the free black population in Texas was not great – not more than 150 individuals. A number of them had aided the Texan cause in the fight for independence from Mexico.⁴⁹

The thorny problem of having free blacks living in a society where most of their brethren were enslaved was not easily solved. The owners of the slaves realized that the presence of even a relatively small number of free blacks would seriously undermine

their ability to keep the slaves content and complacent. On the other hand, some free blacks owned land and had fought for the cause of Texas independence from Mexico. Under the previous Mexican rule, their status as freemen had been guaranteed. Could their right to liberty be suddenly and arbitrarily revoked? The Republic of Texas Constitution addressed the problem by declaring “no free person of African descent . . . shall be permitted to reside permanently in the republic, without the consent of Congress.” This constitutional clause, while giving the government a means to control this particular population, did not absolutely rule out the possibility that free blacks could legally reside in Texas. The constitution, however, denied citizenship to Indians or persons of African descent.⁵⁰ In June 1837, the Congress of Texas further declared,

that all free Africans or descendants of Africans, who were residing within the Republic of Texas at the date of Declaration of Independence, and their natural issue, are hereby granted and allowed the privilege of remaining in any part of the Republic as long as they choose; on the condition of performing all the duties required of them by law.⁵¹

The Texas legislators clearly chose to take a course that would require no overt action by the government. If they had prohibited free blacks from residing in Texas, then action would have been necessary to enforce the law. Free blacks would have had to been deported or placed into slavery. Some free blacks were married to whites and had children whose race would have to be determined by the authorities. By permitting free African Americans to continue to live in Texas without granting them citizenship and by placing conditions on their continued residence, the legislators avoided having to deal with an unpleasant and difficult task.

Although the constitution did not forbid free blacks from continuing to live in Texas, locally enacted city and county laws placed numerous and onerous restrictions on

their rights and liberties. One example was a Galveston ordinance that prohibited free blacks as well as slaves from being out on the streets after 8:00 p.m. without a permit from a “responsible person,” and under no circumstances could they be on the street of the city after 10:00 p.m.⁵²

In 1840 the Texas Legislature passed a law that prohibited free African Americans from entering Texas and ordered all living in there to leave. This law was probably selectively enforced against individuals deemed “undesirable” by local authorities. In the United States Census of 1850, 397 free African Americans were recorded in the State of Texas and in 1860 the Census showed that the number had decreased by only 42. Although free blacks were widely discriminated against and persecuted in Texas, they were usually allowed to live in an area as long as they served some economic purpose to the community and were not engaged in subverting slaves and encouraging them to flee or revolt.⁵³

Free African Americans in Texas engaged in many different occupations but were almost always restricted to menial types of work. Some were farmers and owned land by right of grants made to them under Spanish and Mexican rule. In the towns and cities many men were employed in day labor and others worked on their own as bakers, barbers or fisherman. Free African American women usually worked in sewing and washing clothing or taking care of children.⁵⁴

The border area along the Rio Grande offered economic opportunity for African Americans as well as a place where they could live in Tejano communities. The proximity to Mexico also afforded a place of refuge when oppressive conditions or unrest threatened their safety. John Ferdinand Webber was born in Vermont and came to

Austin's colony as early as 1826. He married his slave, Silvia Hector, and emancipated her. They were living on Webber's Prairie in Travis County with their children in the 1840s but were subject to increasing hostility from new settlers coming into the area who disapproved of the racially mixed family. In 1853 Webber purchased land along the Rio Grande and moved his family there. He supported the Union at the outbreak of the Civil War and he fled to Mexico, returning to his ranch after the war where he and his wife lived the rest of their lives.⁵⁵ About ten miles west of Webber's ranch was the Jackson Ranch, established by a family of free African Americans who emigrated to south Texas from Alabama in the 1850s.

Ben Kinchlow was a free African American who was only one year old when he arrived in Matamoros in about 1847. Ben, his older brother, and his mother traveled from Wharton, in east Texas, to Matamoros in what was then called an "ambulance," a small, enclosed wagon pulled by four mules. Ben was interviewed in 1938 by a Works Progress Administration researcher and told the story of his family's emigration to Mexico. The interviewer wrote,

When Ben was one year old his mother was freed and given some money. She was sent to Matamoros, Mexico and they lived there and at Brownsville, Texas during the years before and directly following the Civil War.⁵⁶

Ben told how he and his family lived in Matamoros for "about twelve years." They then moved to Brownsville where his mother "went to washing and she made lots of money at it." Ben said that he later lived about 40 miles from Brownsville on a ranch where he raised goats and cattle and planted corn. He described how he ground the corn into meal on a grist mill and hunted deer and quail for meat. He described their home as "a log

cabin with a log chimney da'bbed with mud. The cabin was covered with grass for a roof."⁵⁷

In the interview Ben Kinchlow told about how some slaves escaped into Mexico during the Civil War years:

While I was yet on the border, the plantation owners had to send their cotton to the border to be shipped to other parts, so it was transferred by Negro slaves as drivers. Lots of times, when these Negroes got there and took the cotton from their wagon, they would then be persuaded to go across the border by Meskins, and then they would never return to their master. That is how lots of Negroes got to be free.⁵⁸

The experience of Ben Kinchlow and his family demonstrates how free African Americans adapted to the unique situation that existed along the border between Texas and Mexico. Through hard work they managed to survive and sometimes even prosper in the face of extreme economic hardship, while at the same time coping with learning a new language. After staying a few years in Mexico, some former slaves probably returned to Texas with a new name and identity, their fugitive slave status effectively "forgotten" by the authorities.

The fact that fugitive slaves could gain their freedom by crossing the Rio Grande into Mexico effectively limited the location and extension of slavery in Texas. Matagorda County, more than two hundred miles from the Rio Grande, was the southernmost county with large numbers of slaves. While the Bexar County census of 1860 counted 514 African American slaves, the 1860 census figures for Cameron, Hidalgo and Starr Counties only listed 14 slaves in those three Texas border counties, and almost all were female servants or children. The 1860 census for Cameron County named fifty-eight free African Americans living in and near Brownsville. Of those fifty-eight,

twenty-two were females over the age of sixteen, while only five were males over the age of sixteen.⁵⁹ These figures suggest that free African American males over the age of sixteen found that they were better off living in and around Matamoros than in Cameron County. They may have found that their life and liberty were threatened if they resided in Cameron County, or they may have found that there were more economic opportunities and less restrictions placed on the types of employment in which they could engage in if they lived in Matamoros rather than Cameron County

The turmoil and unsettled social and economic conditions caused by the Civil War in Texas probably enabled increasing numbers of slaves to escape into Mexico. As Ben Kinchlow noted, African American slaves were used as drivers of the wagons that transported the Confederate cotton to the Rio Grande and many used the occasion to escape into Mexico.⁶⁰ Some of the fugitive slaves that had escaped into Matamoros enlisted in the United States Army when the Federal forces reoccupied Brownsville in 1863. Private Benjamin F. McIntyre mentioned this in his diary entry for November 1, 1863, writing, "A large number of negroes who had been sent by their masters to Mexico previous to our coming into Brownsville for security from us have been coming over and joining the Corps d'Afrique."⁶¹

Although McIntyre states that the African Americans were sent into Mexico by their owners, he was probably mistaken on this point. It is more likely that they were fugitive slaves or freemen that had sought refuge in Mexico. Nevertheless, government records for the period show that 33 men had been mustered into the 26th Regiment, Corps d'Afrique following the unit's arrival at Brownsville.⁶² Enlistment in the Union forces

provided African American refugees in Mexico a relatively safe way to return to the United States before the end of the Civil War.

Some of those former refugees that crossed the Rio Grande to join the Union army probably continued to serve in the U.S. Army after Congress passed an act on July 28, 1866 authorizing the formation of six regiments of African American troops for post-war duty in Texas and other western states and territories.⁶³

Former African American slaves and free refugees returning to the United States undoubtedly benefited from their experiences, both good and bad, gained from living in freedom under the Mexican flag. After owning property and working for wages or operating small enterprises, the African American refugees were better prepared to survive in the difficult social and economic conditions they encountered after the American Civil War. Their experiences as free immigrants in Mexico also gave them strength and confidence to endure the persistent oppression and discrimination that they would continue to face in the United States even after the end of slavery.

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CHAPTER V

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Three distinct elements of African American refugees immigrated from Texas, Indian Territory and other parts of the United States to Matamoros, Tamaulipas between 1820 and 1865. The majority of African Americans seeking refuge in northeastern Mexico were fugitive slaves from Texas and Louisiana cotton and sugar plantations. Fueled by increasing demand for cotton in the manufacturing centers of the northeastern United States, Britain and France, the slave labor-based cotton economy in the southern United States spread into Texas in the 1820s. By 1861, the slave population in Texas was close to 200,000.

Under Mexican rule, opposition to slavery and increasing apprehension over the expansion of the United States into Mexican territory led many Tejanos to help fugitive slaves escape and give them refuge in their communities. As the number of slaves in Texas increased after the formation of an independent republic after the Texan rebellion in 1836, so did the number of fugitive slaves escaping into Mexico.

Their journey to freedom in Mexico was difficult and dangerous. They usually traveled overland by foot or on horseback and some escaped by sea. Any African Americans traveling alone were assumed to be fugitive slaves and subject to pursuit and capture, especially from slave-hunters looking for a reward.

Texas was annexed by the United States as a slave state in 1845, leading to war with Mexico. In 1848, the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo established the Rio Grande as

part of the boundary between the United States and Mexico. Slaves from the United States continued to escape into Mexico in increasing numbers during the decade of the 1850s. In 1855, one contemporary observer estimated the number of former slaves in northern Mexico at about 4,000.

The oppression of African Americans in bondage also extended to free blacks in American society. Fear of their potential for provoking the desire for freedom in enslaved blacks and deep-seated racial prejudices that had long been engrained into the American consciousness led to widespread oppression and denial of economic opportunities to free African Americans in the United States. An increase in commercial activity between New Orleans and Matamoros, beginning about 1820 and principally by sea, led to the migration of free blacks from Louisiana to Tamaulipas. These free African Americans brought varied agricultural and construction skills acquired from their work experience in the South with them to contribute to an expanding economy in northeastern Mexico fueled by increasing international trade.

African Americans associated with Native American Indian groups displaced from their homelands in what is now the southeastern United States arrived in northeastern Mexico by way of Texas and the Indian Territory beginning in the 1820s. The Indians and the African Americans that accompanied them played an important role in the frontier defense of Mexico's northeastern states after the establishment of the Rio Grande as the border between Texas and the Mexican states of Tamaulipas, Nuevo León, Coahuila and Chihuahua.

Numerous social and cultural factors served to create favorable conditions in northeastern Mexico that resulted in the creation of a safe, although sometimes tenuous,

place of refuge from oppression and slavery for African Americans. These factors had their origins in the historical events that had shaped the prevalent economic, political and social conditions of Mexico in the early 19th century. The gradual but almost complete integration of the African into Mexican society over 300 years of Spanish colonial rule and the guarantees of individual liberty espoused by the leaders of the independence and reform movements of the first half of the 19th century helped to create an attitude of acceptance for African American refugees. Settlers and soldiers were needed to farm and defend the sparsely inhabited areas of Mexico's northern frontier and the resilience and determination that the African Americans brought with them was seen as an asset in a harsh and hostile region where many others might not have the courage or stamina necessary to survive.

In contrast, the increasing number of enslaved African American in Texas and the southern United States after 1820 necessitated an increasingly rigid racial caste system that maintained a large proportion of the population in subjugation, working and living under oppressive conditions. Although escape was risky and adapting to life in another country necessitated learning a new language and different customs, thousands of African Americans fled to freedom in northeastern Mexico.

Some quickly settled in one place, establishing a home and family, but for many, the need to make a living or avoid dangerous situations made staying in one place for any length of time difficult. Local and international conflicts, as well as the continued danger of capture and return to slavery, caused many to move into other areas of Mexico. Others, seeking to reunite with friends and families or discouraged by difficult economic conditions in Mexico, returned to the United States shortly after the abolition of slavery.

Whether they lived in Mexico for a short time or the rest of their lives, they brought cultural influences with them that had their roots in Africa, the Caribbean and the American slave and Indian communities of the southeast. Although African cultural contact with Mexico's Gulf Coast may date back thousands of years, for the past 500 years it has been an important factor in the language, music, and art of eastern Mexico. In fact, African cultural influence along the Gulf Coast and throughout the Caribbean region has been so extensive and constant that it is often difficult to trace the path many traditions and customs of African origin took through the Americas. Just as African cultural factors were a major influence in the music, religion, folktales as well as numerous other facets of life in the southeastern United States, examples of African influence are found throughout the Gulf Coast region of Mexico.

The Rio Grande Delta region and, in particular, Matamoros received African cultural influences from various sources. Beginning in the 16th century, African fugitives came into the Rio Grande Delta from the south, traveling up the coast. The Escandón expedition encountered their descendants near the mouth of the Rio Grande where they had formed a band of Black/Indian Maroons. They continued living in the Rio Grande Delta and were eventually absorbed into the local population. The strong African cultural influences from the lower Gulf Coast of Mexico and the greater Caribbean region continue to influence the music, food, and language of the Rio Grande Delta up to the present. Strong traditions of religion, folk medicine, farming and building brought from Africa to the Caribbean islands and the southern United States arrived in northeastern Mexico with the African American fugitive slaves and freemen.

Their cultural influence in the Rio Grande Delta and other areas of northeastern Mexico was probably much greater than documented examples of the evidence would indicate. In 1834 Jean Louis Berlandier noted the similarity between buildings in Matamoros and New Orleans. African American emigrants like Bártolo Pasement and Nicolás Drouet brought skills as builders and craftsmen that they had acquired working in Louisiana. Ben Kinchlow described farming, building and cooking techniques practiced by African Americans in the Rio Grande Delta that were the same as those found in the plantation slave culture of the southern United States.¹

French missionary and traveler, Abbe Emmanuel Domenech noted the presence of elements of voodoo in Matamoros and Brownsville in 1852. Brought from Africa as part of the cult of snake worship and modified in the slave culture of the West Indies, voodoo arrived in New Orleans beginning in the late 18th century, and was probably first brought to Matamoros around 1830. Voodoo and conjurism provided a means for African Americans to gain a sense of control over their environment and to explain unfortunate events.²

Throughout 19th century North and South America, practically every facet of the lives of African Americans revolved around music and musicians. Whether it was a work song, a spiritual or frolic, music was an integral part of African Americans' social and cultural lives. "Musicians" enjoyed a special status in the slave communities for their ability to provide the accompanying rhythm for song and dance. They fashioned musical instruments from wood, gourds, animal skins and bones just as they had for centuries. Although most slave songs used European words, they retained many cultural elements that originated in Africa.³ The traces of African American music and cultural

traditions brought by fugitive slaves and freemen 150 years ago have blended with African influences from the southern Mexican Gulf Coast and the Caribbean, becoming embedded into northeastern Mexico's music and folklore of the twenty-first century.

African Americans returning to Texas and other parts of the United States from Mexico after the end of slavery also brought with them cultural traditions from northeastern Mexico. In an article entitled "Afro-American and Mexican Street Singers: An Ethnohistorical Hypothesis," author Peter Narváez suggests a Mexican influence in the formation of African American blues. He attributes cultural contact occasioned by the escape of slaves across the Rio Grande in the years before the Civil War and the continued associations between African Americans and Mexican Americans in the southwest after the Civil War to the overwhelming preference of the guitar by the blues musicians of the early twentieth century. Narváez compares the traveling African American musician with the Mexican *trovadores populares* and cites several instances of Mexican influence demonstrated by African American musicians in the southwestern United States.⁴

The Black Seminole's warrior tradition, forged while fighting the U.S. Army in the Seminole Wars, was honed in battle in the deserts and mountains of northeastern Mexico. Some thirty years later the Black Seminole would again perform military service, this time on the side of their former enemy, the United States Army. This journey can be traced through the story of John Horse, his son Joe Coon and his grandson, John Jefferson.

John Horse was born about 1812 in Seminole Florida. He fought with the Seminole against the United States government in the Seminole War from 1835 to 1838.

After his surrender and upon the promise of freedom, he assisted them as a guide and interpreter. After the surrender or capture of more than five hundred Black Seminole, the United States Army realized the future consequence of releasing so many seasoned maroon warriors as freemen among Anglo American settlements that relied so heavily on slave labor. Faced also with the Seminole Indians' refusal to leave Florida without the Black Seminole, the U. S. government decided to send them together to Indian Territory. Wild Cat was the chief of the Seminole and John Horse was the leader of the Black Seminole when they entered Mexico in the summer of 1850. A slave hunter by the name of Warren Adams captured John Horse in 1852 and took him to Eagle Pass. To obtain his release, Chief Wild Cat reported paid his ransom of five hundred dollars with twenty dollar gold pieces "that were later found to be stained, in grim and ironic symbolism, with human blood."⁵

Horse, or Juan Caballo as he was known in Mexico, led the Black Seminole on campaigns against the Apache and Comanche in northern Mexico and accompanied his people to Lagunas de Parras in 1859. In 1870, he led a group of Black Seminole to Texas after the government offered some of the men jobs as Army Scouts and promised them land to live on along Las Moras Creek, north of Eagle Pass. Violent encounters with Texans who were against the settlement of the Black Seminoles resulted in the death of several men and the serious wounding of John Horse. When it became evident that they would not be given title to land in Texas, Horse led a group of his people back to their original settlement in the Santa Rosa Mountains of Coahuila, Mexico. According to tradition, John Horse died during a final attempt to help his people secure title to their land from the Mexican government. In August 1882, at about seventy years of age, he

left to the capital of Mexico to appeal to President Porfirio Díaz for title to the land. He died on the trip and the results of the request, if it was made, were never known.⁶

Joe Coon, Horse's son, was born in Indian Territory (Arkansas) in about 1842.⁷ His mother was Susan July, a Black Seminole, who was married to John Horse in Florida around 1842. Joe was about eight years old when the Black Seminole entered Mexico and grew up on the northeastern Mexican frontier.⁸ In the early 1860s, he was fighting against the Lipan and Comanche alongside his father in the mountains of northern Mexico. He was with his father in 1865 when French soldiers entered the small settlement of El Burro near Lagunas de Parras, where the Black Seminole were living. When the French began to burn the houses in the settlement, John Horse, his son Joe, and David Bowlegs went to talk to them and they agreed to spare their houses.⁹ Shortly after, Joe Coon, along with other Black Seminole and Black Creek, moved to Matamoros. By 1870 he was living in Brownsville with his wife, Hannah and their daughter, Annie.¹⁰ His son John Jefferson was born in September 1878. Jefferson's mother was Phyllis Bruner, of the Black Creek Bruner clan that had integrated with the Black Seminoles in Mexico. Jefferson enlisted in the Black Seminole Scouts at Fort Clark, Texas and was a member until the unit was disbanded in 1914. He also served with the 10th Cavalry and saw duty in the Spanish American War and World War I.¹¹

In their journey to northeastern Mexico, African Americans brought the knowledge and tradition of thousands of years of agricultural practices and animal husbandry that stretched back to Africa and were supplanted by their experiences in the Caribbean islands and North America. Those that returned to the United States after the end of the Civil War brought back experiences gained from working in the cattle-raising

and horse-breeding culture of 19th century Mexico. As Kenneth W. Porter wrote in his article, "Negro Labor in the Western Cattle Industry, 1866-1900," about one quarter of some 35,000 men that worked in the cattle drives that originated in South Texas were African Americans. Many of them also worked on ranches in Texas. Porter wrote that: "Negro cowhands were particularly numerous on the Texas Gulf Coast, in the coastal brush east of the Nueces and at the mouth of the Brazos and south of Houston, and parts of the Indian Territory; in some sections they were the majority, and some ranches worked Negroes exclusively."¹² Some brought knowledge and experience gained from working with cattle and horses in northeastern Mexico before the Civil War.

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- ¹ Jean Luis Berlandier, *Journey to Mexico During the Years 1826-1834* (Austin: Texas State Historical Association, in cooperation with the Center for Studies in Texas History) 434. Scott Cook, *Mexican Brick Culture in the Building of Texas, 1800s-1980s* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press 1998) 30. U.S. Works Progress Administration, Federal Writers' Project, *Slave Narratives of Texas*, "Ben Kinchlow" 261-284. Emmanuel Domenech, *Missionary Adventures in Texas and Mexico* (London: Longman, Brown, Green, Longmans and Roberts, 1858) 286.
- ² Emmanuel Domenech, *Missionary Adventures in Texas and Mexico*, (London: Longman, Brown, Green, Longmans and Roberts, 1858) 286. John W. Blassingame, *The Slave Community, Plantation Life in the Ante-Bellum South*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972) 32-33. Eugene Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made*, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972) 220-223.
- ³ Blassingame, *The Slave Community*, 25-27. Paul A. Cimballa, "Black Musicians from Slavery to Freedom: An Exploration of an African-American Folk Elite and Cultural Continuity in the Nineteenth-Century Rural South," *Journal of Negro History*, volume 80, issue 1 (Winter, 1995) 16-18. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, 571-572.
- ⁴ Peter Narváez, "Afro-American and Mexican Street Singers: An Ethnohistorical Hypothesis," *Southern Folklore Quarterly*, 42 (1978) 73-84.
- ⁵ Kenneth W. Porter, "Lament for Wild Cat" *Phylon*, vol. 4 (1943) 46.
- ⁶ Kenneth W. Porter, "Farewell to John Horse: An episode of Seminole Negro Folk History," *Phylon*, " vol. 8 (1943) 265-273.
- ⁷ 9th United States Census (1870), Population Schedule for Cameron County, Texas. Microfilm Roll 1576, 1580, University of Texas – Pan American Library.
- ⁸ Kenneth W. Porter, *The Black Seminoles, History of a Freedom-Seeking People*, revised and edited by Alcione M. Amos and Thomas P. Senter, (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1996) 100, 131.
- ⁹ Porter, *The Black Seminole*, 164-166.
- ¹⁰ United States Census (1870), Population Schedule for Cameron County Texas.
- ¹¹ Porter, *The Black Seminole*, 252 n. 27. Kevin Mulroy, *Freedom on the Border, The Seminole Maroons in Florida, the Indian Territory, Coahuila, and Texas*. (Lubbock: Texas Tech University Press 1993) 97. Tombstone of John Jefferson in Seminole Indian Scouts Cemetery, Brackettville, Texas.
- ¹² Kenneth W. Porter, "Negro Labor in the Western Cattle Industry, 1866-1900," *Labor History*, 10 (Summer 1969) 346-347.

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