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The UGRR on the Rio Grande

The underground railroad phenomenon occurred over a tremendous territorial extent and encompassed a wide diversity of experiences and features, all linked by the common denominators of resistance and escape from enslavement. Enslaved blacks in the United States often crossed international boundaries in their struggle for freedom. Congress, therefore, has authorized the NPS to seek alternative means to link underground railroad sites in Canada, Mexico, and the Caribbean with those in the U.S.[1]

Canada has long been recognized as the primary destination for fleeing slaves who used the underground railroad system. Within the last 10 years, commemoration and preservation undertakings related to the underground railroad by Parks Canada have had some modest successes and have benefitted by a recent re-evaluation of the importance of African-Canadian history to that nation's heritage.[2] One of the most intriguing features of the underground railroad experience, and certainly one that has been largely overlooked, is the choice many enslaved blacks made to pursue freedom by fleeing over the west Texas mountains and deserts and crossing the Rio Grande into Mexico.

Including Mexico within the scope of the NPS underground railroad project shows the great complexity of the underground railroad story. The underground railroad to Mexico is associated almost exclusively with slavery in Texas—slavery's "last frontier" in the United States. Many of the features usually associated with the underground railroad, such as a clandestine network of abolitionist "stations," or heroic efforts by black leaders such as Harriet Tubman to guide the enslaved to freedom, are usually missing in the underground railroad story in Texas and Mexico. Instead, with a few noteworthy exceptions, resistance against slavery in Texas and flight to Mexico was founded almost entirely on personal initiative among the enslaved. Once the enslaved chose to run away in Texas and seek freedom on the right bank of the Rio Grande, his or her daring flight led through a harsh environment and could lead to tenuous alliances with other racial or ethnic groups who themselves were distinct and perhaps in conflict with the Texas slavocracy. Once across the Rio Grande, the runaway had to adapt to a new language and culture distinct from that of the slave owners that the runaway was accustomed to. The unstable frontier could provide a home for the runaway, but chances were the runaway would have to fight to defend it.

Slavery developed late in Texas, but from its very earliest beginnings, it was impacted strongly by Mexican views toward African slavery. Although the Spanish Crown abolished Indian slavery in Spanish America in the 16th century, black slavery continued in Mexico through the colonial era. By Mexican independence in 1821, African slavery had declined in importance and President Vicente Guerrero abolished slavery in the republic in 1829. Despite Mexico's endemic political instability after independence, later governments reiterated and strengthened the abolition decree. Federal intransigence concerning the abolition of slavery culminated in the Constitution of 1857 which conclusively abolished African slavery in the republic and, in a clause specifically directed to slavery in the U.S., granted freedom and protection to any slave that set foot on Mexican territory.

The lingering ambiguities in Mexico's abolitionist legislation arose out of the unique circumstances that surrounded the evolution of the northern territory of Texas. In 1821, Mexico began to grant huge tracts of land to empresarios, primarily from the United States, in return for promises of populating the grants with a specified number of families. Many who settled in Texas came from the southern United States, and many brought their slaves. Mexico made special allowances for their settlement and the settlers exploited certain loopholes in the Mexican legal code to import their slaves into the territory. Despite Guerrero's abolition decree in 1829, slavery in Texas expanded through the Mexican period.[3]

The Texas Revolution guaranteed the institution's survival in the new republic. U.S. statehood in 1845 further guaranteed that slavery would continue in Texas and the institution spread and strengthened through the next decade. Nevertheless, the proximity of free-soil Mexico still impacted the evolution of slavery in Texas.

When slavery was abolished in Texas at the close of the Civil War, it was confined to only about one third of the state, generally along the river valleys of East Texas. A desert buffer, sparsely populated mostly by Apache and Comanche Indians and free Tejano settlements, ran between

the Texas slave areas and the Rio Grande. The proximity to Mexico also made the slavocracy society highly suspicious of any abolitionist sentiment. Rumors of abolitionist activity and slave uprisings usually led to periods of general hysteria and repression against the non-Anglo populations in Texas.

Within this milieu, the enslaved sought freedom in different ways. Mexico's persistent colonization programs on its northern frontier offered enslaved blacks opportunities for freedom across the Rio Grande. Throughout most of the 19th century, Mexico pursued different colonization programs to encourage population growth on its extensive frontier. Mexico's objectives were to increase its defensive capabilities against the nomadic Indian tribes and to create a barrier to further U.S. expansion into northern Mexico, particularly by the southern slavers who Mexico viewed as the principal agitators for expansion into northern Mexico.

Mexico's liberal colonization policies offered opportunities to a wide variety of ethnic and racial groups. The idea of settling free blacks in northeast Mexico as a buffer against Texas filibusters and nomadic Indians first came about in the 1820s. Benjamin Lundy, the northern abolitionist and an early, outspoken critic of slavery in Texas, was one of the first Americans to seek a land concession in northern Mexico to colonize escaped slaves. He sought to settle freed blacks in the area between the Rio Grande and Nueces River. The project failed, as did many others that never were implemented.[4]

The most noteworthy exception occurred after the War between Mexico and the United States, when, in 1848, the Mexican government sought to reform its frontier defense system. To this end, the Mexican government created military colonies located along the new international boundary. Although the colonies failed to attract many Mexican settlers, recruits came from an unlikely place. In 1850, Mexican officials in northern Mexico reached an agreement with American Seminole Indians under Wild Cat and the Seminole blacks under John Horse to help them escape persecution in the U.S. and settle in military colonies in northeast Mexico. In return, the Seminoles and blacks, called Mascogos, were obligated to defend the frontier and campaign as Mexican army auxiliaries. Several sites in Coahuila are associated with Seminole and Mascogo colonies, including the Hacienda de Nacimiento near Múzquiz, El Moral near Monclova Viejo, San Fernando de Rosas, Nacimiento near Zaragoza, and Guerrero. While many of the Seminoles and Mascogos returned to the U.S. and settled, in particular, around Fort Clark and Bracketville by the 1870s, many stayed in the Coahuila colonies, or dispersed and settled in Parras, Coahuila, or Matamoros, Tamaulipas.[5]

The unique history of the Seminoles and the Mascogos is a noteworthy exception to the more common lack of organization in the movement of fleeing slaves across the Rio Grande. More often, individual initiative was the motivating factor for runaways. The impulse was strong. A contemporaneous estimate suggests that by the eve of the Civil War an estimated 4,000 slaves had escaped

Annaberg Sugar Mill

Annaberg appears on the Oxholm map of 1780 as one of the then 25 active sugar producing factories on St. John. Molasses and rum were also products of bustling Annaberg, or "Anna's Hill," named for an infant daughter of William Gottschalk, a planter-owner from St. Thomas. The Danes, Dutchmen, and slaves from the Danish colony on St Thomas came to St. John in 1717. Slaves had to harvest and process the sugar cane on the steep slopes.

Today, Annaberg Sugar Mill ruins remain with one of the 16 cabins found in the area. The foundation of the slave quarters, with a lime concrete floor and a door in one end, each cabin housed a slave family or served as bachelor quarters. Posts were set in the masonry walls and branches were woven to form the wattle, then daubed with a lime and mud mixture. The roof was probably thatch with palm leaves.

Doug Stover

Annaberg Sugar Mill ruins. Photo by Doug Stover.

enslavement in Texas by crossing the Rio Grande into Mexico.

Many factors influenced slave runaways to Mexico. During the Texas Revolution of 1836, Texans increasingly viewed forced emancipation as a consequence of Mexican suppression of their rebellion. Many Texans feared Mexican complicity in inciting slave revolts and runaways in Texas. These suspicions often led to increased repression against blacks and the Tejano and Indian populations who were thought to harbor runaways or incite rebellions. There were many reports of fleeing slaves seeking the protection of the Mexican army as it campaigned through Texas. By 1836, a small colony of escaped slaves had emerged in Matamoros. The matter was important enough that the Texans fruitlessly demanded the return of runaways as a point in the treaty which ended the rebellion.[6]

Ten years later, during the War between Mexico and U.S., many slaves escaped to freedom while travelling in southern Texas and northern Mexico as servants to their soldier owners. The frequent incidents of runaways heightened tensions between the U.S. officers and the Mexicans, who abhorred slavery. The occupying forces frequently raised accusations against the Mexicans of collaborating with the slaves to achieve their freedom in Mexico. The U.S. occupation along the Rio Grande also tended to disperse the runaway slave colonies that had evolved over the previous decades.

Slavery expanded rapidly in Texas in the late 1840s and 1850s, as did the incidents of runaways to Mexico. Piedras Negras, Coahuila, opposite Eagle Pass, became one of the primary destinations for runaways. Likewise, expeditions out of Fort Duncan in Eagle Pass increasingly turned their resources to patrolling the river bank in search of escaped chattel. The fort also became the center of licit and illicit slave capturing activities.

Since Texas achieved statehood in 1845, the state government had petitioned the federal government to negotiate an extradition treaty with Mexico that included the return of runaway slaves. The agreement was never reached in large part due to Mexico's unwillingness to allow U.S. forces to enter Mexican territory in search of runaways. Without an international accord on extradition, Texan militia groups from such places as San Antonio, Bastrop, La Grange, Gonzalez, and Seguín grew emboldened as they roamed the Rio Grande frontier in search of runaways. Their activities destabilized the border region through the 1850s. Two examples are particularly noteworthy.

Between 1850 and 1853, José Carbajal led a series of raids against several towns in northeast Mexico to protest Mexico's oppressive tariffs. One of the more sordid elements of his movement was the complicity of a large contingent of Texas mercenaries who combined their personal goals of filibustering and pursuing runaway slaves with Carbajal's federalist mission. The movement died after defeats in Matamoros, Cerralvo, Nuevo León, and Camargo, Tamaulipas.

In another incident, Texas Ranger Captain James Callahan led an expedition across the Rio Grande near Fort Duncan on Oct. 1, 1855 ostensibly to capture a band of raiding Lipan Apaches, although their true mission was probably to capture runaway slaves. A large brigade of Mexican militia and Indian auxiliaries confronted Callahan's expedition at the Rio Escondido near La Maroma, Coahuila and the Texans were forced to withdraw. A combined force of Mexicans, Indians, Seminoles, and Mascogos pursued Callahan's column to Piedras Negras. They were forced to cross the river, but not before they sacked and burned the town.[7] Incidents such as these did little to stem the flow of runaways to Mexico, although they increased tensions along the Rio Grande dramatically.

The matter of extraditing runaway slaves dominated activity along the Rio Grande during the 1850s. While the two federal governments were unable to reach an extradition treaty, the issue became very complex on the river frontier. For example, Mexico's inability to fund colonization efforts, combined with the lack of an institutionalized system for accepting runaway slaves, be it abolitionist societies or federal programs, meant that the runaways often turned to banditry to survive and they became a burden on the frontier communities. On the eve of the Civil War, despite national efforts to resist capture expeditions, sympathies on the northern frontier were turning against the ex-slaves.

On the other hand, Mexico refused an extradition treaty with the Confederacy and slaves continued to seek freedom in Mexico. Their numbers were undoubtedly swollen by the entrance into Texas of many slave holders from the southern states who brought their slaves to Texas in a futile effort to avoid the occupying Federal army. Many of the enslaved took advantage of the proximity to free soil to flee across the Rio Grande. In addition, the expansion of cotton trails to the mouth of the Rio Grande caused by the federal blockade of Confederate ports, brought many enslaved blacks to the Rio Grande as teamsters. Not a few crossed the river into freedom. This was particularly true in Matamoros, the outlet for much of cotton trade.[8]

The present bill before congress (HR 105-1635) recognizes the importance of the underground railroad by seeking to authorize the NPS "to coordinate and facilitate Federal and Non-Federal activities to commemorate, honor, and

interpret the history of the underground railroad," and "to enter into cooperative agreements and memoranda of understanding with, and provide technical assistance to, in cooperation with the Secretary of State, the governments of Canada, Mexico, and any other appropriate country in the Caribbean." The NPS should seek to work cooperatively, within the parameters of the proposed legislation and in accordance with all Mexican laws and regulations, with the NPS's counterpart for cultural resources in Mexico, the National Institute of Anthropology and History (INAH—Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia), to identify resources associated with the underground railroad in Mexico and Texas.

A likely place to begin is to identify resources associated with the Seminole and Mascogo colonies in Coahuila and Tamaulipas. Likewise, Fort Clark, a National Register site and the home of the venerable Seminole scouts from 1872-1914, should be included in this survey, as should the Seminole Camp and the Back Seminole Scout Burial Ground in and around Bracketville, Texas. Battlefields or skirmish sites associated with the Seminoles and Mascogos in the U.S. and Mexico also warrant attention.

Other important candidates for resource identification include the neighborhoods, or colonias, of runaways that evolved in the towns and cities on the right bank of the Rio Grande. A good place to start might be in Matamoros, Tamaulipas and Piedras Negras, Coahuila. Likewise, skirmish sites in Texas and Mexico associated with slave-catching raids and filibuster activities might also be identified. Mexican and U.S. resource specialists might also work together to identify resources in Texas that reveal the life patterns and customs of enslaved blacks on Texas plantations and ranches, and in Texas cities. Finally routes and river crossings can be identified, and can help to explain the hardships and challenges that runaways faced in escaping to Mexico. For example, after 309 Seminoles crossed into Mexico at Lehman's Ranch, north of Eagle Pass, that site became a frequent route for runaways into Mexico. Runaways found many spots along the Rio Grande where a hand-pulled skiff waited for them to pull their way to freedom.

This is virtually virgin territory. In Tamaulipas and Coahuila, INAH, which runs a vigorous program of resource identification and cataloging, has not identified sites with a clear thematic association to the underground railroad. Neither has the underground railroad story in Texas been adequately explained. But perhaps by sharing the expertise, resources, and missions of both agencies and other pertinent groups, this neglected feature of the underground railroad story in North America may yet be uncovered.

Notes

[1] U.S. Department of Interior, National Park service, *Underground Railroad: Special Resource Study,* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1995).

[2] Hilary Russell, "Underground Railroad Parks: A Shared History," *CRM* 20:2 (1997):15-21.

[3] Kenneth Wiggins Porter, *The Negro on the American Frontier* (New York: Arno Press, 1971); *An Empire for Slavery: The Peculiar Institution in Texas;* Eugene Barker, "The Influence of the Slave Trade in the Colonization of Texas," *Southwestern Historical Quarterly* 28 (July 1924).

[4] Merton Dillon, "Benjamin Lundy in Texas," *Southwestern Historical Quarterly* 63 (July 1959):60.

[5] Shirley Boteler-Mock and Mike Davis, "Seminole Black Culture on the Texas Frontier," *CRM* 20:2 (1997):8-10; Kevin Mulroy, *Freedom on the Border: The Seminole Maroons in Florida, the Indian Territory, Coahuila, and Texas,* (Lubbock, TX: Texas Tech University Press, 1993).

[6] Paul Lack, *The Texas Revolutionary Experience: A Political and Social History, 1835-1836,* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1992), 238-253.

[7] Ronnie Tyler, "The Callahan Expedition of 1855: Indians or Negroes?" *Southwestern Historical Quarterly,* 579-82.

[8] Arnoldo de LeHist *They Called them Greasers, Anglo Attitudes towards Mexicans in Texas, 1821-1900* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1983).

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Upcoming Events

- May 1998 - International Emancipation Day Program, Smithsonian Institution, Anacostia Museum, Washington, DC
- December 1998 - International Program of Frederick Douglass
  For information call Frank Faragasso 202-690-5185.