

# Star of the Republic Museum

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## Notes

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## "We worked from see to can't": Slavery in the Republic



*"Massa hollered if we was slow eating, 'Swallow that grub now and chaw it tonight. Better be in that field by daybreak.' We worked from see to can't."*

Willis Winn  
Former Republic Slave

*"I'm an old time slavery woman, and the way I been through the hackles, I got plenty to say about slavery. I know they ain't no good in it, and they better not bring it back."*

Former Republic slave, Lulu Wilson

In the years leading up to the Texas Revolution, Mexican law strictly prohibited slavery and the slave trade. Colonists to Texas evaded the law by binding blacks as indentured servants for life, making them *de facto* slaves. On a limited scale there was some smuggling of slaves from the Caribbean or even Africa. "Black-birders," as slavers were called, involved several rather prominent Texans including Jim Bowie and James W. Fannin. On the eve of the Revolution Fannin wrote to a friend, "my last voyage from the island of Cuba (with 152) [slaves] succeeded admirably." Yet, the majority of blacks entered the Republic with their owners. When Jared Ellison Groce migrated to Texas in 1821 from Alabama, his caravan was composed of fifty covered wagons, supplies, livestock, and 100 slaves.

At the time of independence, there were approximately 5,000 blacks in the Republic, and by 1847, the year of the first state census, there were 38,753. In this period, slavery was primarily confined to the plantations of the lower Colorado and Brazos Rivers (where the soil was ideal for cotton production), and sugarcane plantations along the coast. Texans saw the future of the country as tied to the agricultural development of both cotton and sugarcane, a task which could only be accomplished economically with slave labor.

Stephen F. Austin expressed a certain philosophical ambivalence on the morality of slavery, calling the issue a "difficult and *dark* question." Yet, he also felt that Texas "*must* be slave country. Circumstances and unavoidable necessity compel it. It is the wish of the people there, and it is my duty to do all I can, prudently, in favor of it. I will do so."

Texans held firmly entrenched ideas on slavery, including such falsehoods as the inherent biological inferiority of blacks, and their capacity to "withstand heat and work that would prove fatal to

whites." They saw the institution as being "ordained by God," and noted that the Bible "affirmed, nay commanded, slavery." Finally, slavery was viewed as a system which provided social order and race control, in addition to enhancing the personal social status of those who owned slaves.

While visitors to the Republic often condemned the idea of "human bondage" in principle, they had a tendency to comment favorably on its relative mildness in Texas. While traveling through the country in 1843, British-born William Bollaert expressed his observations on the treatment of slaves: "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 plantation and not sold to an indifferent master."

According to white accounts, many planters were lenient in the treatment of their slaves, although in a rather paternalistic way. While staying on a friend's plantation along the Brazos, young Rutherford B. Hayes noted that he had seen "none of 'the horrors' so often described" concerning slavery in the South. He wrote of Mrs. Perry, the mistress of Peach Point plantation: "Instead of having the care of one family, she is the nurse, physician, and spiritual advisor of a whole settlement of careless slaves. She feels it her duty to see to their comfort when sick or hurt."

Slaves were often mentioned in a planter's will, suggesting that there was a real concern for their welfare. Julien Devereux of Monte Verdi Plantation requested in his will that none of his slaves be sold, and stipulated that his son-in-law not be appointed guardian because "he has no feeling or regard for the comfort or the morals of slaves but would take them to Houston or Galveston and let them to the highest bidder."

An examination of slave narratives from this period demonstrates that their treatment by masters varied greatly, from extreme cruelty to sincere kindness. Because of their value as a commodity, they did have food, shelter, clothing, and



Home

medical treatment if they were ill. But they were expected to work from dawn to dusk most of the week.

With the exception of beverages and condiments, most slaves had monotonous diets that were little different from the fare of poor white farmers, and perhaps better than those of black people in other slave societies or some European peasants. On many plantations, eating was a communal activity. According to Willis Winn, who was born to slavery in 1822, the slaves on "Massa Bob's" Texas plantation "et at a long, wooden trough, and it was always clean and full of plenty grub. We used buffalo and fish bones for spoons, and some et with they hands. The grub I like best was whatever I could get."

Former slave Richard Carruthers recalled his life as a slave of Billy Coates on a plantation in Bastrop County during the 1830's: "Us got provisions allowanced to us every Saturday night. If you had two in the family, they allowanced you one-half gallon 'lasses and twelve to fifteen pounds bacon and a peck of meal. If they didn't provision you 'nough, you just had

to slip round and get a chicken. That ain't stealin', is it? You has to keep right on workin' in the field, if you ain't allowanced 'nough, and no nigger like to work with his belly groanin'."

Slaves were usually provided with two sets of clothing a year. Andrew Goodman was born in the 1830's on a plantation in Smith County. He remembered that, "in summer we wore long shirts, split up the sides, made out lowerings - that's the same as cotton sacks were made out of. In winter we had good jeans and knitted sweaters and knitted socks." On many plantations slaves wove homespun, and a good weaver could produce five or six yards of cloth three feet wide in a day.

Many planters found it more efficient to use their slaves in the fields than producing cloth, so they purchased the coarse "negro cloth" that Rhode Island mills were producing especially for planters. Since slaves seldom had the time to mend their clothing, "ragged" and "miserably clothed" slaves could be seen in the fields of many plantations.

Just down the road from the "Big House" were the "quarters," which often resembled small villages on the larger plantations. The domestic world of Republic slaves was dark (as the cabins were often without windows or candles), crowded with people, and sparsely furnished.

During the Republic period, Henry Lewis lived on "Massa Bob's" plantation in Jefferson County. He described slave housing: "De slaves have li'l log cabin house with mud-cat chimney on de side, and de furniture mostly Georgia hosses for beds and mattress made of two sacks. Dey no floor in dem houses, 'cept what God put in dem." A "Georgia hoss" bed was made by bringing two poles out from the walls in a cabin corner and attaching them to a post where they joined.

Slave marriages were not recognized by law, and although slaves usually had permanent partners, and marked their unions with some kind of ceremony - all was contingent upon obtaining the permission of the master. According to Jephtha Choice, who was born in the 1830's on a plantation south of Henderson, "the Massa and old Missus would fix the nigger and gal up in new clo'se and have the doin's in the 'Big House.' Then old Massa would lay a broom down on the floor in front of 'em an' tell 'em to join hands and jump over the broom. That married 'em for good." "Jumping over the broomstick" came to be equated with slave marriages in Texas, although its origin remains obscure.

**"I tells 'em iffen they keeps praying, the Lord will set 'em free." Slave preacher, Anderson Edwards**

Slave women conceived most often in the early fall months - the same time in which white couples were least fertile - and least often in the late winter and early spring. The contrast between white and slave conception cycles is linked to nutrition more than work load; slave food supplies were scantiest in the spring, and dietary deficiencies may have affected a slave woman's fertility.

Most slave mothers worked in the fields until near the time of delivery, and then returned to hard labor within a few weeks after birth. Jephtha Choice recalled: "When babies were bo'n, old nigger granies handled 'most all them cases and the children wa'n't 'lowed 'round our regular living quarters, but were wet nursed by nigger women who did not work in the field. In the evenin', the mammies were let to see them."

William Bollaert, described such a nursery on a large plantation in east Texas: "The Nursery is a large log-house & the collection of juvenile blacks of all sorts, sizes & colors, their cryings & screamings, the bawlings of 'Aunty' & the what she wont do to them if they dont 'quit' crying, her admonitions at their favorite pastime of eating dirt, is very amusing. It is said in Texas and the U.S. by many as a *fact* that if a negro child be kept clean & well clothed it will pine & die; but if allowed to roll & play about in the dirt there is no fear of its not thriving."

Given such attitudes, it is not surprising that among slaves in this period, the infant and childhood mortality was fearful. One out of three black children died in infancy, as a result of devastatingly inadequate infant care and poor diet.

In the "quarters," slaves led a communal life that was only poorly known to their masters, with the highlight being an occasional Saturday night dance. Uncle Cinto Lewis recalled his life as a Republic slave in Fort Bend County: "Sometimes we had dances, and I'd play the fiddle for white folks and colored folks both. I'd play 'Young girl, old girl,' 'High heel shoes,' and 'Calico Stockings'."

In addition to playing the fiddle, slaves often made their own instruments from bones and gourds, or a "clevis" which was a metal part from a plow or wagon. They also created complex and driving rhythms for dancing by "pating juba" which was probably of West African origin and involved rhythmic clapping and body movements.

Singing also played an important role in the daily lives of slaves, "revealing at once the highest joy and the deepest sadness." Often songs were sung to mark the rhythms of their labor, and their exhaustion towards the end of the day :

**“My knee-bones am aching  
My body’s racking with pain  
I really believe  
I’se a chile of God  
This ain’t my home  
Cause heaven’s my aim.”**

This belief in salvation from slavery in the next life was an important aspect to the religious beliefs of slaves. Religion provided a solace from the hardships of their day-to-day lives. Slaves usually belonged to the same church as the master. Anderson Edwards was born in the 1830’s on a plantation in Rusk County. As a slave preacher he was expected by his owner to “tell them niggers iffen they obeys the master they goes to Heaven.” In the woods during secret late night services he recalled preaching a different message: “I tells ’em iffen they keeps praying, the Lord will set ’em free.”

Slaves were kept illiterate by law in many Southern states, and by conscious policy in Texas. One Texas slave recalled that if a slave was caught with a book, “he got whipped like he was a thief.”

Slaves lived to work for someone else, and this fact represented the focal point of their existence. Jared Groce came to Texas in 1821 as one of Austin’s colonists, and by the 1830’s was probably the richest planter in Texas. The following passage describes a typical workday on his plantation - from a white perspective:

“When the gong sounded at day-break, all hands came to the ‘hall’ which joined the kitchen, and each was served a large cup of coffee. It was the duty of some to feed the mules, which are attended to before coffee was served, then all hands went to the field, the men to the plows and the women to the hoes. At 7 o’clock the breakfast was done, consisting of ham, or bacon, hot biscuits, fresh steak, etc. This was packed in buckets, and sent to the field in carts and distributed among the negroes. At 12 o’clock dinner was cooked and served in the same manner. At 6 p.m. all work was finished and all gathered together at the ‘hall’ for a hot supper.

The little people were fed and the mothers took them to their own homes; the older ones sat in front of their doors, or

around their fireplaces, and talked about old days; the younger element gathered in the ‘hall,’ pushed the long dining tables back, and then the fun began. There were always good musicians among the negroes, and how they danced and sang!”

The slaves themselves recall a rather different experience. Willis Winn was born in 1822 and described his work day on “Massa Bob’s” plantation. “I still got the bugle he woke us with at four in the mornin’. When the bugle blowed you’d better go to hollerin’, so the overseer could hear you. If he had to call you, it was too bad. The first thing in the mornin’ we’d go to the lot and feed, then to the woodpile till breakfast. They put out grub in the trough and give us so long to eat. Massa hollered if we was slow eating, ‘Swallow that grub now and chaw it to-night. Better be in that field by daybreak.’ We worked from see to can’t.”

A former slave, Sarah Ashley, was brought to Texas in the 1830’s as a child. She remembered, “I used to have to pick cotton, and sometimes I picked 300 pounds and toted it a mile to the cotton house. If they didn’t get the work done, they got whipped till they had blisters on them. I never got whipped, because I always got my 300 pounds.”



Field Hand

Often slaves were “hired-out” to work for someone else, especially during slack periods. Some scholars have suggested that this practice extended the benefits of slavery to non-slave owners and broadened the support for the institution among Southern whites. In 1838, Dr. Ashbel Smith spent twenty-two hundred dollars to purchase three slaves and hired them out for ninety dollars a month.

Slaves were always vulnerable to violence, and knew that they were never more than a white man’s or woman’s whim away from a beating. According to Sarah Ashley, “the way they whipped niggers was to strip them off naked and

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**“The way they whipped niggers was to strip them off naked and whip them till they made blisters and bust the blisters.” Former slave, Sarah Ashley**

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whip them till they made blisters and bust the blisters. Then they took the salt and red pepper and put them in the wounds. After that they washed and greased them and put something on them to keep them from bleeding to death.” Lulu Wilson was born in Texas during the 1830’s on “Wash Hodges Place” and remembered being abused at the hands of her mistress. “She beat me and used to tie my hands and make me lay flat on the floor and she put snuff in my eyes. I ain’t lying before God when I say I knows that’s why I went blind.”

In addition to the day-to-day violence, there was always the potential for one of the most tragic aspects to the “peculiar institution” - the selling of human beings. Many slaves spoke of being treated literally like animals. In 1839, one Houston auction yard advertised that it handled “Negroes, horses, mules, and carriages.”

According to Lewis Winn, “They was sellin’ slaves all the time, puttin’ ’em on the block and sellin’ ’em, accordin’ to how much work they could do in a day and how strong they was. I’se seed lots of ’em in chains like cows and mules. If a

owner have more'n he needed, he hit the road with 'em and sold 'em off to ad-joinin' farms."

Lulu Wilson bitterly recalled the selling of her brothers and sisters. "I gets to thinkin' how Wash Hodges sold off Maw's chillen. He'd sell 'em and have the folks come for 'em when my maw was in the fields. When she'd come back, she'd raise a ruckus. Then many the time I seed her plop right down to a settin' and cry about it. But she allowed they weren't nothing could be done, 'cause it's the slavery law'. She said, 'Oh Lord, let me see the end of it before I die, and I'll quit my cussin' and fightin' and rarin'."

In the face of such cruel treatment, slaves often attempted to run away, and Republic newspapers frequently listed advertisements offering rewards for their return. In 1838 the *Telegraph and Texas Register* ran an ad for Edwin Waller:

#### \$200 Reward

**"For the delivery of 2 African Negroes named Gumby and Zow, who absconded from my plantation, Oyster Creek, Brazoria Co. some time since. Slaves are about 30 yrs of age - one about 5 ft 10", the other 5 ft 8" - the larger has a broad face, the other a wild look."**

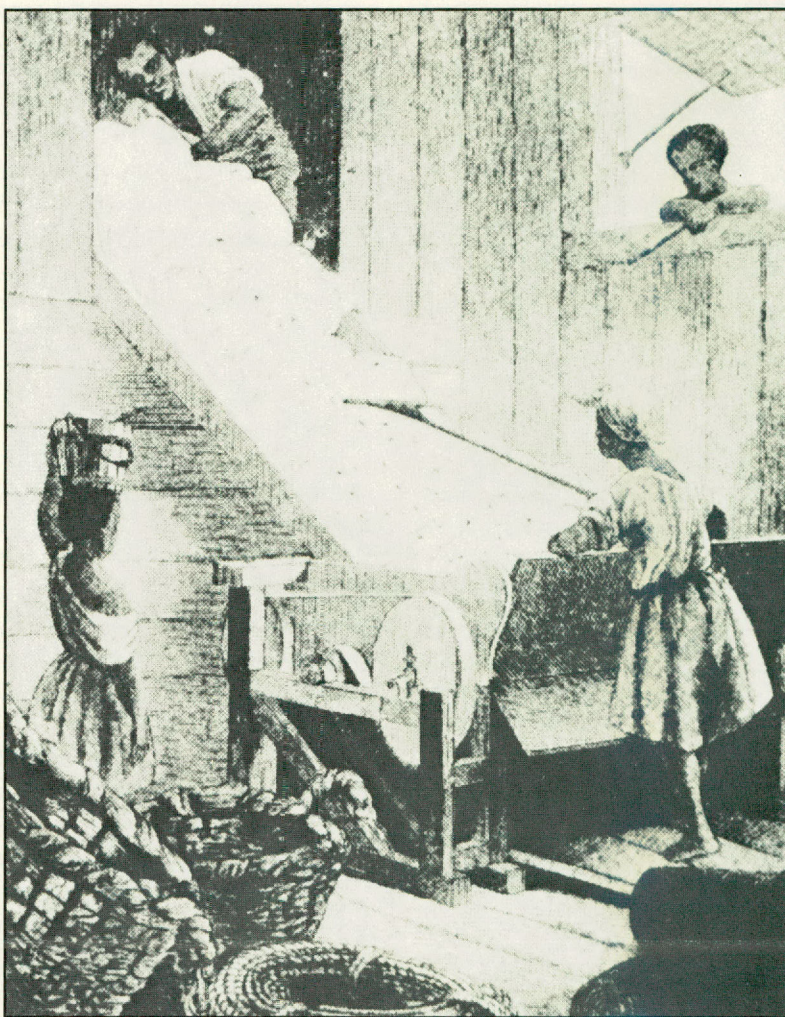
For a slave to get caught meant severe punishment, or even death. Andrew Goodman recalled, "Old Charlie ran away and stayed six months in the woods before Briscoll caught him. The niggers used to help feed him, but one day a nigger betrayed him, and Briscoll put the dogs on him and caught him. He took him home, and he tied him and beat him for a terrible long time. Then he took a big, pine torch and let burning pitch drop in spots all over him. Old Charlie was sick about four months and then he died."

One scholar has estimated that in 1836 there were only 150 free blacks in Texas. For a free black, life in the Republic could be precarious, as whites believed that the presence of free blacks upset the social structure. Consequently as the decade progressed, they faced increasing legal restrictions.

In the Republic period, free blacks could not vote, own property, testify in court against whites, or intermarry with them. In 1837 Congress voted to allow

free blacks in Texas at independence to remain, provided they abided by the country's laws. Yet by 1840, the legislature had adopted a new law which required all free blacks to leave Texas by January 1, 1842. President Sam Houston postponed the effective date to 1845, but the entire decade was one of legal uncertainty for most free blacks.

white woman and became a blacksmith, freighter, innkeeper, and land speculator. During the Republic period, Goyens served as an interpreter for Sam Houston in negotiations with the Cherokees and other Indian tribes of East Texas. Houston apparently had respect for Goyens and trusted him as a mediator. In a letter to Robert Irion, he stated: "Give my



Ginning Cotton

Still, several blacks participated in the battles of the Texas Revolution, owned property, and were well respected in their communities. Samuel McCullough was wounded during the capture of Goliad in 1835; Hendrick Arnold acted as a guide and fought in the battle of San Jacinto along with James Robinson and Mark Smith. Wyly Martin's slave, Peter, won his freedom by freighting military supplies in his own wagon.

William Goyens came to Texas from North Carolina in the 1820's and settled near Nacogdoches. He later married a

respect to Mr. Guyens Agent, and tell him how much I rely upon him."

The Texas Republic was also the focus of abolitionists. In the early 1830's, Benjamin Lundy attempted to establish a colony in Texas for free blacks from the United States. The plan failed on the eve of the Revolution. In fact, Lundy believed that the Texas Revolution was a "vile project" by slave holders to take Texas from Mexico and extend the "peculiar institution." In 1836 he published a pamphlet, *The War in Texas*, reinforcing his theory.

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## Notes

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Another prominent Texas abolitionist was Stephen Pearl Andrews. While living in Houston during the 1830's he established a well-respected law practice. He had hoped that the Texas government would follow the example of Britain, and free its slaves while providing financial compensation to the owners. Unfortunately, Andrews misjudged the temperament of his fellow Texans on the slavery issue. Ultimately his home was mobbed by a group of men who showed him "a rope as an earnest of their purposes." He was forced to flee from Texas to New Orleans. In the fall of 1838, *The Telegraph and Texas Register* expressed the opinion of its citizens on the topic: "our country enjoys a complete immunity from abolitionism."

Abolitionists and free blacks were often viewed as agitators for slave revolts or rebellions. Although whites tried to suppress information on slave insurrections, they were apparently not that unusual in this period. In the spring of 1836, during the first weeks of the Revolution, there was a slave rebellion on the Brazos River. It was ruthlessly crushed with more than 100 slaves being captured and whipped; others were hung as an example to the rest.

At the end of the Republic period, slavery was firmly entrenched into the social fabric of the society. Yet, there were individuals who expressed misgivings about the system. On the eve of statehood, Col. James Morgan reflected: "I am no abolitionist. I am a slave holder, was bred in a slave holding Country - I am tired of slaves and slavery. I am the slave for my negroes - I wish to be free and hope to see Texas free'd of slavery - because it will be to *my interest* as a land holder."

He represented a minority opinion, as the Republic's citizens firmly supported what a visitor to Texas described as "a hideous sore that consumes." While traveling through Texas in the 1840's, the German, Ferdinand Roemer, observed: "The wish to possess slaves is inherent in all Texas farmers." The Texas Republic had the dubious distinction of being one of the "last areas in the civilized world to be developed by the use of slave labor."

## Star of the Republic Museum

## Editor's Note:

An examination of primary memoir material from the Republic period describes slavery almost exclusively from a white perspective. In an attempt to present a more objective sense of the black experience during this period, I relied on interviews with former slaves conducted during the 1930's as a nation wide WPA project. The section on Texas slave narratives encompasses ten volumes and contains over 300 interviews. Within this sample I quoted primarily those individuals who were approximately 100 years or older at the time of the interviews, and hence were theoretically recalling their experiences as Texas slaves in the 1830's and 1840's. E.M.

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