

# Remembering Henry: Refugee Slaves in Civil War Texas

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April 13, 2014

## Abstract

These are the prepared remarks for my talk at the 2014 OAH Annual Meeting in Atlanta, originally entitled "Refugee Slaves and the Confederate Rehearsal for Reconstruction." The paper was part of a panel on New Perspectives on African American Mobility in the American South, chaired by Richard Blackett with comments from Yael Sternhell.

In the autumn of 1865, somewhere near Berwick Bay, Louisiana, a black man named Henry suffered a severe flogging at the hands of Robert Campbell Martin, Sr., the man who had once been his legal owner. Three years earlier, Henry briefly witnessed the liberating potential of the American Civil War when Union troops arrived in Louisiana's lower Lafourche district, forcing Martin, Sr., a sugar planter, to flee his Albermarle plantation without his slaves. But Henry's experience of life without a master proved vanishingly brief.

Martin returned to Lafourche and became a paroled prisoner of war in November 1862, allowing him to resume his plantation operations. By the spring of 1863, Martin had recaptured "nearly all of his Negroes" who had fled during the Union occupation, forcing them back to work at Albermarle. By the summer, however, Martin had raised the suspicion of local Union officials, who received reports of "inhuman" beatings and threats of murder on his plantation. So Martin fled again, this time carrying off about two dozen enslaved people to Alexandria, determined, at first, to "run his negroes off to Texas, and 'sell them all.'" Martin later decided not to sell Henry and the other slaves he had captured, but he did run them off to Texas, where Henry lived near Marshall until Martin, Sr., determined to take him back to Louisiana.<sup>1</sup>

The Louisiana that Henry passed through on his eastward journey both resembled and did not resemble the state he left on his trek to Texas. On the one hand, Martin's flogging of Henry on the trip exhibited the familiar habits of violence and domination that had raised the suspicion of the Union Provost Marshal in 1863. On the other

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<sup>1</sup>Maggie Martin to Robert Campbell Martin, Jr., June 1, 1863, Martin-Pugh Collection, Nicholls State University (hereafter NSU), Item 356; Report of Provost Marshal about Crimes of Robert Campbell Martin, Sr., May 7, 1863, Martin-Pugh Collection, NSU, A-17-B, [Item 343](#); Maggie Martin to Martin, Jr., July 5, 1863, Martin-Pugh Collection, NSU, A-17-B, [Item 365](#). For more on Martin, see Barnes F. Lathrop, "The Pugh Plantations, 1860-1865: a Study of Life in Lower Louisiana" (PhD thesis, University of Texas, 1945), 196, 291.

hand, the response to the flogging, as described in a letter from Martin's son to his wife Maggie, marked the vast changes wrought on the Southern social order by the intervening years of war.

"Father had a very unpleasant affair at the Bay Berwick," wrote Robert Campbell Martin, Jr., to his wife that October. Explaining that his father had whipped Henry "for some misdemeanor," Martin told Maggie that some one had reported the act "to the negro soldiers" stationed nearby, who allegedly determined to murder Martin Sr. and approached his camp. Martin held them off by brandishing a firearm, but under the advice of a local white constable, he waited in town for the night. The next day "the negroes broke into the camp & were beginning to rifle the waggons" before an unspecified guard came up to stop them. That allowed Martin Sr. to move on, with Henry and the other former slaves still under his control.<sup>2</sup>

The story of Henry and the story of the black soldiers who attempted to come to his rescue represent two very different African American experiences of the Civil War, and in this brief talk I want to highlight the historical and historiographical gaps between those experiences.

The soldiers at Berwick Bay represent the story that is, by now, most familiar to historians and, increasingly, to the general public. They represent the emancipatory and revolutionary effects of the war on Southern society. Thanks to a generation of landmark scholarship, historians now better understand how the war helped to dissolve slavery on Confederate plantations. And recent historians now depict Louisiana in particular as an epicenter of a wartime process of emancipation after the fall of New Orleans in the spring of 1862. As Union control spread into Louisiana's rich sugar and cotton districts, slavery crumbled in the face of slave resistance, military campaigns, and a mass exodus from plantations by enslavers and the enslaved alike.<sup>3</sup>

In the new world created by these revolutionary changes, former slaves seized opportunities for their own liberation. Some, like the nearly "700 Negroes" placed for work on Martin Sr.'s Lafourche plantation in his absence, passed the remainder of the war participating in what the editors of the Freedom and Southern Society Project have called "the wartime genesis of free labor." Approximately 150,000 black men in the South also joined the fight on the Union side, including (presumably) the soldiers who clashed with Martin at Berwick Bay over his flogging of Henry.<sup>4</sup>

Many other black Southerners, however, had wartime experiences more similar to that of Henry. Indeed, Henry was only one of tens of thousands of slaves who were "run off" to Texas from other parts of the Confederacy during the Civil War. And if the black soldiers at Berwick Bay represent the emancipatory potential and

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<sup>2</sup>Robert Campbell Martin, Jr., to Maggie Martin, October 29, 1865, Martin-Pugh Collection, NSU Special Collections, A-17-B, [Item 719](#).

<sup>3</sup>See Ira Berlin et al., eds., *The Destruction of Slavery* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985); Steven Hahn, *A Nation Under Our Feet: Black Political Struggles in the Rural South from Slavery to the Great Migration* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2003); Steven Hahn et al., eds., *Land and Labor, 1865* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008); James Oakes, *Freedom National: the Destruction of Slavery in the United States, 1861-1865* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2013).

<sup>4</sup>Robert Campbell Martin, Jr., to Maggie Martin, February 7, 1864, Transcription in Martin-Pugh Collection, NSU, Item 417. Of the approximately 180,000 black troops who served in Union forces during the war, 146,304 were recruited from the slave states. See Oakes, *Freedom National*, 543n65.

reality of the Civil War, Henry's story reminds us powerfully and urgently of wartime emancipation's limits.

Exactly how many slaves were "run" or "refugeed" to Texas during the war is difficult to say, though estimates range from 50,000 to 150,000 or more. If the estimates at the higher end of that range are accurate, then the number of slaves refugeed to Texas rivaled the number of black men who enlisted in the Union army during the War and would have increased the slave population of the state by 50 percent. But even if lower estimates prove to be more accurate, what is clear is that tens of thousands of enslaved people shared the experience of Henry and of WPA interviewee Elvira Boles, who remembered being taken from Mississippi to Cherokee County, Texas, "in a wagon" by white agents of her master, who told her "we'd never be free iffen dey could git to Texas wid us."<sup>5</sup>

Anecdotal evidence confirms that massive throngs of "refugeed slaves" traveled the same roads that Elvira and Henry took during the Civil War. In November 1862, a Texas cavalryman serving in Arkansas recorded in his diary that "every day we meet reffugees [sic] with hundreds of Negroes, on their way to Texas," and a Texas newspaper in October 1863 reported that "refugees from Louisiana and Arkansas, with immense numbers of negroes, continue to pour into Texas, and the roads are all lined with them." Even after the war, notes one recent account, "Texas, with its vast expanses and tiny federal occupation force, attained notoriety as the last stronghold of de facto slavery."<sup>6</sup>

These and similar reports capture the scale of the movement of slaves to Texas. But the abstractions they use to talk about slaves on the move—"immense numbers," "hundreds of Negroes," and crowded roads—also obscure the intimate details of violence and privation that slaveholders used when "running" slaves across the border. Many slaves appear to have been carried into the state on wagons because they were too sick or weak to resist or to walk. And towards the end of the war, Louisiana governor Henry W. Allen noticed in his address to the legislature that hundreds of slaves had also been captured and forcibly removed from plantations under federal control by third parties who hoped to sell the slaves behind Confederate lines.<sup>7</sup>

The recollections both of refugee masters and of refugeed slaves also contain numerous glimpses of the brutality required to "run off" people to another state. Consider, for example, the famous memoir of Louisiana slaveholder Kate Stone, whose

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<sup>5</sup>Elvira Boles interview in *Slave Narratives: A Folk History of Slavery in the United States From Interviews with Former Slaves; Texas Narratives, Part 1*, 106 (Washington, D.C.: Works Progress Administration, 1941), ebook edition at Project Gutenberg, <http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/30576>. On the numbers of refugeed slaves, see Dale Baum, "Slaves Taken to Texas for Safekeeping During the Civil War," in *The Fate of Texas: the Civil War and the Lone Star State*, ed. Charles D. Grear (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2008), 83–103; and my summary of different estimates at "How Many Slaves Were Refugeed to Confederate Texas?," June 25, 2013, <http://wcm1.web.rice.edu/how-many-refugeed-slaves-in-texas.html>.

<sup>6</sup>Bell Irvin Wiley, ed., *Fourteen Hundred and 91 Days in the Confederate Army: A Journal Kept by W. W. Heartsill, for Four Years, One Month, and One Day, or, Camp Life: Day-by-Day, of the W. P. Lane Rangers, from April 19th, 1861, to May 20th 1865* (1876; Jackson, Tenn.: McCowat-Mercer Press, 1953), 84; Austin *Tri-Weekly State Gazette*, October 9, 1863; Hahn, et al., *Land and Labor, 1865*, 77.

<sup>7</sup>Henry W. Allen, *Annual Message of Governor Henry Watkins Allen, to the Legislature of the State of Louisiana, January 1865* ([Shreveport, La.]: Caddo Gazette, 1865), 8, online edition at <http://docsouth.unc.edu/impls/lagov/allen.html>.

wartime experience also captures—like Henry’s—the unevenness and contingency of wartime emancipation.

On the one hand, in the spring of 1863, Stone recorded in her journal countless observations about how many enslaved people were running away to Union camps. Stone also described increasingly bold resistance from some of the family’s household slaves, including one who confronted Stone’s mother with a carving knife before fleeing to the river with her two children. Historians have used these and similar entries as telling evidence of how the war disrupted slavery and challenged slaveholders’ claims to mastery.<sup>8</sup>

But on the other hand, by the time Stone wrote these lines, her family had already removed “the best and strongest of the Negroes” to a western salt works, weeks before Union troops arrived in force in her parish. When she eventually fled with her mother for Texas at the end of March, only about 30 slaves remained behind on their plantation. And even these were captured and taken to Texas with the others when Stone’s brother and a force of armed Confederate soldiers returned to her home, surrounded the “Negroes” cabins, and carried off all but one who had joined the army and four who were considered too old to travel. In the end, the Stones—assisted by military force—took nearly all of their 80 bondspeople to the Lone Star State, where they survived on the income from the hiring out of their slaves until the end of the war.<sup>9</sup>

While there are few other memoirs of the Texas refugee experience as detailed as Stone’s, private letters and later recollections by enslaved people show that similar scenes of capture, terror, and brute force were frequently replayed along the Confederacy’s ragged western edge. One Louisiana planter who fled to Texas complained of his slaves that “the vile animals” constantly tried to run away, a practice he combated, in one case, by having two recaptured runaways “pickled”—a torture that involved flogging slaves and then putting salt on the open wounds.<sup>10</sup>

In an interview with the Federal Writer’s Project, Allen Manning recalled his Mississippi owner ordering all of his slaves to “git everything bundled up and in the wagons for a long trip.” Then, after loading all of his slaves into the wagons, Manning’s master released a group of bloodhounds on a recalcitrant slave named Andy. After the dogs “tore off all Andy’s clothes and bit him all over bad,” the master flogged Andy and Andy’s brother with a “cat-o-nine-tails” until Andy was “jest bloody all over and done fainted,” all while the force already sitting in the wagons watched on. Manning’s recollection closed with a scene eerily reminiscent of Solomon Northup’s account of driving away from the plantation where he had spent twelve years as a slave, noting that as “we all drive off,” Andy was left lying on the ground behind them—a vivid reminder of what might befall Manning and others who might try to resist their removal.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup>See Thavolia Glymph, *Out of the House of Bondage: the Transformation of the Plantation Household* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 97–136; Yael A. Sternhell, *Routes of War: the World of Movement in the Confederate South* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2012), 98–100.

<sup>9</sup>John Q. Anderson, ed., *Brokenburn: the Journal of Kate Stone, 1861–1868* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1995), 168–169, 208–209.

<sup>10</sup>C. C. Weeks to Mary Palfrey Weeks, July 4, 1864, Weeks Family Papers, *Records of Ante-Bellum Southern Plantations*, Series I, Part 6, Reel 18, [Frames 499-501](#).

<sup>11</sup>Quotes taken from Allen Manning interview in George P. Rawick, ed., *The American Slave: A Composite*

Though similar experiences of violence, illness, and wrenching dislocation seem to have marked the experiences of most refugee slaves, their experiences on arrival in Texas were diverse and depended largely on when white masters moved and where they settled. Many refugee planters rented farms on which they attempted to raise crops, but many also hired out their slaves as farm laborers or domestic servants to locals. Local industrialists also hired recently arrived slaves in factories, iron works, and salt works. For example, Robert Campbell Martin, Sr., decided shortly after his arrival in Cherokee County, Texas, to hire his slaves to a local saltmaker named J. S. O. Brooks, having learned of the opportunity from fellow Louisiana refugees who had done the same thing.<sup>12</sup>

Still other refugee slaves found themselves caught up in the dragnet of Confederate military impressment, particularly after the arrival of General John Bankhead Magruder in Texas in 1862 and the recapture of Galveston from Union forces on New Year's Day, 1863. Having witnessed firsthand the effective use of impressed slave labor on fortifications and public works in Virginia during the first year and a half of the war, Magruder formed a Labor Bureau in Texas designed to mobilize large forces of slaves, sometimes numbering in the thousands, to construct coastal fortifications in Galveston and Sabine Pass, as well as defenses farther inland around Austin. Despite some resistance from recently arrived Louisiana refugees who complained that their slaves were impressed before they could even resettle, Magruder ultimately swept up many "refugee slaves" in his levies, including two of Martin Sr.'s male slaves. Both of them contracted pneumonia while at forced labor for the government, and one—Turner—died of the disease.<sup>13</sup>

The fates of Alex and Turner, like the later experience of Henry, remind us again that although the Civil War upended masters and enabled thousands of slaves to run away, those who were "run off" lived through, or did not live through, a very different Civil War experience. Theirs was a story of forced movement instead of freedom, and of forced labor under unfamiliar and sometimes more deadly conditions. How, then, should we remember Henry in our own stories about the Civil War, and how would our understandings of the end of slavery change with him and those like him more prominently included?

One compelling answer is that the story of refugee slaves, instead of standing at odds with the story of wartime emancipation, was a direct consequence of it.<sup>14</sup> After all, the flight of planters like Martin Sr. to Texas was directly and causally related to the collapse of Louisiana's plantation system. If thousands of slaves had not voted

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*Autobiography*, volume 7: *Oklahoma and Mississippi Narratives* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Publishing Company, 1972), 215-222A.

<sup>12</sup>Robert Campbell Martin, Sr. to W. W. Pugh, September 2, 1863, Martin-Pugh Collection, NSU, [Item 373](#). On varieties of occupations, see Mary Elizabeth Massey, *Refugee Life in the Confederacy* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1964); Baum, "Slaves Taken to Texas for Safekeeping During the Civil War," 92-100.

<sup>13</sup>Robert Campbell Martin, Sr. to Maggie Martin and Robert Campbell Martin, Jr., November 6, 1863, Martin-Pugh Papers, NSU, Item 387; Robert Campbell Martin, Sr., to Maggie Martin, February 7, 1864, Transcription in Martin-Pugh Collection, NSU, Item 416. On impressment, see Randolph B. Campbell, *An Empire for Slavery: the Peculiar Institution in Texas* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1989), 234-245; Jaime Amanda Martinez, *Confederate Slave Impressment in the Upper South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013).

<sup>14</sup>See, for example, Oakes, *Freedom National*, 318.

with their feet as Union forces marched through the Confederacy, then slaveholders would not have had to vote with theirs.

It is also important to remember that refugee slaveholders were only partially successful in retaining and removing slaves to Texas. Some of Martin's Louisiana neighbors were able to "run off" a hundred or more of their slaves, but Martin himself managed to bring only about two dozen. As a general rule, the number of slaves whom refugee planters lost to the abrasions of war was much greater than the number they were able to retain and remove. Writing from Texas in October 1864, Martin, Sr., bemoaned that he had been "permanently ruined by the war," notwithstanding "the few Negroes which I have escaped."<sup>15</sup>

Being "run off" also often created new opportunities and new motivations for slaves to run away. According to the editors of the Freedmen and Southern Society Project, attempts to relocate slaves prompted flight, and often had to be done at gunpoint or with shackles; "even then, some refugee slaves escaped and returned to the old plantation, struck out for Union lines, or simply hid in the woods."<sup>16</sup> One enslaved man named Joe, whom Martin had also "run off" to Texas with Henry, managed to run away in the Lone Star State in the summer before Martin returned home. So did James, who escaped not long after Martin first arrived in east Texas.<sup>17</sup> Such episodes suggest that "wartime refugeeing ... contrary to its design, added momentum to slavery's decline," not least by putting extreme pressure on claims to mastery by slaveholders who were reduced to refugees themselves by the dislocations of war. As historian Yael Sternhell has eloquently argued, "the slave society, in effect, collapsed on the road."<sup>18</sup>

In many ways, then, the story of refugee slaves was part of the larger story of slavery's wartime dissolution. But there also may be a danger in folding the story of refugee slaves entirely into the story of slavery's collapse. The relationship between Henry's story and Joe's was not simply the relationship between consequence and cause; rather, the comparison between the two experiences suggest important limits to the causative force of wartime emancipation. For many slaves, the mobility and instability unleashed by slavery's collapse brought continued violence and privation rather than liberation. Henry is a salient example, but the same can be said of Ralph, another Martin slave who was taken to Texas and then back to Louisiana after the war in Martin Sr.'s wagons, too stricken with diarrhea on his return to do otherwise.<sup>19</sup>

Remembering Henry and Ralph does not mean forgetting the overarching story that the Civil War destroyed chattel slavery and brought emancipation to millions

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<sup>15</sup>Robert C. Martin, Sr., to Albert C. Martin, October 24, 1864, Transcription in Martin-Pugh Collection, NSU, Item 614.

<sup>16</sup>Berlin, et al., *The Destruction of Slavery*, 676.

<sup>17</sup>Robert Campbell Martin, Sr. to Robert Campbell Martin, Jr., August 14, 1865, Transcription in Martin-Pugh Collection, NSU, Item 680; Robert Campbell Martin, Sr. to W. W. Pugh, September 2, 1863, Transcription in Martin-Pugh Collection, NSU, Item 373.

<sup>18</sup>Berlin, et al., *The Destruction of Slavery*, 676; Sternhell, *Routes of War*, 7. Other scholars, such as Stephanie McCurry, have pointed to practices like the impressment of slaves by the Confederate military, which happened often in areas where refugee slaves were taken, as additional wartime solvents of the institution of slavery. See Stephanie McCurry, *Confederate Reckoning: Power and Politics in the Civil War South* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2010).

<sup>19</sup>Robert Campbell Martin, Jr., to Maggie Martin, October 29, 1865.

of enslaved people. But forgetting Henry would be forgetting an equally important story—a story of slavery’s resilience, adaptability, and continued power even in the midst of its collapse. Slavery’s downfall was less like the demolition of a building than it was like a nuclear meltdown, whose disabled core continued to emit radioactive residues long after the initial blow.

Indeed, for slaves who were run off, the involuntary movement—or forced confinement—that characterized antebellum slavery did not stop when the war did. As the editors of the most recent volume of *Freedom* report, one “planter en route with his former slaves from their wartime refuge in Texas to their home in Louisiana abruptly threatened to jettison any of them who refused to accept a contract dictated by him. With no alternative but to be abandoned by the wayside, they acquiesced.” Other reports immediately after the war spoke of local vigilante committees being established in Texas “to prevent the freedmen from going to their homes in other states.”<sup>20</sup>

Such postwar reports hint at a final reason why it is important to remember Henry, for stories like his hint at important continuities between the war years and the years *after* the war.<sup>21</sup> At least one refugee slave already mentioned, Allen Manning, later told his WPA interviewer that he perceived a direct connection between the “running off” of slaves to Texas and the difficulties that freedpeople faced in the postwar years. “If anybody ask me why the Texas Negroes been kept down so much I can tell them,” Manning recalled from the vantage point of the twentieth century. “If they set like I did on the bank of that ferry across the Sabine, and see all that long line of covered wagons, miles and miles of them, crossing that river and going west with all they got left out of the War, it ain’t hard to understand.”<sup>22</sup>

Manning believed, in other words, that the story of refugee slaves was not just a continuing story of slavery’s collapse in the midst of war, but also the *beginning* of a significant story about slaveholders’ tenacity and retrenchment. My goal in my current research is to follow up on that lead, and to consider how the experiences of refugee slaves foretold or even rehearsed the experiences of freedpeople in the trans-Mississippi during the eras of Reconstruction and Redemption that followed. Can we, for example, see the thousands of slaves who were impressed by the Confederate military or hired by the state government during the War not just as a sideshow to the main drama of wartime emancipation, but as a Confederate rehearsal for the regimes of forced labor and legislated work details that emerged after the war?

On this question, and others mentioned here, my research is ongoing. But if Allen Manning was right that the story of refugee slaves not only spoke of slaveholders’ doom but also of their persistence, then stories like Henry’s might help to explain why, notwithstanding the revolutionary changes represented by soldiers like those

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<sup>20</sup>Hahn, et al., *Land and Labor, 1865*, 322, 167.

<sup>21</sup>Even historians who stress the dramatic reversals of fortune and power caused by the war know well that the planter class quickly regained or reasserted some of the power that it had lost. Southern whites used Black Codes, penitentiary labor, restrictive plantation labor contracts, and other methods to roll back or stem many of the gains that freedpeople had made during the war itself. Yet the emphasis historians have placed on the *revolutionary* dimensions of slavery’s collapse during the war can sometimes make it difficult to understand how conservative reaction took hold so quickly after it ended.

<sup>22</sup>Manning interview, *The American Slave*, volume 7, 222A.

who challenged Martin Sr. at Berwick Bay, so many enslaved and formerly enslaved people in the Trans-Mississippi South remained in “the storm so long.”<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup>See Leon F. Litwack, *Been in the Storm so Long: the Aftermath of Slavery* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1979). For more information about my ongoing research on these questions, interested readers can visit my “open research notebook” at <http://wiki.wcaleb.rice.edu>.