

Title: African Americans Escape Across the Rio Grande to Freedom in Mexico

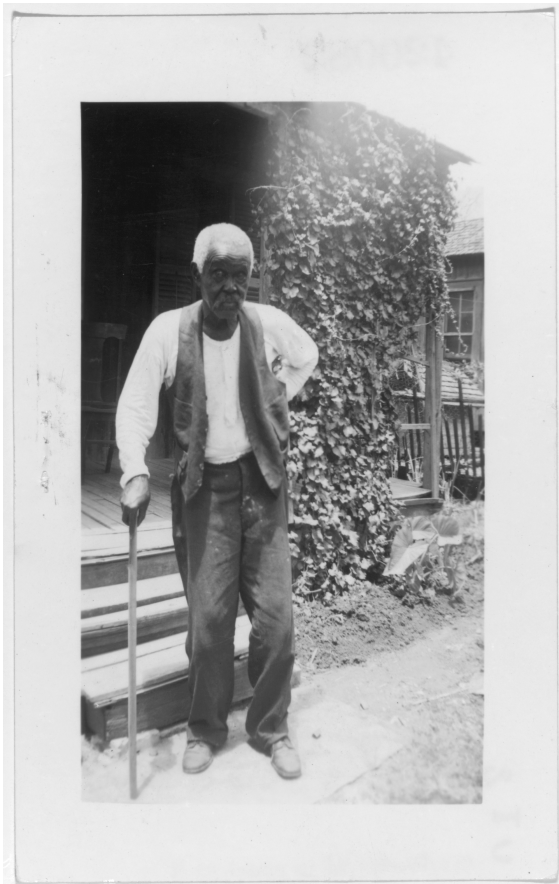
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As the institution of slavery strengthened in Texas, so did the population of slaves within plantation districts along the river bottoms that yielded the best cotton crops. According to Kelley, "By the mid-1830's. . .with a critical mass of population, African American slaves were able to form not simply communities, but interpretive communities." ¹ These interpretive communities had the ability to understand the linkage between the pathway to freedom and Mexico, and take necessary actions to travel along that path.

The scarce population from the mouth of the Rio Grande River to El Paso, Texas also contributed to the opportunity for African Americans to travel into Mexico along the pathway to freedom. According to the U.S. Census of 1860, there were probably 25,000 persons living along this section of the river, of which, "80 to 90 percent were Mexican." ² In an effort to address the increasing number of escaping African American slaves, Army officials, ordered Brevet Lieutenant Colonel Joseph Morris, commanding Fort Duncan on the Rio Grande, to arrest any runaway slave attempting to cross near his post. There were too few troops in the area to carry out this order. ³

Resistance to the institution of slavery included sabotage, otherwise known as insurrection. In an 1858 statute of Texas, "insurrection of slaves" is defined as, "An assemblage of three or more, with arms, with intent to obtain their liberty by force." ⁴ There were several large scale slave revolts. For example, in Columbus, Colorado County on September 9, 1856, more than two hundred slaves planned to attack every house in the town, simultaneously, and, "kill all the whites. . .plunder their homes, take their horses and arms, and fight their way on to a 'free state' [Mexico]." ⁵

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"There wasn't no reason to run up North, All we had to do was to walk, but walk South, and we'd be free as soon as we crossed the Rio Grande." – Felix Haywood, ex-slave, San Antonio, June 16th, 1937.

To reach the pathway of freedom into Mexico runaway slaves found help from people within Texas. According to historian Obadele-Starks, "Flight across the border was initiated primarily by the escapees themselves and with limited help from northern abolitionists or antislavery sympathizers." ⁶ Almost seventy years after his emancipation, Felix Haywood of San Antonio had his own story recorded by a WPA interviewer for the Slave Narratives, "Sometimes someone would come 'long and try to get us to run up North and be free. We used to laugh at that. There wasn't no reason to run up North. All we had to do was to walk, but walk South, and we'd be free as soon as we crossed the Rio Grande." ⁷ His story helps to confirm the communication that took place between slave communities within the plantation districts. An example of slave sympathizers was uncovered when three white men, who had been implicated in the foiled plan for the October 31st revolt in Hallettsville. ⁸ However, slave sympathizers were not only isolated to whites. In 1853, about twenty Mexican families had been driven from Austin, Texas, on charges that they were

horse-thieves. Within two years of being relocated to Seguin they had been accused of aiding and abetting runaway slaves in their escape from bondage.⁹

The success along the pathway of freedom into Mexico is evident through the voices of former slaves, and personal accounts of those who have traveled into Mexico south of the Rio Grande River. During his interview, Felix Haywood stated, "In Mexico you could go free. They didn't care what color you was, black, white, yellow, or blue. Hundreds of slaves did go to Mexico and got on all right."¹⁰ Ronnie C. Tyler, professor of history at the University of Texas at Austin and director of the Texas State Historical Association, had collected more than 1,100 ads posting rewards for the return of fugitive slaves. The destination for many of these runaways was the Coahuila-Texas border towns of Eagle Pass and Piedras Negras.¹¹ During his travels to Mexico, Fredrick Law Olmsted, encountered two runaway slaves in Piedras Negras. In the course of an interview, one informed Olmsted that he was born in Virginia, brought to the South by a trader, and sold in Texas. Furthermore, he had runaway four or five years prior. He could speak Spanish fluently, and professed that he was a competent guide into Northern Mexico. Additionally, he informed Olmsted that runaways were constantly arriving in Piedras Negras, and that forty had arrived in the previous three months.¹² From these accounts we learn that the pathway of freedom into Mexico was indeed existent.

The question of how many runaways traveled the pathway of freedom into Mexico is unknown, and can only be estimated. The Austin State Times, in 1854, estimated that, "There were upwards of two hundred thousand escaped slaves in Mexico."¹³ This estimate appears to be substantially high. A more reasonable estimate was given by John S. "Rip" Ford, doctor, lawyer, journalist, Mexican War veteran, and Texas Ranger. Texans had been willing to pay up to a \$600.00 reward for the return of runaway slaves residing in Mexico. Ford, set out to capture and return these runaway slaves back to Texas. He claimed that slaves worth \$3,200,000.00 were in Mexico. This would put the number of those who traveled the pathway of freedom into Mexico in the range of 4,000.¹⁴

Bibliography

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4. Wendell G. Addington, "Slave Insurrections in Texas," *The Journal of Negro History* 35, no. 4 (October 1950): 409.
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6. Ernest Obadele-Starks, *Freebooters and Smugglers: The Foreign Slave Trade in the United States After 1808* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas, 2007), 126.
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12. 33 Fredrick Law Olmsted, A journey through Texas; or, A saddle-trip on the southwestern frontier (Edinburg: Thos. Constable & CO., 1857), 324. See also Addington, 103, and Kelley, 717.
13. Addington, 432.
14. Tyler, 5-6.

Photo: Felix Haywood, ex-slave, San Antonio, June 16, 1937. Source: Library of Congress, Portraits of African American ex-slaves from the U.S. Works Progress Administration, Federal Writer's Project slave narratives collections, <http://lcweb2.loc.gov/master/pnp/ppmsc/01100/01117u.tif> (accessed May 25, 2012).