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ABSTRACT

Information from local records can be used in a variety of ways to strengthen and add interesting detail to undergraduate history courses on slavery in the United States. Specifically, the author describes the use of county records to teach about slavery in Texas before the Civil War. Four sources of records can be consulted: (1) United States Census records, which provide information on family characteristics of slaves and owners and on the size and productivity of farms, (2) state tax rolls, which reveal individuals' landholding and slaveholding status, (3) probate records, which include wills, inventories and appraisals of estates, and records of estate administration, and (4) slave narratives, which furnish transcripts from interviews with ex-slaves conducted during the 1930s. All these records are available from national and state archives or from local county clerks' offices. Information from the records can be used in a variety of ways. Their data show that the proportion of slaveholders and slaves in Texas was comparable to the proportion for the South as a whole, give interesting information about the price of slaves compared to the price of land, illustrate reactions of slaves and owners to the institution of slavery, and show how slave families were kept together or separated throughout generations. (AV)

RECENT RESEARCH AND THE TEACHING OF SOUTHERN HISTORY

By

Randolph B. Campbell

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Some may consider it unusual to include a session on research as part of a conference on the teaching of history. Research is frequently considered the province of specialists who concentrate on archives rather than classrooms, while teaching, at least at the undergraduate level of instruction, is for generalists who concentrate on interpreting and transmitting the historical knowledge developed by the researchers. So we may ask as a point of departure: is there any effective way that research materials can be used directly in teaching at the undergraduate level -- either in survey or advanced courses?

The first step in dealing with this question is to narrow our focus to something manageable. This session is entitled "Recent Research and the Teaching of Southern History." I would like to narrow this to research in the history of the antebellum South and more specifically yet to research on the South's "Peculiar Institution" of Negro slavery as it existed in Texas. Obviously some of the things that I suggest concerning the relationship of research and teaching in this area will not be possible or valid for other time periods or subjects even in southern history, but I believe that the sources and methods to be discussed have reasonably broad application.

The institution of Negro slavery has attracted a tremendous amount of attention from researchers in the past five

to ten years. The list of important publications is lengthy, but only a few need be mentioned here. Robert Fogel and Stanley Engerman published their highly-controversial quantitative study, Time on the Cross: The Economics of American Negro Slavery, in 1974. At almost the same time Eugene Genovese published Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made. More recently, we have had Herbert Gutman's The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750-1925; Leslie Owens' This Species of Property: Slave Life and Culture in the Old South; and Lawrence Levine's Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Thought from Slavery to Freedom. No two of these studies are exactly alike in focus or conclusions, but they do seem to have in common an insistence that we go beyond traditional sources, use them but go beyond them, for new or fresh data.

The search for new sources of information on slavery has led to extensive use of what may be termed local records, primarily those taken at the county level and available on a county-by-county basis. Fogel and Engerman, for example, directed a small army of assistants in combing county courthouse archives for material relevant to the economics of slavery. Much of Gutman's analysis of the black family depends on records of ex-slave marriages created for various southern counties.

The tendency to emphasize local records in recent research on slavery is especially interesting to me because of my own work on various aspects of nineteenth century Texas history. My colleague, Richard Lowe, and I worked for years on a

study of the economic and social structure of antebellum Texas, and I am currently preparing what I intend to call the "biography" of Harrison County, an important slaveholding cotton-producing community in far east Texas. Local records have figured heavily in both these projects, and I have been greatly impressed both by their value as research materials and by their potential uses in teaching.

At this point, I should explain more precisely what I mean by local records that may be exploited in research and teaching concerning slavery in antebellum Texas. First, there are the United States Censuses, most importantly those for 1850 and 1860. These records, which were taken on a county-by-county basis, include three especially important schedules. The free population schedule (Schedule I) lists all members of each family and provides information on age, sex, occupations, values of property held and so on. The second schedule (Slave Inhabitants) enumerates the bondsmen held by each slaveholder and gives the age, sex, and color of each. The agricultural schedule (Schedule IV) records information on the size and productivity of every farm -- the number of improved acres, the amount of cotton produced, etc. Reserving comment on how these census records may be used in research and teaching, I will only point out here that Schedules 1 and 2 are available on microfilm from the National Archives, and Sched... 4 is available from the state archives. Furthermore, they may be bought on a county-by-county basis. There are also convenient published summaries that present census data on a county-by-county basis.

The state tax rolls are another important type of local record. A listing of the ad valorem property and poll taxes paid by individuals in each county in Texas, these tax records were compiled annually by the county tax assessor/collector and transmitted to the State Comptroller for Public Accounts in Austin. Tax records begin for each county with the formation date of that county and continue to the present. They are the only record available through which an individual's landholding and slaveholding status may be traced on an annual basis. (And they are alphabetized according to the first letter of the surname.) The tax records in Texas are available on microfilm from the Archives Division of the State Library.

Third, there are the probate records located in the offices of county clerks across Texas and the South in general. In some cases these records have been destroyed by one of the courthouse fires that were so common in the nineteenth century, but in most counties they remain in good shape. The probate records, which are usually indexed, include wills, inventories and appraisals of estates, and records of estate administration. Carefully considered, these records are highly revealing concerning the lives of thousands of ordinary men and women in any historical era.

Finally, there are the slave narratives. These are, as you probably know, interviews with former slaves conducted as a WPA project during the 1930s (an early version of oral history, I suppose you could say). The slave narratives must be used with great care since the interviewees were

elderly people roughly seventy years removed from slavery, and the interviewers were generally white southerners. These slave narratives are not strictly local records in that they were not taken on a county-by-county basis, and they do not necessarily exist for every county. However, virtually every one of the slaves interviewed named the county in which he lived so that these records may be readily used on a local basis in conjunction with the others already mentioned. The slave narratives are available in a variety of forms including a published version from Greenwood Press.

Now, how can these local records, which, to repeat, have been recently receiving considerable attention from research scholars, be used directly in teaching about slavery in antebellum Texas? Assume that the course being taught is a United States History survey run primarily as a lecture class. Regardless of how the lectures on slavery are organized some aspects of the discussion will necessarily be quantitative. I have found, for example, that almost invariably someone will ask why Texas defended slavery and joined the Condederacy when slavery was not really all that important or slaves all that numerous in Texas. I usually answer by citing statistics from the census to show that the proportion of slaveholders and slaves in the population of Texas was quite comparable to the proportion for the South as a whole. Then, I go ahead to give examples of Texas counties that had more slaves than whites. Harrison County, for example, had 6,217 whites and 8,784 slaves in 1860 -- and it was not even located in the

great plantation area of the state along the Gulf coast. If the students want to know about any other county, perhaps one they are personally familiar with, the statistics are easy to find. It seems that this sort of emphasis on the situation in particular counties, especially those with more slaves than whites, really makes the point that Texas was indeed heavily involved with the "Peculiar Institution."

Another quantitative aspect of slavery that never fails to interest is the price of slaves. It is fine to give general statistics and averages, for example, for the South as a whole. But if you have a few inventories and assessments from probate records to show the values assigned to individual slaves at a particular time and to indicate the relationship of age, sex, and condition to price, the business of assigning dollar values to humans is less abstract and better remembered. For example, the estate of William J. Blocker of Harrison County had 37 slaves who averaged nearly $840 each in value when they were assessed in 1859. The most valuable was a 32 year old man worth $1,700 and the least valuable was a 2 year old boy worth $200. Also in 1859 the assessors of the estate of William Mims, another Harrison County planter, valued a 29 year old male who had blacksmithing skills at $2,250 and a 25 year old male who had "bad eyes" at only $500.

Interest in this sort of information on slave values is generally heightened if you have data on land values at the same time, preferably from the same estate inventory. The contrast between slave prices and land prices is often startling. For example, William J. Blocker, owner of the

estate just cited, had 2,416 acres of land valued at $7 per acre. At this value, which was relatively high for that time, it took almost 250 acres of land to equal the value of the one 32 year old male slave mentioned in the same inventory. Could you ask for a better illustration of the fact that antebellum Texas was land-rich and labor-poor and therefore much in need of slave labor?

Local records are also invaluable in illustrating many of the human dimensions of slavery. Recent studies, for example, have been much concerned with the slave family. Did slaves have viable two-parent families, and how common were disruptions of family life? The probate records provide numerous instances of slaves being inventoried according to family units, and slaveholders themselves often referred to families in arranging the settlement of their estates. For example, the will of John J. Webster, a large Harrison County planter, provided that "my negroes be so distributed as to allot the families by families in the partition, that members of the same family may remain together." In the slave narratives, the former slaves themselves almost invariably referred to their parents and families. One slave from Buckner Scott's Harrison County plantation implied that his family broke up only after emancipation. He remembered that "dere was no separation of de family long's we lived on de marster's place." On the other hand, slaves frequently mentioned the sale of family members, and the probate records also contain evidence that the family was not necessarily respected. Some wills made no provision at all concerning the family, and

the practice of hiring out bondsmen in the administration of estates clearly took young slaves away from their immediate families. For example, the records of the estate of S. J. Arnett of Harrison County show three slave children who were aged twelve, eleven, and eight when the will was probated in 1853 being hired to three different individuals for the year 1855. I cannot say for sure that these three children w of the same famly, but they were part of a total slaveholding of only twelve slaves. It seems likely that they were being hired away from members of their own families. Evidence of this sort, again, emphasizing individual slaveholders and slaves in a particular time and area, often has considerable impact in the classroom.

How did Negroes react to enslavement? Many individual variations were possible, of course. Stanley Elkins created storms of controversy in the early 1960s by arguing that the typical reaction was that of "Sambo," the smiling, giggling, servile "darky." Fogel and Engerman have been accused of picturing the slaves as obedient, striving, "black Horatio Algers." Others such as Genovese and Owens tend to emphasize the slaves' desire for as much personal autonomy as possible and their tendency to be a "troublesome property." Local records enable the teacher to illustrate the broad range of reactions by slaves. There were some bondsmen who appeared to be faithful and contented servants. Their owners certainly thought so. The probate records contain frequent references to loyal servants who were to receive special treatment. Harrison County records provide numerous examples. John P.

Thompson's will in 1849 stated: "I have an old favorite negro man by the name of Barrow whom I desire to maintain on the place with his mistress and to perform easy labor, but I do not wish him to be regarded as the property of any one." J. M. Saunders who died in 1861 directed that one of his slaves be given $5 per month for life and never be subject to sale. There were even some cases of manumission. In 1856 David Funderburke of Marshall ordered that "in consideration of the good services rendered me through life by my negro man and body servant Thomas, I will and bequest to him, his freedom, and entire exemption from slavery through life." In some cases the slave narratives also support the faithful servant reaction. Ellen Payne who belonged to Dr. William Evans insisted that she "loved all my white folks, and they was sweet to us." Gus Bradshaw who lived on Dave Caven's plantation said that blacks were better off as slaves because then they were made to do right.

Other slaves clearly hated their condition and either gave as much trouble as possible or else bitterly despised their owners. The probate records show, for example, that Cary McClure, administrator of the estate of Zach Abney in 1862, asked permission to sell four slaves off the plantation on the grounds that they "cannot be controlled by any person but their owner without rigid severity, and their example . . . will have a very bad effect upon the other negroes as they are young and prone to follow evil examples even when those examples are not followed with impunity." Wes Brady, who belonged to a planter named John James, remembered only long

hours and severe punishment -- and the fact that "Missa James . . . took sick and stepped off to Hell 'bout six months 'fore we got free." Perhaps too, many slaves took a more philosophical view as expressed by Josephine Howard. Her master, she told the WPA interviewer, was not "worser dan other white folks."

How did the slaveowners view their slaves? Clearly the slaves were treated as property to be bought and sold, hired out, and so on. Local records attest fully to this. But at the same time, the great majority of slaveholders could not overlook the fact that their property was human. They seem to have been very hesitant to use the harsh word "slave;" instead the records abound with references to "negroes" or "bondsmen." Their wills often contained directions for the treatment of slaves that could only apply to human property. We have already seen examples of slaveholders who ordered protection of families and manumission. A more curious recognition of slave humanity is found in the will of Jeremiah Vardaman of Collin County who left the following instructions concerning his slave Solomon: ". . . I wish him to have the privilege to choose a master, and if said master is willing to give his value my executor shall have full power to make said sale . . . ." What other type of property could be expected to choose a new owner? The slave's human intelligence was being recognized at the same time that he was being sold as a piece of personal property.

These illustrations of the recognition of slave humanity by slaveowners do not suggest that slavery was a kindly or benevolent institution, they do show that it was not so totally dehumanized as is sometimes argued. Furthermore, these illustrations support the contention that the "Peculiar Institution" placed a special strain on those who engaged in it. Slaveholders treated Negroes as chattel property and insisted that the institution was just. But most could not ignore the humanity of their property and thus square slavery with the liberal and Christian ideals of the United States. Charles Grier Sellers, Jr. called this situation the "travail of slavery." To live day by day saying that you are right and knowing at the same time that you are wrong can be uncomfortable at best and explosive at worst. This is an aspect of slavery that many students have never considered. Materials from local records illustrate the point very well.

In summary, then, information from local records may be used in a variety of ways to strengthen and add interesting detail to lectures on slavery in the United States. Obviously the use of these materials need not stop at this point. Should you have a teaching situation that would allow the use of research projects as part of the instruction, these records could be invaluable. It is possible, for example, to research the history of one slaveholding family in a particular county. One approach is to pick a family head who died during the late fifties or early sixties and whose estate went through probate. You can then work both forward and backward in time

to piece together the story of that particular family from census, tax, and probate materials. The results can sometimes be fascinating.

Finally, I would emphasize one other advantage of using local records in teaching -- and that is availability. Your school may be located a long way from any major depository of traditional historical materials, but there should be a courthouse nearby. If you have county archives and a few microfilm readers for census and tax records, you are ready to go to work on local records. I think that there is nothing so exciting about history as what one historian called "dirtying your hands with the sources." And I also think that both the materials and the excitement may be carried directly from research into teaching.