SARAH

A series of introductory essays inspired by the stories told at Brush Square Museums.
By Katie Bender

On March 20th, 1836, Joe, at the end of a long journey, and in a very precarious personal position, stood before the newly formed governing council of an independent Texas. He told his rapt audience of the harrowing experiences he'd survived that had brought him there, to the war-torn town of Gonzales, in Coahuila y Tejas. Joe was twenty-one, at once legally free by Mexico's anti-slavery laws and legally the property of the Travis estate by Tejas' laws. Along with nineteen others, mostly women and children, he had survived the battle of the Alamo. Joe could not read or write, but William Fairfax Gray, a volunteer from Virginia, wrote down his account, noting Joe spoke with "much modesty, apparent candor, and remarkably distinctly for one of his class." (1) Joe told of being woken before dawn by the cries of the advancing Mexican army, of shooting down into Santa Anna's front guard as Mexican soldiers used improvised ladders to scramble up the wall, of Colonel Travis' death, of the violence and bloodshed that occurred in the mission once the walls had been breached, and of Santa Anna's decision to execute any surviving soldiers. Joe also mentioned finding the body of a woman, a black woman, among the soldiers, buckshot, and cannons fallen on the wall. He did not know who she was but his mention of her is notable. Her presence in that battle is at once anathema to the mythmaker's narrative of the battle of the Alamo, while pointing to a larger truth about Mexico's northern frontier.

William B. Travis and Joe, Alamo, San Antonio. Courtesy Texas Historical Commission.https://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/travis-joe-1815/

Historians have linked the body of the woman Joe mentioned with an escaped enslaved woman from Louisiana by the name of Sarah. The thread of evidence putting Sarah on the wall on March 6th, 1836, ties a slave owner named Ezekiel Hayes from Louisiana to one Patrick Henry Herndon, who had recently immigrated to Mexico. In 1831, Franco Pizarro Martinez, Mexican consul in New Orleans, reached out to Steven F. Austin through an intermediary, asking for the whereabouts of Herndon. Hayes claimed Herndon had taken his property, the woman Sarah, with him to Mexico, without permission. Ezekiel Hayes clearly expected his right to property to be respected and the woman returned to him. (2) Mexican law aimed at abolishing slavery, while also trying to appease their expansionist slave-owning neighbors to the North. Hayes' claim to Sarah did not guarantee her return. Patrick Henry Herndon died in the battle of the Alamo, and there is no evidence that Sarah was returned to Ezekiel, though he sent out several more petitions over the next few years. It is believed Sarah is the young woman Joe mentioned in his account of the battle. Was Sarah fighting on the mission wall or accidentally caught in the crossfire? Was she in Mexico by choice or coercion? Was Mexico and freedom her intended destination or a tradeoff of one life of servitude for another? We'll never know. We do know that Mexico's antislavery laws, though sometimes mercurial, were well known to enslaved populations and a threat to the “property rights" of southern slave owners. (3) Sarah and Joe's tenuous position on the frontier put them right at the center of the United States and Mexico's ideological struggle between the right to freedom versus the right to property enshrined in both countries' burgeoning democracies.

PROPERTY VERSUS LIBERTY IN THE UNITED STATES

In November of 1820, Moses Austin made his way from Missouri into New Spain seeking permission to settle families from the United States into the fertile and relatively uninhabited northern frontier with the express purpose of expanding cotton production and slavery. (3) Moses was fifty-five years old and desperate to start over. Born in 1761, Moses had grown up beside democracy in the United States. He knew the Declaration of Independence enshrined equality and lived by the property rights afforded to him by the Constitution as a slave owner in Virginia and then Missouri. A businessman who had become a miner through marriage to a wealthy family, Moses had made and lost a fortune in lead production in Virginia. When the Louisiana Territory was transferred to the United States, Moses fled his debtors to try his luck in Missouri. Once again he made a fortune, but in 1819 a financial panic swept the nation. Austin, heavily indebted, once again lost everything. Moses Austin was through with mining. A savvy and desperate businessman, he recognized that the invention of Eli Whitney's cotton gin in 1793 had transformed cotton from a luxury good sought after from halfway across the world to an everyday necessity. The population of Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana had recently exploded as demand for cotton rose and land prices soared. Cotton required wide-open spaces as it quickly depleted the soil, as well as a massive labor force. Moses Austin set his sights to the South and West seeking land and hoping for a government that would be favorable to slavery.

Moses' bid for land in Mexico must be understood through the larger backdrop of statehood in the United States. In 1818, Missouri petitioned to join the Union as a slave state. Having defended their right to hold people as property through the reign of Spain and France,

Missourians made it clear they would continue fighting for that right in the United States. At the time, there were eleven slaveholding states and eleven free states. The balance of power kept the debate at bay. However, with Missouri's bid, the debate spilled out of the House of Representatives and through the States. Northerners felt the addition of a new slave-owning state whose boundary line, as far north as Illinois and Ohio, was ideologically opposed to the Founding Fathers' initial promise of liberty. Southerners, and especially planters, saw Missouri as a test to their ability to expand slavery westward. The nation was divided. Finally, when Maine put in a bid for statehood in 1820, southerners made it clear they would never approve its statehood without Missouri's. The argument here was based on the idea of noninterference. If the state had existed with slavery laws prior to statehood, then the US government should respect those laws. A compromise was reached, by which all unorganized territories north of 36°30' would remain free. Known as the Missouri Compromise, Missouri finally joined the Union. Both sides of the aisle, like Moses Austin and other southern entrepreneurs, were already looking westward and preparing for the next clash over slavery. (3) At the time, New Spain was a slave-owning extension of the Spanish crown. Nonintereference in 1821 meant that if the United States annexed parts of New Spain, they would become slave-owning states. However, Spanish control over New Spain was waning, and the men and women fighting for democracy in those lands were ideologically opposed to slavery.

Artistic propaganda promoting westward expansion left the issue of slavery completely out of the picture. John Gast, American Progress, 1872. Wikimedia.

DEMOCRACY IN MEXICO

The father of Mexico's independence was a priest named Miguel Hidalgo who, shocked by Mexico's resources for agrarian production versus the imports it was forced to buy from Spain, preached his "Grito de Dolores" calling on the people of Mexico to rise up against their European Spanish landlords. In 1810, he marched across Mexico gathering some 90,000 volunteers to him. These were mostly farmers, who, without weapons or proper training, took up arms against the Spanish elite. Hidalgo was captured and executed, but the call to arms reverberated across Mexico. To the south, Vicente Guerrero, a descendant of enslaved people brought over from Africa, joined with the rebels and quickly rose through the ranks, becoming the leader of the insurgency in the south. Guerrero fought for independence from Spain and citizenship for all men, regardless of race. On February 24th, 1821, royalist Brigadier Agustín de Iturbide issued a manifesto that laid out the foundation for a new nation: independence from Spain, Catholicism as the central religion, and the equality of all americanos. By doing so,Iturbide created a coalition of liberals, conservatives, rebels, and loyalists, and the Spanish Viceroy Juan O'Donojú signed a treaty recognizing Mexico's independence.

Viceroyalty of New Spain 1819. Image available on the Internet and included in accordance with Title 17 U.S.C. Section 107.

Like the United States, Mexico's democracy was founded on the dueling principles of liberty and property rights. Slaveholders in Mexico threatened to revolt if their property was not legally safeguarded. However, there were far fewer slave owners in Mexico than in the United States,

and Mexicans associated colonization as a kind of slavery. Their call to arms against Spain was distinctly antislavery. In fact, language from the Abolitionist movement in the United States and England made its way into the Constitution of 1824. The expectation for a democratic Mexico was rooted in the slow emancipation of all current slaves and the prohibition of the slave trade. (3) In this way, Mexico set itself apart, both from the Spanish crown it claimed independence from, and its neighbors to the North. On May 18th, 1822, Agustín de Iturbide was proclaimed emperor of Mexico. The land he governed stretched as far south as Chiapas, and as far North and West as present-day Oregon. It included diverse indigenous populations, languages, and geographies, and though the coalition that brought him to power cast a wide net, governing would prove impossible. In December of 1822, General Antonio Lopez de Santa Anna revolted against the emperor. In the wake of this revolt, each province claimed independence.

The constitution of 1824 was created, giving independence to 19 states, while six territories were to be governed by Mexico City. The constitution set forth a “popular representative and federal republic.” Catholicism would be the main religion. There would still be independence from Spain, and universal male suffrage was guaranteed. General Guadalupe Victoria, a hero of the independence movement, was elected president. Tejas was too underpopulated to be considered its own state, and so it joined with Coahuila to the south, forming the state Coahuila y Tejas. This meant most decisions affecting the northern reaches of Mexico would be made in Coahuila's capital in Saltillo to the south. On March 24th, 1824, the legislature of Coahuila y Tejas upheld a ban on the introduction of slaves. This position was deeply unpopular with norteamericanos who had immigrated to Mexico with slaves, as well asTejanos who saw the economy and infrastructure of the slave-owning settlers as an essential means of developing northern Mexico. However, there was a growing awareness that the norteamericanos flouted Mexican law and that the expansionist interests of the United States were a greater threat. Ultimately, prohibiting slavery was seen as a tool to dissuade settlers from the United States.

ON THE BORDER

Moses Austin would not live to see his bid for land grants in New Spain come to fruition. He died in 1821, after a harrowing return journey to Missouri. But what he’d seen in New Spain convinced him that land to the south and west was the key to his family's future. His dying wish was that his son, Stephen F. Austin, take up the land grant offered by the governing body in San Antonio de Béjar and begin to move settlers into the lands that would, one day, be Central Texas. Steven F. Austin believed the land was only lucrative if slavery was legal. He watched Mexico’s burgeoning democracy carefully, anxious that slavery not be banned outright. He had come of age in Missouri, and seen the political power of slave owners who simply refused to give up their right to property. The terms of Mexico’s land grant that Austin took charge of were extremely generous. Each family was afforded one labor (about 177 acres) and each rancher a sitio (4,440 acres), which they could keep if they were able to improve on the land after two years. Though almost all the settlers were southern planters, they claimed to be ranchers to get the larger acreage. Austin picked well-to-do Southerners. Of the original three hundred he brought to Mexico, only four were illiterate. Nearly all were slave owners. In 1825, the population

of Austin's colony was 1,790 and made up of sixty-nine families; 443 enslaved people had been brought into Mexico. (4) Austin spent a great deal of his time petitioning the government in Coahuila y Tejas and Mexico City to respect the rights of the settlers to keep slaves. In 1828, José Antonio Navarro and José Antonio Tijerina, both well-to-do Tejanos and political allies of Austin's, proposed a bill guaranteeing enforcement of all labor contracts signed in other countries. Slave owners quickly exploited this law by forging indentured servant documents for their enslaved people. This loophole was immediately exploited, and as there was very little infrastructure of Mexico's governing body on the frontier, easily circumvented.

That same year, Manuel de Mier y Terán, leader of a boundary committee expedition, was sent to survey the border between Mexico and the United States, and to report back on how Mexican laws were enacted on the border. Mexico knew its hold on the northern regions wasn't secure, and what Terán reported back alarmed Congress in Mexico City. Norteamericanos did everything they could to undermine Mexico's laws and brought in slaves "with forged letters of freedom and with the name of free laborers who must forfeit the salaries that they have received." In Tejas, norteamericanos outnumbered Mexicans ten to one. (3) Terán recommended strengthening military presence in Tejas, appointing a Mexican consul, and encouraging immigration from Europe and Mexico to Tejas. However, in the late summer of 1829, Terán received word that the Spanish army was invading Mexico. Concerns about the rebellious settlers to the North would have to be set aside as independence leader and president of Mexico, Guerrero, was forced to send all troops south to Tampico to meet the Spanish navy.

The Spanish attack on Mexico in 1829 sputtered out when yellow fever decimated the soldiers, forcing Spanish General Ignacio Barradas to surrender. However, Mexico's coffers had been spent. President Guerrero's hold on power was tenuous, and it was clear Spain was not about to relinquish power throughout the Caribbean, Central, and Latin America. Guerrero sent agents to the newly independent Haiti and to Cuba, with the message that if enslaved people were to rise up against their Spanish oppressors, Mexico would support them. (3) The notion that Mexico could be encouraging a fifth column out of enslaved populations so deeply concerned the interests of the United Kingdom and the United States, that both governments pressured Spain to give up its claim on Mexico once and for all. The lesson was clear, Mexico was not a powerful nation, but its antislavery position gave it leverage amidst larger empires that relied heavily on enslaved people.

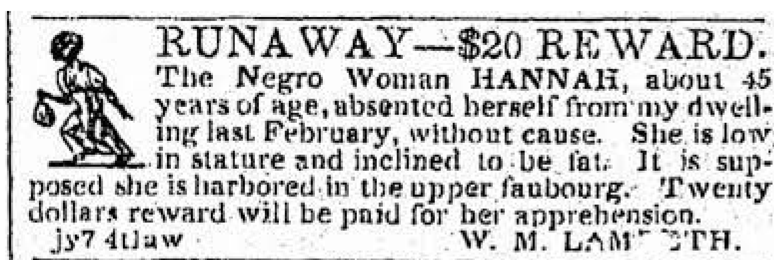
President Vicente Guerrero of Mexico (1782-1831) photo courtesy of Imagine-Mexico.com.
https://imagine-mexico.com/afromexican-vicente-guerrero-a-leader-of-liberty-independence-and-peace/

Mexico’s early democracy was mercurial and chaotic. Iturbide made himself emperor only to be sent away to exile a year later, Guadalupe Victoria had established a federal system of government but had quickly been ousted, and Vicente Guerrero ignored election results naming himself president and inciting riots, only to die before a firing squad. Santa Anna ousted Anastasio Bustamante and inserted the liberal Gómez Farías in his place, only to dissolve Farías’ government and most state legislatures when the liberal reforms proved unsuccessful. (3). In 1834, Santa Anna overturned the constitution, established a centralist regime, and, wary of the growing power of settlers in Tejas and Andrew Jackson's clearly expansionist policies, began enforcing anti-slave laws on the northern border. For the restive slave owners in Tejas, this was all the provocation they needed to cry rebellion. In fact, it was Joe’s owner, William Barret Travis, whose primary concern had always been the “security of persons & property” on the frontier, who took the first step in inciting a rebellion. In June of 1835, Travis received a letter from a friend in Anahuac informing him that customs officials, appointed by Mexico City, were imposing tariffs on trade. In response, Travis gathered fifty volunteers and a small cannon, and sailed across Galveston Bay to attack the garrison in Anahuac. Antonio Tenorio, Captain of the garrison, quickly surrendered. No blood was spilled, and many settlers and Tejanos in the region condemned the attack, declaring they were “true, faithful, loyal, and unoffending Mexican citizens'' and that they strongly disapproved of Travis actions as “incautious and unreflecting” of the peace they wished to maintain with the capital. (3) In response, Santa Anna sent his brother-in-law, General Martín Perfecto de Cos, with troops to investigate.

Rumors that Santa Anna was attacking, that all slaves would be set free, and that Santa Anna would treat Tejas as a colony of Mexico City quickly spread through the North. Santa Anna’s dictatorial style gave the rumors some teeth, and both settlers and Tejanos began organizing to defend their property and independence. For well-to-do settlers, defending their independence really meant defending the practice of slavery. In September of 1835, Lieutenant Francisco De Castañeda arrived on the banks of the Guadalupe River, outside the town of Gonzales, Tejas, to take back the army's cannon. The swollen river kept Castañeda from entering the town

directly, and so he sent word requesting the cannon be returned. The mayor of Gonzales refused, and as Castañeda waited, townspeople stockpiled weapons and gathered reinforcements. On October 1st, volunteers attacked Castañeda's troops, waving a flag that proclaimed "Come and Take it." The first shots of Tejas' bid for independence had been fired.

In November, fifty-eight delegates gathered in San Felipe de Austin to discuss the terms of an independent Tejas, but the delegates were divided. In order to build consensus, they decided for federalism under Mexico's flag, while still creating the infrastructure for a war cabinet in expectation of the continued presence of Mexican troops in Tejas. The efforts were not wasted as General Martín Perfecto de Cos arrived in San Antonio de Bejar with five hundred soldiers that month. Stephen F. Austin, made Commander, was sent with three hundred soldiers to take back the Alamo. In December, Austin and his men attacked the mission. Though they were greatly outnumbered, they were able to fake an attack on the old mission, where Cos was stationed, while actually sending armed men through the town. Taken by surprise, the Mexican army had to respond with close combat throughout the town. Seeing the civilian bloodshed, and with reinforcements too exhausted from a forced March north, Cos surrendered. The Texas volunteers were left with a town and mission destroyed by battle. It is here in San Antonio de Bejar that Patrick Henry Herndon and Sarah's story become entwined in history. Santa Anna began to prepare for a major offensive on Tejas, and volunteers joined from around Tejas, rallying to the cry of independence against a dictator. In Brazoria, the hysteria of a possible slave rebellion, in expectation of Mexican troops and law, swept the town. Over a hundred slaves were lynched or beaten by slave owners desperate to keep control of their system of human bondage.



RUNAWAY—$20 REWARD.
The Negro Woman HANNAH, about 45 years of age, absented herself from my dwelling last February, without cause. She is low in stature and inclined to be fat. It is supposed she is harbored in the upper faubourg. Twenty dollars reward will be paid for her apprehension.
jy7 4tlaw W. M. LAM[illegible]TH.

Add looking for a woman named Hannah, such advertisements filled the last section of the newspaper. Courtesy of Freedom on the Move. https://freedomonthemove.org/

INDIVIDUAL ACCOUNTS

Joe was brought to northern Mexico under false pretenses, like so many people, in the year 1832. He and his family were held by a labor contract as "indentured servants" that their owner, a tinner named Mansfield, had falsified. When Mansfield died, his enslaved people, by Mexican

law, should have been granted their freedom. They were instead used as collateral against Mansfield's remaining debts. William Barret Travis served as the attorney, keeping Joe, his mother, and brother in bondage. Joe's mother, Elizabeth, clearly knew the laws of Mexico. She promptly sued for freedom for herself and her youngest surviving child. No record exists of the outcome of her trial. Joe was sold to Travis, and never saw either his mother or younger brother again.

The same year Joe's family arrived in Tejas, three enslaved people escaped Louisiana, and upon arriving in Anahuac, Tejas, petitioned for "protection under the Mexican flag." Their names are lost to history, but it is clear they understood they were legally free on Mexican soil. The commander of the garrison, Juan Davis Bradburn, considered himself a law-abiding Mexican citizen. He'd come to Mexico in the '20s, fought for independence from Spain, and fully assimilated into the culture. He was not entirely sure what to do with the escapees; while there was no law for the extradition of fugitives, there was also no clear instructions on granting freedom. Bradburn put the three fugitives to work with his other men while he wrote to Mexico City asking for guidance. Within a few weeks, William H. Logan arrived at Anahuac, requesting the return of his property. Bradburn wouldn't release them before receiving word from Mexico City. Logan hired Travis, who was just starting his law practice, to help him recover his enslaved people. Travis didn't seem to think the answer could be found in a court of law. A few days later, a cloaked figure arrived at the garrison warning that a hundred men were gathering to forcibly take back the fugitives at the garrison. Bradburn prepared for an attack, only to discover the plot had been a trick, and Travis simply wanted to pressure Bradburn. Furious, Bradburn had Travis arrested for inciting violence. Word quickly spread to local norteamericanos that Bradburn was holding Travis unlawfully. Bradburn was one of the few custom officials who followed Mexico's laws and was deeply unpopular within the community. A group of thirty armed colonists rode north from Brazoria, gathering volunteers, to attack the garrison. Bradburn and his nineteen men were outnumbered, but the colonists lacked artillery to take the fort. Fearing a full-scale uprising, Colonel José de Las Piedras, Mexican Commander at Nacogdoches, rode to Anahuac to negotiate a surrender. The colonists demanded the return of the fugitives and that Bradburn be relieved of his post. Piedras agreed. The fear of inciting a rebellion or giving the United States an excuse to send troops to the border was enough to let the norteamericano settlers act according to their own interests.

In 1831, Honorine, who spent her life in slavery on a plantation in Ascension Parish, Louisiana, determined to escape to Mexico and freedom. She was assisted by a local merchant named John Franz. During their journey, Franz convinced Honorine to sign an indentured servitude document in order to move through Mexico without interference. She did so. When they arrived in San Felipe de Austin, Franz used the document to sell Honorine, making a quick profit. Honorine sent word back to Louis Elie Laroque Tourgeau, her previous owner, requesting that she be returned to the plantation. Escaped enslaved people on the frontier were in the precarious position of having to trust, and always being vulnerable to, the communities they found themselves in.

There is evidence of many escaped enslaved people who made their way into Mexico, claimed freedom, and lived fully integrated lives. In 1833, the abolitionist Benjamin Lundy made a trip to

San Antonio de Béjar, with the hopes of establishing a free black colony in Tejas. In his diary, he noted "There lives here in Béjar, a free black man, who speaks English. He came as a slave first from North Carolina to Georgia, and then from Georgia to Nacogdoches, in Texas...He now works as a blacksmith in this place." Lundy also made reference to a man named Felipe Elua. A former slave from Louisiana, Elua had purchased his freedom for himself and his whole family. Lundy noted they had “resided here twenty-six years, and he now owns five or six houses and lots.” (5)

In 1835, Benjamin Lundy also noted befriending a norteamericano named David Town, who had immigrated to Mexico with the express purpose of emancipating his wife and children, who had up until that point, lived in slavery. Lundy met the family in Nacogdoches, where they lived in “harmony, are quite industrious, and make a very respectable appearance.” (5) Was Sarah, like Honorine, coerced into escaping one form of bondage for another? Or was she like the wife of David Town, emancipated, living, and fighting by her choice with Henry Patrick Herndon? From Sarah herself, like all the women living between slavery and freedom on the frontier, we are left with only silence and the scant paper trail of men who would claim them as property. What Sarah’s story points to is a frontier made potent with possibility and danger. The people living in Tejas, regardless of where they came from, used the land as a backdrop on which to paint their own ideas of the future. Santa Anna surrendered Tejas in 1836, after he was captured in the battle of San Jacinto. The Republic of Texas quickly legalized slavery, disenfranchised Tejanos, and worked to eradicate indigenous populations, clearly defining what norteamericano settlers needed Texas to be.

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