

Biracial Politics and Community Development: The Reconstruction Experience in Fort Bend County, Texas 1869-1889

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Situated in the Brazos River valley, Fort Bend County, Texas, was one of the first counties settled by Americans as part of Austin's colony in the 1820s. Due to the fertility of the soil and the county's proximity to both Galveston and Houston, by 1860 Fort Bend County had grown into one of the wealthiest plantation districts in Texas. One consequence of such a predominant plantation economy was a fairly unequal ratio of black and white Texans who lived in the county. On the eve of the Civil War, approximately 4,000 black slaves and 2,000 whites resided in Fort Bend County.¹ Prior to the war, such a large number of slaves translated into great wealth and power for the county's white slaveholders. But, after emancipation and the subsequent political empowerment of black men through the Fourteenth and Fifteenth amendments, the county's whites witnessed their political emasculation as the "natural" leaders of county affairs. Although primarily symbolic, this sense of political belittlement violently manifested itself in what was perhaps Fort Bend County's most famous historical event, the Jaybird-Woodpecker War. Lasting approximately a year, and culminating in a lethal riot on August 16, 1889, the Jaybird-Woodpecker War was fought between whites opposed to black political enfranchisement—calling themselves Jaybirds—and whites who were sympathetic to black electoral power—or Woodpeckers. It ended in victory for the Jay Bird Democratic Association, which ran the county as an all-white political organization from 1889 until 1954. This violent "reclaim-

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¹Fuller details on the economy and population of the county are in Leslie Lovett, "The Jaybird-Woodpecker War: Reconstruction in Fort Bend County, Texas" (master's thesis, Rice University, 1994), 7-23.

ing" of power by conservative whites has received great attention from earlier local historians. Unfortunately, these historians tended to accept uncritically the negative Jaybird version of Fort Bend County's 20 years of biracial politics.² In light of revisionist scholarship of the last two decades concerning Reconstruction, this older interpretation of the biracial county government that governed Fort Bend County from 1869 to 1889 warrants a more careful study.³ Several questions are crucial in examining the meaning of black political power in Fort Bend County during these years: Who were the men elected? How many were black? How many were white? What offices did blacks hold? Was there cooperation between black and white officials? And, most importantly, how successful was this biracial county government at fostering economic growth and stability for all of Fort Bend County's citizens, black and white? At the heart of this reappraisal is the larger question of whether Fort Bend County's "redemption" relieved the county from an incompetent and hopelessly corrupt government or whether the Jaybird takeover in 1889 was merely a reinstatement of white supremacy for its own sake as the guiding principle of Fort Bend County politics.

During Reconstruction, black voters in Fort Bend County successfully played an important role in state politics by consistently returning large Republican majorities in state and national elections and by electing members of their own race, such as State Senator Walter Moses Burton, to the state legislature (Table 1). However, through their electoral majorities, the control of county government gave Fort Bend County blacks their greatest impact on

²Clarence R. Wharton, *Wharton's History of Fort Bend County* (San Antonio: Naylor Co., 1939), 174-221; Pauline Yelderman, *The Jay Bird Democratic Association of Fort Bend County: A White Man's Union* (Waco: Texian Press, 1979), 38-144. Yelderman, who also wrote the entry "Jaybird-Woodpecker War" for the 1956 *Handbook of Texas*, had a personal as well as a historical interest in the subject; according to the biographical note in her book, she was an active member of the Jay Bird Association during the 1930s.

³For recent historiography of Reconstruction in general, see Joe Gray Taylor, "The White South from Secession to Redemption," Lawanda Cox, "From Emancipation to Segregation: National Policy and Southern Blacks," and Harold D. Woodman, "Economic Reconstruction and the Rise of the New South, 1865-1900," in John B. Boles and Evelyn Thomas Nolen, eds., *Interpreting Southern History: Historiographical Essays in Honor of Sanford W. Higgenbotham* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1987), 162-253. For Texas Reconstruction historiography, see Alwyn Barr, "African Americans in Texas: From Stereotypes to Diverse Roles," and Randolph B. Campbell, "Statehood, Civil War, and Reconstruction, 1846-76," in Walter L. Buenger and Robert A. Calvert, eds., *Texas Through Time: Evolving Interpretations* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1991), 50-79, 165-196, and Barry A. Crouch, "'Unmanacling' Texas Reconstruction: A Twenty-Year Perspective," *Southwestern Historical Quarterly* 93 (January 1990): 275-301.

Table 1. Fort Bend County Presidential Election Statistics, 1872-1888

	Total Votes Cast	% Republican	% Democratic
1872	1,222	82.3%	17.7%
1876	1,194	83.5%	16.5%
1880	N.A.*	N.A.	N.A.
1884	1,905	83.4%	16.6%
1888	2,523	78.1%	21.9%

*The 1880 election registers did not list the presidential returns, but the gubernatorial race between Republican E. D. Davis and Democrat O. M. Roberts showed a Republican majority of 78.9%.

Sources: Election Registers, 1872-1890, Secretary of State Records (RG 107), Archives Division, Texas State Library, Austin.

local affairs in the years between 1869 and 1889.⁴ As Eric Foner noted in his monumental study of Reconstruction, county government was often the scene of the most intense rivalry between blacks and whites, for unlike state and federal officials it was the "decisions of [local] public officials [that] directly affected daily life and the distribution of power. . . [County officials], in the words of an Alabama lawyer, dealt with 'the practical rights of the people, . . . our business and lives.'"⁵

⁴Lovett, "The Jaybird-Woodpecker War," 50-52; Merline Pitre, *Through Many Dangers, Toils, and Snares: The Black Leadership of Texas* (Austin: Eakin Press, 1985), 133-41. Pitre has mapped the changing lines of the senatorial and representative districts of Texas during Reconstruction. Fort Bend County belonged to the 13th Representative District in 1869-1876, the 37th Representative District in 1876-1881, and the 53rd Representative District after 1881. The county was part of the 13th Senatorial District during 1869-1876 and the 17th Senatorial District after 1876. See Table 1 for presidential election statistics reflecting black voting trends from 1872 to 1888.

⁵Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988), 355-360; Randolph Campbell, "Grassroots Reconstruction: The Personnel of County Government in Texas, 1865-1876," *Journal of Southern History* 58 (February 1992): 99-116. Campbell's study only covers the offices of county judge, county commissioner, and sheriff, and he did not include Fort Bend County, so a direct comparison with his findings for that part of Texas settled prior to 1861 is impossible. Campbell found very low percentages of black officials in county government, the greatest being seven percent in 1876.

Table 2. Fort Bend County Elected Officials by Race

Total Elected Officials	% Black	% White	% Unknown	
1869-76	40	47.5%	40.0%	12.5%
1876-78	27	40.7%	37.0%	22.2%
1878-80	26	42.3%	38.5%	19.2%
1880-82	22	27.3%	50.0%	22.7%
1882-84	28	35.7%	50.0%	14.3%
1884-86	30	40.0%	43.3%	16.7%
1886-88	30	36.7%	40.0%	23.3%
1888-89	32	18.8%	53.1%	28.1%

Sources: Lists of elected officials were compiled from Election Registers, 1870-1888, Secretary of State Records. The race of officials was determined from a variety of sources in addition to the election registers: Appointments to Office 1863-1865, Secretary of State Records (RD 107), Archives Division, Texas State Library, Austin; Manuscript Census, Fort Bend County, Texas, Schedule 1, 1870; Manuscript Census, Fort Bend County, Texas, Schedule 1, 1880; accounts of Fort Bend County politics in contemporary periodicals; Voter Registration of 1867, Texas, Archives Division, Texas State Library; "Constitution and By-Laws, Jay Bird Democratic Association of Fort Bend County," The Center for American History, The University of Texas at Austin; Yelderman, *The Jay Bird Democratic Association*; Wharton, *Wharton's History of Fort Bend County*.

Table 3. Fort Bend County Population by Race

	Total	Black	White
1860	6,143	4,136*	67.3%
1870	7,114	5,510	77.5%
1880	9,380**	7,508	80.0%
1890	10,586	8,981	84.8%

*Nine were free blacks, the other 4,127 slaves.

**The 1880 census included one Indian resident in the county.

Sources: *Ninth Census—Volume 1: The Statistics of the Population of the United States* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1872); *Statistics of the Population of the United States at the Tenth Census (June 1, 1880)*, Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1883); *Report on Population of the United States at the Eleventh Census: 1890* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1895).

In Fort Bend, black men at one time or another functioned in the roles of sheriff, county commissioner, tax assessor, voter registrar, treasurer, cattle and hide inspector, board of appeals (a county office created by the 1869 Constitution and discarded in the 1875 Constitution), district clerk, justice of the peace, and constable, all of which had some direct influence on everyone in the county, black or white. Between 1869 and 1889, at least 44 black men served Fort Bend County as elected officials, some of whom held their offices for multiple terms and went on to become prominent members of the Republican party in Texas, most notably Henry Ferguson and his brother Charles Ferguson.⁶

But even with such a large number of black elected officials, it would be inaccurate to describe Fort Bend County as being dominated by a black government. As Tables 2 and 3 illustrate, at no time in the 20 years of black political involvement did the percentage of black officeholders match the black percentage of the population. On the contrary, as the years went by, whites in Fort Bend County—without coercion or illegal action—maintained their numbers in county government varying from a low point of 37 percent between 1876 and 1878 to 50 percent between 1880 and 1884, suggesting that there was never a concerted effort on the part of county blacks to impinge on white prerogatives to play an active role in county affairs. As opposed to rejecting white leaders, blacks merely exercised their freedom to choose the white men whom they felt represented their interests.

Despite the hardships of the 1873 depression, which were magnified by that year's crop failures in the area, Fort Bend County experienced steady growth during the first decade of biracial county government. With an increase of both blacks and whites, the county population grew from 7,114 in 1870 to 9,380 in 1880.⁷ While most blacks who moved to Fort Bend County during Reconstruction were more than likely to be sharecroppers or tenant farmers, the establishment of a black colony in the western part of the county between Turkey Creek and the San Bernard River attracted blacks with more financial resources. Named after William E. Kendall, a longtime white resident and member of the county bar, Kendleton was formally established

⁶Election Registers, 1869-1889, Secretary of State Records (RG 107), Archives Division, Texas State Library, Austin. For information on the later political careers of Henry Ferguson and Charles Ferguson, see Pitre, *Through Many Dangers, Toils, and Snares*, 106-115, 184-185.

⁷*Four Counties* (newspaper, published in Richmond), January 8, 1874; "Petition from Citizens of Fort Bend County to the Senate and House of Representatives of Texas," 1875, Memorials and Petitions, Secretary of State (RG 107); *Compendium, Ninth Census* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1872), 92-93; *Tenth Census of the United States: 1880* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1883), 409.

in 1884, but the "colony," as it was referred to by white contemporaries, began to be settled by black landowners as early as 1869. By purchasing 100-acre lots at the rate of 50 cents to \$1.50 per acre, many blacks were able to acquire land, giving them some independence from local whites. Soon enough—to the chagrin of Fort Bend County whites—the black "colonists" began to play an active role in county politics. Kendleton and the area surrounding it became the second precinct of Fort Bend County, with its own county commissioner who, until 1884, was always a black man. During the Jaybird-Woodpecker War, Kendleton, for obvious reasons, became the focus of white antagonism towards black political leadership.⁸

Perhaps to counter the increase of the county's black population, which continued to rise after emancipation, as early as 1868 county whites began an active campaign to attract white immigrants. One editorial, printed on August 22, 1868, in the *Brazos Signal*, encouraged Fort Benders to emulate the Texas Emigration Agency, which had just opened an office in New York, by sending their own emissaries to attract foreign immigrants.⁹ Glowing descriptions of the county's fertility and its ready access to Houston and Galveston were printed in the county and Texas newspapers, claiming in 1878 that "the alluvial soil of the Brazos bottoms cannot be equaled in the state, and is second to none in any county." This advertisement, printed in the *Galveston Daily News*, notes that the county had six brick sugar mills that expected to turn out 2,500 hogsheads of sugar cane and 6,000 barrels of molasses. The writer also claims that there were 20 public schools in Fort Bend County with an attendance of 1,500 students. Whether these were white and black or only white students is hard to tell. The advertisement's description of Richmond, the county seat, paints an appealing picture of community prosperity: "twenty stores, two hotels, four churches, one Masonic Hall and one Odd Fellow Hall, one grist mill, three physicians and five lawyers."¹⁰

What is interesting about this advertisement is not that it idealizes Fort Bend County, but that it is not that far off the mark in showing how much the county had developed in spite of the economic hardships of Reconstruction.

⁸Kendleton File, Local History Programs, Texas Historical Commission, Austin, Texas; County Commissioners Court Minutes, Vol. C, 1881-1891, 302-304, Office of the County Court, Fort Bend County, Richmond, Texas; Election Registers, 1869-1889, Secretary of State Records; *Galveston Daily News*, September 7, 1888; Lawrence D. Rice, *The Negro in Texas, 1874-1900* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1971), 206-208, and see 176-183 for more information about black property ownership in Texas.

⁹*Brazos Signal*, August 22, 1868; *Four Counties*, August 30, 1873; *Richmond Opinion*, June 26, 1885.

¹⁰*Galveston Daily News*, September 15, 1878. One hogshead of sugar equaled 1,000 pounds and one barrel of molasses equaled 31.5 gallons.

While the cash value of the county's agricultural produce dropped from \$3,310,820 in 1860 to \$1,453,017 in 1880, with the exception of cotton production, its overall productions increased, notably the county's sugar production. From a molasses production of 4,500 gallons in 1860, the county increased its production to 119,079 gallons in 1880. Agricultural land use increased as well, rising from 28,747 to 45,891 improved acres between 1860 and 1880. Although an increase in the amount of improved acreage reflected steady economic growth in the county, the majority of Fort Bend County's farmers, as in the rest of the South, were sharecroppers. Of 1,097 farms listed in the 1880 census, 634 were rented on shares and another 175 were rented for cash, together making approximately 74 percent of all farms.¹¹ The 1880 census does not give any information as to the race of sharecroppers or tenant farmers, but with an approximately 77 percent black population in 1880 it would not be unreasonable to assume that the majority were black.¹² From the preceding set of statistics, one can see that black political power did not seriously threaten white control of Fort Bend County's most valuable asset: fertile land. In fact, white property ownership increased from 67 percent of all taxpayers in 1860 to 74 percent in 1868 and most likely maintained a high proportion throughout the Reconstruction era.¹³

The increases in agricultural production and land use were paralleled by the growth of new railroads, towns, and immigration, both black and white. New towns and hamlets sprang up all over the county, often connected to the

¹¹*Compendium, Ninth Census, 782-783; Tenth Census, 90-91, 134-135, 242-243.*

¹²Stanley B. Parsons, William W. Beach, and Michael J. Dubin, *United States Congressional Districts and Data, 1843-1883* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1986), 219. This approximation is based on the composite figure given for the racial statistics of Fort Bend County between 1875 and 1883, when Fort Bend County was part of the 4th congressional district of Texas.

¹³Tax Rolls, Fort Bend County, Texas, 1868 and 1888, Clayton Center for Genealogical Research, Houston Public Library. I surveyed every tenth taxpayer on the county tax rolls of 1868 and 1888; the first year being the final year of white county government and the latter being the last year that blacks held county office in any significant numbers. While the 1868 tax roll is divided by race, making the statistics on white property easy to tabulate, the 1888 tax roll is not divided by race. Since the 1890 manuscript census is no longer in existence, and the 1880 census is too far back to record many of the migratory black families who lived in the county in 1888, I was unable to trace enough of the names off of the 1888 county tax roll to make any correlations based on race. In 1868, 30 percent of taxpaying citizens owned real estate, while in 1888, 43 percent of taxpayers owned real estate. We know that in Kendleton, at least, in 1888 a small percentage of black taxpaying residents owned property, so therefore it does not seem unreasonable to assume that a good portion of the increase in property ownership between 1868 and 1888 may have been by blacks. Furthermore, since there was little change in the racial demographics between 1868 and 1888, it does not seem unreasonable to conclude that white property ownership also increased. See Appendix B, Lovett, "The Jaybird-Woodpecker War," 106-115.

extension of Fort Bend County's three prominent railroads that existed during Reconstruction: the Gulf, Colorado & Santa Fe, the International & Great Northern, and the Southern Pacific. Arcola, Cleveland, Fayetteville, Foster, Fulshear, Harlem, Helinora, Kendleton, Pittsville, Rosenberg, Sartaria (formerly Sugarland), Stafford, and Vossville: all of these places, some of which no longer exist, represented additional people with the same needs as the older inhabitants of Fort Bend County, all of whom expected the county government to provide the means to bring their crops and livestock to market and to furnish various other services such as police protection, jails, pauper relief, civil courts in which to air their petty grievances, and the maintenance of public schools.¹⁴

The rapid growth of these communities obviously added to the responsibilities of the county government. To connect these communities to Richmond and later Rosenberg, which soon rivaled the county seat as the commercial hub of Fort Bend, the county commissioner's court, at least in the 1880s, authorized countless numbers of new roads that required the construction of additional bridges over the county's meandering network of creeks, bayous, and rivers. At almost every meeting of the county court, petitioners requested new roads and bridges to be built in all areas of the county.¹⁵ For each road or bridge that was approved juries were appointed to supervise the construction and maintenance, generally consisting of men who lived in the vicinity of the new road. Significantly, these juries almost always included both blacks and whites, Jaybirds and Woodpeckers alike. In one instance on February 18, 1888, just before the county Democrats began organizing to challenge the Republican county government, the commissioner's court appointed a jury to open a first-class road from Richmond to Houston that included at least two Jaybird leaders, Yandel Feris and Walter Andrus, as well as Walter Moses Burton, the former black state senator and now a property-

¹⁴*Galveston Daily News*, April 9, 1883; *ibid.*, May 27, 1885; A. J. Sowell, *History of Fort Bend County* (Houston: W. H. Coyle & Co., 1904), 154; John J. German and Myron R. Janzen, *Texas Post Offices by County* (Houston, 1987); description of Fort Bend County's towns and villages written by G. T. Snedecor, ca. 1930, Clarence Wharton Papers, Woodson Research Center, Rice University, Houston. A resident of Rosenberg, Snedecor wrote at Wharton's request a brief history of every town or hamlet in the county that existed in the 1930s, or had previously existed. He also included plantation communities where landowners owned stores and created villages for sharecroppers, such as Booth, DeWalt, Duke, Foster, Juieff, Sartaria, and Sugarland.

¹⁵For an example of a road petition, see County Commissioners Court Minutes, Vol. C, 12. In this case, petitioners on February 12, 1882, requested a new bridge across Jones Creek and Cotton Bayou on the road from Richmond to Pittsville. The petitioners stated that the desired bridge was a public necessity and the court agreed, granting \$150 for the bridge. Volume B, 1868-1881, is missing.

owning farmer.¹⁶ How well these men got along is unknown, but the constant mixing of the two races on county committees, especially blacks and Jaybirds, was evidence that white Democrats were never excluded from county government as they later liked to claim. In fact, white Democrats often served in various appointed roles in the county government as road commissioners, election judges, and legal representatives. Contrary to white public opinion at the time, most white tax-paying citizens generally benefited financially from the government they professed to hate.¹⁷

As a result of the increase in county expenses due to population growth and the expansion of settlements, county property taxes did rise appreciably during Reconstruction in Fort Bend County. Between 1865 and 1889, county property taxes increased from a rate of 10 cents to 65 cents for every \$100 worth of real estate and personal property.¹⁸ As one of the constant barbs leveled at the county government by white Democrats prior to the Jaybird takeover in August 1889, this increased level of county taxes allegedly was the greatest source of grievance among Fort Bend County's white property owners. In the 1884 report of the Democratic county convention, which was reported in *The Nation*, an 1880s Fort Bend County paper, the delegates charged that "ignorance and incompetence prevail to a shameful degree with the Republican office holders of Fort Bend County, And . . . the time is now and has ever been that it becomes the Democracy to arise and demand all such evils be corrected and do all in their power to correct such evils." According to the convention report, the "tax paying majority of Fort Bend County"—synonymous with white residents whom the Democrats claimed to represent—

¹⁶County Commissioners Court Minutes, Vol. C, 299; Tax Roll, Fort Bend County, Texas, 1888. Burton owned 200 acres that were valued at \$2,000.

¹⁷Yelderman, in particular, makes a claim that county appointments such as road juries were made on the basis of politics. She implies that only whites favored by the administration were chosen, but from the number of appointments made in the 1880s, any such allegation would be impossible to prove. Almost every Democrat who later became active in the Jay Bird Association was appointed to a county office. See Yelderman, *The Jay Bird Democratic Association*, 54. For examples of various appointments of white Democrats to public office, see County Commissioners Court Minutes, Vol. C, 55-58, 214, 295-297, 302-304. A large part of each county court session was spent hearing petitions for reductions in property tax assessments. The county court almost always approved such petitions. Henry Frost made at least three such petitions—on May 8, 1882, on February 15, 1883, and on May 14, 1883—that were approved as a matter of course. County Commissioners Court Minutes, Vol. C, 55-58, 65-67. Yandel Feris, a well-known Jaybird, also benefited from the county government when he was awarded a lease to a farm that the county had purchased with the intent of establishing a county poor farm. His lease required him to pay \$10 a month for a property that cost the county \$918.75 in 1884. County Commissioners Court Minutes, Vol. C, 94, 144-146.

¹⁸County Commissioners Court Minutes, Vol. A, 380-381, 398, 410-412; *ibid.*, Vol. C, 21, 65-67, 94, 115-116, 214-215, 294-295, 354-358.

intended to take back county government, renewing their efforts to be elected to county office.¹⁹

In the above-mentioned November 1884 election, the Democrats once again were unsuccessful at capturing the county government for themselves, but the election of Democrat Grover Cleveland as president in the same year seemed to give county Democrats greater determination to win the majority vote in the county. Organized in 1885 and led by Henry H. Frost, the saloon keeper of the Brahma Bull and Red Hot Bar in Richmond, the Young Men's Democratic Club of Richmond, the progenitor of the county-wide organization formed in the summer of 1888, served as the seedbed of Fort Bend County's so-called Democratic renewal in the late 1880s. The son of an antebellum Fort Bend County family, Frost had already made a name for himself during military Reconstruction as a white supremacist by his violent attack on one of his own employees. Arrested by the Freedmen's Bureau agent William H. Rock for an assault on the freedman John Ballas in 1867, Frost evidently continued to nurse a hatred for Reconstruction and all that it represented involving black equality and freedom, thus inspiring the county's young Democrats to dream of destroying the current county government.²⁰ In an account of the political strife of the 1880s, one older historian described Frost with admiration as "one man who gave all his time and his undivided attention to the laudable enterprise," the overthrow of Republican government in Fort Bend County.²¹ Initially named the Rosebud Club, the Young Men's Democratic Club of Richmond had a membership of 80 men, many of whom were of the younger generation of Fort Bend County men who, as another Fort Bender wrote, "were unsobered by a war which they had not experienced."²² Even though the county's prominent white men—whether they were elected or appointed—continued to hold influence within the county government, the principal activity of this organization seemed to be a collective brooding over the loss of symbolic white power in Fort Bend County politics.

That this loss of power was largely symbolic rather than real is evidenced by the fact that Fort Bend County blacks not only elected members of their own race, but they also routinely voted for former slaveholders and postwar wealthy landowners. One such example was Jake W. Blakely, a white man who

¹⁹*The Nation*, August 8, 1884.

²⁰Yelderman, *The Jay Bird Democratic Association*, 62-63; *The Nation*, April 24, 1888; Record of Murder and Assaults, 1867-1868, 5th Military District/Texas, Adjutant General's Records (RG 401), Archives Division, Texas State Library, Austin.

²¹Wharton, *Wharton's History of Fort Bend County*, 192.

²²Yelderman, *The Jay Bird Democratic Association*, 62.

was elected to county office as sheriff in 1876 and 1878 and then as county treasurer for one term in 1880. He possessed land holdings valued at \$26,015 in 1888 and was a business partner of Clem Bassett, who would be a founding member of the all-white Jay Bird Democratic Association. Blakely would seem an unlikely choice for black voters. However, Blakely was apparently willing to work with black officials, a job requirement of county officials that most Democrats seemed unwilling to meet voluntarily.²³

A few so-called "independent Democrats" were elected prior to 1888, including James W. Parker, a wealthy landowner and descendant of an antebellum slave-owning family, who participated in the first exchange of shots in the riot and was seriously wounded by the Jaybirds. However, for the most part white officials who were elected to office between 1869 and 1888 were avowed Republicans who took an active part in county conventions and black political life.²⁴ More than any black official, it was these whites—either "independent Democrats" or Republicans—who drew the wrath of white Fort Bend. Accused of manipulating the black vote for their own financial gain, whites who took part in county government between 1869 and 1889 eventually became the physical targets of their more conservative white opponents. In 1888, these pragmatic whites earned the sobriquet of Woodpeckers who, according to the self-proclaimed Jaybirds, needed to be driven from their alleged control of the county courthouse, just like a jaybird in nature drives a woodpecker from its tree hole.²⁵

Some Republicans—black and white—did prosper during their tenure in office, but whether they profited from public graft, as the Democrats repeatedly claimed, would be difficult to substantiate. J. W. Blakely, J. W. Parker, Charles Ferguson, and Henry Ferguson: all of these men possessed substantial land holdings both in and out of Richmond, but there were many more Republican officials—black and white—whose property holdings were modest enough to counter any Democratic claim that Republicans, especially black Republicans, had abused their political power to enrich themselves at

²³Tax Roll, Fort Bend County, Texas, 1888; Manuscript Census, Fort Bend County, Schedule I, 1870; Manuscript Census, Fort Bend County, Schedule I, 1880; Election Registers, 1876-78, 1878-80, 1880-82, Secretary of State Records, and see Appendix E, Lovett, "The Jaybird-Woodpecker War," 121-138; Yelderman, *The Jay Bird Democratic Association*, 99; "Constitution and By-Laws, Jay Bird Democratic Association of Fort Bend County," *The Center for American History*, The University of Texas at Austin.

²⁴Tax Rolls, Fort Bend County, 1888; Election Registers, 1866-70, 1878-80, 1884-86, Secretary of State Records; Manuscript Census, Fort Bend County, Schedule I, 1870; Wharton, *Wharton's History of Fort Bend County*, 147; *The Nation*, August 8, 15, 22, 1884; *ibid.*, September 19, 1884; *Richmond Democrat*, October 6, 1888.

²⁵*Galveston Daily News*, October 4, 6, 24, 1888; Yelderman, *The Jay Bird Democratic Association*, 68-71.

the "tax payers" expense.²⁶ While the Jaybirds of Fort Bend County later claimed that the events of 1888 and 1889 that led to the overthrow of Republican county government and eventually to black disenfranchisement in county politics resulted from their inability to rein in county corruption except by violent measures, after looking beneath the surface it becomes readily apparent that the Jaybird-Woodpecker War had much more to do with the potent symbolism of race than any noble act of political reform.

"Fort Bend Democracy: Like a Mighty Leviathan It Rises from the Wave of Oppression," wrote the editor of the *Richmond Democrat* on July 21, 1888.²⁷ After lying dormant since 1869, Fort Bend County's white Democratic party in the summer of 1888 once again pledged itself to defeat the Republican county government. This strident commitment on the part of white Fort Bend to take back county government into their own control was the first salvo of the Jaybird-Woodpecker War. Within little more than a year, white Democrats, through the use of violent intimidation, succeeded in driving out almost all of the black officials who had been elected in Fort Bend County in the 1886 election. On August 16, 1889, Jaybirds and Woodpeckers shot at each other in the streets of Richmond, leaving four dead and many wounded. The Jaybirds who died during the war were later made into county heroes, while the dead Woodpeckers were vilified. In the months that followed the August 16 riot, the white "redeemers" of Fort Bend County, through the auspices of the recently created Jay Bird Democratic Association of Fort Bend County, quickly gained control of the county commissioners court and succeeded in ridding the county of all vestiges of biracial government. To ensure that county government would remain free of black influence, the Jaybirds successfully organized one of the first white primaries in Texas. After 1889, black participation in county politics became virtually nonexistent. While blacks could continue to vote in national or state elections, their exclusion from county elections caused an approximate 75 percent drop in black voting. From this point on until 1954, when black citizens of Fort Bend County successfully challenged the Jay Bird Association white primary in the Supreme Court, Fort Bend was once again a white man's county.²⁸

²⁶Tax Rolls, Fort Bend County, 1888; Yelderman, *The Jay Bird Democratic Association*, 127-129.

²⁷*Richmond Democrat*, July 21, 1888.

²⁸Lovett, "The Jaybird-Woodpecker War," 65-75. The white primary was a mechanism for excluding black voters. Unlike most states, Texas considered political parties to be voluntary associations and gave the responsibility of administering primary elections to the party itself rather than to the state. As voluntary associations, parties were free to define their membership as they pleased. Since Texas effectively became a one-party state after Reconstruction, the general election, in which blacks might vote, merely served to ratify the choices already made in the Democratic primary by white voters. The U.S. Supreme Court finally invalidated the white primary in a 1944 decision, *Smith v. Allwright*.

Although Fort Bend County eventually succumbed to the racist forces that ended Reconstruction in the South, its prolonged period of biracial government offers historians a unique view into the potential held by Reconstruction. Whereas most Reconstruction governments did not last long enough to establish a substantive record of achievement or failure, Fort Bend County's Reconstruction government enjoyed a 20-year span in which it proved its ability to function. What is noteworthy about this government is that black political participation did not bring ruin to the county; on the contrary, it brought prosperity. As slaves, blacks in Fort Bend County had helped to build one of the wealthiest districts in Texas; as free men and women, they continued to aid in Fort Bend County's growth and development. Tragically, the majority of white Fort Bend County refused to acknowledge this reality, thus ending a remarkable era in Texas history in which blacks and whites had the opportunity to revolutionize race relations and overcome the bitter legacy of African slavery.