

## Reconstruction Change and Continuity in Brazoria County, Texas

*Alwyn Barr*

Reconstruction stimulated strong emotions as the desire for change met efforts to preserve continuity. Most former Confederates felt frustration over defeat in the Civil War and fear of possible changes in economic, political, and social life that might follow. Southern Unionists who had opposed secession hoped for a greater role in state and local governments to ensure renewed loyalty to the United States. Former slaves sought economic opportunity, education, family stability, and the legal and political rights of citizens after emancipation. When the hopes of some people represented the fears of others, conflict became probable and violence possible.<sup>1</sup>

Reconstruction occurred at several levels. Actions of the President and Congress created broad guidelines for the restoration of former Confederate states to a normal relationship with the United States government. State governments responded with legislation that sought to limit or expand upon federal directives. But for most people Reconstruction occurred at the local level in a county or smaller community. To answer some of the important questions about Reconstruction—how much change occurred, how it happened, and how much continuity existed—studies of local areas such as Brazoria County, Texas, are necessary.<sup>2</sup>

Brazoria County must be seen in a larger context for purposes of comparison and perspective. For Texas, more than other former Confederate states, Reconstruction represented a period of growth. The state population increased from 604,000 in 1860 to 818,000 in 1870 and to 1.6 million by 1880, with much of the growth by white migrants who settled in newer regions. Brazoria, an older and more settled county, grew more slowly. From 1860 to 1870 the white population declined slightly, from 2,027 to 1,791, but increased to 2,250 by 1880. Immigrants from other nations grew from 73 in 1860 to 362 in 1870, perhaps because many arrived at the nearby

Alwyn Barr is Professor of History at Texas Tech University.

port of Galveston. The number of immigrants declined slightly to 331 in 1880. The black population grew from 5,110, or 71 percent, in 1860 to 5,736 in 1870 and to 7,524, or 77 percent, by 1880.<sup>3</sup>

As Texas grew in population it also experienced violence after the Civil War, some on the expanding frontier and some reflecting Anglo efforts to retain control of labor, government and social interaction with African Americans. The Freedmen's Bureau, a federal agency created in 1865 to supervise the transition from slavery to freedom, kept records of violence against freedmen from its inception through 1868. In Texas, the bureau officers compiled a list of 2,316 acts of violence, with other instances probably going unreported. The bureau recorded 18 cases of violence in Brazoria County. Twelve, or two-thirds, represented white assaults on blacks including two women, over issues of wages and acts viewed as "disrespect," which suggested fears of losing control. Three whites killed whites — two listed as murders and one as self-defense. In one case three white men killed a black man and threw his body in the river before fleeing the area. Finally, a group of African Americans gathered for protection after rumors of an Anglo attack, only to face accusations of rioting. More violence occurred in Brazoria than in some counties, but less than in others across the state. Violence remained within some limits probably because the Freedmen's Bureau assigned an agent or sub assistant commissioner to Brazoria County as a result of the large black population.<sup>4</sup>

The Freedmen's Bureau in Texas by 1866 had only 25 agents to conduct its efforts in the more than a hundred counties. J. B. Bostwick became the first sub assistant commissioner at Columbia from December 1865 to March 1866. He dealt primarily with checking labor contracts for fairness and trying to settle economic disputes. Later that year the agent at Columbia complained that he lacked troops or a clerk to help him carry out his orders, but received neither. By November 1866 the number of bureau agents in Texas had increased to 31 and reached 57 by July 1867. Sub Assistant Commissioner P. F. Duggan died of yellow fever at Columbia in 1867, along with many Texans in the coastal counties. A. B. Homer, who served as the bureau agent at Columbia for most of 1868, thought race relations were improving as a result of the need for labor on farms and plantations. The United States Army never established a post in the county, although some troops remained in nearby Galveston into 1867.<sup>5</sup>

Despite the violence, economic changes and revival represented a major theme of the Reconstruction period. The Civil War had left Confederate money worthless and thus fewer funds remained available for

paying wages or buying goods. Some destruction had occurred where armies had fought, although less in Texas than in most other former Confederate states. Slavery had ended, but what kind of new labor system would develop in its place remained unclear. In July 1865 planters in Brazoria County agreed not to hire an ex-slave who had "runaway from his former master." They did offer freedmen on each plantation 5 percent of the crop in return for food, clothes and medical care similar to what had been provided slaves before emancipation. Since 25 to 50 percent of the crop would become acceptable shares by the 1870s, the limits of this early offer seem clear. By June 1866 Brazoria planters sent representatives to help organize the Texas Land, Labor and Immigration Company that would seek white laborers since they no longer controlled black workers. Texas, like other southern states, adopted a Black Code in 1866 that regulated wage contracts and included vagrancy and apprenticeship laws to force labor and limit bargaining. The Freedmen's Bureau by 1866 had authority to check contracts for fairness to see that former slaves received the wages due them. Tensions arose as freedmen moved about seeking family members who had been sold away during slavery, or better labor contracts, or simply more independence and control of their own lives. White landowners had little cash and docked pay for any act of insubordination by freed people. Out of these conflicts developed the sharecropping system in which landowners rented land to tenants of sharecroppers who then raised the crop and divided it with the landowner.<sup>6</sup>

For Texas agriculture the results of those changes proved mixed. Cotton production dropped from 1860 to 1869, but increased again by 1873. The value of farms in the state fell from \$88 million in 1860 to \$60 million in 1870. Ranching survived better with an increase from 2.7 million head of cattle in 1860 to 2.9 million in 1870. Manufacturing production and railroad mileage fared best as each doubled from 1860 to 1870. Growing population provided the key factor in the Texas economic revival.<sup>7</sup>

As an older county, Brazoria enjoyed less growth and struggled with change but did not suffer economic collapse. On the eve of the Civil War in 1860, Brazoria County counted among its population 26 of the 260 Texans with \$100,000 or more in property—more than in any other county. Since slaves had been counted as property, emancipation eliminated a significant portion of that wealth. In 1870, Brazoria County counted among its population William Bryan, only one of the 58 Texans with \$100,000 in property.<sup>8</sup>

Yet the change had been less striking than these figures suggest. Seven of the 26 wealthy citizens of Brazoria County in 1860 had died by 1870. Of the other nineteen, thirteen remained in the county ten years later, and they averaged \$32,000 in property, which meant they retained a considerable degree of wealth and prominence in the local economy. They also reflected considerable continuity, which proved typical of wealthy Texans in other areas of the state.<sup>9</sup>

Farm values as well as wealth holding in Brazoria County declined after the Civil War. Plantations and farms in the county had been worth \$4.8 million in 1860, but had fallen in value to \$1.4 million in 1870. Yet the farms of the county, which had ranked first in value among all counties in Texas in 1860, still ranked seventh in 1870, above most of the more than a hundred counties.

Agricultural production as well as farm values fell for all of the major crops and domestic animals. In 1860 the county plantations generated 346,000 gallons of sugar, then fell to 92,000 gallons in 1870, before reviving to 175,000 gallons by 1880. Yet Brazoria County remained first in the state for sugar production throughout the period. There had been 66,000 head of cattle in the county in 1860, but the numbers declined after the war to 42,000 in 1870 and to 23,800 in 1880. Thus Brazoria County fell from fourth in the state in 1860 to eleventh in 1870 and then to about average for the state in 1880 as ranching developed in new areas. Cotton production, less important in Brazoria County than in some others, declined from 12,000 bales in 1860 to 2,988 in 1870, then rose slightly to 3,484 by 1880. Brazoria County found its economy changed and for the prewar landowners partially disrupted by the Civil War and Reconstruction.<sup>10</sup>

Disruption and slow recovery of agriculture in the county resulted in part from transportation problems. The Houston Tap and Brazoria Railroad, constructed in the 1850s, had deteriorated during the Civil War. Financial problems kept the owners from rebuilding immediately after the war and led to sale of the line to pay debts in 1869. Only after purchase by the Houston and Great Northern in 1871 did new construction allow the railroad to again carry agriculture products.<sup>11</sup>

Yet the changes reflected new opportunities for the freedmen who had labored without pay or opportunity for advancement or property ownership under slavery. Part of the decline in production reflected their desire to grow more food for local consumption rather than sale. The goal of African-American women to remain at home with small children reduced the total hours of field labor compared to the demands of slavery, even

though they still engaged in housework and helped in the fields at planting and harvest times. Black families also began to send older children to school, which further limited time that had been devoted to chores under slavery. Thus the labor efficiency of the slave plantation gave way to a better-balanced life style for the freed people. The shift to sharecropping and even to land ownership for African Americans is reflected in two sets of figures. The number of farms in the county grew from 165 in 1860 to 253 in 1870 and 444 by 1880. Since the white population had grown little in the fifteen years after the war, African Americans probably rented or owned most of the new farms. A sample of black families from the United States census in 1880 supports that conclusion by showing that 19 percent had saved some money and acquired small farms of 5 to 50 acres, a pattern similar to other Texas counties.<sup>12</sup>

Social as well as economic changes occurred during Reconstruction, especially for African Americans. Slaves had not been able to legally marry, although they had formed families that usually survived unless separated by sale. Beginning in 1865 freed people sought to legalize their marriages and to locate relatives who had been sold away. The movement toward greater stability seemed successful, for in a sample of black families from the 1880 census 73 percent included two parents, a figure only slightly less than white families in the same year.<sup>13</sup>

Education represented another new opportunity for African Americans after the Civil War, since slaves generally had been discouraged from learning to read and write. Early in Reconstruction the Freedmen's Bureau, religious denominations, and black families cooperated to create the first schools open to African Americans. In 1866 the bureau found three planters in Brazoria County who allowed schools on their lands. By January 1867, Columbia had a bureau school with a white teacher and 33 pupils. The bureau added a school with 24 students in the town of Brazoria by May 1868. Those efforts expanded by April 1870 to include three schools with 150 pupils and black teachers. When the state developed public schools in the 1870s, Brazoria County by 1872 listed fifteen schools with a total of 741 students in separate black and white schools. In a sample of African-American families from the 1880 census, 45 percent had at least one child attending school, a level similar to other Texas counties. For an era without a compulsory attendance law and with considerable pressure for children to assist in farming, that figure represented a major advance over slavery and a continuing commitment to education.<sup>14</sup>

As economic and social changes occurred during Reconstruction, so too did participation in the political system and in government. In 1865 when the Civil War ended, the United States government wanted loyal officeholders at the state and local levels in former Confederate states. For Texas, Provisional Governor Andrew Jackson Hamilton appointed county officials including the key positions of county judge, sheriff, and county commissioners who later would be called justices of the peace. In Brazoria County five of the six men appointed to those positions had been born in the South, while the sixth, Joseph E. Wilson, had immigrated from England. All six had lived in Texas by 1860. George L. Bell, H. J. B. Cash, H. P. Cayce, and John M. Prewett engaged in farming, while Andrew P. McCormick served as an attorney, and J. E. Wilson described himself as a laborer. McCormick had served in the Confederate army. All of them owned property, averaging over \$6,000. Thus the old stereotype of scalawags being poor men seeking wealth does not seem to fit. The most prominent figure, Andrew P. McCormick, had been born in Texas and held Unionist views before the Civil War. After the war he won election to represent the county in the Constitutional Convention of 1866. Then he joined the new Republican Party when it formed in 1867.<sup>15</sup>

In 1866 white Texans elected state and county officials under the new Constitution of 1866. Former Confederates who led the Democratic Party won state offices with James Throckmorton elected governor. In Brazoria County two of the county officers appointed in 1865, Wilson and Cash, won election in 1866. Four of the six key officials had been born in the South, while the other two, John Adriance and R. M. Collins, had come from New York. All six had been in Texas by 1860, with two, Collins and S. W. Perkins, holding county offices under the Confederacy. All of them owned property, averaging \$6,000. Cash, Collins, and J. W. Yerby farmed, Adriance had retired as a merchant, and Perkins practiced law. In the legislature Mordello Munson, a planter and attorney and a Democrat, represented the county. As a group those officials seemed fairly typical of Texas officeholders chosen in 1866.<sup>16</sup>

Because of violence against African Americans and Unionists, discriminatory Black Codes, and rejection of the Fourteenth Amendment that would protect civil rights by ten former Confederate states including Texas, Congress adopted three Reconstruction Acts in 1867. That legislation required new state constitutions and extended to black males the right to vote in the ten states. Commanders of five military districts that included the ten states could remove uncooperative state and local officials. As a result,

E. M. Pease received appointment as governor of Texas in 1867 and the various military commanders of Texas at different times removed between 15 and 20 percent of local officeholders.

Under the Reconstruction Acts, Brazoria County had four of its six key officials removed. The two county officers who had not been removed, Cash and Wilson, were the appointees of 1865 who won election the following year. Several men served as appointed county officers for various periods in 1869. The new appointees generally had been born outside the South, a pattern that was not typical of Texas counties in 1867-1869. Two had come from the North — Hannel Stevens from Pennsylvania and Charles Holmes from Massachusetts — while the other two had immigrated, Edwin Kolkow from Germany and James Brougham from Ireland. Yet three of them, Brougham, Cash, and Holmes, had been in Texas before the Civil War. Five of them owned property that averaged over \$2,000 each; thus they did not fit the old stereotype of property-less outsiders seeking quick wealth. Brazoria County voters sent two delegates to the Constitutional Convention of 1868, Andrew P. McCormick and Erwin Wilson, a farmer. Both had been born in Texas and had served in the Confederate army before they became Republicans during Reconstruction.<sup>17</sup>

Under the new Constitution of 1869, written by the convention delegates chosen the previous year, new county officials would be selected by the enlarged electorate that included black voters. In Brazoria County and thirteen other Texas counties, African Americans became the voting majority. The six key officials elected in Brazoria County included two of those appointed in 1869, Brougham and Kolkow. Two officers had been born in the South, Charles G. Ballenger and Eugene Wilson, one in New York, J. C. Rogers, and two, Brougham and Kolkow, had immigrated from Europe. Yet Ballenger, Brougham and Wilson had been in Texas before the Civil War. Ballenger, Brougham, Kolkow and Rogers owned property that averaged \$1,300. Thus a majority still had an investment in the local economy and society. Brazoria County differed from most Texas counties, however, in having a majority of key officials born outside the South. That reflected the shared political views of black and immigrant Republicans, a pattern that did appear in some Central Texas counties. For example, Edwin Kolkow, a German immigrant with \$1,900 in property, had been appointed sheriff in 1869 and then won that office in the following election.<sup>18</sup>

In the 1869 state election both candidates for governor came from the Republican Party, with "Radical" Edmund J. Davis narrowly defeating "Conservative" Andrew J. Hamilton. Similar divisions existed at the local

level. In the race for state senator to represent Brazoria and neighboring counties, George T. Ruby, the black former Freedmen's Bureau teacher who had risen to a leadership role in Galveston, carried Brazoria County 599 to 427 and defeated A. P. McCormick in the district. The white Republican, although "by no means unobjectionable" in the view of local Democrats, apparently received their support.<sup>19</sup>

In the 1870s, Republican leadership at the state level came to an end as Democrats elected a majority of the Texas legislature in 1871, chose Richard Coke as governor in 1873, and selected most of the delegates who wrote a new state constitution in 1875. In a legislative district that included three counties, the Democratic majority in Galveston County proved larger than the Republican majorities in Matagorda and Brazoria counties in 1873. Yet Brazoria County with its Republican majority that included African Americans, immigrants, former Unionists and a few ex-Confederates continued to elect Republicans to most key positions at the local level in 1873 and 1876. At least one or two won reelection each time to provide some leadership continuity. One Democrat, W. J. Bryan, joined the county leadership group in 1876. Despite some internal disputes, however, the Republicans won the other leadership contests. In those elections four or more of the county officials had been born in the South, a shift back to an earlier pattern. One black county commissioner won election in the 1870s. Walter Wormley, a teacher who had thus proven his leadership ability, did not fit the old stereotype of an African American unprepared for office. A black official in a key position remained uncommon, however, in most Texas counties. Five of the six officers owned property, with the Republicans averaging \$3,000. In the Fifteenth Legislature of 1876, Andrew P. McCormick represented Brazoria County in the senate, while attorney Abner Lathrop represented the county in the Lower House. Ironically McCormick, a Republican, had been born in Texas, while Lathrop, a Democrat, had come from Ohio before the war.<sup>20</sup>

Reconstruction in Brazoria County involved a variety of economic, social and political changes. Conflict occurred in the form of violence and lively political contests. Yet examples of continuity also existed. The results proved complex and did not fit into older stereotypes. Most people living in Brazoria County felt some frustrations because there had been too much or too little change, depending on different views. But most also could find some positive aspects in the results of Reconstruction. Anglo American farmers and planters faced reduced wealth, but continued to own most of the land and dominated the local economy. In politics, most officials remained

white property owners who had been born in the South or had come to Texas before the Civil War, although some became Republicans while others remained Democrats. Immigrants and new migrants from the North did participate as voters and leaders in both parties. African Americans faced some violence, but many achieved advances. Most lived in more stable two parent families. Children from about half of the black families attended newly created schools. About one in five black farmers had acquired small landholdings. Finally, black men had an opportunity to vote and to have some share in political leadership, with leadership a possibility in only a limited number of Texas counties.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> For a general account see Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: American's Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877* (New York: Harper and Row, 1988). On Texas, two important volumes are Carl Moneyhon, *Republicanism in Reconstruction Texas* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1980), and James Smallwood, *Time of Hope, Time of Despair: Black Texans During Reconstruction* (Port Washington, N.Y.: National University Publications, 1981).

<sup>2</sup> The focus and analysis of this study have been influenced by Randolph B. Campbell, *Grass Roots Reconstruction in Texas, 1865-1880* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1998). Comparisons drawn between Brazoria County and general patterns in Texas are based in part on Campbell.

<sup>3</sup> U. S. Census Bureau, *Population of the United States in 1860: Eighth Census* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1864), 484, 487; U. S. Census Bureau, *Statistics of the Population of the United States: Ninth Census 1870* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1872), 64, 372; U. S. Census Bureau, *Statistics of the Population of the United States: Tenth Census 1880* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1883), 408, 443.

<sup>4</sup> Record of Criminal Offences Committed in the State of Texas, 1865-1868, U.S. Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen and Abandoned Lands, Records of the Assistant Commissioner for the State of Texas, 1865-1869 (microfilm, Texas Tech University Library).

<sup>5</sup> William L. Richter, *Overreached on All Sides: The Freedmen's Bureau Administrators in Texas, 1865-1868* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1995), 38-41, 102, 112, 156, 177-178, 244; William L. Richter, *The Army in Texas During Reconstruction, 1865-1870* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1987). Bostwick and Homer settled in the county for varying periods after their bureau service and held either county or federal positions.

<sup>6</sup> *Galveston Daily News*, July 6, 1865, June 5, 1866. See Barry A. Crouch, *The Freedmen's Bureau and Black Texans* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1992); and Richter, *Overreached on All Sides*.

<sup>7</sup> U. S. Census Bureau, *Agriculture of the United States in 1860: Eighth Census* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1864), 140-141; U. S. Census Bureau, *Statistics of the Wealth and Industry of the United States: Ninth Census 1870* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1872), 250-251; U. S. Census Bureau, *Statistics of Agriculture of the United States: Tenth Census 1880* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1883), 170.

<sup>8</sup> Ralph A. Wooster, "Wealthy Texans, 1860," *Southwestern Historical Quarterly* 71 (October 1967), 163-180; Ralph A. Wooster, "Wealthy Texans, 1870," *ibid.*, 74 (July 1970), 24-35.

<sup>9</sup> *United States Ninth Census, 1870, Population, Brazoria County, Texas* (microfilm, Southwest Collection, Texas Tech University); Real and Personal Property Tax Rolls of Brazoria County, Texas, 1865-1871, Records of the Comptroller of Public Accounts, Ad Valorem Tax Division (microfilm, Genealogy Division, Texas State Library, Austin). The thirteen wealthy men who remained in Brazoria County included: John Adriance, Joseph Bates, William J. Bryan, Aaron Coffee, Richard Collins, John H. Herndon, Levi Jordan, William H. Kennedy, John G. McNeel, David G. Mills, Alexander Mims, Stephen S. Perry, and Ammon Underwood.

<sup>10</sup> U. S. Census Bureau, *Agriculture of the United States in 1860*, 140-143; U. S. Census Bureau, *Statistics of the Wealth and Industry of the United States, 1870*, 250-253; U. S. Census Bureau, *Statistics of the Agriculture of the United States, 1880*, 88, 170, 242.

<sup>11</sup> S.G. Reed, *History of Texas Railroads* (Houston: St. Clair Publishing Co., 1941), 315-318; James A. Creighton, *A Narrative History of Brazoria County* ([Angleton, Tex.]: Brazoria County Historical Commission, 1975), 211-215.

<sup>12</sup> *United States Tenth Census, 1880, Population, Brazoria County, Texas* (microfilm, Southwest Collection, Texas Tech University); U. S. Census Bureau, *Agriculture of the United States, 1860*, 216; U. S. Census Bureau, *Statistics of the Wealth and Industry of the United States, 1870*, 363; U. S. Census Bureau, *Statistics of the Agriculture of the United States, 1880*, 88.

<sup>13</sup> George P. Rawick, ed., *The American Slave. A Composite Autobiography* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1972-1979), ser. I, v. 4, pt. 2, pp. 41-46, 253-254; Creighton, *History of Brazoria County*, 262-264.

<sup>14</sup> Monthly Reports, January 1867, May 1868, April 1870, Records of the Superintendent of Education for the State of Texas, 1865-1870, U. S. Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen and Abandoned Lands (microfilm, Texas Tech University Library); U. S. Tenth Census 1880, *Population, Brazoria County, Texas; Texas Almanac, 1873* (Galveston: Richardson, Belo and Co., [1872]), 23.

<sup>15</sup> Election Registers, 1865-1876, Records of the Secretary of State (Archives Division, Texas State Library, Austin); U. S. Eighth Census, 1860, *Population, Brazoria County, Texas* (microfilm, Southwest Collection, Texas Tech University); U. S. Ninth Census, 1870, *Population, Brazoria County, Texas* (microfilm, Southwest Collection, Texas Tech University); *Tax Rolls of Brazoria County, Texas, 1865-1871; Galveston News*, September 8, 1865; William S. Speer and John Henry Brown, *Encyclopedia of the New West* (Marshall: U. S. Biographical Publishing Co., 1881), 375.

<sup>16</sup> The profile of county officials elected in 1866 is based on the election registers, censuses, and tax rolls listed in footnote 14. See also *Members of the Legislature of the State of Texas from 1846 to 1939* (Austin 1939), 55; John Henry Brown, *Indian Wars and Pioneers of Texas* (Austin: L. E. Daniel, 189 ), 675; Creighton, *History of Brazoria County*, 452.

<sup>17</sup> The profile of county officials appointed in 1868-1869 is based on the election registers, censuses, and tax rolls listed in footnote 14. See also Betty Sandlin, "The Texas Reconstruction Constitutional Convention of 1868-1869" (Ph.D. dissertation: Texas Tech University, 1970), 256, 261; Creighton, *History of Brazoria County*, 452.

<sup>18</sup> The profile of officials elected in 1869 is based on the election registers, censuses, and tax rolls listed in footnote 14. See also Creighton, *History of Brazoria County*, 272. The sixth official elected in 1869 was George Mecheleu.

<sup>19</sup> *Galveston Daily News*, November 30, December 7, 1869.

<sup>20</sup> The profile of officials elected in 1873 and 1876 is based on the election registers, censuses, and tax rolls listed in footnote 14. See also U. S. Tenth Census 1880, *Population, Brazoria County, Texas; Galveston News*, December 18, 1873, February 17, 19, 23, 1876; *Members of the Legislature of the State of Texas*, 88, 91; Creighton, *History of Brazoria County*, 450. The new officials elected in 1873 included Hannel Stevens, J. E. Santee, Thomas T. Copes, and Walter Wormley. Additional new officials chosen in 1876 were Erwin N. Wilson, A. J. Burke, Jr., and George W. Thomas.