

SLAVERY IN HOUSTON: THE 1850s

BY SUSAN JACKSON

In late January 1857, the citizens of Houston learned from the *Telegraph* that "an abolitionist from Boston . . . has been circulating incendiary papers and documents in this city for two or three days past. The boys have taken him in hand today, and at last accounts, he was in considerable fear that something was going to happen."¹ Three days later, the *Telegraph* reported the details of the incident. It seemed that the "abolitionist" had received newspapers from his family in New England. These papers, which he lent to others, contained articles "of very black Republican complexion, and this gave rise to the suspicion that he was intentionally giving a free circulation to such sentiments as were not to be tolerated in any Southern community." When questioned by a citizens' committee, the visitor "denied the intention of giving offense, or of interfering in the least degree with the sentiments or institutions of our people" An examination of his trunks by the citizens' committee satisfied them of his innocence and they "apologized to the gentleman for the course they had felt incumbent on them to pursue"²

Incidents like this occurred across the South in the years before the Civil War. Few were settled so amicably, and even these deepened the anxiety shared by Southern whites. The white residents of Houston, whose livelihoods depended on the cotton trade, were, like other white Southerners, pulled inexorably into the intensifying dispute over slavery. By February, 1861, they were ready to ignore Governor Sam Houston's warning that secession would drown them "in fire and rivers of blood" and voted overwhelmingly for Southern independence.³

Although the threat to the system was, surely, less immediate than they supposed, the people of Houston, in risking the calamity the Governor predicted, must have thought that their livelihoods, their way of life, and perhaps even their very lives were endangered by Lincoln's election.⁴ The rumors of imminent slave rebellion, the wave of virtually simultaneous incidents of arson in July and August, 1860, and the subsequent lynchings of suspected slaves and whites thought to be abolitionists certainly encouraged

¹Houston *Tri-Weekly Telegraph*, January 30, 1857.

²*Ibid.*, February 2, 1857.

³The text of Governor Houston's speech in Houston can be found in Thomas North, *Five Years in Texas* (Cincinnati, 1871), pp. 93-95. In Harris County, the vote was 1084 for, and 144 against, the Ordinance of Secession. See Earnest W. Winkler (ed.), *Journal of the Secession Convention of Texas, 1861* (Austin, 1912), pp. 87-90.

⁴See Billy D. Ledbetter, "Politics and Society: The Popular Response to Political Rhetoric in Texas, 1857-1860," *East Texas Historical Journal*, 13 (Fall, 1975), pp. 11-24.

white Texans to believe that secession was necessary.⁵ They also raised some question about the over-all stability of the institution of slavery. This subject merits and has received considerable attention in historical literature. Of particular interest here is the debate over the stability of urban slavery.

In his *Slavery in the Cities*, Richard C. Wade argued that by 1860 the urban milieu had so undermined the discipline necessary to the maintenance of slavery that the institution was disintegrating in Southern cities. The primary evidence of disintegration was that "everywhere proportionately and in many places absolutely, the number of town slaves declined." He noted, however, that "the black population of smaller and new cities, like Mobile or the Texas towns, showed some vitality, but there is no reason to believe they would not have shared the same attrition as they expanded."⁶

Claudia Goldin, however, has maintained that declining numbers or proportions of slaves in Southern cities is evidence, not that the institution itself was in jeopardy, but that slaves were "pulled" out of the cities by feverish demand for agricultural labor. While urban demand for slave labor also continued to climb, substitutes for that labor were available in cities that were not available to agricultural areas. Free blacks and whites were acceptable substitutes for urban work, but not for labor in cotton fields. If movements of slaves were the product of great demand for (and the rising price of) a particular kind of irreplaceable labor and a limited supply of that labor, then declining numbers of slaves in cities is not evidence of a disintegrating institution.⁷

Goldin asserted that it was largely unskilled, male youths who were sold to the countryside because skilled workers, whether craftsmen or experienced house servants, were sufficiently valuable to their owners (either as personal servants or for the wages they earned) to offset the profits that could have been made from selling them into field work. The selective "export" of young males, and especially young male slaves, further imbalanced sex ratios among urban slaves, pushed up the mean age of the slave community, and depressed its level of fertility.⁸

In Houston, although the number of bondsmen doubled during the decade of the 1850s from 527 to 1061 persons, slaves composed about 22 percent of the total residents in 1850 and in 1860.⁹ It is not now possible to

⁵Bill Ledbetter, "Slave Unrest and White Panic: The Impact of Black Republicanism in Antebellum Texas," *Texana*, 10 (1972), pp. 335-350.

⁶Richard C. Wade, *Slavery in the Cities: The South, 1820-1860* (New York, 1964), pp. 3, 244.

⁷Claudia D. Goldin, *Urban Slavery in the American South, 1820-1860: A Quantitative History* (Chicago, 1976), pp. 103-106.

⁸*Ibid.*, pp. 56-57, 60-65.

⁹The slave schedules of both the 1850 and the 1860 censuses for Houston have been damaged. There seems to have been a few more slaves in both years, but water damage has made the entries unreadable. Moreover, five male and five female slaves in 1850 have unknown ages. Of the 527 slaves of 1850, 14 were owned by persons not on the free schedules; in 1860, 63 slaves were listed as the property of non-residents. These entries probably indicate slaves hired out to city dwellers; indeed, several of these entries have an employer listed. See Seventh and Eighth Censuses of the United States, Schedule II (Slaves), Harris County, Texas, microfilm, Texas State Library, Genealogical Section, Austin.

determine whether this stability in proportion did or did not presage the decline in numbers that Wade predicted. It is certainly clear that the demographic characteristics of the slave community underwent substantial alteration. Not all of these changes mirrored those Goldin found in larger, older cities. Data derived from the slave schedules of the 1850 and 1860 censuses show that the median age of slaves rose considerably and that slave children made up a smaller portion of the community in the latter year. Throughout the decade there were more enslaved women than men in the town, but the proportion of male slaves increased sharply. Nevertheless, the level of fertility among slaves seems to have dropped steeply.

Entries on the slave schedules are not only less informative than those on the free schedules, but also are frequently less reliable. The enumerator noted only the owner's name and the age and sex of the slave. Neither name nor occupation nor any hint of the marital or familial status of the slave was included. The census takers were also apparently more willing to record estimated ages for slaves than for free persons. "Age-heaping"—that is, denoting persons in their forties, for instance, as either "40" or "45"—is a problem not confined to the slave schedules. Nevertheless, the fact that in 1850 a third of Houston's slaves and in 1860 40 percent of them were reported to be in what might be called a quinquennial year raises suspicion about the quality of the slave data. Hence, all the age data reported in the present discussion should be understood to contain possibly significant error.

The proportion of all bondsmen held in the United States who were less than twenty years old was the same in both 1850 and 1860: about 56 per cent.¹⁰ The proportion of youthful slaves in Texas also remained stable, but at a little over 58 per cent.¹¹ The slave community in Houston, however, did not share this stability. Slave youths constituted 53 per cent of those held in bondage in the town in 1850, but by 1860 their portion had declined to 44 per cent.

The largest upward shift in the age distribution of the town's slaves occurred in the group of thirty-year-olds whose portion increased from about 14 to nearly 18 per cent. Among all United States, and all Texas slaves, those in their thirties comprised about 11 per cent of the group in both census years. Houston slaves in their forties were a larger proportion of their community (7.8 percent rising to 10.4 per cent) than were comparably aged slaves in Texas as a whole (almost 6.2 per cent in both years) or in the entire United States (6.8-7.1 per cent). Houston had proportionately fewer slaves older than 50

¹⁰For the age and sex distribution of all U.S. slaves, see the United States Bureau of the Census, *Historical Statistics of the United States, Colonial Times to 1970* (Washington, 1976), p. 18. It is generally recognized by demographers and historians that slave schedules of every census seriously undercount the slave population. The size of this error is not known. For the best current estimate of the antebellum black population, see Jack E. Eblen, "Growth of the Black Population in Antebellum America, 1820-1860," *Population Studies*, 26 (July, 1972), pp. 273-289.

¹¹For the age and sex distribution of all Texas slaves, see Bureau of the Census, *Seventh Census of the United States: 1850* (Washington, 1853), p. xlv; and Bureau of the Census, *Eighth Census of the United States: 1860* (Washington, 1864), Vol. I: *Population*, p. 594.

years than did the United States as a whole in both years, but proportionately more such slaves than lived in Texas as a whole.¹²

A clearer picture of the nature of the shifts in age-sex distribution of Houston's slave population can be derived from the more detailed data presented in Table 1. It is at once obvious that there is no pattern among the growth rates of the ten age-sex groups. Upon reflection, this is not surprising. Slaves could neither move nor marry of their own volition. They moved at their master's direction and were bought and sold both as individuals and as family units. Consequently, age groups expanded at rates that were more independent of each other than were growth rates of groups of free persons.

The percentage increases of the groups of males and females under ten years expanded at similar rates, 76 and 81 per cent. Among adolescents, however, percentage increases differed greatly between the sexes. The number of teenaged males rose by 126 per cent while teenaged females showed an increase of only 36 per cent. It is reasonable to suggest that teenaged males, who in 1850 might have been sold off into the countryside, were retained in the city in 1860 or that in 1850 slave purchasers simply did not buy adolescent males for work in the town. It is equally possible to suppose that teenaged females had been brought from the country in significant numbers before the 1850 census and that the frequency of such importations had declined sharply, but not ceased, by 1860.

Unlike the groups of slaves under twenty, the proportion of male slaves in their twenties remained the same during the decade at about 23 per cent. However, the proportion of men in their thirties increased from 14 to 19 per cent of all male slaves while the numbers of those in their forties rose from 7 to 9 per cent.

Among the female slaves, the most significant shift in age distribution was the decline in the proportion of adolescents from 30 per cent to 22 per cent while all of the female age groups over twenty showed some relative increase in size. The largest gain was shown by females in their forties, whose numbers increased only from 8 to 11 per cent of the female population.

The age distribution of Houston's slaves contrasts sharply with that which apparently existed on cotton-producing plantations in Texas, or on plantations that housed fifty or more slaves. In 1860, slave children aged less than ten years comprised only about 22.6 per cent of the town's slaves but about 31.7 per cent of cotton plantation slaves and about 30.3 per cent of the slaves found in large, agricultural holdings. Slaves in the prime of life, aged 15 to 49 years, made up 59 per cent of Houston's slaves and about 50-51 per cent of the two agricultural groups. The two farm groups had slightly more slaves aged 10 to 14 years than did the town and somewhat fewer slaves older than 50 years. The town, moreover, had a particularly large group of females who were aged 50 to 64 years, precisely the group most likely to be experienced housekeepers.¹³

¹²The percentages of those older than 50 years are: for all U.S. slaves about 7.5 per cent in both years, for all Texas slaves, 4.8 per cent in 1850 and 5.3 per cent in 1860, and for Houston slaves 5.5 per cent rising to about 6.9 per cent.

¹³Richard G. Lowe and Randolph B. Campbell, "The Slave-Breeding Hypothesis: A Demographic Comment on the 'Buying' and 'Selling' States," *Journal of Southern History*, 42 (August, 1976), pp. 406-408. The Lowe and Campbell data are based on two samples drawn from the 1860 schedules; the first sampled all Texas slave-holding, cotton-producing plantations while the second included all Texas plantations with 100 or more slaves and a random sample of those with 50 or more slaves.

Table 1 Age Distribution of the Slave Population of Houston, by Sex, 1850 and 1860.

AGE GROUP	MALES			FEMALES		
	1850	1860	PER CENT INCREASE	1850	1860	FEMALES INCREASE
Under 20	109 (50%)	218 (44%)	100%	163 (54%)	251 (45%)	54%
20-29	51 (23%)	112 (23%)	120%	53 (18%)	110 (20%)	108%
30-39	30 (14%)	95 (19%)	217%	41 (14%)	92 (16%)	124%
40-49	16 (7%)	45 (9%)	181%	25 (8%)	65 (11%)	160%
Over 50	12 (6%)	29 (6%)	142%	17 (6%)	44 (8%)	159%
Total	218 (100%)	499 (100%)	129%	299 (100%)	562 (100%)	88%

Source: Seventh and Eight Censuses of the United States, Schedule II (Slaves), Harris County, Texas. Five male and five female slaves in 1850 have unknown ages.

The median ages of Houston's slaves illustrate how the town's age distribution differentiated these urban slaves from the majority of all slaves in the nation. While the median age of all male slaves in the United States remained at 17.0 years throughout the decade, the median age of female slaves dropped ever so slightly from 17.4 to 17.2 years.¹⁴ Houston's slaves as a group were older than all United States slaves and, as the age distribution in the town shifted upward, they became still older. The median age of male slaves in the town rose from 20.0 to 20.8 years while that of female slaves climbed from 18.3 to 22.8 years.¹⁵

Although in 1850 and in 1860 the slave population of the United States as a whole was evenly divided between the sexes with the ratio at one hundred men for every one hundred women in 1850 and one hundred one in 1860, this parity did not exist in Southern cities. While there were more free men than women in urban areas, there were more female than male slaves.¹⁶ In Houston, there were more women than men on the slave schedules of both 1850 and 1860, but the imbalance between the sexes was significantly reduced in 1860. The sex ratio in 1850 was 73 men for every one hundred women but reached 89 in 1860.

The sex ratios of the different age groups reflect the operation of external forces on the slave population (see Table 2). The exceedingly low ratio for adolescent slaves in 1850 (52 males for every hundred females) demonstrated either the removal of teenaged males or the disproportionate importation of teenaged females, or some combination of these movements. The imbalanced ratios for very young blacks indicate that this process began quite early in life. The ratio for persons in their twenties and thirties in 1860 mirrors the apparent introduction of males in this age group into the town, perhaps because of a growing need for unskilled slave labor in the cotton warehouses and on the steamers. The great disparity between the sexes among adolescent slaves pulled the overall sex ratio for 1850 down considerably. If only persons over twenty are considered, the adult sex ratio was 80. The overall ratio in 1860 was not affected as drastically by the youthful age groups and the ratio for adults (90) did not differ significantly from that for the entire slave community.

¹⁴Derived from tables in *Seventh Census . . . : 1850*, p. xlvii, and in *Eighth Census . . . : 1860*, Vol. I: *Population*, p. 594.

¹⁵To overcome the problem of "heaped" ages, the ages recorded on the schedules were grouped in five-year intervals and the medians computed from the grouped data. The calculation of a median from grouped data assumes that the cases are evenly distributed over the intervals. While this method may overcorrect for "age-heaping," the method seems preferable to the calculation of median ages from obviously incorrect data. This method has the additional advantage of improving the comparability of the Houston medians and those calculated for all slaves in the United States, which are based on the grouped data published in the printed census reports.

¹⁶Wade, *Slavery in the Cities*, pp. 24-25. Goldin uses an awkward "female-to-male" ratio to report the same conclusion for the ten southern cities she sampled. Only Richmond in 1850 and Richmond and Mobile in 1860 had more male slaves than females. The ratios ranged from Richmond's 87 to Baltimore's 211 women per 100 men in 1850 and from Richmond's 76 to Baltimore's 228 women per 100 men in 1860. Goldin, *Urban Slavery*, p. 66. By this method, Houston had, in 1850, 137 women and, in 1860, 113 women per 100 men.

Table 2 Sex Ratios of the Slave Population of Houston, 1850 and 1860.

AGE GROUP	1850			1860		
	MALES N	FEMALES N	SEX RATIO	MALES N	FEMALES N	SEX RATIO
0-9	62	72	86	112	127	88
10-19	47	91	52	106	124	86
20-29	51	53	96	112	110	102
30-39	30	41	73	95	92	103
40-49	16	25	64	45	65	69
Over 50	12	17	71	29	44	66
Total	218	299	73	499	562	89

Source: Seventh and Eight Censuses of the United States, Schedule II (Slaves), Harris County, Texas.

Table 3 Indirect Measures of Fertility of Slave Populations of United States, Texas, and Houston, 1850 and 1860.

	1850	1860
A. Ratio of children under one year to 1000 women aged 15 to 49 years.		
United States	107	122
Texas	99	126
Houston	95	54
B. Ratio of children under five years to 1000 women aged 15 to 49 years.		
United States	718	702
Texas	706	718
Houston	411	372
C. Ratio of children under ten years to 1000 women aged 15 to 49 years.		
United States	1354	1320
Texas	1319	1333
Houston	848	722

Source: Seventh and Eighth Censuses of the United States, Schedule II (Slaves), Harris County, Texas, microfilm. *Seventh Census*, xlv, 500-503. *Eighth Census*, Vol. I, Population, 594-595.

While there is no census data on slave families and marriages, some information on the levels of fertility can be derived from the schedules. Since slave children were greatly undercounted by census enumerators throughout the United States, all the figures in Table 3 must be viewed with considerable caution. There is no obvious indication that the enumerators in Houston were any more or less careful than their counterparts elsewhere in the South, but the Houston schedules show 15 slave infants in 1850 and only eighteen in 1860 despite the growth of the fertile age groups. Infant mortality rates may have been far greater in Houston than elsewhere and the small size of the slave community raises the possibility that in a given year only a very few births may have occurred, but these exceedingly low numbers promote considerable suspicion about the completeness of the enumeration. This suspicion centers particularly around the infants of 1860.¹⁷

The fertility data reported in Table 3 present an unusually difficult problem of interpretation. The 1850 data, for example, involve so few cases that small numerical changes have a noticeable impact on the ratios. If only two infants went uncounted by the enumerators, then the town's level of fertility, as indicated by the infant/woman ratio, would equal that found for all American slaves and for all Texas slaves. But these ratios also represent an understatement of slave fertility because of uncounted slave infants in these greater populations. The problem here is that the magnitude of error remains unknown and, worse, it is not possible to judge which entity was likely to have the more serious error.

Whatever the precise levels of fertility, the Houston infant/woman ratio of 1850 indicates a level of fertility that approximates that found in Texas in the United States as a whole in 1850. The 1860 infant/woman ratio for the town, however, records a level of fertility that was well below that found among either Texas or all United States slaves. The Houston enumerators that year could have been far more careless than their predecessors, missing not a few, but more than half of the slave infants, or the level of fertility among town slaves could have plummeted. Higher infant mortality and yellow fever among the adults undoubtedly produced part of this decline. The remainder can be attributed to underenumeration, to the low sex ratio in the town, and to lengthy separations of slave women from their husbands who did not live in town. Moreover, pregnant housekeepers and especially housekeepers with young children were less valuable to white householders. The care and supervision of young slaves was a greater problem in town than on plantations where one older slave could supervise many children. Separation of slave children from their mothers may well have begun at very young ages.

¹⁷There is, of course, suspicion of the completeness of the enumeration of the ante-bellum black population in general. Jack E. Eblen has estimated that perhaps 47 per cent of all black infants in 1850 and 35 per cent of them in 1860 were not counted. If this is even approximately correct, then the levels of fertility for all United States slaves were higher than indicated in this table and the levels for Houston are accordingly still more suspect. See Jack E. Eblen, "Growth of the Black Population in ante bellum America, 1820-1860," *Population Studies*, 26 (1972), pp. 273-289, esp. 280.

The levels of fertility, or more properly, the infant/woman ratios found among Houston's slaves are not unreasonably low when they are compared to those found among other urban slaves. Indeed, they are somewhat higher than most of those yet reported. There were, for example, only 42 infants per thousand slave women aged 15 to 44 years in Charleston in 1850, 46 infants per thousand women in Richmond, 50 infants per thousand women in New Orleans, and 63 per thousand in Mobile. In Houston that year there were 103 infants per thousand women aged 15 to 44 years. By 1860, Houston's ratio had fallen (possibly through a more severe undercount) to only 59 infants per thousand while in Charleston there were 55 infants, in Richmond 75 infants, in New Orleans 40 infants, and in Mobile 91 infants per thousand women.¹⁸

A sharp difference between Houston slaves and the general population of slaves shows up clearly in the ratios of children under five years and children under ten years to women aged 15 to 49 years. (See Table 3.) The ratios for Texas and for the United States are roughly the same with Texas having slightly lower ratios in 1850 and slightly higher ones in 1860 than did the United States. Whatever the magnitude of error might be, all of the ratios for Houston in both years are at least a third lower than the others. Lower fertility due to the separation of wives from husbands certainly accounts for some of this disparity but most of it is due to substantially higher rates of child mortality and to the removal of young slaves from the town either by sale or by transfer to the owner's farm or plantation.

The extent of concubinage is unknown as is the frequency with which slave women were forced to submit to white males. The presence of numerous young mulattoes, including several children, does suggest that interracial sex was an ongoing, if probably unmentioned, facet of this slave society.

While whites are listed in the population schedules by family groups, slaves are often listed from oldest to youngest, or with all of one sex followed by all of the other. Hence no clues about family relationships or even numbers of children per family can be wrung from the data. The very format of the schedules as well as the listings silently remind the researcher of the institution's denial of human stature to the slaves.

It has been argued that slavery in the cities "was fundamentally the same wherever it existed and that similarities of urban life were more important to the institution than the differences in settlement, region, or age."¹⁹ While the demographic profile of Houston's slave community does not coincide with those of larger, older cities—it was after all, *gaining* proportionately more males rather than losing them—some other aspects of slavery in the town parallel those of older communities. Measures to ensure the control of slaves, for example, were similar to those employed elsewhere. Bondsmen could not hire out their labor without their master's consent and could not hold dances within the city limits without the mayor's consent. They were required to be off the streets before the curfew bell rang at 8 p.m. and it was illegal to give or sell liquor to slaves.²⁰

¹⁸ Goldin, *Urban Slavery*, p. 61.

¹⁹ Wade, *Slavery in the Cities*, p. ix.

²⁰ David G. McComb, *Houston, The Bayou City* (Austin, 1969), p. 82. B.H. Carroll (ed.), *Standard History of Houston* (Knoxville, 1912), p. 392.

But the assertion that there was a high incidence of small slaveholdings in Southern cities does not accurately describe the institution in Houston.²¹ One difficulty lies in determining what constitutes a "high" incidence and a "small" slaveholding. Moreover, what is the appropriate universe to determine incidence: all residents, adult males, households, or families? The most commonly used measure is the proportion of families who were slaveholders. It should be recognized that in a community in which a large proportion of the free adult male population was single, the use of families to measure the incidence of slaveholding may seriously misrepresent the daily involvement of the townspeople with the institution. This would seem to be especially true of a community with large numbers of Northern-born and foreign-born residents.²²

Frank L. Owsley argued in *Plain People of the Old South* that slaveholding families made up about one-third of the white population of the South (which is *not* to say that one-third of Southern families owned slaves) and that 60 per cent of these families owned no more than five slaves.²³ About 30 per cent of free families in the old South, and apparently in the new South as well, owned slaves in 1850 and two-thirds of these families owned fewer than five slaves.²⁴ In Texas the proportion of slaveholding households declined during the decade from about 30 per cent to about 27 per cent possibly because of the immigration of thousands of Germans. At the same time the proportion of slaveholding households who owned fewer than five slaves dropped from 54.4 to 47.5 per cent.²⁵ In short, more slave owners possessed larger groups in

²¹ See Wade, *Slavery in the Cities*, p. 21.

²² In 1850, 43 per cent of free males who were twenty or older and, in 1860 55 per cent of them, were not married. At mid-century, 47 per cent of these men, and ten years later 55 per cent, were foreign-born. Most of these immigrants were German. For more detailed information on the demographic profile of the free population, see Mary Susan Jackson, "The People of Houston in the 1850s" (Ph.D. diss., Indiana University, 1975).

²³ Frank L. Owsley, *Plain Folk of the Old South* (Baton Rouge, 1949), pp. 8-9.

²⁴ Bureau of the Census, *A Century of Population Growth* (Washington, 1909), pp. 135-136. Data in *A Century of Population Growth* were drawn from the printed volumes of the censuses and from J.D.B. De Bow's *Statistical View of the United States: A Compendium of the Seventh Census* (Washington, 1854). The states of 1790 constitute the "old" South, while those organized thereafter make up the "new" South. These data are for families while that for Texas is clearly for households. The table headings indicate that these data concern the proportion of families who owned slaves, but it is not clear that the term was used in the strict sense employed in the present work to distinguish it from "household." The confusion is worsened by a footnote to the table which explains that "slave-holding families" (the label) was "given in the compendium of the Seventh Census . . . as 'slaveholders.' 'Slaveholders' can and did include more than a few single males. A later table in *Century of Population Growth* provided estimates of the "Proportion of white population connected with slave ownership: 1850." The overall estimate for the Southern states was put at 32.1 per cent with the various state figures ranging from Missouri's low 18.5 per cent to Louisiana's high 46.1 per cent. The estimate for Texas was 28.7 per cent. See *Century of Population Growth*, p. 138, Table 68.

²⁵ These statements are derived from data reported in Randolph B. Campbell and Richard G. Lowe, *Wealth and Power in Antebellum Texas* (College Station, 1977), p. 44. Campbell and Lowe's work is based on two sizeable random samples of Texas households on the schedules of 1850 and 1860. Of these households, 69.9 per cent owned no slaves in 1850, and 72.7 per cent owned none in 1860. Simple manipulation of the data presented in the tables yields the number of slaveholders in each sample and how they were distributed among the various sizes of slaveholdings. Note that data from Campbell and Lowe's samples indicates that 54.4 per cent of all slaveholding families owned fewer than five slaves in 1850, while data from De Bow's *Compendium* indicate that 59 per cent of "slaveholders" in the state owned fewer than five slaves. De Bow, *Compendium*, p. 95.

1860 than in 1850. There is only one county-level study of slaveholding patterns in Texas. In Harrison County, a cotton-producing region, more than half of all families owned slaves in the 1850s and two-thirds of these families owned five or more slaves.²⁶

In Houston about one household in four owned slaves throughout the period. Most of these households, 64 per cent in both census years, owned fewer than five slaves while another 5 per cent in 1850 and 10 per cent in 1860 owned exactly five slaves. Indeed, 66.4 per cent of all slaveholders in 1850 and 63.2 per cent of them in 1860 owned fewer than five slaves. Proportionately fewer households in Houston than in Harris County or in Texas as a whole owned slaves and more of these urban households owned small numbers of slaves.

The mean size of the 119 slaveholdings of 1850 was 4.3 slaves while that of the 193 holdings of 1860 was 5.2 slaves. Only a few persons possessed more than a dozen bondsmen. The largest slaveholders in 1850 were W.W. Stiles, who owned 18 slaves, and William J. Darden and I.N. Dupree, each of whom owned 17 slaves. Stiles was a Mississippi-born farmer, Darden was a lawyer from Virginia, and Dupree, who reported no occupation, was from North Carolina. The largest slaveholders in 1860 were Colonel T.B.J. Hadley, Thomas S. Lubbock, and F.M. Anderson. Hadley, a lawyer, owned 29 slaves, Lubbock, who described himself as a "gentlemen of leisure" but who also operated the city's largest cotton press and warehouse, had 31 slaves and Anderson, a brickmaker, owned 42 slaves. All three men were natives of South Carolina.

The typical slaveholder was a native-born male who pursued a nonmanual occupation. In 1850, 94 men and 25 women and, in 1860, 171 men and 22 women held slaves. While only 16 foreign-born persons (13 per cent of slaveowners) owned slaves in 1850, by 1860 their numbers had grown to 45 (23 per cent of slaveowners). More than 80 per cent of slaveholding men who reported occupations in either year were white collar workers. Moreover, several of the men who described themselves on the census as following skilled trades were clearly businessmen of some importance. Brickmaker F.M. Anderson, for example, was the proprietor of a brickyard.²⁷

Thirteen women who were heads of household in 1850 and 17 such women in 1860 possessed bondsmen. Only one child, Sam H. Duckworth in 1850, owned slaves. At mid-century, the partnership of Bremond & Van Alstyn owned a male slave and Coleman & Levy owned two male adults in 1860. The remaining slaveholders were either men who reported no occupation or women who were not heads of household.

²⁶Randolph B. Campbell, "Slaveholding in Harrison County, 1850-1860," *East Texas Historical Journal*, 11 (Spring, 1973), pp. 19, 24.

²⁷The description of the slaveholders of Houston in these paragraphs is drawn from the manuscript schedules of the censuses of 1850 and 1860. The names of slaveholders found on Schedule II were traced to persons on Schedule I (Population). See Seventh and Eighth Censuses, Schedules I (Population) and II (Slaves), Harris County, Texas, microfilm, Texas State Library, Genealogical Section, Austin.

Table 4 Size of Slaveholdings in Houston, 1850 and 1860.

	1850	1860
1 to 4 slaves	79 (66.4%)	122 (63.2%)
5 to 9 slaves	24 (20.2%)	46 (23.8%)
10 or more slaves	16 (13.4%)	25 (13.0%)
Total	119 (100.0%)	193 (100.00%)

Source: Seventh and Eighth Censuses of the United States, Schedule II (Slaves), Harris County, Texas, microfilm.

The purchase of slaves was a simple matter in Houston. Edward Riordan operated a sizeable slave depot in the city and most merchant houses, including William M. Rice & Company, Cornelius Ennis & Company, and Van Alstyne and Taylor, accepted consignments of slaves from their customers for resale or in default of payment for goods. Information on the cost of a slave in Texas is very scarce, but in 1857 in Upshur County, a 35-year-old male brought \$1254, a 24-year-old male, \$1260, and a 22-year-old male, \$1410.²⁸ The mean assessed value of all slaves in Harris County rose steadily through the decade from \$308 in 1850 to \$763 in 1860.²⁹

Persons who could not afford, or did not choose, to purchase slaves could lease them from their owners. Some of these leases were arranged by the slaves themselves. In 1860, Judge Peter W. Gray employed a female slave owned by I. Jones of Indianola. Two bondsmen belonging to H.H. Milby worked for Dick Dowling, a popular saloonkeeper, while Frederick Mohl apparently employed at his hotel, the Fannin House a half-dozen slaves belonging to T.B.J. Hadley. In 1856 a female slave could be hired in Houston for \$12.50 a month.³⁰ This wage rate is rather high when compared to the \$53 per year paid in Richmond, Lynchburg, and Fredericksburg, Virginia in 1860.³¹ This substantial difference may be accounted for by the fact that slaves were, in general, more expensive in Texas than in the Upper South.

Slave occupations are not listed on the census schedules and therefore any discussion of how they were employed is inevitably speculative. Many urban slaves, and certainly the majority of female slaves, were employed as domestic servants. In Southern society, whites avoided menial and personal service occupations as degrading. In Houston, slaves must have been employed as barbers, waiters, bartenders, draymen, food vendors, and washerwomen, for very few whites pursued these humble occupations. Slaves, but perhaps not those owned by Houston residents, shoveled the coal that powered the steamboats serving the town. Some, if not all, of the slaves owned by L.C. Stanley and F.M. Anderson worked in their masters' brickyards and Thomas S. Lubbock's slaves surely provided the muscle-power for his cotton press and warehouse. Still other slaves must have worked in the construction trades because white workers complained bitterly about them.³²

²⁸Galveston *Weekly News*, July 28, 1857.

²⁹Assessed value should not be confused with cost or price, and this was the mean value for all slaves of whatever age, sex, health, or skill. See the "Recapitulations," at the end of each year's tax duplicate. Harris County Tax Duplicates for 1850 and 1860, microfilm, State Library, Austin.

³⁰Noted in McComb, *Houston*, p. 83.

³¹Goldin, *Urban Slavery*, p. 73.

³²Houston *Republic* in Galveston *Weekly News*, March 30, 1858. See below.

Wade has contended that the principal cause of the disintegration of urban slavery was the difficulty of controlling slaves off the job. "The problem was not what happened in the factory or shop but what happened in the back street, the church, the grocery store, the rented room, and the out-of-the-way house."³³ While slavery in Houston was not disintegrating, Houston's slaveholders did experience the same problems confronted in larger Southern cities.

Gambling, drinking, stealing, and running away as well as "insolence" were the misdemeanors generally attributed to the town's slaves. In September, 1856, for example, the town marshal discovered some slaves gambling in a private house. As they fled, he shot and wounded one of them. This slave had recently been recaptured nearly 100 miles from Houston.³⁴

In April, 1856, the *Telegraph* attributed the rising number of burglaries in part to the nonenforcement of laws governing slave conduct.

The first thing that strikes an attentive observer on his arrival in Houston is the immense latitude allowed to negroes. No matter what time of night you pass through the streets, you are sure to meet parties of negroes, who go where they please, unquestioned and irresponsible. Such a thing as a 'pass' is unheard of, and we doubt if they are even furnished. In certain quarters of the city there are large congregations of negroes, who hire their own time, and who live entirely free from the supervision of any white man. Speaking candidly and impartially, there is more insolence among the negroes of Houston, and more careless conduct, than in any other city or town South of Mason & Dixon's line.³⁵

The editorialist further contended that such slack supervision permitted, even encouraged, theft by slaves and concluded that if property was not safe, "are not our persons in danger?"

Not merely the security of property, then, was involved in this issue. Ultimately, the whites' physical safety seemed to demand strict control over the slaves. More subtly, racial hegemony required the expulsion or exclusion of slaves and indeed all blacks from occupations that conferred high status or respect. The town's white skilled workers shared the resentment of their fellows in other towns at working alongside black mechanics. The Houston Mechanic's Association on March 3, 1858, adopted a series of resolutions directed against Negro, that is, slave, contractors. The mechanics unanimously

³³Wade, *Slavery in the Cities*, p. 245.

³⁴Houston, *Weekly Telegraph*, September 17, 1856.

³⁵*Ibid.*, April 9, 1856.

Resolved, That we unqualifiedly discountenance the system, which prevails to a considerable extent, of negro mechanics *contracting* for work and employing journeymen to execute the same.

Resolved, That we consider no white man, who works under or with a negro contractor, as deserving of the support or sympathy of any true mechanic.

Resolved, That we heartily deprecate the practice adhered to by some of *making contracts* with the negro mechanics to carry on work, *as a contractor*.³⁶

Other resolutions urged the enactment of legislation to prohibit Negro mechanics from making contracts. These white mechanics were denouncing not only the infringement of their economic position, but also the erosion of the existing pattern of racial deference.

"Living amongst slaves, yet without masters," free blacks in Southern towns were anomalies in a fixed social order.³⁷ A grand jury in Houston in 1839 phrased a typical view of the problem bluntly:

As a population, they are much worse than useless: in general, they neither perform any productive labor, nor exercise reputable callings. With scarcely an exception, they are addicted to vice and the commission of petty crime But it is chiefly the mischievous influence which the free Negroes exert over our slaves . . . to which the Grand Jurors would invite especial attention In the towns where the facilities for dishonesty by slaves are much greater than in the country, the presence of free negroes is felt a very great evil.³⁸

Although fewer than ten free blacks are known to have lived in Houston during the 1850s, the white townspeople apparently felt their presence to be obnoxious.³⁹ In May, 1855, the aldermen passed an ordinance "Concerning Free Negroes, requiring free blacks to obtain permission from the Board of Aldermen to rent a house or dwelling in the city." If permission was granted, the petitioner had next to obtain a \$1000 bond signed by two responsible citizens. This bond required that "he or she shall keep a good orderly house; and he or she shall further bind themselves not to permit any slave to visit his or her premises." Finally, the free black had to pay the city marshal \$2.50 a month for a permit.⁴⁰

³⁶Houston *Republic* in Galveston *Weekly News*, March 30, 1858. Emphasis in original.

³⁷Wade, *Slavery in the Cities*, p. 251. See Ira Berlin, *Slaves Without Masters: The Free Negro in the Antebellum South* (New York, 1974).

³⁸Quoted in Andrew F. Muir, "The Free Negro in Harris County, Texas," *Southwestern Historical Quarterly*, 46 (January, 1943), p. 223. See also Ledbetter, "White over Black," pp. 414-416.

³⁹There were only five free blacks in 1850 and eight in 1860 listed on the population schedules. All were women or children. It is possible that the enumerators simply chose not to "see" any male free blacks whose presence might be considered more dangerous than that of women and children.

⁴⁰Houston *Tri-Weekly Telegraph*, May 12, 1855.

Although state and local laws were harsh, enforcement was only sporadic. The authorities in Houston appear to have ignored the illegal presence of free blacks in the city. Few freemen applied to the legislature for the necessary permission to remain in Texas after manumission. The few free blacks who lived in Houston in 1850 and 1860 failed even to submit residence petitions, but they remained undisturbed by public authorities.⁴¹

The slave population of this "smaller and newer" Texas town showed considerable vitality in the sense that the numbers of slaves doubled during the 1850s. Most of this increase occurred in the adult age groups and was due to the importation of slaves from elsewhere. The "vitality" of the slave population, then, derived more from the decisions of slaveholders than from natural increase among the slaves. The purchase of large numbers of slaves was itself a statement of the belief that urban slavery was a stable institution and a permanent fixture of Houston's social structure.

Those who had committed large amounts of capital to slave purchases as well as those who aspired to slave ownership were outraged by Lincoln's election. "Black Republicanism" endangered not only massive investments but also a principal mechanism for conferring prestige in Southern society. Most importantly, it threatened the continuance of white racial hegemony. However politely the whites of Houston listened to Governor Houston's warning of the coming fire and rivers of blood, the vehemence of their support for the institution of slavery appears in the cascade of votes they cast for the Ordinance of Secession.

Susan Jackson is a member of the history faculty at the University of Vermont; in 1980-81 she will be a visiting professor at Southern Methodist University. Her 1975 dissertation at Indiana University is entitled, "The People of Houston in the 1850s".

⁴¹No evidence has appeared to detail the enforcement of this local ordinance. No later mention of it could be found in the *Telegraph* or the *Galveston News*.