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Website Review

The Texas Slavery Project, www.texasslaveryproject.org. Reviewed May 21–28, 2018.

The Texas Slavery Project is the creation of Dr. Andrew Torget, associate professor of history at the University of North Texas. Torget's graduate research on slavery in pre-annexation Texas culminated in the 2015 book *Seeds of Empire: Cotton, Slavery, and the Transformation of the Texas Borderlands, 1800–1850*, which examines how slaveholding Anglo-American settlers in northern Mexico, rebelling against an abolitionist Mexican government, created the first North American republic with a slave economy at its core.

In conjunction with his doctoral work at the University of Virginia, Torget spearheaded the creation of the Texas Slavery Project between 2007 and 2008 as an effort to explore how the tools of digital humanities can render statistical data more accessible and more meaningful. Together with a staff that assisted with research, design, and programming, Torget created a website that brings the story of slavery in Texas to life through interactive maps, graphs, charts, and primary source documents.

The website offers visitors a variety of ways to engage with data that show the exponential growth of slavery in the Republic of Texas from 1837 to 1845. Color-coded maps depict the number of slaves and slaveholders in each county based on data recorded in tax returns. The map turns redder in shade with each passing year, illustrating the rapid pace with which Texas's slave society grew in its first years of existence. Double-clicking on an individual county on the map brings up a screen with data on the number of slaves and slaveholders in a given year, including statistics that group slaveholders in accordance with how many slaves they owned. Other features of the Texas Slavery Project site include line graphs

Home page, Texas Slavery Project, http://www.texasslaveryproject.org/.

that chart both the total number of slaves and slaveholders over time, as well as graphs that track the numbers for individual counties and allow for side-by-side comparison.

As a resident of modern-day Harris County, which includes Houston, naturally I was curious to learn about the area's slaveholding past, and the following statistics provide an example of what can be gleaned from exploring the Texas Slavery Project's resources. From the website's population database I learned that both Harris County's slave and slaveholder populations more than doubled between 1837 and 1845, and that almost no slaveholders in the county owned more than nineteen slaves at any time. Just to the south, however, in Brazoria County, which was home to some of the earliest Anglo settlement in the region, the numbers were

much higher in all respects. The average slaveholding family in Brazoria owned as many as fifteen slaves, according to the charts, compared to just four in Harris County.

While the site allows the visitor to uncover and compare this data, the historical background required for the nonspecialist to make deeper meaning out of these numbers is occasionally lacking. The bottom line: slavery spread quickly throughout Texas in the pre-annexation period, although it spread much more rapidly in some areas of the republic than others, for reasons that are left unexplained.

How do these numbers compare to that of Jewish slave ownership in the same era? Based on scholar Bertram W. Korn's estimations in his classic essay "Jews and Negro Slavery in the Old South," the profile of the average southern Jewish slaveholder more closely resembles that of Harris County than Brazoria Country, since very few Jews owned plantations. Most southern Jews, working in petty trade, had neither the need

"Texas Slavery Project Maps," http://www.texasslaveryproject.org/maps/hb/.

for slave labor nor the resources to acquire it. All the same, as Korn points out, information from census records and wills suggests that about one in four southern Jewish families owned slaves. The 1840 census recorded fifty-five Jewish slaveowning families in New Orleans, who owned a total of 348 slaves between them, for an average of about six slaves per slave-owning Jewish family.

A treasure trove of primary sources (transcribed, not digitized in their original format) completes the site's offerings and lends a human dimension to the facts and figures on slavery in Texas. Documents offered here include Republic of Texas legislation relevant to slavery and taxation, personal correspondence about owning and selling slaves, and newspaper advertisements related to the slave market. In one particularly striking document, dated June 25, 1837, J. Pinckney Henderson, as the Republic's new minister to England and France, is given instructions from the Texas Department of State as to how to win political recognition from the two European superpowers. Anticipating that Texas's adoption of slavery may be a stumbling block in the diplomatic process, Henderson is directed to admit that slavery is "cruel and impolitic," yet due to the "peculiar organization of the Government, the nature of the climate, the habits of the people and the locality of the country, it must continue as provided by the constitution and laws." Henderson is further instructed to state that slaves in Texas receive far better treatment than in other parts of the southern United States, so it is to their benefit to be imported to America's new neighbor. Primary sources such as these lend valuable insight into the mechanisms and rhetoric by which Texans justified buying, selling, and abusing other human beings.

It is beyond my expertise to assess the technical quality of the project, and one must also bear in mind that the website was built over a decade ago, primarily through the labor of graduate students. Although some visualization methods are more appealing and accessible than others, and although more historical context would help, this is an impressive achievement of lasting educational value.

What of its applicability to the field of southern Jewish history? Little of the content is directly relevant: although Jewish slave ownership in antebellum America is well-documented, only a small number of Jews were among the earliest settlers of Texas, and organized Jewish life there begins only in the 1850s, after annexation. However, as an early model of what

digital scholarship can do for the study of population flows into and out of a region, and for the dissemination of important primary texts to a wide audience, taking note of the Texas Slavery Project and spending time with its maps, charts, and historical records is worthwhile. The field would be especially enriched by new digital humanities projects that take advantage of mapping technology to illustrate migration patterns into and within communities, particularly as a means of preserving the history of those cities and neighborhoods where Jews have departed. Similarly, websites that integrate demographic statistics with images and primary source documents, offering visitors comprehensive historical narrative, would bring greater visibility and accessibility to southern Jewish life in all its breadth and depth. Hopefully the field will grow in this direction in the years to come.

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