

DID YOU KNOW

the Underground Railroad made an important stop in the Rio Grande Valley?

By Roseann Bacha-Garza, CHAPS Program Director

While most clandestine pathways of the Underground Railroad led through the northern United States into Canada, freedom seekers and freed persons of color also followed southerly routes through Texas and into Mexico. Lured by the fact that slavery was fully abolished in Mexico by 1837, some enslaved people achieved freedom by navigating through Texas and crossing the Rio Grande.



Martin Jackson (right) and his son Ben.

Martin, a son of Matilda and Nathaniel Jackson, made the 900+ mile journey from Alabama to the border. He later sold a portion of the family land that the Jackson Ranch Church resided on to the Methodist Church for \$1.

In the decade preceding the US Civil War, the polarization of the American public over the institution of slavery sparked much tension, greatly impacting both the enslaved and free people of color.

With the re-enactment of the Fugitive Slave Act in 1850, the Dred Scott Decision of 1857, and anti-miscegenation laws, families of mixed races felt the crescendo of animosity and hate throughout the southern states. Prior to the outbreak of the American Civil War, these families packed their belongings and made their way to a place where they could settle in peace. By crossing the treacherous “Nueces Strip,” a 150-mile arid and dangerous expanse between Corpus Christi and Brownsville, avoiding slave catchers and bounty hunters, several freedom seekers successfully slipped across the border to freedom in Mexico where they settled in small colonies, learned to speak Spanish, and struggled to earn a modest living.

Although many assisted freedom seekers on their journeys, there are some local stories that stand out. In addition to freed people of color and white Texas settlers with abolitionists ideals, there were mixed-race families that ventured south toward Mexico prior to the US Civil War that played an important role in assisting self-emancipators along their pathways to freedom. One such family was the Jacksons. The Jackson Family embarked on their 1000-mile journey to Hidalgo County in five covered wagons led by family patriarch Nathaniel Jackson, a white Alabama-plantation owner and Matilda Hicks, a former slave. Traveling in their caravan were Nathaniel and Matilda’s



What remains of the rebuilt Jackson Ranch Church "El Capote" and cemetery where the family held their religious services and revivals after they arrived on the river in 1857.

children and extended family members; many of whom were counted as slaves in the Alabama census. By that time, all their children were adults and had families of their own. Upon their arrival on the US-Mexico border in 1857, Jackson bought 5,535 acres of riverfront property equipped with a licensed ferry landing. According to family folklore, oral history interviews, and written reports by Jackson family descendants and Hidalgo County Historical Commission historians, the Jackson Ranch community was instrumental in shepherding runaway slaves across the Rio Grande to freedom in Mexico.

The Jackson family helped pave pathways to freedom along a fluid international border. The transformative importance of the Jackson family's story in the broader context of Texas history has contributed greatly to the fabric of these experiences as they overlap within the grand scheme of borderland life. What remains of the original Jackson Ranch property is represented by a small chapel and two cemeteries south of the levy in San Juan.

Today, descendants of the Jackson families still live in Hidalgo County. Knowledge of their African American heritage was not always a welcome concept. Previous generations had kept this knowledge a secret so as not to bring negative attention to family descendants during decades of discrimination and marginalization regarding people of color. As years



Chapel at El Capote Circa 1940 - Courtesy Kelly Norquist

progressed and generations passed, family members now recognize, embrace, and celebrate this knowledge. Their participation in Underground Railroad-like activity is what puts these families on national and international maps.

The term Underground Railroad was a concept that first appeared in The Liberator, an anti-slavery newspaper in October of 1842, when abolitionist Charles T. Torrey came up with the popular term. This term is embedded into national history and typically outlines pathways that led through the northern US and into Canada.



To learn more about the Underground Railroad in South Texas and the "Pathways to Freedom" project, visit the CHAPS Program at UTRGV.

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THE MAGAZINE OF THE RIO GRANDE VALLEY



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STUDENTS PROVIDE FINE DINING AND GET HANDS-ON TRAINING



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