Family, Religion, and Music: 
"The Strength to Endure"
RANDOLPH B. CAMPBELL


ON THE EVE OF CIVIL WAR, THE STATE'S SLAVE POPULATION APPROACHED 200,000. DENIED THEIR FREEDOM, BLACK TEXANS FACED LIVES OF "HARSHNESS AND HOPELESSNESS." DR. CAMPBELL ARGUES, HOWEVER, THAT THREE IMPORTANT FACTORS—FAMILY TIES, RELIGIOUS FAITH, AND SONG—HELPED "SLAVES SURVIVE THE PSYCHOLOGICAL ASSAULT OF BONDAGE.”

His wife having been sold, and facing punishment himself, a slave who belonged to Irving Jones in Anderson County committed suicide. He "stood it as long as he could," said the bondsman who told the story. Slave suicides were not at all common, however. Bondsmen, although most faced a lifetime of manual labor with at best adequate material conditions

while subject to punishment largely at the whim of their masters, very seldom took their own lives. Their instinctive will to live was threatened by the harshness and hopelessness of bondage, but at the same time it was encouraged by several institutions that mitigated the psychological conditions of servitude. What aspects of Texas slaves’ lives contributed to the mental and emotional strength to endure, and what behavioral adjustments did bondsmen make in order to survive? These questions serve as a focus for the next two chapters.

Sizes of slaveholdings affected the psychological as well as physical conditions of servitude. Approximately one-third of Texas bondsmen belonged to small holders, whereas the great majority were on farms and plantations having at least ten slaves. Those who lived in smaller holdings, especially the few who resided in towns, benefited mentally and emotionally from having greater control over their own working and living conditions than did their plantation counterparts. Some may have had an advantage also in that closer daily contact with their masters led to greater recognition of their humanity. At the same time, these bondsmen, particularly those on small farms, were likely to spend most of their time under the close supervision of their owners with only a few other people who shared their situation. The presence of as many or more whites than blacks probably served as an oppressive reminder of their inferior status as slaves while reducing their opportunity to share the support that bondsmen could give each other. These slaves endured, but only the plantation majority had an opportunity to demonstrate the truth of an old adage about strength in numbers. They were in a better position to create families, worship according to their own religious ideas, and have their own music.

Slave families had no legal existence in Texas. A treatise on the state’s laws affecting married women, written in 1901, concluded that “since there can be no valid marriage between persons who are incapable of assenting to any contract, it follows that slaves could not marry, even with the consent of their master, so as to constitute them husband and wife. . . . Contubernism was their matrimony; a permitted cohabitation not partaking of the nature of lawful marriage, which they could not contract.” Since slave marriages had no standing under the law, it followed that fathers and mothers had no legally protected relationship with their children. The state supreme court demonstrated this in 1849 when it ruled that a district court jury had erred in assessing the value of a woman and her child together in determining the damages due for the theft of the two bondsmen. The two had to be assessed separately, the court said, since they were distinct pieces of property. Obviously, slaveowners had no legal compulsion to create or respect family ties of any sort.

A few masters went to the extremes possible under these circumstances and forced their slaves to reproduce without regard to any family relationships. Women were put with men, Annie Row remembered, like “the cows and the bull” and bred for “bigger niggers.” Other former slaves spoke of “breeding,” “traveling,” or “stud” Negroes who in some cases went from one plantation to another to sire slave children. Fannie Brown said that although she had children before 1865, “I never did have any special husband before the war. I married after the war.” Children who were simply “bred” as animal-like property could be treated as such as they grew older. “We mostly were like cattle and hogs are today,” said Jane Cotten.
Some owners, unwilling to “breed” their slaves but determined to insure reproduction, forced “marriages” between their men and women. Seventeen-year-old Rose Williams, for example, did not understand what was expected when her master told her to move from her parents’ cabin and live with one of his male bondsmen. She fought back at first and drove the man from her bed and the cabin. Finally, however, after remonstrances and threats from her owner, she gave in. The circumstances of this “marriage” marked her for life. When asked by a WPA interviewer if she had married after slavery, she replied: “Married? Never! No sir! One experience enough for this nigger. After what I’ve done for the master, I never want any truck with any man.” Other former slaves indicated that Williams’ “marriage” was not an isolated case. Betty Powers, for example, fairly snorted when her WPA interviewer inquired about slave marriages. “Did we uns have weddings?” she said. “White man, you know better than that. Them times colored folks am just put together. The master say, ‘Jim and Nancy you go live together,’ and when that order give it better be done.”

Most masters, however, did not interfere in the sexual lives of their slaves to the point of “breeding” or forcing “marriages.” Instead, they permitted the formation of families and the bearing and rearing of children within a family setting. In some cases, a woman and her children were referred to as a “family.” In 1860, for example, when Reuben Hornsby, Jr., of Austin bought a woman and her seven children, the bill of sale described his purchase as “a family of eight Negroes.” A Johnson County bill of sale referred to “a certain family of Negroes, Viz Emily aged about twenty-six years and her four children.” Such records suggest that the female-headed black family at least existed during slavery. Generally, however, the word family, as it was used by slaveholders and slaves alike, meant the nuclear social unit—a man, his wife, and their children.

Texas bondsmen themselves provided extensive evidence concerning the existence of nuclear families. In a sample of 181 slave narratives, 60 percent remembered living with both parents on the same home place and another 9 percent recalled that their fathers lived nearby on a neighboring farm or plantation. Inventories from probate records also provide numerous examples of nuclear families existing among bondsmen. Jared E. Groce’s Austin County estate, for example, had sixty slaves when it was inventoried in February, 1840. Kinship ties were specified for forty-four bondsmen, while sixteen were not identified with a particular family. Most of the families consisted of a man, his wife, and their children, and others, while not “complete” in this way, gave evidence of long-term kinship ties. One, for example, was made up of an “old woman” (age fifty-eight), two of her sons aged twenty-eight and eighteen, and a six-year-old granddaughter. Another was headed by a fifty-two-year-old blacksmith who had five children aged sixteen to three but no wife. The Joseph Mims estate in Brazoria County had seventy-two slaves in January, 1845. Fifty-nine of these lived in twelve family units, only one of which was headed by a female. John Millican of Brazos County owned sixty-seven slaves at the time of his death in 1859. Ten were not identified with particular families, but the others lived in twelve families, eight headed by husbands with wives, three by women, and one by a man with no wife. William Ward of Brazoria County had eighty-two slaves in 1864, and only two did not belong to one of the nineteen families on his plantation. Eighteen of these families were headed by men. Abram Sheppard of Matagorda County owned only ten slaves.
in 1856, but eight of them belonged to one family headed by a fifty-year-old man. In Cass County in 1849, eight of W. M. Freeman’s thirteen bondmen belonged to one family. Two of the other five slaves were a sixty-year-old woman and her sixteen-year-old son, but they were not designated a “family” in the inventory. In short, the evidence from slaves and slaveholders alike strongly suggests that the majority of bondmen in Texas lived at least part of their lives within a traditional family setting.

Masters had good reasons for permitting and even encouraging their slaves to live in families. Treating bondmen with humanity and having them reproduce within a secure family setting, regardless of what the law allowed, was more socially acceptable than “breeding” or forced “marriages.” Moreover, owners recognized how determined slaves were to have families and how important family ties were to the mental and emotional state of their bondmen. Masters could see that the family led both to children and to ties and obligations that made their bondmen more controllable in servitude. Considerations of humanity aside, few would deliberately deny an institution that served their own purposes so well. Masters were advised that “marital rights and conjugal ties ought to be scrupulously respected.” Nevertheless, there was noticeable variation in what they were willing to do to permit and preserve slave families.

When a man and woman on the same place wished to marry, they had to get their owner’s permission. This was generally no problem, but the wedding ceremonies that followed varied markedly from one master to another. Some couples, once they had permission, simply moved into a cabin together, whereas others had elaborate wedding ceremonies with ministers presiding. The most common celebration was a “broomstick wedding” in which the bride and groom literally jumped over a broomstick together. According to one legend, the first one over would “rule” the family. In any case, such weddings essentially amounted to, as one former slave said, “no ceremony, no license, no drama, just marrying.”

A good many families began when men and women from neighboring farms made matches and asked their respective masters for permission to marry. For example, J. W. Devereux’s diary for January 25, 1846, noted a marriage between one of his females and Sam Loftus “by consent of all parties. Sam brought a consent and good recommendation from his master.” Henry Lewis who lived in Jefferson County described such a match from the slave’s point of view: “My first wife named Rachel and she lived on Double Bayou. She belong to the Mayes place. First time I see her I was riding the range seeing about cattle. I was living on Master Bob’s place in Jefferson County and I have to get a pass to go to see her. I tell Master Bob I want to get married and he say, ‘all right.’ Then I have to go and ask Mr. Mayes and he say, ‘all right.’ Us had a big wedding.” When slaves on different farms and plantations married, they generally had to remain apart during the week and be together only on weekends and special holidays such as Christmas week. Such arrangements were far from ideal for the bondmen, and they were not good business for the owner of the husband either, in that children born to such unions generally belonged to the owner of the mother. It was not uncommon, however, for one slave or the other, usually the man, to be bought or traded so that the couple could live together. For example, Hattie Cole, George Sells, Martha Spence Bruton, and Gill Ruffin all remembered their fathers being bought from other masters in order to unite them with their wives and children. At times, women were sold for similar reasons. When, for example, George Scott prepared to buy a slave named Liddy from
Thomas B. Huling in 1860, the latter wrote his mother, “I have no objections to sell her as she has her husband belonging to Scott.”

Slave families tended to be large, since, after all, children were valuable, and reproduction was encouraged. Women often had their first child while in their late teens and then had another every two years until they were in their forties. Even with the very high infant mortality of that age, many women had four or five living children by the time they reached the age of thirty, and some had spectacularly large families. For example, in 1859, a forty-five-year-old Brazos County woman named China had children aged twenty-eight, twenty-four, twenty-two, twenty, eighteen, sixteen, fourteen, twelve, ten, eight, seven, six, four, and an infant. Of course, white families also tended to be large during this era.

Slave families, regardless of how they were created or their size, played a vital role in providing the mental and emotional strength necessary to endure bondage. Family ties gave slaves love, individual identity, and a sense of personal worth—all from relationships with people like themselves, not from their masters or from others of a clearly superior status. “If you love me like I love you,” a Harrison County slave woman wrote her husband in 1862 while he served his master in the Confederate army, “no knife can cut our love into [sic].” Judge John Scott wrote to Ashbel Smith about what happened as he prepared to ride his circuit in 1839 and take a hired slave with him as a body servant. “I agreed with Dr. Anderson for his man Thornton,” he wrote, “but the rascal runaway, & will not go with me, alleging that he wishes to sleep with his dear wife, etc.” One of Smith’s own slaves also objected to leaving home even briefly. “Albert got home, safely, on Monday night,” M. S. Tunnell informed Smith. “He takes the separation from his family to heart considerably. He said he would rather be set up and shot, then the trouble would be soon over.” Clearly the relationships between these men and women were vital parts of their everyday lives.

Slave husbands and wives apparently wanted to divide responsibilities as much as possible along the lines that were traditional in mid-nineteenth-century families. Men, for example, hunted and fished when they could in order to provide additional food. Women kept their homes and took care of the children.

Slave children received love, support, and discipline from their parents. Delia Barclay, for example, remembered how weekend visits from her father who lived on a nearby plantation were a special part of her life. On one occasion, she became so excited at his arrival that she ran across the porch, caught her toe in a crack between the planks, and nearly pulled it off. Martha Spence Bruton told her WPA interviewer that after her mother died her father had to be “mammy and pappy.” On Sunday morning, she said, “He’d get out of bed and make a big fire and say ‘Jiminy cripes! you children stay in bed and I’ll make the biscuits.’” Mollie Dawson described the way children who misbehaved got a good spanking. All most parents had to do, she said, “was to look out the corner of the eye at the kids and they got good right now.” Mandy Morrow recalled what happened when she decided to sneak off to the barn and try smoking a pipe. Her mother missed her because things were too quiet and found her in the barn. “She pulled me out of there. Now, white man, there am plenty of fire put on my rear and I see lots of smoke.” Finally, the experience of Hannah Mullins at the time of emancipation
showed the meaning of her family. She had been living at her master’s house as a playmate for his children, but at freedom “my pappy comes after me and we’uns all live together in the cabin instead of me living in the master’s house with the kids.”

Families were one focal point for survival for many slaves, and yet, paradoxically, families also could bring almost unbearable pain. Husbands generally could not protect their wives from whippings or from sexual abuse by white men. Wives at times saw their husbands beaten and humiliated by overseers and masters. Children had to see their parents unable to protect each other or themselves. Jacob Branch, for example, remembered how awful it was to see his mother whipped. “Many’s the time I edges up,” he said, “and tries to take some of them licks off my mama.” The greatest pain from family relationships, however, came from the fact that they were always subject to disruption by the actions of slaveowners.

Some owners showed notable concern that the family ties of their bondsmen not be disrupted. These masters not only kept husbands, wives, and children together while they lived, they also wrote wills directing that family ties be respected in the settling of their estates. John J. Webster of Harrison County, for example, wrote: “It is my further will that my Negroes be so distributed as to allot the families by families in the partition, that members of the same family may remain together.” Dr. E. Stevens of Brazoria County directed his executors to sell all his property for cash but added the proviso that “the slaves shall be sold in families.” Richard Carter of Brazos County left all his slaves to his wife. At her death, one large family (a man, his wife, and their eight children) plus four “orphan” Negroes would become the property of his daughter. The other slaves were to be sold, provided that another large family of eight “shall all be sold together to a purchaser, so that they may not be separated.” Samuel McGowen of Polk County bequeathed all his sixty-four slaves in family units, adding a special instruction that two of the families “shall choose for themselves whichever of my children they may like to live with (the one chosen paying the other a fair consideration).” These masters, and the many others who gave similar directions concerning at least some of their bondsmen, obviously appreciated the strength and importance of the slave family.

Estate administrators and the guardians of minors with slave property also expressed concern at times for the preservation of families. One guardian in Colorado County asked the probate court’s approval for hiring to herself the seven slaves belonging to her wards because “it would be painful to separate Negroes united by ties of blood.” Rebecca Hagerty proposed to buy part of a Cass County plantation as a place to work the slaves under her care as guardian of Anna Hawkins. This was best, she told the court, because the bondsmen “consist of families, say, men, women, and children all of which are unsuitable to hire out.” Other guardians and administrators went ahead and hired out slaves but kept families together in the process. For example, the administrator of William A. Nail’s Colorado County estate sought and obtained the court’s permission to hire out a family together for 1856. David G. Mills, as administrator of Sterling McNeel’s huge Brazoria County plantation, hired out six families in 1857. Several large families belonging to William Routt’s estate in Washington County were hired out for 1858, although the administrator reported that John, his wife, and their five children were “not hired no one wanting them.”
While some owners and estate managers made notable efforts to keep slave families together, others went only so far as was not terribly inconvenient. The will of Dr. John L. Graves is a good example. His wish was that "in making a division the Negroes shall be so divided as to avoid as far as practicable consistently with a just apportionment the separation of the persons constituting a family." Amelia Swanson of Harrison County directed that her slaves' families be kept together as much as possible. The administrator of Susan A. S. Gardner's estate in Colorado County petitioned to hire out two families of slaves for 1857. He kept one family together but hired three members of the second to one hirer and two to another.

Thus, many Texas slaves belonged to masters or came under the control of estate managers who made at least some effort to preserve families; many others, however, were the property of owners who showed absolutely no concern for family ties. In some cases, relationships among husbands, wives, and children were disrupted by the move to Texas from older southern states. For example, Ben Chambers of Jasper County remembered how the move to Texas from Alabama had disrupted his family. He and his mother belonged to Lazarus Goolsby who migrated, while his father's master remained behind. Chambers never saw his father again. John Bates told a similar story: "My mother belonged to Harry Hogan and my father belonged to Mock Bateman... I don't know much about him [father] because we moved to Limestone County Texas while I was small leaving my pappy in Arkansas. I never saw him no more."

Eli Davison's owner decided in 1858 to leave his own wife in Dunbar, Virginia (now West Virginia), take a few slaves, including young Eli, and begin anew in Texas. Davison was permanently separated from his mother and father. Some young slaves were not even fortunate enough to come to Texas with one of their parents or their original owner. Instead, they were bought elsewhere and brought to the Lone Star state by a new master. Sarah Perkins and her brother, for example, traveled from Tennessee after being sold to Charlie Jones. The boy died en route and was buried beside the road; Sarah was so sickly that she was given away in San Antonio. Ashbel Smith bought three slaves, aged ten, twelve, and seventeen, in 1838 in New Orleans and shipped them to Galveston. Smith's bill of sale and shipping manifest provide no evidence, of course, on the family relations of these young bondsmen, but it is obvious that they were purchased and brought to Texas without their fathers or mothers.

Slave families that survived migration or were formed in Texas also were subject to disruption at any time. Contemporary observers, newspaper advertisements, and former slaves all provide evidence that masters could and did sell bondsmen without regard to age or family ties. Nicholas Doran P. Maillard described an auction during 1840 in Fort Bend County in which a family of four was sold to three different purchasers—the father to one, the wife and an infant to another, and a boy to a third. The Clarksville Northern Standard carried an advertisement in 1857 offering a thirteen-year-old girl for sale or barter for a boy or cattle. Lizzie Atkins remembered having two brothers and a sister sold from her family when she was six or seven years old. James Brown described slave families being broken up on the auction block, and Josie Brown saw "children too little to walk split from their mammys and sold right on the block in Woodville."

Perhaps the ultimate example of selling a young slave occurred in Austin County during May, 1859, when James Strawther, who was in severe financial difficulty, sold a six-week-old female
for $75. Strawther warranted the infant a slave for life, but did “not warrant her soundness in any manner.” The purchaser was Strawther’s sister, who soon became the administrator of his estate and a partial heir of his property, so perhaps the infant was never separated from her mother. Nevertheless, the transaction reveals that there was no limit on the age at which slaves could be, and were, sold.

Slave children sometimes were given away as well as sold. Sarah G. Burleson of Hays County, for example, gave her daughter-in-law, Louisa, “a certain negro boy named Phillip of copper complexion and about six years of age.” The boy’s mother had already been given to one of Burleson’s sons (not Louisa’s husband). Minerva Bratcher at age six was part of the “dowry” accompanying one of her master’s daughters who married in the mid-1850s. The 1862 will of David Barton of Burnet County directed that a girl named Caroline be given to the yet-unborn child being carried by his wife.

Slave families were broken up by migration, sales, and gifts. However, the death of a master created an even greater likelihood of disruption. In many cases, immediately after an owner died, his farm or plantation came under the management of an administrator who then hired out the bondsmen belonging to the estate and in the process often broke up slave families, sometimes year after year. For example, William Steen’s De Witt County estate included four nuclear families when it was inventoried in January, 1847. The estate’s administrator immediately hired out its slaves for the remainder of that year and in the process disrupted all four families. In Rusk County, six slaves belonging to one estate, including a forty-year-old man, a thirty-year-old woman, and her three children aged fourteen, twelve, and six, were each hired to different renters each year from 1859 to 1862. The boy was separated from his mother and served four different masters before he reached the age of ten.

Hiring out constituted a temporary disruption, but final estate settlements, some of which took place soon after a slaveholder’s death and others not until after years of administration, often resulted in the permanent breakup of slave families. Although some slaveowners in their wills sought to protect families, many others made no such provision or even directed the separation of husbands, wives, and children. William C. Sparks of Bell County, for example, left his ten slaves to his six children “share and share alike.” Robert O. Reeves of Grayson County and Thomas H. Snow of Polk County also wrote wills that left slave families at the mercy of an equitable division of their estates. Lewis M. H. Washington of Travis County left one slave couple to his wife, but his will also directed that a woman named Charlotte be sold and that each of his four stepchildren be given one of Charlotte’s five children. The fifth child went to Washington’s wife. Ephraim D. Moore’s will bequeathed one slave to each of his seven children. Any slaves born before the will took effect, Moore wrote, will be “kept by them that may have their mother.” In similar fashion, John Robbins divided six slaves among his five heirs. The youngest bondsman involved was only four. Isaac Vandorn of Matagorda County wanted his wife to keep all his slaves together during her lifetime. At her death, however, each of his three children was to pick one slave, and the others were to be divided equally. Clearly, these wills permitted or necessitated the disruption of families.
In cases where slaveowners died intestate, settlements partitioning estates according to state laws on the subject often broke up slave families. William Steen's estate again provides a good example. When this estate was partitioned into eight "lots" of approximately equal value in April, 1848, all four families were disrupted in some way. For example, Armystead, a thirty-four-year-old blacksmith, saw his wife Aggey and three children combined with another man to create Lot #3, while he was placed in Lot #6 with a fifteen-year-old girl. Peter W. Gautier, Sr., of Brazoria County had fifteen slaves who comprised six families when his estate was inventoried and partitioned in 1848. In the partition, four of the families were kept intact but two were disrupted. Sancho and Lucy, who were both thirty-three, had their nine-year-old son placed with another family. The Polk County estate of Nicholas M. Callahan had such extensive debts that seven slaves including a twenty-two-year-old woman and her four children aged six, four, two, and one, were sold in 1849. The same man bought Letty and her youngest child, but the other three children went to three different purchasers. Probate records provide case after case of this sort, but the point is obvious—estate settlements constituted a major threat to slave families in Texas.

The breakup of a slave family was heart-rending. When eight-year-old Charlie Sandles was traded to a new master, he cried for a week. Tempe Elgin's master moved from Arkansas to Texas, taking her mother and sister, and leaving behind her father who belonged to a different master. The man ran away and followed them for sixty miles, urging his wife to run away and live with him. She, however, would not leave her children, so he gave up. His family never saw him again. Albert Henderson, drawing an analogy from his rural background, said that slaves when sold from each other "bawled" like cattle that had lost their calves. James Brown remembered seeing "them cry like they at the funeral when they am parted, they has to drag them away."

Many slaves demonstrated a willingness to sacrifice virtually everything else in their lives in order to preserve their families. Millie Ann Smith described how she was brought to Texas with her mother and two sisters. Her father, who belonged to a different master, ran away, followed his wife and children to Texas, and begged their owner into buying him so that he could be with his family. Wash Ingram of Panola County told a similar story. His family lived in Virginia, he said, and his father ran away but remained in the neighborhood. Then his mother died, and he and the other children were sold to Jim Ingram from Texas. His father followed the children all the way to Louisiana before catching up with them and becoming Ingram's slave also in order to be with his family. Walter Rimm told his WPA interviewer a story that, he said, "makes the impression on me all my life." At a slave auction on his master's place, a man from "outside" put a fifteen-year-old girl on the block. Suddenly, there was a scream from an older woman who had features very similar to the girl: "Ise will cut my throat if my daughter am sold." The owner talked to the woman, failed to calm her, and took the girl off the auction block. Her threat had preserved a family relationship, at least for the time.

When slave families were disrupted, fathers, mothers, and children did the best they could to stay in contact and visit each other. The Christmas holidays were an especially likely time for families to be reunited, although many were able to get together more often. Charlie Sandles, for example, visited his parents from Saturday night until sundown on Sunday. Mollie Dawson's father lived on a neighboring plantation, and at times she left her home to visit him.
at his. One of Preston R. Rose’s slaves went to California with him during the early 1850s, and somehow managed to obtain freedom and stay in the new El Dorado. In May, 1851, he wrote Rose, saying “I cannot come home this season, but would like much to have my family with me, if any arrangement could be made. Please let me know how much money it will be necessary for me to send you for their freedom.” W. Steinert, a German visitor to Texas in 1849, traveled from New Braunfels to Austin by a stagecoach that included a slave woman and child among its passengers. To his surprise, when the stage reached Austin a Negro woman ran up and almost literally pulled the child from the coach, crying, “My baby, my little baby.” Steinert then found that “the very happy woman was the mother of the child. The christian whites had torn mother and daughter apart by a sale. On the other hand they were humane enough to permit the visit.”

Some efforts to renew family ties after long periods of disruption were truly heroic. Mary Armstrong’s mother was sold from her home in Missouri to Texas before the Civil War. Upon being manumitted in 1863, Armstrong decided to go to Texas in search of her mother. She was almost returned to slavery in Austin, saving herself only with her manumission papers, before finally locating her mother in Wharton County after the war. Louisa Picquet was born in South Carolina, the child of a mulatto slave named Elizabeth Ramsey and her master. Eventually a man from Texas bought the mother, and Louisa was sold to a man in New Orleans and became his concubine. Upon his death, she was manumitted and given enough money to move to Cincinnati, where she married a mulatto named Henry Picquet. Louisa then continued a search for her mother that had begun almost as soon as they were separated. Finally, a friend who traveled to Texas told her of a Mr. Horton who fit the description of the man who had bought her mother. This was Albert C. Horton, a former lieutenant governor and acting governor of Texas and one of the state’s largest slaveholders. She began a correspondence with her mother and with Horton in 1858 or 1859, seeking to buy her mother’s freedom. Horton asked $1,000; Picquet convinced him to take $900 and raised the money through severe personal economies and a public request for funds. A note in the Cincinnati Daily Gazette of October 15, 1860, thanked everyone who had contributed to purchasing the freedom of Elizabeth Ramsey and invited them to call at the Picquets’ home to be thanked personally by mother and daughter.

Following the Civil War, the Freedmen’s Bureau in Texas received numerous inquiries from blacks in other states concerning family members. A letter of July 20, 1866, from Topeka, Kansas, for example, contained a request from David Barber for “information concerning his wife Sophia Howard, who with her 6 children were sent to Collin Co., Texas in 1861.” Charles White of Elizabeth City, North Carolina, wrote in June, 1867, asking that the bureau “procure and return to him his wife and two children John Westley & Florence who before the war were sent to Victoria, Tex.” These men were attempting to restore families that had been disrupted for more than five years.

No more eloquent testimony to the vital importance of the slave family can be imagined than the determination of the bondsmen themselves to form and preserve bonds between husbands/fathers, wives/mothers, and children. A few may have sought to escape the heartbreak of family disruptions by avoiding such ties. William Byrd told of slaves who tried not to let
children know who their parents were, and Lu Lee said women sometimes forced themselves to miscarry by taking calomel and turpentine. But this was not typical. “Nobody can tell me now,” wrote Steinert after witnessing the joyous reunion of a mother and her child in Austin, “that the Negroes do not have fatherly and motherly love in their hearts.” The bonds of love and support between the men, women, and children who created slave families, in spite of the fact that a majority of those families probably faced disruption at some time, provided much of the emotional strength necessary to endure servitude.

Religion appears to have been second only to the family in helping slaves survive the psychological assault of bondage. Its role, however, depended on how spiritual instruction was given and how slaves heard and received the various articles of faith and religious precepts. Religion could be highly supportive of slavery when it taught that men had to obey their temporal masters in the same manner that they served their spiritual ruler. Bondsmen were instructed to be loyal, virtuous, and industrious, with the idea that, as one traveler put it, “a good christian is not a bad servant.” On the other hand, Christianity could be subversive of slavery when it taught that all men, black and white, stood on an equal footing before God and were equally capable of attaining eternal salvation. Most Texans, while they certainly did not mean to undermine their Peculiar Institution, did not deny this most fundamental Christian assumption. At least, then, religion offered many slaves the promise, as Mary Gaffney put it, of an eternity “where they would not be any more slaves.” At best, there was the hope for deliverance as the Bible told of people delivered from bondage and sin. Many years later, Ellen Ford remembered how her family had prayed for freedom and insisted that “emancipation wouldn’t have come if it hadn’t been for the prayers of my mother and grandmother.”

Slaveholders probably had fewer reasons to encourage or even permit religious instruction and worship among their bondsmen than they had for allowing slave families. Religion was not generally as vital to the slaves’ emotional well-being, and it involved nothing of such practical value as procreation. Under these circumstances, some masters did their best to prohibit all religious activities. They did not allow their bondsmen to attend church or even to worship on their own. According to Sarah Ashley, who belonged to Mose Davis near Coldspring, “there wasn’t any meetings allowed in the quarters. The boss man even whip them when they have the prayer meeting.” “Sometimes,” she added, “us run off at night and go to . . . camp meetings, but I was plumb growed before I ever went to church.” John Bates’s Uncle Ben read the Bible and told the others on his place that some day they would be free. Their master heard and said, “Hell, no, you will never be free, you ain’t got sense enough to make the living if you was free.” He said the Bible had put bad ideas in people’s heads and took it away from Ben. Bates remembered, however, that his uncle got another Bible and “he keeps this one hid all the time.” In 1857, Ashbel Smith’s overseer refused the slaves permission to attend services on Sunday, which they, as was their practice in all such disputes, protested to their master.

Preventing religious activity was thus virtually impossible. Most masters, therefore, did not attempt to prohibit worship, and some actively encouraged it. Their purposes ranged from the cynical view that Christian virtues made better slaves to the sincere conviction that the souls of all, black as well as white, should be saved. Wes Brady complained that he heard
only about obeying and not stealing. There was “nary a word about having a soul to save.” But Albert C. Horton, a Baptist deacon and one of the largest slaveholders in Texas, took a genuine interest in the spiritual welfare of his bondsmen. He built a church, employed a minister, and personally read the Bible and prayed with his servants. Most slaveholders probably had mixed motives. As one Harrison County minister said of the slaveholders in his area, “all seem to understand, that while the Gospel qualifies their servants for immortality and eternal life, at the same time it makes them better servants here—better to their earthly masters—more obedient, industrious, trusty, and faithful.”

Bondsmen on some places simply held local services that created as little bother as possible. Charlotte Beverly said that her master sometimes allowed one of the slaves who was “a sort a preacher” to speak to the others. However, he had to preach with a tub over his head, because if he got too “happy” and loud someone would come from the big house and end the “disturbance.”

It was common, however, for slaves to belong to organized churches and attend regularly scheduled services. Most Texan slaveholders who attended church belonged to one of the “standard” Protestant denominations—Methodist, Baptist, Presbyterian, Episcopal, Cumberland Presbyterian, and Disciples of Christ (Christian church)—and all these churches baptized slaves. The Methodist church, the largest denomination in antebellum Texas, claimed 1,000 blacks by the mid-1840s and reported nearly 7,500 Negro members and probationers in 1860. Complete membership statistics for the Baptist church, the second largest in the state in 1860, are not available, but clearly thousands of slaves belonged to it, too. In 1861, for example, the Colorado, Austin, Little River, and Grand Cane Baptist associations, which represented fewer than half of such associations in Texas, reported 1,087 Negro members. The other denominations were far smaller, but they, too, baptized slaves. Caleb Ives, the Episcopal minister who organized Christ Church at Matagorda in 1839, accepted “colored” members, and when Texas became a separate diocese in 1859, its first bishop, Alexander Gregg, ministered as regularly to slaves as to whites. The Cumberland Presbyterians accepted Negroes as full members of their local congregations. The Colorado Presbytery, for example, reported 256 white and 44 black communicants in 1860. The Disciples of Christ’s pioneer “Old Liberty” Church in Collin County was founded by 16 whites and 5 slaves. In short, only a minority of Texas’ slaves actually belonged to organized churches. But thousands had been baptized, many others doubtless attended services, and a good many more worshipped on their home places. Certainly most had access to some form of religion.

Some of the slaves attended worship services with their masters, sitting in pews especially designated for them. Far more common, however, were special meetings for black church members on Sunday afternoon or night. In some cases, the Methodists and Baptists permitted even more separate worship through the formation of all-black congregations. By 1860, for example, the Methodist church had thirty-seven “missions” to the slaves with a total membership of 2,585 bondsmen. The Colorado Baptist Association at its 1854 meeting permitted the “Colored Church on J. H. Jones’ plantation, Matagorda County” to join as a separate congregation. The next year, however, the Union Baptist Association rejected a similar request by the “Africa Church at Anderson” on the grounds that “the establishment of independent Churches among
our colored population would be inconsistent with their condition as servants, and with the interests of their masters." Separate worship services were acceptable, the association said, “but always to be aided in this work by the presence and counsel of some judicious white members.”

The matter of separate slave congregations raised a more fundamental question—who was to minister to the bondsmen? Obviously, the slaveholders intended that white preachers provide religious instruction, but, as slavery matured in Texas, black ministers were not uncommon. In Washington County during the 1840s, a slave named John Mark preached so well to white and black alike that, when his owner moved, local planters bought and deeded him to three ministers in trust for the Methodist church. In 1853, the Texas Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, elected John Mark “to deacon’s orders as a local preacher.” The Trinity Presbytery of the Cumberland Presbyterian church in 1848 authorized a man called “Brother Henry,” the property of William Roberts, to preach, to baptize other blacks, and to “administer the sacraments of the supplies” to them. Slaves in the Indian Creek community of Jasper County built the Dixie Baptist Church in 1853 with the aid of Joshua Seale. One of Seale’s slaves, Richard, was the church’s founding minister. Bondsmen in the area reportedly “flocked into the wooden church every Sunday and dared not think of missing.” Some black preachers, of course, ministered without the formal approval of any denomination. Some were recognized locally and preached on their own places and adjoining plantations, while others repeated and interpreted what they heard from white ministers. In any case, extensive evidence from church records and from the slaves themselves indicates that many and probably most had the opportunity to hear a religious message presented by a fellow slave. Indeed, black ministers were numerous enough by 1860 that the Texas Conference of the Methodist Church received a recommendation from its committee on African missions to withdraw approval from meetings “conducted by colored men” and stop “licensing or renewing the licenses of colored men to preach.”

What did bondsmen hear when they attended worship services? White ministers, as noted above, generally told the slaves to be loyal, honest, and industrious in order to attain ultimate salvation. Blacks who led worship services often had their words carefully monitored by slaveowners or other white supervisors. Nancy Jackson and Simpson Campbell, for example, both remembered how their ministers were instructed to preach obedience to earthly masters. Josie Brown said that the slaves on her place had to hold their church meeting “in the yard, so the white folks could see the kind of religion expounded.” Those who preached “wrong” views were likely to have short careers. Sarah Ford told about a preacher named “Uncle Lew” who said that the Lord had created all men equal. “Uncle Jake,” the black driver, told the master, and “Uncle Lew” found himself a field hand again the next day. And yet, in spite of all efforts to insure that slaves heard only the “right” religious message, those who worshipped were well aware of the other implications of a belief in God and Jesus. Even without an “Uncle Lew” to tell them, they understood that all men stood equally before their creator. This meant, at the very least, the promise of salvation for all, and, at best, it was a promise of redemption. Religious faith helped many thousands of slaves to endure.

In Texas, as elsewhere across the South, slaves’ music contributed significantly to their adjustment to servitude. Music was an acceptable form of expression that served the needs of blacks in a variety of ways. Slaves sang to set a pace for their work and to express their
emotions. As Vinnie Brunson told a WPA interviewer, "the Negro used to sing to nearly everything he did. It was the way he expressed his feelings and it made him relieved, if he was happy, it made him happy, if he was sad, it made him feel better, and so he naturally sings his feelings." Slaves also used music as a deceptive form of communication. Richard Carruthers of Bastrop County remembered how, as a youth with the job of managing livestock, he watched for the overseer, Tom Hill, and used a song to warn his fellow bondsmen in the cotton field. When Carruthers sang "Hold up, hold up, American spirit," the field hands knew that they were about to receive a visit from "Devil Hill." In a similar vein, when one of Rosina Hoard's owner's sons tried to teach some of the slaves the ABCs, lookouts stood ready to give a musical warning if the master approached. Above all, slave music contained protests against bondage and expressions of the dream of freedom. One song protested:

Master sleeps in the feather bed,
Nigger sleeps on the floor
When we all get to Heaven,
They'll be no slaves no more!

"We hummed our religious songs in the field while we was working," Millie Ann Smith of Rusk County said. "It was our way of praying for freedom, but the white folks didn't know it." Slave music was thus a means of expression, communication, and protest. Bondsmen often said a great deal more through song than their masters knew or cared to recognize, and in the process they exercised one more means of withstand ing the psychological pressure of slavery.

Many Texas slaves had some opportunity for education in reading and writing because the Lone Star state had no laws intended to prevent slave literacy. Some owners deliberately sought to prevent any education of slaves because it would lead to running away and other expressions of discontent. Even in some of these cases, however, members of the white family, usually children, ignored the objections of the master and mistress and tried to teach young slaves to read. Susan Merritt, for example, remembered being hit with a whip when her mistress caught her being taught to read by one of the family's daughters. Many owners, however, had no objections if their slaves were taught, and others sought deliberately to give a minimal education and take advantage of it. Andrew Goodman's master, for example, urged his bondsmen to learn all they could, and Robert Prout attended a Sunday morning "school" taught by his owner. W. L. Sloan of Harrison County educated some of his slaves to the point that they could keep records on cotton picking and other plantation work. Others had similar opportunities, although not all cared to learn. Liza Jones, for example, said that she cried to go out and play when one of her master's daughters tried to teach her to read and write. Such reluctance may have been nothing more than the expression of a child's desire to play rather than work, but it may also have been an indication that formal education was relatively unimportant to slaves. It seems that literacy did not confer any special status, unless combined with preaching, and had no particular mental or emotional benefits. No doubt informal education—the knowledge of what it meant to be a slave and how to get along in the system—was more important than formal learning.
This type of education, however, was provided by families and other slaves in the quarters and cannot be documented.

Texas slaves, as they endured bondage, generally gained mental and emotional strength from their families, religion, and music. Still, however, they had to adjust their attitudes and day-to-day behavior to the pressures of bondage. How Texas blacks behaved as they faced the widespread harshness and essential hopelessness of slavery constitutes another vital aspect of the psychological conditions of servitude.