

HIDDEN HISTORY

SEARCHING FOR THE STRUCTURES OF SLAVERY IN SAN ANTONIO

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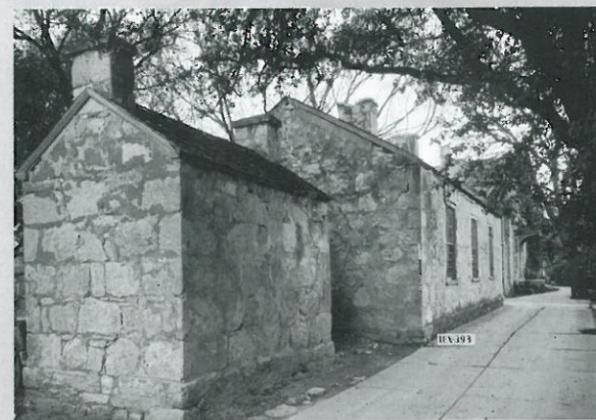
Historic photographs courtesy of Historic American Buildings Survey, Library of Congress

To a preservationist, the story of history is told through the built environment. The structures and spaces that remain from the past tell us a great deal about the world in which they were constructed. Physical remains are sometimes all that we have to shape our view of that world. The walls talk, where the voices within have been silenced. The world of the American slave is one that has been silenced for far too long and is now increasingly being analyzed through this methodology.

Even in areas of the country with historically dense slave populations like Virginia, South Carolina, and Louisiana, the remnants of slave housing and structures associated with the slave trade are few. San Antonio and South Texas present greater challenges in the search for the architecture of slavery. Historically low slave populations resulted

in fewer structures associated with slavery, whether slave quarters or processing centers like markets and slave pens. However, these structures did, and most likely do, still exist. Analyzing the spaces and places that defined slave confinement may be more difficult, but it will ultimately be essential to filling in the gaps in San Antonio's slave history.

With its cultural ties to Mexico, which pressed to outlaw slavery in Texas, San Antonio had relatively few slaves. Indeed one of the rights Texans fought for during the revolution of 1836 was to bring slaves into the colony. Once Texas gained its independence from Mexico in 1836, slaves poured into the new republic and remained a keystone of its economy until the Civil War.



First Page: The Magnus Seng House;
This Page Clockwise from Top Left: Slave quarters at the Magnus Seng House, Delgado-Harris House at 305 E. Euclid, Slave quarters and smokehouse behind the Nathaniel Lewis house

San Antonio, however, was not a major player in the slave trade, nor did it have the sizable populations of working slaves like the other major cities of antebellum Texas such as Houston or Galveston. San Antonio's large German population that was generally not of strong Confederate support, coupled with the absence of large-scale farming of cash crops like cotton and sugarcane found in the eastern parts of the state, contributed to a relatively low slave population. But slaves were not completely absent from the historical landscape of San Antonio or South Texas.

Some noted structures in the city are linked with slavery, including the Alamo itself, where William Travis' slave, Joe, survived the siege. New research indicates that there were perhaps other slaves present at the battle as well. The Emily Morgan Hotel (formerly the Medical Arts Building) was named for the mulatta who supposedly seduced Santa Anna to aid the rebel cause. A January 2, 1939 newspaper article from the San Antonio Express contained a story about David Alexander. In the article, eighty-nine year old "Uncle Dave" remembers a slave market located at the corner of Alamo and Commerce Streets where the old Joske's building now stands. The article recounts how "... he used to watch negro slaves being placed on the auction block to be sold to the highest bidder." It also indicates that his father, David C. Alexander, was in the mercantile business and traded in slaves through the end of the Civil War. Was this auction block temporarily placed there when slaves were sold or was this a permanent block as in other cities? Was there, perhaps, something more substantial at that location such as a slave pen? Slave pens were common features of the domestic slave trade in many cities including New Orleans, St. Louis, Savannah, and Washington D.C. Additional research is needed to fully reveal the extent of San Antonio's slave selling infrastructure.

Finding slave dwellings in San Antonio can also prove difficult. The archives of the Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS) at the Library of Congress reveal a handful of dwellings in and around San Antonio that were identified as slave quarters. In San Antonio, two structures were identified as having slave quarters. The Magnus Seng House, now demolished, was documented between

1934 and 1937 and was located at the corner of Bowie and Nacogdoches Streets. According to the HABS data pages, it was constructed in 1842. The photographs include one of a dwelling identified as slave quarters. The small structure appears to be typical of the adobe buildings found throughout San Antonio in the early to mid-nineteenth century. More research on this complex is needed to fully substantiate the validity of this structure as slave quarters and to determine who may have lived there.

The second house with slave quarters identified in HABS documentation of 1937 was the Denman or Lewis House at 112 Lexington, now the site of the El Tropicano Hotel (which is today a historic landmark in its own right). The property was owned by Nathaniel Lewis, whose home reportedly dated to before 1850. Outbuildings on the property included a smoke house and slave quarters. Further research indicated that the Lewis property was quite large and contained a barn and a small house, probably a kitchen, about a mile north of the main complex at what is now 305 Euclid in Tobin Hill. This small house, known as the Delgado-Harris House, still stands and is the only remaining vestige of the property. It may also be one of the only slave houses remaining in San Antonio. This is where our story begins.

There are so many stories in San Antonio that need to be told. Some of these voices are silenced and stories erased by demolition only to resurface again through research. Other stories linger in deserted buildings waiting to be discovered. Such is the case of the Delgado-Harris house, a local landmark at 305 E. Euclid. It begs to tell its story but who would listen? The little caliche house in the Tobin Hill neighborhood is not a mansion or the former home of a prominent San Antonio resident. No famous person slept there so why should the history of this little house matter? After all, the former owner's mansion on the San Antonio River, along with a smokehouse, barn, and slave quarters, were demolished fifty years ago to build the El Tropicano Hotel at the intersection of Lexington and N. St. Mary's Street.

The property on which the Delgado-Harris house is located was purchased by Nathaniel Lewis in 1852 from Ygnacio Perez. The property was part of the Manuel Delgado Spanish land grant from





From Right to Left: Nathaniel Lewis Home: The house built by Nathaniel Lewis at 112 Lexington (now the site of the El Tropicano Hotel), El Tropicano Hotel on the site of the former Nathaniel Lewis House at Lexington and N. St. Mary's Street



the 1700s. The structure is locally known as the Delgado House and believed to date to the late 18th century. However, preliminary archival review, architectural components, and some limited artifactual material uncovered during the course of stabilization lend support that the little house was built in the mid 19th century. It is then possible that the house was built after the property was purchased by Nathaniel Lewis. A more accurate date of construction would require an archaeological excavation. Regardless of the exact age of the house, the question that has surfaced recently is this: could the little house have been a slave dwelling?

It is difficult to discover the histories necessary to tell the stories of former slaves. The resources are scant and research could take years. We could let this history be forgotten through the passage of time, but what if we could prove that this house was a slave dwelling worth preserving for generations of African-Americans and Afro-Latinos in San Antonio and throughout the United States? Additional research needs to be done, but the following information suggests that this property may have been a slave dwelling associated with the Nathaniel Lewis family and a former slave, Lucinda Harris.

According to the 1850 and 1860 slave schedules for Bexar County, Nathaniel Lewis was a slave owner. In 1850 he owned three slaves, and by 1860 he owned eight slaves. Newspaper archives and photographs of Nathaniel Lewis' estate reveal that there were slave quarters in proximity to his mansion at the corner of Lexington and N. St. Mary's. The Delgado-Harris house at 305 E. Euclid is about a mile away from where the Lewis mansion once stood.

The earliest documented history connecting Lucinda Harris with the house dates to 1870 when she purchased the house from Nathaniel Lewis for \$860.00. Lucinda had a grown son in 1870, and the title from the purchase of her home mentions that the house would go to "Henry Selby" after her death. The history of Nathaniel Lewis and his family is well documented, but who was Lucinda Harris and where did she come from? Was Lucinda a former slave of Lewis's and was the house she bought from him her former slave dwelling?

What is known about Lucinda Harris in San Antonio has been identified in the 1870 census records by researcher Larry Kirkpatrick. Lucinda was part of the Nathaniel Lewis household. She was listed in the census as a fifty-one year old mulatto female cook born in Mississippi. Her son Henry, the next listed entry in the census record, was identified as an eighteen year old mulatto male barber

also born in Mississippi. The Nathaniel Lewis household included a total of twenty-five people. Only three of these, Nathaniel, wife Fannie, and son Daniel, were members of the Lewis family. All other members of the household were servants, laborers and their families, and the cook Lucinda and her son.

The connection is clearly established between Lucinda Harris and Nathaniel Lewis in San Antonio, but what about her earlier life? Had Lucinda been a former slave? A research tip came from Sylvia Reyna at the Central Library in the Texana Department. Sylvia discovered the book compiled by Ed Johnson, *African Americans in the Bexar County Deed Records*. The book identified a slave woman named Lucinda and child who had been part of the estate of Daniel W. Ragsdale from Goose Pond Plantation in Mississippi.

In 1850 Daniel W. Ragsdale owned sixty-nine slaves. When he wrote his will in 1851, Ragsdale stated that each family member was to receive an allotment of slaves from his estate. Upon his death in 1856, slave lot 8 was allotted to his son, Daniel H. Ragsdale. The slaves included "Charles Fox, Phillis, Wilson, Lucinda and child, Jerry, Matt, Lucien, Whining, Joseph, Buster, Ellen and child, Bob, Harriett, Jenny Glasgow (old)." In the late 1850s, Daniel H. Ragsdale came to Texas and settled in Frio County, presumably bringing his slaves with him. Ragsdale later left to fight in the Civil War and was killed in 1863 in Louisiana. A missing piece of the puzzle is what happened to Ragsdale's slaves after his death? Was the "Lucinda and child" mentioned in his father's will the same Lucinda Harris who was later part of the Nathaniel Lewis household? Circumstantial evidence seems to lend some credence to this hypothesis.

Daniel H. Ragsdale and Nathaniel Lewis had business dealings together as determined through research done at the Daughters of the Republic of Texas Library. However, since a probated will for Daniel H. Ragsdale has not been identified, it is not known what happened to his slaves. Documentation exists of Nathaniel Lewis buying and selling slaves, but a bill of sale for Lucinda and her child has not been discovered.

Until additional research is done to determine if Lucinda and her son came to the Lewis estate as slaves or laborers the question of the house at 305 E. Euclid being a former slave dwelling remains unanswered. The house is, however, definitively associated with African American Lucinda Harris and is protected as a local historic landmark.