



The Patton Plantation House as it looked in the 1890s

*"Iffen a bird fly up in de sky
it mus' come down sometime."*

THESE ARE THE WORDS OF SARAH FORD (PICTURED ON COVER). SHE WAS BORN INTO SLAVERY AND OWNED BY THE PATTONS ON THE PLANTATION WE NOW CALL VARNER-HOGG. SARAH FORD TELLS US MUCH ABOUT LIFE IN THE PLANTATION COMMUNITY THROUGH HER 1937 WORKS PROGRESS ADMINISTRATION SLAVE NARRATIVE, DISCUSSING THE SKILLS AND SPECIALIZATIONS OF ENSLAVED WORKERS AS WELL AS THE VIOLENCE THEY ENDURED ON THE PATTON PLACE.

SARAH FORD USES THE ICARUS MYTH TO DESCRIBE THE HEIGHTS THAT FELLOW SLAVE RACHEL ACHIEVED IN THE PATTON HOUSEHOLD. AS COLUMBUS PATTON'S MISTRESS SHE HAD A POWERFUL HAND IN RUNNING THE BIG HOUSE. HOWEVER, SARAH'S WORDS ALSO RECALL THAT EVENTUALLY THE PATTONS AND FAMILIES LIKE THEM WHO PROFITED FROM THE CULTURE OF SLAVERY WOULD ALSO SUFFER A DRAMATIC FALL.



"I tried to fix up the old place as George Washington would do if he had a bank roll."

Will Hogg, eldest son of
James Stephen & Sally Stinson Hogg

"When I remember the lovely old way it was, it distresses me to think that any alterations were ever made."

Ima Hogg



This picture, taken during the 1930s, shows the considerable renovations the Hogs undertook. Beneath the genteel façade still stand the walls of brick made by the hands of the Patton slaves.

FURTHER READING

Mark M. Carroll, *Homesteads Ungovernable: Families, Sex, Race and the Law in Frontier Texas, 1823-1860*. Austin, University of Texas Press, 2001.

Born in Slavery, Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers Project, 1936-1938. Available online at American Memory: <http://memory.loc.gov>

Varner-Hogg Plantation State Historic Site
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Interpretive Guide to:

VARNER-HOGG PLANTATION STATE HISTORIC SITE



THE SPELL OF THE CANE

Martin and Elizabeth Varner, the first Anglo settlers of the property, received their land grant from Mexico in 1824. The Varners along with their slaves began distilling rum from sugar cane, the first recorded liquor in Austin Colony. Having improved the land, they sold it to the Patton family ten years later.

The Pattons, who held between 40 and 60 slaves at any one time, grew wealthy on the cane produced by the soil and the labor of their enslaved. One of their slaves, Rachel Patton, lived as the wife of Columbus "Kit" Patton, the owner of the plantation. Rachel held a fragile but genuine autonomy, making expensive purchases in town, managing the household and defiantly sitting in white pews at the Methodist church.

But even Rachel could not fully escape the life she was born into. Sarah Ford described Rachel's fate: *"Marser Kit go crazy an' die and Marster Charles (Kit's brother) takes Rachel and puts her out in de field to work like de rest."*

SHARECROPPERS, CONVICTS AND COWBOYS

From 1869 to 1901, landowners across the American South struggled to return to the prosperity of the slave system in part by keeping labor costs low. They turned to convict leasing programs for the labor that slaves once performed. Some prisoners had been slaves. The system was abusive and in 1875 state investigators cited particular cruelty toward convicts at the Patton Place, counting 604 lashes by the scars on the back of one convict. With public outcry and the rising cost of convict



In the late 1800s, fence-building and cowboying absorbed more of the work as ranching became increasingly prominent on the plantation.

labor, sharecropping came to replace the leasing system. Nonetheless, these sharecroppers continued to live in the old slave cabins.

As their quest to replace slave labor faltered, landowners pursued crops that required less labor than sugar. Cotton reigned briefly at the Patton Place, but after the Texas Land Company purchased the land in 1876, they gradually converted to ranching. Again the majority of the laborers, now cowboys, were African American.

OIL!

In 1917 the Hogg family struck oil at Varner-Hogg in their pasture. Soon they were producing millions of barrels a year. William Ferguson, Hogg family attorney, remembered that in the 1920s, there was "a cluster of derricks so close together that you couldn't drive a wagon between them." The fortune the Hogg children made in oil financed the renovations of the plantation house as well as much of their philanthropy throughout the 20th century.



THE HOGG LEGACY



Former Texas Governor James Stephen Hogg purchased the old Patton Place in 1901. He saw in the property a country retreat for his family and, in keeping with his progressive politics, a place to play the gentleman farmer.

In 1958, his daughter Ima Hogg donated Varner-Hogg Plantation to the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department as a decorative arts museum. Ima Hogg was a major philanthropist and a renowned collector of American decorative arts. The oil boom she and her brothers struck on the former plantation allowed them to establish humanitarian organizations, cultural institutions and historic sites across Texas. By her death in 1975, she had gained prominence to match that of the revolutionary heroes she honored.

