

AN INFERNO OF ANXIETY: HOW NARRATIVES SURROUNDING THE NORTH TEXAS
FIRES OF 1860 IGNITED PARANOIA AND DISTRUST IN TEXAS PRIOR TO SECESSION

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ABSTRACT

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The purpose of this thesis was to examine the impact of the 1860 North Texas fires on Texas' decision to secede. This research project looks at the various factors of these events. Chapter 2 looks at the environment of North Texas and how the dry conditions combined with white settlement practices created conditions that helped the summer fires spread. This chapter also analyzes Donald E. Reynolds' prairie match, which claims that the North Texas fires of 1860 were caused by matches combusting from the summer heat. Chapter 3 looks at the animosity Texans had against Northerners. A specific focus of this section is Texans' assumption that all Northerners were abolitionists who wanted to harm Southerners and take away their slaves. Chapter 4 analyzes Texas coverage of the North Texas fires and how the narratives were manipulated to accuse abolitionists of setting fires across the region. The chapter also introduces how other Southern states influenced Texas to secede during the state convention of 1861.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Although Denton is one of the more well-known cities in North Texas, its history and role in the coming of the Civil War are very obscured. In 1860, a series of mysterious fires spread across Dallas and Denton. Although records do not show that these resulted in any deaths, the infernos destroyed many businesses and residences. The importance of these fires could be seen on the state level when prominent Dentonites attended the secession convention in Austin when the city was still in its infancy. In light of rampant anti-abolitionist paranoia in southern states, these fires fueled rumors that the progressive anti-slavery element had invaded North Texas.

In the broader societal landscape of the United States, the southern states became increasingly worried over abolitionists' political interference and slave insurrections between 1831 and 1861. These fears were particularly evident in South Carolina, which proceeded with secession as soon as Abraham Lincoln won the presidency in 1860. South Carolina then sent commissioners to convince other states to create a new confederate government with them. For three months in late 1860 and early 1861, southern states debated secession. Settlers founded Denton, made it the county seat in 1857, and soon joined this debate. Unfortunately, the region was already prone to wildfires, necessitating laws that prohibited the burning of wild vegetation between February and August. In 1860, a year after John Brown's raid on Harper's Ferry, the fires across Dallas and Denton would cause some locals and spectators as far as Houston to place blame on rebellious slaves and abolitionists. Denton's Union League and small Black population were easy targets to accuse, rather than the unusually hot temperatures of that summer and the easily combustible prairie matches that were popular at that time.

This thesis intends to answer the primary research question of how much of a role these fires played in sparking local paranoia over abolitionist and slave revolts. This project will discuss Southern secessionist rhetoric and examine how, in the context of the north Texas fires, it impacted local communities. The thesis of this research is that the political climate of the South caused paranoia regarding the North Texas wildfires, making the state more susceptible to arguments persuading them to secede from the Union.

The geographic scope of this project focuses on the North Texas area, using the greater Texan and Southern perspectives to provide context on the overwhelming panic regarding slave revolts. The Gainesville hangings of 1861 will further show Texans' paranoia over abolition and their violent reactions that led to the deaths of multiple white men. Editorial articles within Houston's *Weekly Telegraph*, show how pro-secession actors attempted to utilize the North Texan fires to fan their audiences' panic and influence opinions over secession. The project will also consider Denton's involvement in the secession hearings that took place in Austin in 1861. Although the primary scope of this thesis focuses on Texas, there will be points where it will be essential to briefly look at a broader history of the United States to show how the social and political climates of the country impacted North Texas.

This research will touch on history in wider America to provide context for how the South, specifically North Texas, became so paranoid over abolitionists and the violence they feared would befall them from Northern political actors. This fear manifested primarily through reactions to Nat Turner's Slave Rebellion, John Brown's raid on Harper's Ferry, Abraham Lincoln's nomination, and secession commissioners sent to sow seeds of dissent across the South. These factors, in addition to general mistrust between North and South, influenced the anti-abolitionist culture in North Texas.

The introduction of the thesis will introduce the research question and argument of the paper and provide the context for the tense social and political climate in the United States. The second chapter will explore North Texas' flammable environment and how that surfaced in the region's history and policies. This chapter will also introduce the prairie match theory many historians argue was the actual cause of the 1860 fires. Chapter 3 discusses the South's fear of abolition and how that manifested in distrust towards Northerners, anti-secessionists, and Black southerners. This chapter briefly widens its scope to show how this culture of mistrust bled into regional politics in Denton, Dallas, and the surrounding North Texan communities. This element will also introduce the secession commissioners sent to various Southern states to persuade them to leave the Union. The 4th chapter will go into how these fires, and the paranoia that stemmed from them, impacted the region and possibly influenced the state's willingness to secede. This analysis will continue the previous chapter's discussion regarding secession commissioners and bring this to the Texan perspective. This chapter will also discuss the conspiracy theories from outsiders that contributed to the paranoia over abolitionist action against the institution of slavery. Finally, the conclusion of the thesis will bring these actions to their natural endpoint with the presence of Dentonites at the secession convention and how paranoia was a more significant factor in Texas secession than any desire to form a new confederate government.

Many of the primary sources used are newspaper articles that cover the fires in North Texas as they were happening. Most of them are from the North Texas area and describe the locations of various fires, who owned the land, and the monetary value of the destroyed properties. Other newspapers used are from other Texas publications—mostly Houston's *Weekly Telegraph*—that theorize that the source of the fires were abolitionists and rebellious slaves. Another essential primary source for this thesis is the state of Texas's "A Declaration of the

Causes which Impel the State of Texas to Secede from the Federal Union,” which lists the reasons for the state’s secession from the Union. This source also implies the paranoid tone of the state regarding the North and abolitionists.

Ed. F. Bates’ *History and Reminiscences of Denton County* is an early secondary source essential to my research. In 1918, the Subscription Committee of the Old Settlers’ and Veterans’ Association of Denton County commissioned this book to supplement an earlier history that was destroyed in an 1875 fire.¹ *History and Reminiscences of Denton County* describes the early environment the settlers encountered, the policies they implemented to make North Texas livable, and Denton’s general early history. It is crucial to this research because it provides early Denton perspectives on both the North Texas fires and abolitionists.²

The North Texas fires of 1860 were not well-researched in either Texas or Civil War history until the mid-1970s when Donald E. Reynolds began publishing extensive research on Texas secession, abolitionist panic, and the North Texas fires. Many authors who wrote about the secession crisis in the 2000s referenced his research and briefly mentioned the North Texas fires. Because Reynolds was a foundational voice in this field, his prairie match theory has also influenced my research. However, this is not to say that this paper has nothing of substance to contribute. My research goes beyond examining vigilantism, abolitionist paranoia, and editorial influence. This project also touches on the environmental factors that allowed the fires to spread quickly and how the narratives around them fit into the broader national discourse.

In 1970, Reynolds published *Editors Make War: Southern Newspapers in the Secession Crisis*. In this book, he argues that newspapers greatly impacted Southern readers in the eleven

¹ Ed. F. Bates, *History and Reminiscences of Denton County* (Denton: Terrill Wheeler Printing, Inc, 1976), ix-x.

² Ibid, 93-97, 112, 348-349.

states that seceded from the Union.³ Reynolds' scope for this research project spanned from 1860 to 1861 throughout the South. He uses newspapers and letters to explain how editors used newspapers to push their political agendas. Reynolds briefly examines the North Texas fires in a chapter focused on Texas newspapers. He describes the spontaneous fires that ignited throughout multiple North Texas towns during the hot summer of 1860.⁴ Reynolds claims that the fires and anxieties over slave rebellion swept the North Texas region in a violent swirl of paranoia. Reynolds devotes considerable time to a discussion of the vigilante committees formed in North Texas communities shortly after the fires. Reynolds claims that newspaper editors encouraged anti-Northern hatred and incited vigilantes to kill possible abolitionist infiltrators across North Texas.⁵ Reynolds further examines these themes in his later, more well-known work, *Texas Terror: The Slave Insurrection Panic of 1860 and the Secession of the Lower South*.

Reynolds' *Texas Terror* was the first scholarly work to fully explore the atmosphere of paranoia that the North Texas fires created. Modern historians use this book to describe paranoia in the state on the eve of secession. In *Texas Terror*, Reynolds argues that the narratives surrounding the fires were an intentional plot to bring the South to a more susceptible mindset of secession. He further states that this event helped push Texas to secede. Each chapter analyzes elements that resulted from the North Texas fires and contributed to Texas' secession. Reynolds begins his narrative by discussing the early fires and *Dallas Herald* editor Charles R. Pryor's letters reporting on the events to other newspapers. The book then describes how the abolitionist

³ Donald E. Reynolds, *Editors Make War: Southern Newspapers in the Secession Crisis* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2006), 5-9.

⁴ Ibid, 97-99, 109-111.

⁵ Ibid, 102-116.

arsonist conspiracy developed and its effect on North Texas communities. The region's various towns formed vigilante committees to find and punish suspected abolitionists.⁶

A lesser-known predecessor to Reynolds in the historiography of the North Texas fires was William W. White's paper, "The Texas Slave Insurrection of 1860." He argues that the North Texas fires sparked fear and hatred of abolitionists across Texas.⁷ The paper states that Dallas residents formed committees to dispose of abolitionists and rebellious slaves.⁸ Like Reynolds, White follows newspaper coverage of the North Texas fires to display white Texans' anxieties of abolitionist violence. White seems to take the letters and newspaper articles covering the events somewhat at face value. He concludes the paper, claiming that the abolitionists were not quite as organized as editorials stated, and that it was a slave insurrection.⁹ White's paper did not mention the prairie match theory that Reynolds' work would become well known for later in the century. This paper gives insight into the conclusions that an earlier historian came to prior to Reynolds' *Editors Make War and Texas Terror*.

Gary W. Gallagher cited Reynolds' research on the North Texas fires and their impact on Texas secession in his book *The Confederate War: How Popular Will, Nationalism, and Military Strategy Could Not Stave Off Defeat*. This book's primary purpose was to address how the Confederate army lost the Civil War despite their advantages at the start of the conflict. While this book primarily analyzes the period after secession, Gallagher still takes time to address the atmosphere in the South that led to secession. Regarding Texas' secession, he notes that the fires, combined with a politically charged presidential election, aggravated the climate. This led to

⁶ Donald E. Reynolds, *Texas Terror: The Slave Insurrection Panic of 1860 and the Secession of the Lower South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2007), 45, 54-77.

⁷ William W. White, "The Texas Slave Insurrection of 1860," *The Southwestern Historical Quarterly* 52, no. 3 (1949): 259.

⁸ Ibid, 264-265.

⁹ Ibid, 285.

exaggerated reactions that left an aftermath of intense violence.¹⁰ However, Gallagher does not delve into the factors that caused the animosity between the North and South. Because of this, it is crucial to look at the larger history of the United States leading to the secession crisis. This gives insight into why Texas reacted the way that it did to the North Texas fires.

Eric Foner's *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men: The Ideology of the Republican Party Before the Civil War*, published in 1970, displays the cultural and economic differences between the North and South. Foner argues that abolitionists did not solely create the Republican party and its ideals. Many ideologies incompatible with the current political structures caused the North to unite under the Republican party.¹¹ Foner's book explores the perspectives that northerners held toward the South. The North did not want to see slave-based economies expand into new territories. This was primarily because this detracted from the North's political power and opportunities for Northern families to establish small farms in these new states.¹² Foner also details the process of the Republican party's formation and the various groups that formed it.¹³ This book is important to the history of the North Texas fires because it provides context for the North's perspective of events before the Civil War. Reynolds pushes back on the South's assumption that northerners were invading to destroy their communities. However, he does not explore why southerners' stereotypical views of northerners were incorrect, nor does he refute the widely held Southern idea that most northerners were ardent abolitionists. This is where Foner's book is beneficial. Foner provides context regarding Northern politics during this

¹⁰ Gary W. Gallagher, *The Confederate War: How Popular Will, Nationalism, and Military Strategy Could Not Stave Off Defeat* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 148-149.

¹¹ Eric Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men: The Ideology of the Republican Party Before the Civil War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 6-10.

¹² Ibid, 23-29, 40-69.

¹³ Ibid, 124-148.

period. However, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men* is one-sided in its analysis of the North, and it does not examine the long process of disunion leading to the Civil War.

Elizabeth R. Varon's *Disunion! The Coming of the Civil War 1789-1859* looks at the disconnection between the two major regions of the United States from the country's inception to John Brown's 1859 raid on Harper's Ferry. She argues that disunion was a longstanding issue that made the North and South inherently distrust each other.¹⁴ Throughout the book, Varon looks at various instances in United States politics where the North or South threatened disunion. This is especially evident in Varon's analysis of the raid on Harper's Ferry. She claims these events damaged the South's belief that they could peacefully coexist with the rest of the country.¹⁵ They already thought the North wanted to oppress them with the Republican nomination of Abraham Lincoln for president.¹⁶ Varon's contextualization of Brown's raid within the long history of disunion is vital to the history of the North Texas fires. It shows that there was already tension in the United States and explains why the South distrusted the rest of the country.

The sources used in this paper provide an image of pre-Civil War North Texas and describe the theories and perspectives held regarding the 1860 fires. Using the North Texas fires as a case study, this thesis argues that Southern paranoia was a significant factor in Texan secession from the Union. The state's decision to seceded was motivated by fear of Northern abolitionist violence and fanned by Southern elites with a vested interest in Southern nationalism. This thesis' most important contribution is to show the local impact of political paranoia in the months leading up to Texas' decision to leave the Union.

¹⁴ Elizabeth R. Varon, *Disunion! The Coming of the American Civil War, 1789-1859* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 14-15.

¹⁵ Ibid, 326-335.

¹⁶ Ibid, 315-326, 337-347.

CHAPTER II

A REGION ON FIRE

When white settlers first settled Texas, few could have predicted the events in North Texas during the summer of 1860. Fire was everywhere, laying a destructive path of rubble in the midst of a national panic over the extremely contentious election of 1860. The fires spreading through the region's towns added to the panic Texans felt, with many believing these fires were the work of sinister abolitionists or rebellious slaves. The answer to the question about the fires' cause, however, was far simpler. The region may have already been primed for the fires to occur without human interference. This chapter argues that the climate and ecology of the North Texas region, coupled with white settlement strategies, created an ideal combination to foster wildfires. The chapter discusses environmental factors and policies, specifically laws, which created an environment for the fires to spread. In the summer of 1860, Texans blamed neither the climate nor settlement laws for the fires. Instead, recent historians have argued that prairie matches were to blame.¹⁷ This chapter concludes with a discussion of these matches and their role in the fires.

Settlers in Texas in the first half of the nineteenth found the area to be beautiful, fertile, and an ideal place to create homes and communities. Early settlers to Texas described the area as a natural wonderland akin to a piece of art. William Kennedy, a diplomat for the British government, refers to the Northern Cross Timber region of Texas as "one of the natural curiosities of the country" due to its unique topography and its vast forests.¹⁸ He goes on to describe how well-suited the soil and humid climate were for producing an assortment of fruits

¹⁷ Reynolds, *Texas Terror*, 32,142, 202-203.

¹⁸ William Kennedy, *Texas: The Rise, Progress, and Prospects of the Republic of Texas, Vol. 1*, (London: R. Hastings, 1841), 101-103.

and nuts, stating that “Texas presents a fruitful field for the labors of a botanist.”¹⁹ In theory, such lush living conditions could have led to a fertile environment with good living conditions for these communities. However, due to the methods used to tend the lands, and other outside factors, the Texas environment would end up not reaching the expectations of its new residents.

Although North Texas had a proximity to the Red and Brazos rivers, settlers needed additional irrigation to maintain their farms and communities. Donald Worster’s *Rivers of Empire: Water, Aridity, and the Growth of the American West* goes into detail about how communities in the region shaped their environments to create optimal conditions for growing export crops. The primary method that these western settlers used to manipulate the environment was through irrigation ditches.²⁰ This can be seen in the earliest planning for the Peters Colony. Here, settlers primarily built their communities near rivers and creeks.²¹ The lack of reliable water supply throughout the West made it necessary to manipulate rivers and create other sources of water. Even then, the water was not necessarily dependable for all its uses. Creeks were known to make settlers sick when they drank from these waters.²²

It should be noted that the term desert, in this context, refers to an area with low amounts of rainfall, similar to the North Texas region at this time.²³ The common forms of irrigation in the nineteenth century West included simpler trenches in poorer areas and more sophisticated systems in the more populated regions. This method of building infrastructure was called an

¹⁹ Ibid, 98-108.

²⁰ Donald Worster, *Rivers of Empire: Water, Aridity, and the Growth of the American West* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 4-11.

²¹ Susan A. Lebo, C. Reid Ferring, and Kenneth Lynn Brown, “Environmental Setting,” in *Archaeology of Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries Lifeways in the Lewisville Lake Area, Denton County, Texas* (Denton: Institute of Applied Sciences University of North Texas, 1995), 4.

²² Bates, *History and Reminiscences*, 81-82.

²³ Worster, *Rivers of Empire*, 68-69; C.G. Forshey, “Climatology of Texas” in *The Texas Almanac for 1860 With Statistics, Historical and Biographical Sketches, &c, Relating to Texas*, ed. W. Richardson and D. Richardson (Galveston: W. & D. Richardson, 1860), 119-121.

Agrarian State Mode. These systems were developed to allow wealth to be centered in the centers of power.²⁴ The state of Texas had set aside land grants for companies in return for their cooperation in building railroads, canals, irrigation ditches, constructing shipbuilding facilities, and clearing river channels.²⁵ The manipulation of the water supply, through irrigation, was just one way that Texans manipulated their surroundings.

The increased level of deforestation, and accompanying settlement, impacted the ecosystem and contributed to the environmental factors that left it vulnerable to wildfires. North Texas included the Cross Timbers Forest along the Red River, which ran from Oklahoma south into Texas. The three most dominant trees of the area were the post oak, blackjack oak, and black hickory.²⁶ Robin W. Doughty states in “Settlement and Environmental Change in Texas, 1820-1900,” the increased arrival of settlers led to higher rates of tree felling and forest clearance.²⁷ The lumber felled during this period of time was commonly for the purpose of creating an area for houses and farms. This wood was usually only used as firewood and poles for minor support in domestic and public infrastructure.²⁸ Settlers did not use these woods to harvest lumber for commercial or domestic use.

The lumber from North Texas forests was not used for construction because the timber was seen as poor in quality. The unimpressive state of the wood was due to two qualities: the sandy, porous soil and the trees’ competition with woody herbs, weeds, and shrubbery. The poor

²⁴ Worster, *Rivers of Empire*, 37-38.

²⁵ Don Beckel, *Bridges to the Future: The Pre-Incorporation History of The Colony, Texas* (The Colony: The Friends of The Colony Public Library, 2009), 39.

²⁶ Laxman Karki and Stephen W. Hallgren, “Tree-Fall Gaps and Regeneration in Old Growth Cross Timbers Forests,” *Natural Areas Journal* 35, no. 4, (October 2015), 533-541.

²⁷ Robin W. Doughty, “Settlement and Environmental Change in Texas, 1820-1900,” *The Southwestern Historical Quarterly* 89, no. 4, (April 1986), 434-438.

²⁸ Edward Everett Dale, *The Cross Timbers: Memories of a North Texas Boyhood* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1966), 4-14; William Bollaert, “Observations of the Geography of Texas,” *The Journal of the Royal Geographical Society of London* 20, (1850), 126.

soil quality resulted in the trees growing to be shabby and thin from lack of nutrients.²⁹ Because of the Cross Timbers' lack of overtly useful resources in development, Native Americans, travelers, and settlers found a use for the forest outside of its material worth.

Those traveling through North Texas used the Cross Timbers as a landmark to break up the monotony of the plains. The woods thus helped travelers to navigate the region. Native Americans and white settlers used the Cross Timbers to help describe their travel and hunting routes to others. Similarly, European explorers relied on the forest, which they referred to as the Greenwich Meridian, to map out their exploration routes and, by extension, the wider area of the region they traveled through.³⁰ However, with the lumber of the Cross Timbers unusable by North Texan settlers, one questions what materials houses and major buildings were built out of, and from where this wood came.

Most lumber that settlers built their homes with was imported from mills in Wood and Upshur counties. These materials were \$2.00 per hundred feet of wood if someone were to purchase it at the mill and transport it themselves. The cost to have the lumber transported was \$1.00 per hundred feet and per quarter inch of thickness. The prices for hauled wood often ranged from \$4.00 - \$7.00 per hundred feet.³¹ Because the railroads had not yet reached North Texas, the transportation of these building materials was undertaken by ox trains, which were made up of a half dozen oxen and a wagon.³² However, the North Texas area, especially getting closer to the Cross Timbers Forest, was difficult to traverse due to the heavy, dense underbrush and foliage such as grapevines and briars.³³ To create the roads for the ox wagon trains, and post-

²⁹ E. J. Dyksterhuis, "The Vegetation of the Western Cross Timbers," *Ecological Monographs* 18, no. 3 (July 1948), 331-333.

³⁰ Ibid, 332-333; Kennedy, *Texas*, 101-103.

³¹ Bates, *History and Reminiscence*, 169, 295.

³² Ibid.

³³ Dyksterhuis, "The Vegetation," 332-333.

Civil War railroads, even more deforestation was required to deliver resources to and from the Northern region of the state. In addition to increased rates of deforestation, several non-native creatures were introduced to the ecosystem.

The settlers of Texas had major impacts on the animal ecosystem of the area. Settlers hunted the native species in massive amounts for either their flesh, their hides, or for pure sport.³⁴ Both settlers and the Native Americans of Texas viewed the plains between the Rio Grande and Red River as fertile hunting grounds filled with highly sought-after game. The animals most hunted in the Northern Cross Timbers area consisted of deer, antelope, partridges, turkey, wild boar, and buffalo. Native Americans would travel and hunt buffalo throughout the area that later became Denton County, with early settlers stating that before many farms or towns were constructed, the land was covered in trails following buffalo tracks.³⁵ It became a common occurrence for men living in the area to get together in the Fall and travel west to hunt buffalo and deer.³⁶

White settlers to North Texas attempted to dominate hunting in the region after the United States pushed Native Americans onto reservations. Native Americans confined to reservations could only go on hunting expeditions outside the reservation with the permission of federal agents. However, these attempts, like similar ones at other reservations across the country, did not successfully limit Native American hunting. Many snuck out to go hunting without the required permits and strayed from the areas that they were allowed to go.³⁷

³⁴ Doughty, "Settlement," 436-441.

³⁵ Bates, *History and Reminiscences*, 10-11.

³⁶ Ibid., 324, 379-380; Dyksterhuis, "The Vegetation," 336-337.

³⁷ Bates, *History and Reminiscences*, 10-11; Karl Jacoby, *Crimes Against Nature: Squatters, Poachers, Thieves, and the Hidden History of American Conservation* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2003), 1-2, 17-19; Mark David Spence, *Dispossessing the Wilderness: Indian Removal and the Making of the National Parks* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 45-54, 70-82, 96-104.

Although North Texas settlers attempted to control Native access to game, the number of animals hunted continued to have a major impact on the region's environment. By the late nineteenth century, the Cross Timbers region's game regeneration rate had declined below pre settlement rates.³⁸ Beyond hunting animals new settlers had a larger impact on the ecosystem through the domestication and overt control of animals and through agricultural commercialization.

Because North Texas soil, especially closer to the Cross Timbers Forests, was of such poor quality, settlers made the majority of their living with livestock.³⁹ Settlers would often come across wild horses in the North Texas plains and catch them for either their own or commercial use.⁴⁰ The cattle of the region also had started off as wild animals that roamed the region. However, as settlers flooded into the area, those animals were claimed, penned, and used to make a perpetual living for the newcomers.⁴¹ Both horses and cattle would be left to graze throughout the vast landscape of the plains. North Texans viewed their horses as another prized animal. This inherent value was due to the amount of work settlers could get out of them as well as the money that they could make from their sale.⁴² Horses and cattle were the main animals raised for commercial use in the region because of their versatile uses and the fact that they could be transported so quickly and easily through drives. Pigs and sheep existed on farms in much smaller numbers. Settlers raised pigs for meat and sheep for their wool.⁴³ Settlers used most privately owned land to graze their livestock.

³⁸ Dyksterhuis, "The Vegetation," 336-337.

³⁹ Ibid, 336-337.

⁴⁰ Bates, *History and Reminiscences*, 93.

⁴¹ Ibid, 83-83.

⁴² Ibid, 92-93, 167.

⁴³ Ibid, 167-169.

Similar to how trees were not able to thrive in the Northern region of Texas due to the soil quality, crops had an all too familiar struggle to survive. The majority of owned land was set aside for grazing with only native vegetation and grasses.⁴⁴ An example of the poor farming conditions is evident in one of the earliest groups of white settlers, a commune of French immigrants calling themselves the Icarians. They attempted to build a settlement in the Cross Timbers region between the Oliver and Denton creeks. During an especially rainy spring in 1849, the Icarians attempted to farm the land. However, because the soil was thick and in poor condition, the settlement yielded few vegetables that year.⁴⁵ The Icarians serve as an example of how difficult it was to make a living from crops. Most farms were ranches that included a small area used to cultivate food for private use. However, a few larger farms produced corn or cotton in the area. The soil in the area was not fully able to sustain the high nutritional demands of these cash crop farms, and the sandy soil lost more of its nutrients closer to the end of the century.⁴⁶

The settlers' actions and impacts on the land left North Texas vulnerable to frequent wildfires, ultimately leaving the flora and fauna in competition for the now heavily reduced resources.⁴⁷ Newcomers to the region brought new livestock that were allowed to graze without restriction on wild grasses and vegetation. Settlers cut down forests to make room for houses, roads, and farmland. The deforestation, manmade fires, and manipulation and control of the animal population caused the area to become dry and prone to massive wildfires.⁴⁸ The major transformations of the Texas environment raises the question of how local and state government reacted to these changes.

⁴⁴ Ibid; Dyksterhuis, "The Vegetation," 339.

⁴⁵ Bates, *History and Reminiscences*, 82-83.

⁴⁶ Dyksterhuis, "The Vegetation," 338-339.

⁴⁷ Ibid, 338.

⁴⁸ Bates, *History and Reminiscences*, 434-442; Del Weniger, *Explorers' Texas: The Lands and Waters* (Austin: Eakin Publications, 1984), 187-199.

When Stephen F. Austin was initially attracting individuals to settle in Texas, his contracts made no mention of how they were to colonize the lands the Mexican government granted them, nor were there guidelines for proper maintenance over the land. Rather, these contracts were more concerned with settlers' morals and religious character, requiring them to be Catholic families with excellent moral character. The only points that could potentially dictate land settlement stated the locations of granted lands and mandated that new towns must conform to Mexican laws.⁴⁹ As a result, settlers' use of land during the Mexican period was largely unregulated.

One of the earliest laws passed by the Texas Republic established a general land office that oversaw the surveyance and management of public lands.⁵⁰ The verbiage in the document does not go in depth about the responsibilities of the general land office aside from vague descriptions, but it shows a change in attitudes pertaining to the governmental involvement with the environment.

Notably, the "Act to Create the County of Denton" contained important passages relating to land use. For example, the legislators expected residents of the new county to give up lands to establish a townsite with county buildings. However, the act does not describe the environmental impact of the new town or county.⁵¹

⁴⁹ "Testimonio (Certified Copy) of Stephen F. Austin's Second Empresario Contract," Bullock Museum, Bullock Texas State History Museum, Accessed September 28, 2022, <https://www.thestoryoftexas.com/discover/artifacts/testimonio-certified-copy-of-stephen-f-austins-second-empresario-contract>; "Certified Copy of Stephen F. Austin's Second Empresario Contract," TSHA Online, Texas State Historical Association, Accessed September 28, 2022, <https://www.tshaonline.org/teacher-resources/resource/certified-copy-of-stephen-f-austins-second-empresario-contract>.

⁵⁰ An Act Supplementary to an Act "Act to Establish a General Land Office for the Republic of Texas, Passed 22nd of December 1836," June 12, 1837, 01_congress_1-90, Container 2-7L/1, Texas Secretary of State legislative bills and resolutions filed (General and Special Laws), Archives and Information Services Division, Texas State Library and Archives Commission, Austin, TX, https://tsl.access.preservica.com/uncategorized/IO_73a57bd2-2ca2-4b12-a52b-bf82a725a58f/.

⁵¹ Bates, *History and Reminiscences*, 13-14.

Local areas of Texas made regulations and legislation governing land use and environmental matters as it became necessary to do so. This could include building fences, burning old wood and foliage, clearing forests to create space for farmland, or building irrigation ditches. The North Texas region did not create public land or resources when the area was being surveyed and sectioned for settlers. Although there were no public buildings and plots of land aside from the courthouse, locals considered the grasslands free for anyone to take and use as they pleased. The lush grasses of the region were one of the region's defining charms. Grasslands were essential to the residents' livelihood, as they depended on them to feed their livestock. This public utility was so valuable to these settlers that it occasionally was a defining issue for candidates in the region.⁵²

North Texas' frequent wildfires burned through the region's prairies, spreading further in an inferno of destruction. Occasionally these were sparked by accident, caused by a wayward flame from a campfire or match not put out properly. However, the wildfires were occasionally foliage burns that got out of hand. It was common at that time to burn old foliage or brush to make space for new grass. These controlled burns would often get out of hand and spread across the region. The most dangerous fires, however, occurred during the summer. Because of the seasonably hot and dry climate, these fires got out of control faster and burned hotter.⁵³ The wildfires and controlled burns had lasting impacts on the environment beyond damages to property and livestock. The infernos, combined with the overwhelming grazing of livestock, reduced the presence of high and medium coarse grasses. This ecological gap made room for shorter grasses and weeds to take over the region.⁵⁴ In addition, many tree-fall gaps in the Cross

⁵² Ibid, 92-94.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Dyksterhuis, "The Vegetation," 333; Lebo, "Environmental Setting," 4.

Timbers forests resulted from settlers setting the area ablaze, which destroyed new saplings in the process.⁵⁵ Locals attempted to curb these infernos through political means.

On March 28, 1848, Denton County commissioners passed a law that prohibited residents from purposely setting fire to their property between July and February every year. The commissioners passed this legislation for two primary reasons. The first was to prevent the careless foliage burning in the summer months and decrease the number of wildfires that tore through the grasslands.⁵⁶ The second reason was an attempt to better the region's reputation for potential settlers. The rampant fires made newcomers uneasy, fearing that their property may be the next to be set ablaze.⁵⁷ County commissioners reasoned that by passing a law that only allowed fires during the cooler, more precipitous spring and winter months, these necessary fires could be better controlled, and outsiders would become less hesitant to settle in the area.

Settlers in Kansas were similarly eager to control fires that ravaged the plains. In her book, *Prairie Fire: A Great Plains History*, Julie Courtwright writes extensively about fires in the region. This book is an environmental survey of the Kansas Great Plains ranging from its paleo history, Native American residence, and the years of white settlement in the nineteenth century. The latter half of the book discusses American attempts to control the wildfires of the plains. However, unlike North Texans, Kansans attempted to suppress fires entirely. The region's residents saw this control over nature as a sign of civilization and conquest over the area.⁵⁸ It was a way of differentiation from the Native Nations, who used controlled burns to cultivate the plains and return nutrients to the soil.⁵⁹ Kansans did not embrace the controlled burn techniques

⁵⁵ Karki, "Tree-Fall Gaps," 533-541.

⁵⁶ Bates, *History and Reminiscences*, 92-94.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Julie Courtwright, *Prairie Fire: A Great Plains History* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2011), 66, 79-91.

⁵⁹ Ibid, 23-28, 30-42, 50-62.

until later in the nineteenth century.⁶⁰ Courtwright describes the grass fires of Kansas in a similar nature to the ones in North Texas. Most notable of the similarities was how the wind spread the fires faster to the point of futility in putting them out.⁶¹

After examining the ecological and legal backgrounds concerning Texas' environment, it is crucial to analyze the climate of North Texas in 1860. Had the area been cooler and less arid, the wildfires would not have started as easily or spontaneously. The ease with which the fires started and spread gave rise to claims that abolitionist arsonists were behind them.

In a letter between brothers Henry S. Moore and Charles B. Moore written in July of 1860, the latter describes his experience working at a mill in North Texas during the summer months. He writes that the summer temperature and winds had been the hottest that he had ever experienced. The letter aptly describes the heat's effects on the people and crops that endured it. Moore wrote that the heat was overwhelming enough to prevent him and the slaves on the property from attempting any work for several days. The heat was severe enough that the corn became dry. Moore also claimed that his skin began to blister and develop boils under his arms. He estimated that the temperatures he endured were around 100-110 degrees.⁶² It should be clarified that the extreme heat that Moore experienced was not necessarily a surprise to those who had access to almanacs.

The 1860 *Texas Farmers' Almanac* attempted to predict the state's weather for the year. The meteorology section written by C.G. Forshey gave almanac readers background regarding climate and, specifically, how heat impacts dry climates. The almanac reasons that extreme heat

⁶⁰ Ibid, 232-233.

⁶¹ Ibid, 9, 16-18, 40-59, 75-76, 100-125.

⁶² Henry S. Moore, "Letter from Henry S. Moore to Charles B. Moore, July 12, 1860," The Portal to Texas History, The Libraries of the University of North Texas, Accessed September 30, 2022, <https://texashistory.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metaph207616/m1/1/?q=Henry%20S.%20Moore%20to%20Charles%20B.%20Moore>; Reynolds, *Texas Terror*, 23.

stems from hot air that expands and spreads over colder areas. Forshey then explains when and how it rains, stating that large amounts of vapor in the air produces rain. However, for the purposes of explaining the dry temperatures, Forshey states that “if the stratum of air, penetrated by the rising column, be very dry, as it usually is in Western Texas... it may either drink up the condensed moisture, or cut off and dissipate the ascending column, and thus defeat the rain.”⁶³

Forshey’s following article in the almanac, “Climatology of Texas,” goes into further specifics about his predictions regarding how the wind will create certain weather conditions for that year. This section focuses on the south wind blowing from the Gulf of Mexico through the rest of Texas. Humidity and wind were the primary factors used to predict the weather for 1860. Forshey’s research states that the south wind, when traveling north, does not stray west often and rarely exceeds 2,000 feet. This chapter includes a chart documenting the amount of rain observed from multiple positions between the Mississippi and Rio Grande rivers organized by longitude. The closest point of observation to North Texas, Fort Belknap, had received twenty-two inches of rain over two years, averaging about eleven inches of rain a year.⁶⁴ The droughts and hot temperatures throughout the year did not blindside North Texan readers of the almanac. On the contrary, such little rain in the previous years with the established wind and heat patterns showed that the conditions were suitable for wildfires.

Texas’ environmental background and local awareness of the easy spread of wildfires provide context for how the fires of 1860 were not a rare occurrence in the region. Before 1860, the infernos blazed through the region and continued to spread long after the Civil War. In 1860, many North Texans feared that the series of wildfires resulted from an abolitionist plot to

⁶³ C.G. Forshey, “Outline of the Principles of Meteorology” in *The Texas Almanac for 1860 With Statistics, Historical and Biographical Sketches, &c., Relating to Texas* (Galveston: W. & D. Richardson, 1860), 116-118.

⁶⁴ Forshey, “Climatology of Texas,” 119-121.

terrorize the South. However, most historians have concluded that the spontaneous combustion of matches—at the time referred to as prairie matches—was most likely the true culprit. In his book *Texas Terror*, Donald E. Reynolds attributes the fires to prairie matches that spontaneously combusted in the dry, hot summer of 1860. For this theory, the temperature and drought during the year's summer made it possible for the sudden combustion of the matches and the rapid spread of wildfires. Reynolds uses a lot of anecdotal evidence, including the letter between the Moore brothers, to establish that Denton experienced exceptionally hot and dry weather during the summer of 1860.⁶⁵

While the fires were blazing through Dallas and Denton, multiple articles kept track of where the fires took place and the cost of damages. Clarksville's *The Standard* received a letter from the publisher of the *Dallas Herald* that described the destruction in North Texas. He writes about the destruction of the *Dallas Herald* building, the W.W. Peak & Bro. building, the Dallas and Crutchfield hotels, and the entire eastern side of the Dallas square. The estimated damages ranged from \$300,000 to \$400,000, with only \$10,000 in insurance.⁶⁶ This article was published during the early days of the fires before letters from Dallas told other newspapers that the fires were part of an abolitionist plot.⁶⁷ Without the added elements of paranoia, the article was factual and limited itself to listing the damaged properties and estimating the approximate costs of the damage.

Unlike many later articles and editorial letters, which attributed the fires to abolitionists, *The Standard* blamed the fires on matches. Mr. Dupree, whose store burned in the fire, believed the hot temperatures ignited matches and caused the fires. Two other store owners at Milford and

⁶⁵ Reynolds, *Texas Terror*, 27; Henry S. Moore, Letter.

⁶⁶ John W. Swindles, "Serious Calamity – Great Fire," *The Standard* (Clarksville, TX), July 14, 1860.

⁶⁷ Reynolds, *Texas Terror*, 30-32.

Honey Grove similarly believed that their fires had the same cause.⁶⁸ Similarly, *The Navarro Express* in Corsicana reports that the entire town square of Dallas had caught on fire resulting in \$400,000 of damage. Like *The Standard*, the editorial claims that the true culprit of the fires was the self-ignition of prairie matches which were further sabotaged by rats gnawing on them.⁶⁹ Columbus' *The Colorado Citizen* reports on two later fires that occurred late in July. They report that two small fires in Jefferson started within the drug store owned by the Campbell family and in the Jefferson Hotel. *The Colorado Citizen* further states that faulty matches on the premises caused the fires.⁷⁰ While many believed the fires were the result of a terroristic plot by abolitionists and slaves, those who lived through the events blamed prairie matches.

Ed. F. Bates' *History and Reminiscences of Denton County* briefly examines the fires of 1860. He states that the residents of North Texas originally blamed the fires on the Union League, a group of Northern sympathizers.⁷¹ This was a conclusion that multiple communities in North Texas jumped to as these fires were happening. However, most people later reasoned that the summer heat ignited prairie matches, causing wildfires across North Texan towns. A unique insight that Bates lets modern audiences in on is what prairie matches were made of — compressed paper coated in a sulfur preparation.⁷² However, even more valuable is an interview with a Denton resident who lived through the events.

The sheriff at the time, C.A. Williams, is one of the primary oral histories Bates uses in his research on the fires of 1860. Williams states that on July 8, there was a major religious meeting that resulted in the closure of many downtown stores. Williams claims that the fire

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ "Dallas Burned," *The Navarro Express* (Corsicana, TX), July 14, 1860.

⁷⁰ "Jefferson," *The Colorado Citizen* (Columbus, TX), July 28, 1860.

⁷¹ Bates, *History and Reminiscences*, 69.

⁷² Ibid.

started around one in the afternoon in what was, in the 1910s, the Greenlee corner. He estimates that the damages of the three buildings destroyed, including the destroyed products, cost approximately \$80,000. Denton residents assumed that Northern sympathizers and abolitionists had set the fires. The county charged them with arson until events in the town of Lebanon in Collin County had proved their innocence. Around the same time as the events in Denton, eyewitnesses saw smoke rise from a building with no people close by. Upon further investigation, they found that the fire started in the back of the store where the prairie matches were stored. At the same time, fires with similar causes occurred in Pilot Point, Waxahachie, and Dallas.⁷³

There is a disconnect between Bates and historians that discuss the North Texas fires of 1860 regarding the type of matches used. Both Bates' narrative, as well as Williams' recollection of the events, state that the matches were composed of compressed paper with sulfur coated tips.⁷⁴ However, in modern historians' statements regarding the events of the North Texas fires, they often claim that the culprit of the event was phosphorus tipped matches.⁷⁵ This may have been a case of modern historians missing the claims of the Bates book, especially since many newspapers and letters state neither the composition of the matches nor how manufacturers constructed them. In these primary accounts, they are either referred to as matches or prairie matches.⁷⁶ Because Reynolds is one of the few historians who has extensively researched the North Texas fires of 1860, other modern historians who discuss those events reference him. Looking through his footnotes and epilogue, Reynolds claims that the responsible incendiary

⁷³ Ibid, 348-349; Reynolds, *Texas Terror*, 205-206.

⁷⁴ Bates, *History and Reminiscences*, 69, 348-349.

⁷⁵ Reynolds, *Texas Terror*, 32, 200; Rupert N. Richardson, *The Frontier of Northwest Texas, 1846 to 1876: Advance and Defense by the Pioneer Settlers of the Cross Timers and Plains* (Glendale: The Arthur H. Clark Co., 1963), 223.

⁷⁶ "Dallas Burned;" "Jefferson;" Swindles, "Serious Calamity."

element had phosphorus coated tips based on a history of matches written by M.F. Crass, Jr. in 1941.

Crass' "A History of the Match Industry" examines how matches have evolved since the seventeenth century. Reynolds attributes the cause of the 1860 fires to phosphorus matches because of Crass's description of the chemical composition of nineteenth century matches.⁷⁷ Crass argues that phosphorus matches became commonly used in the United States after manufacturers received multiple patents to utilize a substance called pyro-phosphorus or phyrophorus to create matches between 1860-1870.⁷⁸

Wilhelm Homberg discovered phyrophorus around 1680. Robert Hare later refined this chemical combination in 1831. However, in experiments and individuals' experiences, the material proved to be extremely flammable – even with the most minor agitation.⁷⁹ Crass states that the flammability of phosphorus matches was well-known enough that some railroads refused to allow the matches on board.⁸⁰ By the mid-1860s, it was widely recognized that phosphorus matches were too sensitive to heat and were the cause of many explosions and accidents. Multiple countries in Europe banned the use of phosphorus matches between the 1870s and the early twentieth century.⁸¹

Reynolds' phosphorous matches were identical to Bates and Williams' sulfur matches. The different names most likely came from an emphasis on either sulfur or phosphorous, both of

⁷⁷ Reynolds, *Texas Terror*, 202-206.

⁷⁸ M.F. Crass, Jr., "A History of the Match Industry, part 1," *Journal of Chemical Education* 18, no. 3 (March 1941), 117.

⁷⁹ Ibid, 117-119; William B. Jensen, "Whatever Happened to Homberg's Pyrophorus?" *Bulletin for the History of Chemistry* 3 (Spring, 1989), 21-23.

⁸⁰ Crass, "Match Industry, part 1," 118.

⁸¹ M.F. Crass, Jr., "A History of the Match Industry, part 3," *Journal of Chemical Education* 18, no. 6 (June 1941), 278; M.F. Crass, Jr., "A History of the Match Industry, part 9," *Journal of Chemical Education* 18, no. 9 (September 1941), 428-429.

which were ingredients in the matches. Crass states that the *phosphorus* matches commonly found in the United States during the mid-nineteenth century were composed of “a compound of phosphorus, chlorate of potash, *sulphuret of antimony*, and gum arable or glue.”⁸² By making a connection between phosphorus and sulfur matches, this project solved a minor riddle in the historiography. Importantly, regardless of their name, sulfur-phosphate prairie matches were highly flammable.

By examining the climate, ecology, as well as settlers’ ranching and farming practices, historians can see how the region was the perfect environment for spontaneous fires to quickly spread through the dry vegetation and wooden settlements. Denton County officials also had enough experience with wildfires across the region that they passed anti-fire legislation to curb burning during the warmest and driest months of the year. However, an exceedingly scorching summer was still able to reign in terror over North Texas in 1860. Denton, and a few of the surrounding small towns, logically concluded that prairie matches caused the 1860 wildfires. However, this did not stop the editor of the *Dallas Herald*, Charles R. Pryor, and other Southern editors from spreading panic regarding the sudden summer events.

⁸² Crass, “Match Industry, part 3,” 277.

CHAPTER III

FANNING THE FLAMES OF DISTRUST

Leading up to and during the North Texas fires of 1860, tensions were remarkably high. The communities in the region were paranoid that their political leaders, neighbors, or recent newcomers would betray them. This chapter examines this paranoia and argues that the region's fear of abolition, both locally and across the Union, primed them to take desperate measures to uphold Southern rights. Southerners' reactions to Sam Houston's pro-Union rhetoric, and Northerners they suspected of abolition, will lay the groundwork to examine how North Texans were already apprehensive towards Northerners or anyone supportive of Unionism. This chapter will then discuss John Brown's raid on Harper's Ferry to show why Southerners feared abolition and the physical threats it could pose. Finally, this chapter examines the vigilance committees Southerners formed in response to the fires across North Texas. Ultimately, this chapter demonstrates the region's descent into chaos, blaming the fires on the presumably violent abolitionists.

Political propaganda stoked hatred of abolition and used this to build up Southerners' disdain towards the Republican Party. The Texas state elections between 1858 and 1860 contributed to the anxieties held by most Texans.⁸³ *The Dallas Herald*, a major newspaper for the city, belittled or mocked the Republican Party in the summer months that year. The paper claimed in a June 1860 article that Northern abolitionists had uncharitable and horrendous opinions of Southerners and were guaranteed to become "the most intolerant Republican partisans."⁸⁴ An article in the same issue quotes Sam Houston as saying, "the Democracy has no

⁸³ Donald E. Reynolds, *Texas Terror*, 11-13.

⁸⁴ *Dallas Herald* (Dallas, TX), June 6, 1860.

use for the refuse of the Know Nothing and Black Republican conventions.”⁸⁵ Throughout this period, there were multiple political articles disparaging Republicans or politicians who were not unwaveringly supportive of Southern rights.

Although many Southerners claimed that the aims of the “Black Republicans” were to destroy slavery and the region’s way of life, many Republicans disagreed with this sentiment. Many of the more moderate and conservative members of the Northern party claimed that they only wanted to prevent the political power of slave states from expanding further than they already had. Others in the Republican Party wanted to limit the spread of slavery so that free labor was the primary economic system in the United States. Other Republicans ignored slavery and saw the preservation of the Union as a more significant issue than trying to change Southerners’ cultural and economic practices.⁸⁶ Eric Foner’s *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men* presents the North, Republicans, and abolition as nuanced systems that did not cleanly fit within a single ideology.⁸⁷

Southerners distrusted abolitionist and Republican politics to the point that their disdain stained itself into the culture. The South even saw their politicians as traitors if they failed to meet certain levels of hatred towards their Northern neighbors. This is one of the reasons that some published letters and articles criticized Sam Houston. Houston was in favor of slavery and, to a certain degree, Southern rights. However, Houston was fiercely loyal to the United States.⁸⁸

⁸⁵ “Unparalleled Impudence or Ignorance,” *Dallas Herald* (Dallas, TX), June 6, 1860.

⁸⁶ Reynolds, *Texas Terror*, 44-58, 150-164, 186-220; James Oakes. *The Radical and the Republican: Frederick Douglass, Abraham Lincoln, and the Triumph of Antislavery Politics*, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2007), 22-28, 80-81.

⁸⁷ Foner, *Free Soil*, x-xiv, xvi-xxxix, 2-3, 5-10, 11-36, 38-39, 45, 47-48, 51-58, 66-69, 73-102, 103-106, 109-114, 116, 118-147, 150-158, 160, 162-185, 186-216, 219-220, 222-225, 226-244, 247-256, 258-260, 261-300, 301-304, 306-312, 314, 316-317,

⁸⁸ Michael Phillips, “White Violence, Hegemony, and Slave Rebellion in Dallas, Texas, before the Civil War,” *East Texas Historical Journal* 37, no. 2 (1999), 26.

Although Houston made strong statements in favor of Southern rights, not all Texans believed him. During the 1858 gubernatorial election, some of his constituents felt Houston would not live up to the people's expectations. In an anonymous letter that the *Dallas Herald* later republished, a man speaks on how displeased he was with Houston's beliefs and performance as the former president of the Republic of Texas and senator for the state. The writer says that he attended the barbeque Houston hosted during his 1858 gubernatorial campaign. The author claims that Houston, during a toast, supported Southern confederacy and their rights. However, when the author later asked why Houston did not publicly proclaim his support of Southern rights during his speech at the event, he states "the North has got the power, and the South can't help herself... the only chance is to lay down, and keep quiet, and the North may yet put off for some time the destined castigation. They want our cotton and maybe, if we behave ourselves, after all, they will let us keep our n*****s." The author further claims that "Old Sam" went against Texan values and that he lost their vote.⁸⁹ The author of this anonymous letter further states that he was already biased against Houston and used his quiet or private support of Southern rights to dismiss him as either a liar or a flippant politician. Houston's detractors in the 1858 gubernatorial election accused him of, at best, betraying his Southern constituents or, at worst, supporting Northern abolitionists. The anonymous letter writer, and other Southern sympathizers, questioned Houston's loyalty to the region and worked to defeat his election as governor.

One article republished from the *San Antonio Texan* went further than implying Houston was a Union sympathizer, accusing him of being a firm believer in Northern politics. The article entitled, "Will Houston Protect the Frontier" questions Houston's abilities to protect frontier

⁸⁹ "The Sam Houston Barbecue," *Dallas Herald* (Dallas, TX), September 1, 1858.

communities from Native American raiders. The article further states that, based on his record in Congress, Houston did not have the interests of his white constituents at heart. The author further questions the candidate's loyalties to Southern values, implying that he had abolitionist beliefs. The author states that Houston voted with abolitionists and free-soilers against the best interests of the frontier.⁹⁰

Despite this, Texans still found Houston preferable to his opponent, Hardin Richard Runnels. More than likely, Houston's election was because of his war hero status from the Battle of San Jacinto and Runnel's poor performance as governor. Many believed Runnels failed to protect Texans from Native American raids.⁹¹ Despite his election, many Texans thought Houston's pro-Union sympathies were cowardly or a sign that his allegiance to the South was weak. Although Texans may not have agreed with Houston's opposition to secession, they found him a strong supporter of slavery. However, North Texans were not so lenient to individuals with less concrete commitments to slavery and Southern culture.

For the most part, North Texans aimed their animosity toward white abolitionists. Southerners equated all Northerners with anti-slavery activism, seeing their Northern neighbors as a hegemonic threat looming above them. This focus on white enemies, as opposed to seeing enslaved people themselves as a direct threat, is most likely because the region had a small slave population.⁹² Randolph Campbell's *An Empire for Slavery*, includes a chart of Texas counties and the number of enslaved people claimed on tax records from 1837 through 1864. Of the counties considered a part of North Texas, the average enslaved population by 1864 was approximately 1,246. Navarro County had the largest population of slaves, with about 3,913 by

⁹⁰ "Will Houston Protect the Frontier?" *Dallas Herald* (Dallas, TX), July 20, 1859.

⁹¹ James L. Haley, *Sam Houston* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2002), 362-365.

⁹² Reynolds, *Texas Terror*, 7-8.

1864. Dallas and Denton counties, where most of the fires occurred in 1860, had 2,482 and 588 slaves a year before the end of the Civil War. However, according to Campbell's numbers, they had doubled from what they were in 1860. The book documented Dallas' slave population at 923 in 1860, and Denton's was 256.⁹³

Ed Bates' 1976 history of Denton put the number of slaves in the county at far less than Campbell suggests. He similarly states that Denton County had a significantly smaller slave population.⁹⁴ Bates claims that "there was not exceeding eight or ten n***o slaves in the county" around 1861. Compared to Campbell's numbers, Bates may have exaggerated his claims, or those he interviewed misremembered the accurate numbers. According to Campbell, there was a period when Denton County's enslaved population was less than ten between 1846 and 1850. However, by 1861 Campbell notes that there were at least 256 enslaved people.⁹⁵

The smaller enslaved population helps explain why most North Texans directed their ire at Northerners and Union sympathizers, especially prior to the fires in 1860. With fewer enslaved people in the region, it was significantly more difficult for them to band together and start a rebellion. Black resistance against Southerners in North Texas usually consisted of individual

⁹³ Randolph Campbell, *An Empire for Slavery: The Peculiar Institution in Texas, 1821-1864* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1989), 265-266. Although the second appendix lists the enslaved populations of Texas in the counties present between 1837 and 1864, I only pulled the statistics from those that are considered a part of North Texas as the region exists today. These counties are Collin, Cooke, Dallas, Denton, Ellis, Erath, Hunt, Johnson, Kaufman, Navarro, Palo Pinto, Parker, Tarrant, and Wise counties. I was somewhat unsure if I should have included Navarro County in this analysis of population statistics in North Texas for three reasons. The first is because its enslaved population is an outlier with close to 4,000 slaves. The highest population behind Navarro County was Dallas with 2,482. All other counties seldom exceed 1,000 recorded slaves. Secondly, in Texas geography, Navarro County sits considerably lower than the rest of North Texas, sitting just below Ellis County. My third and final reason why I was unsure of the relevance of including Navarro County here was because, as far as I am aware, that county did not have records of there being any fires during the Texas Troubles in 1860. I decided to include the outlier, however, because the *Navarro Express* reported on the Texas Terror fires multiple times in July. Furthermore, I felt that others could interpret the omission of Navarro County's slave population as an attempt to confirm my statement that North Texas had a considerably lower slave population than the rest of the state. I still stand by my assertion that the region had fewer slaves than others, but I felt that it would have been academically dishonest to omit the outlier.

⁹⁴ Bates, *History and Reminiscences*, 97.

⁹⁵ Ibid; Campbell, *An Empire for Slavery*, 265-266.

acts, often associated with perceived abolitionist manipulation. Slaves' confessions to these crimes were also usually coerced by their masters, the legal authorities, or by community leaders.⁹⁶

Abolition and slave rebellions sparked fear into the imaginations of North Texans. This caused them to blame Northerners or their slaves for attempted violence or arson⁹⁷. One example occurred three days after the initial fire in Dallas. On July 12, 1860, Crill Miller's farm caught on fire a few miles west of Dallas. This event resulted in a few buildings on the property being destroyed. Miller questioned his slave Bruce as to how the fire was started. Bruce claimed that several white men sent him out to get a bucket of water. When the young man returned, the barn and house were already ablaze. After Miller threatened to harm Bruce, and after he reminded him that lying resulted in eternal damnation, Bruce confessed to arson and blamed another enslaved person of paying him to do it. The *Dallas Morning News* interviewed a neighbor who witnessed the events as they happened. The man claimed that Miller had already assumed that it was one of his slaves that set the fire before starting any interrogation. Miller threatened to kill Bruce and told him that lying would send his soul to Hell. Bruce, under duress, confessed to the arson and gave Miller the names of other slaves who were allegedly involved.⁹⁸

Another incident associated with a potential slave rebellion was the attempted poisoning of white men on election day 1860. Several slaves were accused of attempting to murder several white Texans. Newspaper editors published a narrative that accused them of poisoning their

⁹⁶ "Excitement in Collin County! Tampering With Slaves!," *Dallas Herald* (Dallas, TX), February 29, 1860; *Galveston News* (Galveston, TX), June 28, 1860; Reynolds, *Editors Make War*, 98-100; Reynolds, *Texas Terror*, 7-8; William D. Carrigan, *The Making of a Lynching Culture: Violence and Vigilantism in Central Texas, 1836-1916* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2006), 48-49.

⁹⁷ Carrigan, *Lynching Culture* 48-49; Phillips, "White Violence," 25, 27-34.

⁹⁸ Reynolds, *Texas Terror*, 34-35; "First Account of an Old Settler in Dallas," *Dallas Morning News*, (Dallas, TX), July 10, 1892.

masters' breakfasts and contaminating the community's water supply. According to some reports, some slave owners found poison among their slaves' belongings. White authorities forced slaves to admit to their crimes and implicate others as being a part of the massive plot.

Reynolds recounts another event of extracting mass confessions in Tennessee Colony, Texas.⁹⁹ Vigilantes kidnapped several black people and beat them until they confessed information regarding malicious plots and the individuals involved. While some of the kidnapped victims told the vigilantes the supposed plans of a few white abolitionists, many more gave forced confessions that slaves were plotting to harm white society.¹⁰⁰ Slaves were an easy scapegoat to blame for suspected insurrections. However, Southerners presented Northern abolitionists as a more insidious threat. The region persecuted them with increasing vigor.

North Texans had a history of singling out and expelling Northerners from their towns. Expressing anti-Southern sentiments, by word or action, was enough to warrant expulsion from many North Texas towns. For example, Solomon McKinney, a preacher from Kentucky, was initially invited to come to Dallas to deliver a sermon on the relationship between masters and their slaves.¹⁰¹ While it is unknown what McKinney preached in the sermon, his views were divisive enough to spur a community meeting to discuss the sermon's content and the preacher's fate. In the meeting notes published in the *Dallas Herald*, McKinney was officially expelled from the city for preaching to slaves. The community justified the expulsion of a potentially

⁹⁹ Tennessee Colony was a town founded in 1847 where the northwestern part of Anderson County is currently. Immigrants from Tennessee and Alabama made up most of the settlement's founding families. Although Tennessee Colony was in East Texas, this event is still relevant to this research because it contributed to white Southerners' fear of abolition and how they often forced slaves to give confessions under duress. For more information on the Tennessee Colony, see: Pauline Buck Hohes, *A Centennial History of Anderson County, Texas* (San Antonio: Naylor, 1936).

¹⁰⁰ Reynolds, *Texas Terror*, 42, 78-80.

¹⁰¹ P. Thomas Stanford, *The Tragedy of the Negro in America: A Condensed History of the Enslavement, Sufferings, Emancipation, Present Condition and Progress of the Negro Race in the United States of America* (Boston: Charles A. Waston, Printer, 1897), 87-89.

dangerous preacher by arguing that they were protecting lives and property. At the community meeting, the people warned him to “seek a field where the sentiments of the people are more congenial to his own, and not again attempt to preach in this community.” McKinney and fellow preacher William Blount attempted to leave, but were chased down by the community, jailed, and beaten.¹⁰² Blount claimed that he never preached abolitionist rhetoric and that he held firm views aligned with the pro-slavery Democratic Party.¹⁰³ However, Blount and McKinney were just visitors to the area. Northern immigrants to the region faced further scrutiny for possible abolitionist loyalties.

George D. Drake and his family immigrated to Collin County from Illinois some time prior to 1860. His friend B. Warren Stone described Drake as “a gentleman, a good and public spirited citizen, an honest industrious thrifty farmer... and in every sense worthy of the high regard and consideration of Southern gentlemen, or Northern gentlemen.”¹⁰⁴ On February 23, 1860, Drake was accused of attempting to steal and free an unnamed enslaved woman who belonged to Col. Collier.¹⁰⁵ An article in the *Dallas Herald*, written by J.S. Ray, states that white authorities caught the woman during her third attempt to burn down the Collier family’s house. Under duress, she confessed her guilt and implicated Drake. The woman claimed that Drake had often tried to give her free papers, which she burned. Ray further says that Drake pressured the woman to burn down Col. Collier’s house with the family inside. In return, she was to receive

¹⁰² Reynolds, *Texas Terror*, 17.

¹⁰³ Stanford, *The Tragedy of the Negro in America*, 87-89; J.M. Crocket and T.C. Hawpe, “Public Meeting in Dallas,” *Dallas Herald* (Dallas, TX), August 17, 1859; Campbell, *An Empire for Slavery*, 223; *Daily Crescent* (New Orleans, LA), August 7, 1860. A year after McKinney and Blount were exiled from Texas, an enslaved preacher named Sam Smith was executed. The *Daily Crescent* notes that it was Smith who allegedly indoctrinated McKinney and Blount in abolitionist ideology. No other cause is given for Smith’s execution, other than a generally “bad reputation.” More than likely he was executed for preaching abolitionist rhetoric.

¹⁰⁴ B. Warren Stone, “Collin County Excitement,” *Dallas Herald* (Dallas, TX), April 18, 1860.

¹⁰⁵ J.S. Ray, “The Excitement in Collin County,” *Dallas Herald* (Dallas, TX), March 7, 1860; “Excitement in Collin County,” Reynolds, *Texas Terror*, 23.

aid in escaping to freedom. The authorities found Drake preparing his hayloft to hide the woman. He was held in jail on a \$3,000 bond.¹⁰⁶ In his article for the *Dallas Herald*, J.S. Ray frames Drake as a malicious abolitionist who wanted to steal Collier's property and murder his family.

In March, the *Dallas Herald* once again turned its gaze on Drake, calling for his punishment to the fullest extent of the law along with any of his sympathizers. The article, again authored by J.S. Ray, reiterates the events from February with some new information. In this telling of Drake's alleged crimes, it was Drake who attempted to set Collier's house on fire the previous two times before hiring the enslaved woman for the third arson attempt. She was to burn down her master's house and then run away to Drake's residence under the cover of night. Drake then planned to transfer her to a free state. Ray reveals that, after the enslaved woman's confession, Collier and his neighbors devised a plan to trap Drake for his offenses. The woman was sent to Drake's residence with a bundle so it looked like she had run away. Collier and his neighbors arrested Drake after he hid the woman in his oats stable. The article then describes the events of his trial, stating that Mrs. Drake spoke as a witness for her husband. The article claims that Mrs. Drake told the court that an enslaved woman came to her husband asking for a free pass. Claiming that they were at dinner when the woman arrived, Mrs. Drake stated that her husband invited the potential runaway to have supper with them. The article does not describe what Drake said during the trial, only that his words and actions proved the slave's confession.¹⁰⁷ For J.S. Ray, the *Dallas Herald*, and many North Texans, abolitionists were loathsome. Indeed, the article describes Drake and his sympathizers as "tainted ones."¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁶ "Excitement in Collin County."

¹⁰⁷ Ray, "The Excitement in Collin County."

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

Drake's friend, B. Warren Stone, a fellow immigrant from the North, took great offense at the *Dallas Herald's* characterization of his close friend. Shortly after Drake's case came before the district court, Stone involved himself in the public discussion.¹⁰⁹ Responding to Ray's March article, he expresses deep admiration for Drake, validated from the years knowing him and his family. He concedes that the enslaved woman laid down in the oats stable, that Drake told her she was in no danger, and that he was arrested. However, Stone argues that Drake hid the slave with the purpose of informing her master (Collier). Presumably, he wanted to keep her safe until Collier could retrieve her. Stone took offense at Ray's characterization of Drake and his fellow Northerners as "tainted ones." Indeed, Stone did not want the paper's readers to assume that Drake, or any of his supporters, were abolitionists. Stone is clear that neither he nor Drake were abolitionists. Stone claims that he owned several slaves and was in favor of the African slave trade.¹¹⁰

In May, Ray once again involved himself in the discussion surrounding Drake's alleged slave theft, but this time he focused his ire on Stone. The author defends himself against the accusations of unfair bias arguing that he included all the evidence submitted to court—including witness testimony from both the prosecution and defense. Furthermore, Ray accuses Stone of being an abolitionist despite the latter's claim of being in favor of the African slave trade. Ray argues that "if Mr. Stone is not an abolitionist, why does he labor so hard to convince the public that he is not. There has been no accusations made against him." He continues his line of reasoning, stating that he does "not know that Mr. Stone is an abolitionist, but [he knows] that he professes to be a sympathizer with G.D. Drake who is an abolitionist and a n***o thief." In regard to Stone's claim of it being impossible for him to be an abolitionist because of his status

¹⁰⁹ *Dallas Herald* (Dallas, TX), April 4, 1860.

¹¹⁰ Ibid; Stone, "Collin County Excitement."

as a slave owner, Ray argues that he knew many abolitionists in Kentucky who owned slaves. These abolitionist slave owners' purpose was to break the bondage of other slaves and assist them in their escape.¹¹¹

On May 16, 1860, the *Dallas Herald* republished Oscar Dalton's inflammatory statements concerning a copy of an article discussing the Drake incident that was originally published in his newspaper, the *Crockett Printer*. The Houston editor did not believe Drake and Stone's arguments of innocence. The most interesting aspect of the editor's statement was an accusation against the two counties involved. He states, "abolitionism must be strong in Collin and Dallas when the people will permit such a defense of such acts, even by a paid lawyer." The *Crocket Printer's* statement was short but intended to spread distrust of Dallas and Collin counties. This accusation was so offensive to the region's reputation that *Dallas Herald* editor, Charles Pryor, attached a response underneath the *Printer's* article when it was reprinted in the *Herald*. The *Herald* stated that the Collin and Dallas counties were more devoid of abolitionists than any other locale in the state. The *Dallas Herald* acknowledged Dalton's underhanded attack, stating that they "regret to see such a statement in a respectable paper in a neighboring county, as such interferences are apt to mislead, and well calculated to throw distrust upon our people."¹¹²

In late March 1860, a *Dallas Herald* article states that the Dallas court system finally presented the Drake case to the grand jury. However, because the judicial term ended before the jury came to a decision, the judge postponed the case until the beginning of the next judicial term. On June 13th, the *Dallas Herald* published a small article stating that a C.N. Drake was to

¹¹¹ Ibid; J.S. Ray, "For the *Dallas Herald*," *Dallas Herald* (Dallas, TX), May 30, 1860.

¹¹² "Rather Suspicious," *Dallas Herald* (Dallas, TX), May 16, 1860.

leave Collin County and Texas entirely for “the safety and peace of this community.”¹¹³ It is unclear whether C.N. Drake was the same person as accused slave thief George Drake; however, as there is no further reference to the Drake case in Collin County court records, the two were likely the same person and the error was merely a typographical slip at the newspaper. It is unknown if Drake, like McKinney and Blount, was chased and beaten after his departure. Drake’s treatment, like McKinney and Blount, shows a trend in the North Texas legal system to exile known or suspected abolitionists.

McKinney’s exile combined with the Drake case the following year, displays the level of outrage and panic felt by the North Texan community over the speculation that abolitionists were lurking amongst them. The public saw McKinney’s preaching as a threat to the superior status of white slave owners, despite Blount’s claims that the content of his character and sermons were devoid of abolitionist rhetoric.¹¹⁴ However, both preachers were visitors to Texas and could have been dismissed as Northerners who were easily chased away. The Drake case elevated North Texan anxieties over slave revolts. Drake, a resident of the region, allegedly enticed an enslaved woman to run away from her master. To make matters worse, he allegedly convinced Collier’s slave to set fire to her master’s home in an attempt to burn the family alive.¹¹⁵ The Drake case was an incredibly well-known instance of abolition turned violent in North Texas.

North Texan fear of abolitionism increased greatly after John Brown’s raid on Harper’s Ferry in October 1859. In 1859, the *Dallas Herald* republished an article following up on the events of Harper’s Ferry. The article notes that the farmhouse Brown temporarily resided in held letters from several Northerners, many of which discussed funding to support Brown. In the

¹¹³ *Dallas Herald* (Dallas, TX), March 28, 1860; *Dallas Herald* (Dallas, TX), April 4, 1860; “Resolved,” *Dallas Herald* (Dallas, TX), June 13, 1860.

¹¹⁴ Stanford, *The Tragedy of the Negro in America*, 87-89.

¹¹⁵ Ray, “The Excitement in Collin County.”

same article, the *Dallas Herald* reports that Garret Smith, an abolitionist politician, wrote a letter to Brown promising that he would do what he could to help him continue his work to liberate slaves.¹¹⁶

North Texan reporting on the raid at Harper's Ferry articulated the well-worn conspiracy theory that most Northerners were abolitionists out to harm the South and destroy the institution of slavery.¹¹⁷ The articles that the *Dallas Herald* chose to repurpose for their own publication claim that Brown had massive support from people throughout the North.¹¹⁸ Edward Ayers' book *In the Presence of Mine Enemies* goes further in examining the impact that Brown had on the South, specifically on Augusta County, Virginia. Many in the community argued that Republicans needed to take responsibility for the raid on Harper's Ferry, as their cultural environment created abolitionists like Brown and enabled them to act on violence. They reasoned that Brown's raid was just the beginning of a larger scale attack on the South. Their logic was that if one "madman" was able to rally a decent number of slaves under him to enact violence in the name of abolition, then more abolitionists could potentially rally all slaves in the South to destroy the region. Augusta County created standing militias to protect their community from violence perpetrated by abolitionist instigators or rebellious slaves.¹¹⁹

Similarly, Elizabeth R. Varon's *Disunion!* also looks at how the raid on Harper's Ferry impacted the South's perception of the North and abolition. The book analyzes the various disagreements between the Northern and Southern United States and how this created political

¹¹⁶ "Still Later From Harper's Ferry," *Dallas Herald* (Dallas, TX), November 2, 1859.

¹¹⁷ Phillips, "White Violence," 25.

¹¹⁸ Ibid; "Riot and Insurrection at Harper's Ferry, VA," *Dallas Herald* (Dallas, TX), November 2, 1859; "Military Commission of the Insurgents," *Dallas Herald* (Dallas, TX), November 2, 1859.

¹¹⁹ Edward L. Ayers, *In the Presence of Mine Enemies: The Civil War in the Heart of America, 1859-1863* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2004), 11-16, 34-38, 40-53; Oakes, *The Radical and the Republican*, 105-106.

and cultural dissonance. She argues that Southerners continuously wielded the threat of disunion to strong-arm the rest of the country to enact policies that directly benefitted them. However, Varon claims that Southern states did not seriously consider secession until Brown's raid. The raid on Harper's Ferry had a major effect on the Southern political climate. Moderate Democrats descended into zealous anti-Northern sentiments seemingly overnight. Like Ayers, Varon states that Southerners blamed Republicans for Brown's actions and for further perpetuating disunion between the two regions. However, the author states that most Democrats, and to a lesser degree Republicans, specifically blamed Massachusetts senator Charles Sumner. The book claims that they accused Sumner of supporting policies that emboldened abolitionists to take direct action against the South. *Disunion!* pinpoints the raid on Harper's Ferry as the point of no return regarding secession.¹²⁰

In January 1860, the *Dallas Herald* published an article paraphrasing Governor Houston's opinions regarding slavery, emancipation, and abolition. One of his talking points was a Texas law passed in 1858.¹²¹ This legislation allowed slaveholders to purchase 160 acres of public land at a federally set minimum price for every three slaves a person owned. The legislatures' original intention was to allow settlers to purchase land before spectators could inflate its price. Texas lawmakers allowed slaveholders to purchase an amount of land dependent on their slave population to increase the legislation's chances of being passed.¹²² In the article, Houston recommended repealing the law, to no longer give slaveholders this privilege. The *Dallas Herald* accused the governor of rousing tensions between the state's slave and non-slave

¹²⁰ Varon, *Disunion!*, 5-15, 121-124, 151-152, 326-335, 337-347.

¹²¹ "Governor's Message," *Dallas Herald* (Dallas, TX), January 25, 1860.

¹²² Dale Baum, *The Shattering of Texas Unionism: Politics in the Lone Star State During the Civil War Era* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1998), 28-29.

holding populations.¹²³ The paper took exceptional issue with Houston's characterization of abolitionists as a misguided group of fanatics. To this, the *Dallas Herald* responded stating that to call abolitionists misguided was in "striking contrast with the facts of the last three months, - to say nothing of John Brown and his invasion of Virginia... Are there any who are not misguided, - and who can dare draw the distinction?" To those at the *Dallas Herald* it was not enough to state that only some Northern abolitionists were misguided. They believed that everyone in the North believed in abolition to some degree, and therefore, were all capable of violence. Their statement "who can dare draw the distinction" questioned Houston's ability to claim that any Northerner was not misguided.¹²⁴

On February 8, 1860, the *Dallas Herald* published an article that aimed to disparage the reputation of one "misguided" abolitionist, Maria F. Childs. The author claims that Childs had more sympathy and affection for Brown than she did for her daughter.¹²⁵ The article begins with a discussion around how much Childs admired the abolitionist. For example, the article claims that she had written to Governor Wise of Virginia requesting to visit Brown in prison. The author then claims that she attempted to "covet the office of nurse to Brown." Most of the article contrasts Childs with her daughter and the family she was staying with as a teacher. The author

¹²³ The Preemption Law of 1858 was later repealed in 1860. See: Baum, *Texas Unionism*.

¹²⁴ "Governor's Message."

¹²⁵ At first, I thought that the Maria F. Childs in this article could have been Lydia Maria (Francis) Child, who was a Garrisonian abolitionist. The reason why I originally came to this conclusion was because Child also wrote to Governor Wise of Virginia and the "F" initial may have stood for the abolitionist's maiden name, Francis. However, Child lived in New York and later Massachusetts, whereas the article specifically stated that Childs lived in the South. In addition to this, I could not find anything that stated that Child had a daughter with a spinal affliction that worked for a Col. Lee in Mississippi. Because of this, there are two possibilities regarding Childs. It is possible that Childs, her admiration of abolition, and her daughter were not significant enough to have been researched or written about after their lives. She may have been someone whose sympathy for John Brown was notable enough for the *Dallas Herald* to use her as an antithesis of a good Southern woman. However, it is also possible that the author wanted to publish propaganda that made Childs and any other woman who sympathized with Brown seem cold hearted. The use of "Maria F. Childs" could have been a typo, and the daughter who suffered from a spinal affliction could have been a work of fiction. The *Dallas Herald* article does not specify where Childs lived. They only stated that her unnamed daughter was working for and living the Lee family in Mississippi.

explains how Childs' daughter was no longer able to work due to a spinal affliction and wrote to her mother asking for her to take care of her. The author claims that the daughter wrote to Childs multiple times without any replies. The daughter's employer, Col. Lee, continued to provide lodging and care for her as she waited for a response. The article states multiple times that the Lee family was planning on moving from their home but had to postpone their journey for Childs' daughter since she was unable to move due to her spinal affliction.¹²⁶

The article's primary purpose was to compare the abolitionist sympathizer Childs with the "noble hearted southerner" Lee. The author takes great care to note how the daughter was unable to move for long periods of time. Even though Lee and his family were going to move away from their old house, in the sale they stipulated that the daughter was to be provided with a furnished room to reside in, a personal servant, and payment of \$200-300. On the other hand, the paper calls Childs a horrible mother for not immediately providing shelter to her sick daughter. Moreover, they further question her moral character because "John Brown, the murderer, and the traitor could arouse all the humane impulses of the bumcombe Mrs. Childs." The article concludes that no one in the community should have any sympathy for Childs.¹²⁷

North Texas was wary of outsiders who posed a threat to their Southern way of life. North Texas society feared the possible existence of abolitionists amongst their communities. They felt that needed protection from Northern incendiaries that intended to do harm. Since Brown's raid on Harper's Ferry, the South had become more on edge and desperate for a way to ensure that no one could infiltrate their property the way Brown and his posse had invaded federal property.¹²⁸ Although vigilantes were already a standard method of maintaining social

¹²⁶ "Mrs. Maria F. Childs Has No Sympathy for Her Own Child," *Dallas Herald* (Dallas, TX), February 8, 1860.

¹²⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁸ Reynolds, *Texas Terror*, 6-7, 18-22, 37.

order outside of legal boundaries, it was at this time that North Texas communities actively adopted vigilance committees.

There were multiple instances prior to the North Texan fires of 1860 when the public proposed the formation of vigilance committees. Texans introduced the concept of a vigilance committee as a way to protect their communities from Comanche raids and horse theft. However, after the raid on Harper's Ferry, the idea quickly mutated to also include hunting down abolitionists. There were multiple instances leading to the summer of 1860 where newspaper articles suggested or overtly called for the formation of vigilance committees.¹²⁹ One such instance was after Cooke County expelled E.C. Palmer for suspected abolitionist sentiment. Harrison County, although not near the region in which Palmer lived, reached out to multiple Texan counties to find a solution to the dangers abolitionists posed to their communities. The eastern county suggested vigilance committees to protect themselves.¹³⁰

The prior fears of Northern abolitionists, slave violence, and considerations of vigilante law all cumulated together to create the perfect storm of fear, paranoia, and violence during the summer of 1860. Chapter 2 addressed how North Texas was ecologically primed for fires to easily burn out of control. It has also been established that pyro-phosphorus matches, more well known as prairie matches, combined with the abnormally hot summer to cause the fires. This chapter details the long-standing North Texas fear of an impending abolitionist threat. During the summer of 1860, many communities in Texas, especially those near Dallas, blamed abolitionists for directly setting the fires or for influencing slaves to do it for them.¹³¹ Newspaper

¹²⁹ "Threatened Invasion of the Northern Frontier of Texas by the Comanches," *Dallas Herald* (Dallas, TX), August 7, 1858; "Horse Stealing on the Frontier," *Dallas Herald* (Dallas, TX), September 15, 1858; Bates, *History and Reminiscences*, 96; *Dallas Herald* (Dallas, TX), September 15, 1858; "Excitement in Collin County!," *Dallas Herald* (Dallas, TX), February 8, 1860; White, "Texas Slave Insurrection," 269-285.

¹³⁰ "Texas Items," *Dallas Herald* (Dallas, TX), December 14, 1859.

¹³¹ Carrigan, *Lynching Culture*, 77.

editors fanned the flames with hyperbolic articles blaming the fires on Northerners, disloyal Southerners, and rebellious slaves.¹³² One article near the end of July claimed that white incendiaries were responsible for the fires set across Dallas and Denton Counties, but that the fires in Waxahachie were set by a group of disgruntled Black people.¹³³

As the rumors of abolition-supporting arsonists spiraled out of hand, considerations towards sanctioned vigilante justice came to fruition. Around the end of July, many North Texan communities started to adopt vigilance committees to protect themselves from further attacks from perceived terrorists. In an article describing the state of affairs in Texas, the *Daily Crescent* states that many respectable men from Dallas were eager to join these committees for the safety of their communities.¹³⁴ These groups of vigilantes often did not need very much evidence to punish any potential abolitionist threats. In *Editors Make War*, Donald Reynolds claims that most of these committees were made up of hundreds of men who would watch for anyone, even remotely suspicious, day or night. The vigilance committees were especially interested in rooting out secret abolitionists like Drake and McKinney. Reynolds states that Texans heavily scrutinized anyone who had a Northern accent. If the suspects were recent immigrants to the region, the vigilance committees watched the newcomers until they proved themselves to be reliable members of the community.¹³⁵ Reynolds further discusses how difficult it was to travel

¹³² Charles R. Pryor, "Incendiary Fires," *The San Antonio Ledger and Texan* (San Antonio, TX), July 28, 1860; John. W. Swindles, "Further From Dallas—Another Fire in Dallas County—Serious Fire in Denton," *The Weekly Telegraph* (Houston, TX), July 24, 1860; "The Northern Texas Fires," *The Weekly Telegraph* (Houston, TX), July 24, 1860; "Destructive Fire in Denton," *The Weekly Telegraph* (Houston, TX), July 24, 1860; "The Insurrection Excitement—Public Meetings. ect.," *The Weekly Telegraph* (Houston, TX), July 31, 1860; "Later From North Texas," *The Weekly Telegraph* (Houston, TX), July 31, 1860.

¹³³ "Later From North Texas."

¹³⁴ "Texas Intelligence," *Daily Crescent* (New Orleans, LA), August 7, 1860.

¹³⁵ Reynolds, *Editors Make War*, 102-103; Reynolds, *Texas Terror*, 54-77; Donald E. Reynolds, "Vigilante Law during the Texas Slave Panic of 1860," *Locus: An Historical Journal of Regional Perspectives* 2, no. 2 (spring 1990), 173; "To Our Friends South," *The Navarro Express* (Corsicana, TX), August 25, 1860; "Letter From Cherokee," *The Southern Intelligencer* (Austin, TX), October 10, 1860.

through Texas during that fiery summer. Some communities had their vigilance committees patrol the area and check the credentials of people passing through.¹³⁶ It did not matter if the person passing through was from the North or South, everyone was a potential abolitionist. It was only after long periods of observation and questioning that an immigrant or visitor was no longer considered a suspect.

Vigilance committees did not hesitate to punish rebellious slaves and suspected abolitionists. They often intimidated frightened slaves to give false testimony implicating others.¹³⁷ After all, many Texans believed that without abolitionist tampering their slaves were docile and obedient by nature. However, North Texan slaveholders' paternalistic attitudes towards their slaves did not exempt them from the fullest extent of vigilante justice.¹³⁸

A letter sent from Fort Worth to *The Southern Intelligencer* stated that "we will hang every man who does not live above suspicion. Necessity now reverses the rule, for it is better for us to hang ninety-nine innocent (suspicious) men than to let one guilty one pass, for the guilty one endangers the peace of society... Such is the universal sentiment of this community, and soon must and will be of the entire South."¹³⁹ Another paper discussing Texan affairs reported that "several men have been hung from the neck to black jacks and pecan trees, on account of supposed unsoundness on the N****r question, and suspicion of being concerned in burning down houses, etc., of late at Dallas and elsewhere."¹⁴⁰ These statements display the mindset of the North Texan vigilante supporter. North Texas vigilantes believed that a widespread abolitionist conspiracy united Northerners in the single-minded goal of destroying slavery. In

¹³⁶ Reynolds, *Editors Make War*, 104-106.

¹³⁷ Reynolds, *Texas Terror*, 56-57, 91.

¹³⁸ Ibid; "The Herald and Late Improvements," *Dallas Herald* (Dallas, TX), October 10, 1860; Reynolds, *Texas Terror*, 54-77.

¹³⁹ "Incendiarism," *The Southern Intelligencer* (Austin, TX), October 10, 1860; Reynolds, *Editors Make War*, 103.

¹⁴⁰ "Texas Intelligence."

Stone's public defense of Drake, he argues that Northern origins "tainted" those who moved South.¹⁴¹ In a matter of speaking, Stone was right. North Texas was so afraid of another John Brown, that being from the North or sympathizing with Northerners were crimes punishable by hanging.

Southerners were extremely paranoid when it came to Northerners and their potential influence on the region's slaves. North Texans were already distrustful of politicians, with perceived Northern sympathies, like Sam Houston. With that mindset, why would they trust any Northern immigrant to be loyal to the region? Southerners' paranoia surrounding abolition increased tenfold after John Brown's raid on Harper's Ferry. From this point on Southerners did not just fear that abolitionists would steal their slaves, but that abolitionists wished them physical harm. Once the North Texan fires of 1860 blazed across the region, Northerners and slaves were the ideal scapegoat.

¹⁴¹ Stone, "Collin County Excitement."

CHAPTER IV

BURNING BRIDGES

A Paper Submitted For Publication in

Ibid. A Student History Journal

Leading up to 1861, many throughout the United States heavily discussed disunion and secession. Southerners felt that the North was politically attacking them, especially in instances of Kansas and California's ratification for statehood. However, indignant frustration turned into fear and rage after John Brown's raid on Harper's Ferry. What was once an anxiety over the federal government limiting the geographic expansion of slavery, turned into panic over a potential abolitionist-led slaughter of the entire South. Prior to 1860, many Texans were either neutral or against secession. However, this chapter will argue that newspaper editors successfully primed the public to become more accepting of secession, using the North Texas fires as a catalyst. This chapter will examine published opinions on disunion prior to the North Texas fires. These articles demonstrate that, before the fires, Texans were indecisive regarding both secession and the politicians who advocated for it. Following that, this chapter will examine the North Texas fires and how editorial narratives changed over the summer of 1860. The chapter argues that newspaper editors used the fires to manipulate the public into fearing the North. Newspaper editors framed the North Texas fires as the Texan Harper's Ferry. The chapter will then show how the public became frenzied over possible abolitionist attacks. Many Texan communities formed vigilance committees and organized hangings to keep themselves safe from abolitionist incendiaries. Finally, this chapter will discuss the Secession Convention of Texas. The chapter argues that the North Texas fires created a political environment conducive for Texas' choice to secede from the Union in 1861.

The North Texas fires, and other instances like the raid on Harper's Ferry, made Texans more open to the idea of secession. Prior to the fires, some newspapers published articles stating that they wanted to avoid secession at all costs.¹⁴² They stated that if any state were to secede, the United States would crumble to a ruin of its former glory.¹⁴³ Other publications predicted that secession would lead to a catastrophic war, resulting in the destruction of both sides. After all, Texans saw the bloodshed and destruction that resulted from the Mexican Civil War.¹⁴⁴ These viewpoints were in line with the 1860 presidential candidate John C. Breckinridge, the candidate many of these publications supported.¹⁴⁵ Wary of secession, these editors nevertheless blamed the North for creating a political environment that caused the South to consider leaving the United States. Through their rhetoric, they claimed that they did not want the United States to dissolve.¹⁴⁶ The violent frenzy that consumed Texas during the summer of 1860 turned many North Texan editors into secessionists. Other states had already threatened secession before, thus the concept remained in the peoples' minds.¹⁴⁷

¹⁴² Reynolds, *Texas Terror*, 118, 168.

¹⁴³ "Our Modern Civilization," *The Weekly Telegraph* (Houston, TX), January 20, 1858; "For Our Hobby Men," *The Southern Intelligencer* (Austin, TX), April 7, 1858; "Political Self-Deceit," *Civilian and Gazette* (Galveston, TX), April 20, 1858; "Douglas' Southern Supporters," *Galveston Weekly News* (Galveston, TX), October 26, 1858; "When I Can Read My Title Clear," *The Southern Intelligencer* (Austin, TX), October 27, 1858; "Washington Correspondent," *The Weekly Telegraph* (Houston, TX), December 29, 1858.

¹⁴⁴ *The Southern Intelligencer* (Austin, TX), January 5, 1858; *State Gazette* (Austin, TX), February 20, 1858; "Message of Gov. H.R. Runnells in Relation to Kansas Affairs," *The Texas Republican* (Marshall, TX), February 20, 1858; "The State Convention and a Southern Convention," *Civilian and Gazette* (Galveston, TX), February 23, 1858; "The Debate," *The Colorado Citizen* (Columbus, TX), February 27, 1858; Gawkins Roaming, "Ed. Telegraph," *The Weekly Telegraph* (Houston, TX), April 7, 1858; "A Terrible Civil War," *The Southern Intelligencer* (Austin, TX), April 28, 1858; "Letter to Latimer," *Dallas Herald* (Dallas, TX), July 17, 1858.

¹⁴⁵ Michael F. Holt, *The Election of 1860: "A Campaign Fraught with Consequences"* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2017); Varon, *Disunion!*, 339; Larry Jay Gage, "The Texas Road to Secession and War: John Marshall and the Texas State Gazette 1860-1861," *The Southwestern Historical Quarterly* 62, no. 2 (1958), 193-195, 197-210.

¹⁴⁶ "Guy M. Bryan," *The Southern Intelligencer* (Austin, TX), March 24, 1858; "Washington D.C., March 8, 1858," *The Weekly Telegraph* (Houston, TX), March 24, 1858; Edmund Ruffin, "Consequences of Abolition Agitation," *State Gazette* (Austin, TX), March 27, 1858; *Galveston Weekly News* (Galveston, TX), August 31, 1858.

¹⁴⁷ Gallagher, *The Confederate War*, 100-104; Manisha Sinha, *The Slave's Cause: A History of Abolition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016), 77, 227, 473-491; Varon, *Disunion!*, 57-58, 223-231, 324-340.

Texan newspaper editors were major contributors in spreading conspiracy theories about the fires. In *Editors Make War: Southern Newspapers in the Secession Crisis*, Donald Reynolds argues that the editor of the *Dallas Herald*, Charles R. Pryor, was responsible for most of the narratives regarding the North Texas fires.¹⁴⁸ The basis for Reynolds' claim lies with the many letters Pryor wrote to other Texas newspapers. These letters describe the events and damage regarding the 1860 fires across North Texas. Pryor aimed to scare Texans into thinking Northern abolitionists were an immediate threat and to convince them that secession was the only way to save themselves. Pryor's letters to newspapers across the state claim that the North Texas fires were evidence of a "regular invasion, and a real war."¹⁴⁹

Pryor depended on these letters to spread his narrative of the North Texas fires because the offices of his newspaper, the *Dallas Herald*, had been destroyed in the fires. The destruction forced the newspaper to cease production until the office could be repaired. However, this did not stop the editor from telling people about the North Texas fires and framing his conspiracy theories as fact.

Pryor wrote to editors who shared his political beliefs. Most of them were conservative, strong proponents of Southern rights, and promoters of Breckinridge's 1860 presidential campaign. Breckinridge was one of two Southern Democratic presidential nominees.¹⁵⁰ Ardent

¹⁴⁸ Charles R. Pryor was the editor of the *Dallas Herald* from 1859 to 1861. He was born in Virginia in 1832 and moved to Dallas, Texas in 1850. During this decade, he was a contributor to the newspaper while James W. Latimer was the editor. After Latimer's death in 1859, the editor position was given to Pryor. Although he had a major part in the Texas Troubles, his role as editor was short lived. He later stepped down in 1861. For more information on Pryor, see Reynolds' *Editors Make War*; Reynolds, *Texas Terror*; Reynolds, "Vigilante Law."

¹⁴⁹ Reynolds' *Editors Make War*, 97-117.

¹⁵⁰ The four presidential nominees for the election of 1860 were Abraham Lincoln who represented the Republicans, John Breckinridge who specifically represented Southern Democrats, John Bell who represented the Constitutional Unionists, and Stephen Douglas who was the official Democrat nominee. Although both the North and South each had two nominees competing in their political sphere, the North was more aligned with the Republican Party. However, the Democratic Party benefitted from solid support from Southern voters. Because of this, they were able to draw a decent percent of Northern voters to their cause. The major voter division caused both Democratic nominees to lose the 1860 election. It should be noted that prior to this election there had only been five

supporters of Southern rights nominated the Kentucky politician to combat the more moderate Democratic nominee, Stephen Douglas. Breckinridge was a firm supporter of slavery and Southern rights. The South hoped that his election would force the North to acquiesce to Southern demands about the western expansion of slavery. Breckinridge supporters felt that if they could force the rest of the United States to submit to pro-slavery policies as they had with the Annexation of Texas, the Fugitive Slave Act, or the Dread-Scott decision, then it would stave off talk of disunion.¹⁵¹

Pryor was especially close to Major John Marshall, owner and editor of Austin's *The State Gazette*. Marshall bought the newspaper in January 1854 and assumed the editorial position that July. Under his ownership, *The State Gazette* saw major growth in its popularity and subscription numbers. Marshall used his new platform to promote political platforms he agreed with. These policies included the continuation of slavery, states rights, and, later, secession. Marshall used *The State Gazette* to hinder Sam Houston's 1858 gubernatorial campaign. He feared that Houston was not a strong defender of Southern rights. Marshall also used his platform to promote Breckinridge's presidential campaign. He hoped that a president with the South's interests as the basis of his platform would save the Union and force Northern abolitionists into submission.¹⁵²

Pryor also sent details of the North Texas fires to Edward H. Cushings, owner and editor of Houston's *The Weekly Telegraph*. Although he integrated himself into Houston society,

presidents not belonging to the Democratic-Republican Party or the later Democratic Party. For more information on this, see Holt, *The Election of 1860*; Varon, *Disunion!*

¹⁵¹ William Archibald Dunning, *Essays on the Civil War and Reconstruction and Related Topics*, (London: MacMillan & Co., 1898), 1, 8-9; Anna Irene Sandbo, "Beginnings of the Secession Movement in Texas," *The Southwestern Historical Quarterly* 18, no. 1 (1914), 42-43, 48-49; Holt, *The Election of 1860*, 2-8, 13-29, 36-49, 57, 212; Varon, *Disunion!*, 12, 153-159, 212-219, 222-229, 235-237, 241-242, 264, 295-306, 317, 325, 339, 391.

¹⁵² Gage, "Secession and War," 193-195, 197-210.

Cushings was born in Vermont and obtained a degree from Dartmouth College. In October 1856, the Northerner bought *The Weekly Telegraph* and took on the position of its editor. Although he was raised in the North, Cushings was sympathetic to the South and appreciated its institutions. These beliefs evolved into outright Southern nationalism during his ownership of *The Weekly Telegraph*. Cushings' son, Edward B. Cushings, described his father's life in his article, "Edward Hopkins Cushing: An Appreciation by His Son." The younger Cushings claimed that upon purchasing the paper, his father practically became its essence. In an 1857 editorial note celebrating the first anniversary of his ownership of *The Weekly Telegraph* Cushings claimed that the paper would be used to promote many platforms that he felt were important.¹⁵³

Prior to the Civil War, the Houston newspaper used its platform to promote Southern self-sufficiency. Cushings' Northern upbringing brought with it a different, Whiggish, perspective than the standard Southern views on infrastructure, education, and economics.¹⁵⁴ However, he was staunchly pro-slavery to the point that he called for the reopening of the international slave trade. Like his views on Southern economics and infrastructure, his views on

¹⁵³ Emory M. Thomas, "Rebel Nationalism: E. H. Cushing and the Confederate Experience," *The Southwestern Historical Quarterly* 73, no. 3 (1970), 343-345; E.B. Cushing, "Edward Hopkins Cushing: An Appreciation by His Son," *The Southwestern Historical Quarterly* 25, no. 4 (1922), 261-264.

¹⁵⁴ Because Edward H. Cushings was raised in the North, he had some Whiggish beliefs combined with the experience living within their economics and infrastructure. One of the things he advocated for was to move away from the South's cotton monoculture. Cushings also believed that Texas needed to improve its education system so that the state's youth could become productive members of society, thus improving the South's infrastructure. Another major change that Cushings pushed for was for the development of a railroad system throughout Texas for the mass transportation of goods. The editor's belief in a strong railroad system was enthusiastic enough that he suggested that the state fund the construction of the system. Although these beliefs were more progressive than most of the South's political leanings, there was a more nationalistic purpose behind them. The reason why he advocated for these changes in Southern culture was he wished for the South to be able to gain complete independence from the Union. Cushings believed that although the South was able to profit from its current economic systems, it would never be able to survive without Northern support. In addition to this, the South did not have the infrastructure to sustain itself if it were to secede. Because Cushings was ardently in favor of Southern independence and rights, he used his platform to push for these changes. However, looking at the South's infrastructure and economic systems, it seems that this advocacy was largely unsuccessful. For more information on Edward H. Cushings see Thomas, "Rebel Nationalism" and Donald E. Reynolds, "Cushing, Edward Hopkins," TSHA, Texas State Historical Association, last modified September 9, 2020, <https://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/entries/cushing-edward-hopkins>.

slavery were similarly tinged with Whiggish ideas. Cushings viewed slavery as the economic backbone of the South and an inherent part of the region's culture. Like Pryor, Cushings used his platform to sway others to the cause of secession. Much of this propaganda described the North, and the Union in general, as an oppressive force under which Texas could not thrive. As threats of Civil War loomed, *The Weekly Telegraph* began to include rumors of abolitionist plots.

Pryor's early accounts of the North Texas fires were more truthful than his later, highly propagandized, descriptions.¹⁵⁵ He sent the first known, published letter detailing the events of the Dallas fire to John Marshall, the editor of the *Austin State Gazette*.¹⁵⁶ In the editor's foreword to the letter, Marshall expresses his sympathies to Pryor and the residents of Dallas. He also refrained from inserting his own opinions or any conspiracy theories about the fires. Pryor's brief letter was dated July 9. He claims that every hotel, business, law office, and physicians' office was destroyed in the fire. Only the Dallas courthouse and the southeast corner of the square were left standing. Pryor states that the fire originated "two doors above the *Herald* office," and because of this, he was only able to save their accounting books and subscription list. At this point in Pryor's narrative, there are no defined arsonists, but he does not completely rule out the possibility. He states that "it is not known whether it was the work of an incendiary or not." This showed that the people of Dallas did not know if there was an arsonist responsible for the destruction.¹⁵⁷

Pryor also wrote to Cushings in Houston with details on the Dallas fire. This letter was also dated July 9, which implies that Pryor initially wrote these letters en masse, hoping to spread

¹⁵⁵ Reynolds, *Texas Terror*, 33.

¹⁵⁶ *The State Gazette* states that this letter was dated June 9, 1860. This is most likely a typo, as the *Dallas Herald* was still publishing during the month of June. More than likely, *The State Gazette* meant to date the letter for July, because the letter Cushings received was dated July 9.

¹⁵⁷ Charles R. Pryor and John Marshall, "Terrible Conflagration! The Town of Dallas Destroyed," *The State Gazette* (Austin, TX), July 12, 1860.

Dallas' plight to as many readers as possible. Similarly to the letter sent to Marshall, Cushings' letter limited itself to describing the known events regarding the Dallas fire and the extent of the damages. On July 17, 1860, *The Weekly Telegraph* published Pryor's letter. Cushings wrote a foreword, stating that the fire was a tragedy for those whose homes and businesses were affected by the fire. Following that, he offered his sympathies and assurances that the residents of Dallas were "plucky" enough to rebuild and that the *Dallas Herald* would soon resume operations. Pryor's letter states that on the afternoon of July 8, 1860, a fire started in front of Peak's drugstore and spread to the neighboring buildings in the Dallas square. The destroyed buildings included Smith's warehouse, the *Dallas Herald* office, the St. Nicolas Hotel, Smith and Murphy's brick store, Shirek's store and warehouse, the Crutchfield House and the post office within it, Westen's Corner, Simon's new building, the old tavern, Saddler's shop, Hirsh's storehouse, Carr's frame building, Simon's store, Nicholson and Ferris' exchange office, Thomas' drug store, Ellett's storehouse, McCoy's law office, Lynch's establishment, Carruth's storehouse, Fletcher's mercantile, Birtle's establishment and residence, Mrs. Bingham's residence, and all the material goods within those buildings. Pryor estimates that the damages at over \$300,000.00 accounting for the material and emotional damages. Pryor notes that the fire caught many Dallas residents off guard because they were enjoying afternoon "siestas" from the 105-degree heat. Pryor makes an appeal to his readers' emotions, stating that all of his clothes were lost in the fire. He even requests that Cushings send him an old coat, shirt, or pair of shoes if he could spare them.¹⁵⁸

It is unclear if Pryor exaggerated the fires' destruction of the Dallas square. However, this version of events contains no conspiracies of abolitionist threats or slave revolts. In the letter sent

¹⁵⁸ Charles R. Pryor and Edward H. Cushings, "Terrible Conflagration!! The Town in Dallas in Ashes! Every Store & Hotel Burned! Loss \$300,00!!!," *The Weekly Telegraph* (Houston, TX), July 17, 1860.

to Marshall, he stated that the courthouse and the southeastern corner of the square were left standing.¹⁵⁹ The version printed in Cushings' *Weekly Telegraph* fails to mention that the fire spared any buildings in the Dallas square.¹⁶⁰ This could be seen as Pryor's first exaggeration, or purposeful omission, for the sake of gaining Texan readers' sympathies.

An article from *The Matagorda Gazette* similarly retells Pryor's earliest account of the fire. This article seems to be a brief account of the Dallas fire and the cost of its damages.¹⁶¹ *The Matagorda Gazette* did not receive a letter from Pryor, so the article is most likely an abridged version of his letter to *The Weekly Telegraph*.¹⁶² Looking at some of the other articles in the Matagorda based newspaper, the writers and editor also seem to be politically conservative. This paper includes articles that support John Breckinridge's presidential campaign.¹⁶³ Based on the contents of this issue, it is not unreasonable to believe that this publication would have also believed the later versions of Pryor's story that included abolitionist conspiracy theories.

Around this time, other papers in the region reported on fires happening closer to home. These smaller North Texan towns were either close to the events of Dallas or they experienced their own fires. The writers of these articles detail the events and damages as they were known. On July 14, Clarksville's *The Standard* published a letter from John W. Swindles, the *Dallas Herald's* publisher. In the letter, he describes events similar to Pryor's early letters, though not as detailed as the one published in *The Weekly Telegraph*. However, Swindles updated Pryor's account of events and changed the damage estimate to \$400,000. Swindles also specified that the

¹⁵⁹ Pryor, "Terrible Conflagration."

¹⁶⁰ Pryor, "The Town in Dallas in Ashes."

¹⁶¹ The archive in which I read this newspaper was partially destroyed. There was a section of this article that was missing. However, I was able to discern most of what the article said through context.

¹⁶² *The Matagorda Gazette* (Matagorda, TX), July 18, 1860.

¹⁶³ "Political News," *The Matagorda Gazette* (Matagorda, TX), July 18, 1860; "Woman's Marriage," *The Matagorda Gazette* (Matagorda, TX), July 18, 1860.

Dallas fire started around two in the afternoon on July 8. He also stated that another fire occurred a mile and a half north of Dallas on July 9. This fire destroyed the homes of J. J. Eakins and Silas Leonard. In an editorial note under Swindles' letter, *The Standard's* editor, Major C. DeMorse, noted that on July 13, fires also destroyed two stores in the towns of Ladonia and Milford. No one was reported dead or hurt in any of the fires.¹⁶⁴

The Standard states that the self-combustion of prairie matches caused the fires on July 9 and 13. Swindles' letter also implies that they could have caused the Dallas fire, as the fire started amongst a pile of "rubbish" in front of Peak's drugstore.¹⁶⁵ This is one of the first public claims that faulty prairie matches caused the fires in North Texas. Other smaller newspapers in the region also made similar claims regarding the inferno.

Corsicana's *The Navarro Express* stated that a fire destroyed the entirety of Dallas' square other than two groceries and a law office. However, this article also describes a similar situation in Waxahachie. In the smaller town, an anonymous merchant discovered an ignited box of prairie matches and was able to stop the fire before it could spread. The paper argues that prairie matches were dangerous to have around, as rats and mice were attracted to something in their composition. The paper further explains the hazards these matches posed, stating that "the slightest friction during the warm weather is sufficient to ignite them."¹⁶⁶

Importantly, under its initial report on the fires, the *Navarro Express* appended a postscript, to include information received from Ellis Merrill Stackpole (only identified as Mr. Stackpole in the text) from Dallas. This postscript was one of the first claims that the fires in Dallas were an abolitionist plot. In this update, the newspaper claims that the damages amounted

¹⁶⁴ Swindles, "Serious Calamity."

¹⁶⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶⁶ "Dallas Herald," *The Navarro Express* (Corsicana, TX), July 14, 1860.

to \$500,000 (an amount larger than any estimate made before or after this issue). The postscript also noted that an additional thirty-three houses were destroyed in the fire and that two unnamed abolitionist arsonists were responsible for the blaze. The paper also states that “a number of persons” (which was most likely a mob) were in the process of pursuing the two abolitionists.¹⁶⁷

The Navarro Express’ postscript serves as a contrast to the editorial forewords often included in reports on the Dallas fire. Other editors introduced the disaster with a brief summary of events and then expressed their sympathies to those effected and especially to Pryor.¹⁶⁸ However, *The Navarro Express* chose to include their opinions regarding the claim of abolitionist arson. Once they state that two abolitionists were being chased by a mob, the writers express their hope that “these satanic fanatics be caught, hung and quartered.” This comment gave the public insight towards the possibility that the employees of *The Navarro Express*, if not the wider public, were in favor of extreme mob justice in the form of violence.

The author of the *Navarro Express* postscript partially blames Southerners for allowing the Dallas fires to happen. They argue that Southerners had been too lenient towards Northern abolitionists and had indulged their fanaticism for too long.¹⁶⁹ They blame those with moderate or forgiving opinions towards Northerners for emboldening abolitionist violence.

Stackpole was the first individual to spread the rumor that the fires were caused by abolitionist arsonists. He resided in Dallas and dealt in dry goods, tin, hardware, wool, and clothing. His store was located on “the railroad corner of the Dallas square.”¹⁷⁰ Stackpole was relatively well-known in the community and seemed to have a decent reputation as a

¹⁶⁷ Ibid.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid; Swindles, “Serious Calamity;”, *The Matagorda Gazette* (Matagorda, TX), July 18, 1860; Pryor, “Terrible Conflagration;” Pryor, “Terrible Conflagration.”

¹⁶⁹ “Dallas Herald,” *The Navarro Express* (Corsicana, TX), July 14, 1860.

¹⁷⁰ “Fall and Winter Supply of New Goods Just Received By E.M. Stackpole,” *Dallas Herald* (Dallas, TX), March 9, 1859; “Tin Shop,” *Dallas Herald* (Dallas, TX), March 9, 1859; “Pro Bono Publico,” *Dallas Herald* (Dallas, TX), November 23, 1859; *Dallas Herald* (Dallas, TX), November 30, 1859.

businessman. For a period in 1860, he even served as a city alderman.¹⁷¹ Stackpole was also a slave owner. It is unclear how many slaves he owned, but around November 1858, he advertised that he was looking for a young slave girl to be a house servant.¹⁷² In 1861, the merchant looked to sell his slave “for no fault” of her own.¹⁷³ Stackpole’s store and warehouse were one of the many buildings destroyed in the Dallas fire.¹⁷⁴ An indicator that Stackpole might have experienced financial difficulties following the fire was a June 1861 advertisement offering to sell or trade “a house and three lots” in Dallas. The advertisement further explains that the lots would be inexpensive and that he accepted cows, calves, or mares in exchange for the property.¹⁷⁵

Based on his actions after the Dallas fire, Stackpole’s letters could be seen as a plot to advance his ideological interests. During the Civil War, the merchant posted multiple wanted advertisements in the *Dallas Herald* asking to be sold \$20,000.00 worth of Confederate bonds.¹⁷⁶ This financial support of the Confederacy combined with his status as either a current or previous slaveowner displayed a political motive for Stackpole to spread fear through Texas that the “abolitionist North” was a threat to Southern culture. However, he was able to use these events for more than just political outcomes. Later in 1860, he used the events of the fire to help advertise Herring’s patent champion safes in *The Texas Almanac for 1861*. The review claimed that the safe was the only thing in his store that survived the Dallas fire. Even though it sat in the

¹⁷¹ John M. Crockett, “Corporation of the Town of Dallas,” *Dallas Herald* (Dallas, TX), March 7, 1860; *Dallas Herald* (Dallas, TX), March 7, 1860; John M. Crockett, “Corporation Ordinances,” *Dallas Herald* (Dallas, TX), May 9, 1860; “First Annual Fair of the Navarro County Agricultural and Mechanical Association,” *The Navarro Express* (Corsicana, TX), June 2, 1860.

¹⁷² E.M. Stackpole, “Advertisements,” *Dallas Herald* (Dallas, TX), November 17, 1858.

¹⁷³ E.M. Stackpole, “For Sale,” *Dallas Herald* (Dallas, TX), June 26, 1861.

¹⁷⁴ Vicki Betts, “Marshall Texas Republican, 1860,” *Scholar Works at UT Tyler* (2016). By Title, Paper 66, <http://hdl.handle.net/10950/720>, 33.

¹⁷⁵ E.M. Stackpole, “For Sale or Trade,” *Dallas Herald* (Dallas, TX), June 12, 1861.

¹⁷⁶ E.M. Stackpole, “Wanted,” *Dallas Herald* (Dallas, TX), August 28, 1861.

smoldering remains of Stackpole's store for three days the contents within stayed intact. The only damage done to the books, papers, and the safe itself was a bit of melted glue and some of the safe's varnish melting off.¹⁷⁷ He later sold Herring's patent champion safes in his store once it was rebuilt.¹⁷⁸

Stackpole wrote another letter that was published in the July 24, 1860 edition of Houston's *The Weekly Telegraph* to further spread a conspiracy against abolitionist arsonists. This article updated the previous narrative published on July 17. This new version of events included the various other fires in surrounding North Texan towns. However, Stackpole also claims that the entirety of Dallas and the surrounding area were all set ablaze by two "abolitionist emissaries" from Kansas. According to this article, they had been arrested at the point of the letter being written. The author further blames the fires on two abolitionists exiled from Dallas in 1859.¹⁷⁹ He assumed these men were responsible because the buildings targeted in the fire belonged to those who had forced the two accused abolitionists out of the city in 1859. *The Weekly Telegraph* then reported that North Texan communities formed safety committees and large special police forces to watch for abolitionist incendiaries.¹⁸⁰ Stackpole's conspiracy-driven narrative of the North Texas fires spread through the state. After Stackpole injected the element of abolitionist arson, readers throughout the state considered these events as proof that the Northern threat of violence had descended into the South.

¹⁷⁷ E.M. Stackpole, "Great Fire in Dallas, July 8, 1860," in *The Texas Almanac for 1861*, (Galveston: Richardson & Co., 1861), 265.

¹⁷⁸ E.M. Stackpole, "Herring's Patent Fire Proof and Burglar Proof Safes," *Dallas Herald* (Dallas, TX), February 6, 1861; February 27, 1861; March 27, 1861; April 17, 1861; April 21, 1861; June 26, 1861.

¹⁷⁹ The two men that Stackpole referenced in this correspondence were most likely Solomon McKinney and William Blount from Kentucky and Wisconsin respectively. The previous chapter of this work states that these two men were preachers invited to speak in Dallas. They were accused of telling Dallas slaves to rebel against their masters which the two men denied. They were exiled via committee decision on August 17, 1859. For more information, see Stanford, *The Tragedy of the Negro in America*, 87-89; Crocket, "Public Meeting;" Campbell, *An Empire for Slavery*, 223.

¹⁸⁰ "The Northern Texas Fires."

On July 23, 1860, San Antonio's *The Daily Ledger and Texan* reported on the fires in Dallas and Waxahachie. Most of the newspaper's information regarding the events in North Texas came from *The State Gazette*'s initial article on July 12. The San Antonio article's summary of events is mostly in line with what had been presented thus far. However, *The Daily Ledger and Texan* claims that "the facts above specified, together with those mentioned by Dr. Pryor, into consideration there would seem to be no doubt that regularly organized bands of assassins have secretly plotted a wholesale destruction of life and property." The article continues to insinuate the dangers posed to the entire state. The author states that even though San Antonio was not in the region of the fires they should still remain vigilant and increase surveillance on those assumed suspicious.¹⁸¹

Although *The Daily Ledger and Texan* article did not specifically name abolitionists as the suspected arsonists, many of the readers could easily come to that conclusion on their own. This can be attributed to the established mistrust of abolitionists and the Northern United States as a whole. There were multiple instances where Texan communities ran Northerners out of town on the suspicion that they were abolitionists.¹⁸² In addition to mistrusting individual Northerners, Southern newspapers assumed that Northern political institutions were controlled by radicals. For example, many Texan newspapers referred to the newly established Republican Party as "Black Republicans" or "Black abolitionist republicans" prior to the fires of 1860. Most of these discussions pertained to the political incompetence of Republicans or the assumed bad character of these politicians.¹⁸³ Southerners in general stereotyped all Northerners as

¹⁸¹ "Incendiary Fires," *The Daily Ledger and Texan* (San Antonio, TX), July 23, 1860.

¹⁸² "Excitement in Collin County!," *Galveston News* (Galveston, TX), June 28, 1860; Crocket, "Public Meeting;" Campbell, *An Empire for Slavery*, 223; Reynolds, *Editors Make War*, 98-100; Stanford, *The Tragedy of the Negro in America*, 87-89.

¹⁸³ "Senator Douglas, the President and the Territories," *The Southern Intelligencer* (Austin, TX), January 6, 1858; "The People of Goliad and the Cart War Again," *The Southern Intelligencer* (Austin, TX), January 6, 1858; "Meeting at the Capitol," *State Gazette* (Austin, TX), February 4, 1860; "Municipal Elections North," *The San*

abolitionists regardless of individual Northerners' attitudes towards slavery or freed Black people. This assumption regarding an entire region was a way to justify their increasing calls for disunion.¹⁸⁴ This fear of the North, abolitionists, and slave rebellion colored Texan publications' narratives regarding the North Texan fires.

The San Antonio Ledger and Texan later republished the first known letter in which Pryor directly blamed abolitionists for the fire. In a letter originally addressed to *The State Gazette's* Marshall, Pryor claims that "all of these [fires] were so plainly the work of an incendiary, that suspicions were excited, and several white men and n****s were arrested and underwent examination." Like Stackpole, he accused two suspected abolitionists, who were exiled from Dallas in 1859, of being the masterminds. Their supposed plan was to burn all of North Texas, targeting ammunition, artillery, clothing, and grain. Their goal was to leave the residents helpless. Once this was accomplished, white abolitionists were going to lead Native Americans and slaves in a revolt to ensure that Texans could not vote on election day. Pryor also suspected that their secondary motive was to start a civil war.¹⁸⁵

Pryor's letter in the *San Antonio Ledger* differs greatly from his first letter to *The State Gazette*. His first letter states that he did not know whether arsonists were involved in the fires or not.¹⁸⁶ His second more detailed letter to Cushings neglects to include any suspicion of foul play.¹⁸⁷ Pryor's narrative only changed after Stackpole sent out letters that stated abolitionists burned Dallas to ashes. After Stackpole sent out his letters, to share his own version of events,

Antonio Ledger and Texan (San Antonio, TX), April 21, 1860; "Black Republicans Abolitionized," *The San Antonio Ledger and Texan* (San Antonio, TX), April 21, 1860; "Unparalleled Impudence or Ignorance;" "Squatter Sovereignty," *The Navarro Express* (Corsicana, TX), April 28, 1860.

¹⁸⁴ "The Northern Texas Fires;" Foner, *Free Soil*, 44-58, 73-81, 105-148, 150-164, 180-220; Varon, *Disunion!*, 7-15, 102-108, 181, 216-238.

¹⁸⁵ Pryor, "Incendiary Fires;" Carrigan, *Lynching Culture*, 49, 58-59.

¹⁸⁶ Pryor, "Terrible Conflagration."

¹⁸⁷ Pryor, "The Town in Dallas in Ashes."

Pryor also started to take advantage of Southerners' anxieties over abolition. This is evident with his fearmongering starting with his letter published in *The San Antonio Ledger and Texan* on July 24, 1860.¹⁸⁸

On July 24, *The Weekly Telegraph* published letters from *Dallas Herald* publisher, Swindles and from the merchant Stackpole. Both were printed on the newspaper's front page. Swindles' letter stated that the *Dallas Herald* had ordered a new office and that the town had begun rebuilding from the calamity. He seemed hopeful that his newspaper would resume printing within two to three months. In a postscript he stated that Denton and two households north of Dallas experienced fires on July 9. However, despite the fact that fires were only discussed in the postscript, Stackpole's letter influenced *The Weekly Telegraph*'s decision to base the article's title, "Further from Dallas—Another Fire in Dallas County—Serious Fire in Denton," solely on the postscript's contents.¹⁸⁹

Unlike Swindles' correspondence, *The Weekly Telegraph* did not print their correspondence with Stackpole. Instead, the newspaper chose to use the information he provided in their articles. Stackpole gave an estimate of the various material losses that the fires caused. He also stated that the fires burned E.P. Nicholson and Crill Miller's homes. Although the damages to Nicholson's property were minimal, the blaze destroyed Miller's buildings and wheat stacks. This same article states that *The Weekly Telegraph* was contacted by the *McKinney Messenger*'s office. The McKinney newspaper claims that residents often saw two men in the same areas of the fires. Because of this suspicion, the town of McKinney arrested them.¹⁹⁰

¹⁸⁸ Pryor, "Incendiary Fires."

¹⁸⁹ Swindles, "Further from Dallas."

¹⁹⁰ "The Dallas Conflagration," *The Weekly Telegraph* (Houston, TX), July 24, 1860; "The Northern Texas Fires."

The narrative of the North Texas fires spiraled further into a frenzy of terror. The original narrative grew and changed each time newspapers published the events. On August 4, 1860, Corpus Christi's *The Ranchero* printed new information that Pryor relayed to them. In this new version of events, the citizens of Fort Worth found two abolitionists who distributed one hundred weapons to slaves and then descended upon the region to burn the communities to the ground.¹⁹¹ This same page of this newspaper also republished Pryor's letter dated July 16, 1860 to *The State Gazette* with his early statement that claimed that there were only two abolitionist incendiaries causing the fires in North Texas. This version of Pryor's narrative also accuses Northerners of attempting to start a civil war.¹⁹² At this point, newspapers were actively trying to make their readers believe a narrative that pitted them against the Northern United States.

At this point, Southerners had a lengthy history of instigating disunion, either by threatening secession or accusing Northern states of attempting to destroy the union. Elizabeth R. Varon discusses this at length in her book *Disunion! The Coming of the American Civil War*. She states that there were occasions when the South accused the North of trying to destroy the tenuous coalition between the states.

The North and South's threats of disunion contextualize Pryor's claim that the North Texas fires were abolitionists' attempt to start a civil war. The South accused the North of disunion as a result of William Lloyd Garrison's American Anti-Slavery Society (AASS) and its mail pamphlet campaign.¹⁹³ In 1835, the AASS published abolitionist literature that relied on

¹⁹¹ "Abolition Incendiaries in Texas," *The Ranchero* (Corpus Christi, TX), August 4, 1860.

¹⁹² Charles R. Pryor, "Conflagrations in Northern Texas--- Startling News," *The Ranchero* (Corpus Christi, TX), August 4, 1860.

¹⁹³ William Lloyd Garrison was a nineteenth century abolitionist and journalist who was active in promoting Black voices and for the immediate dissolution of slavery. In 1831 he founded *The Liberator*, an antislavery newspaper that published articles written by white women, freed Black people of both genders, and abolitionist men. Garrison founded the AASS as an extension of his early organization, the New England Anti-Slavery Society (later reorganized as the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society). Although he was praised for his fervent support of abolition, his politics- or lack thereof- were more controversial among activists. He felt that

moral arguments. This was an attempt to sway slaveholders to their cause. Their plan was to mail these pamphlets to the South. However, opponents of abolition quickly discovered these pieces of propaganda and pleaded with multiple postmaster generals to cease their distribution. Southerners accused the AASS and the North in general of trying to incite their slaves to escape and rebel. The South used this postal campaign to accuse abolitionists of sowing disunion. Many Southern communities, most notably in South Carolina, Louisiana, and Mississippi, responded to this attempt to spread anti-slavery propaganda by forming mobs. These groups sought out alleged abolitionists to lynch and murder them.¹⁹⁴

While the AASS did not intend for their postal campaign to break apart the United States, Southerners' accusations towards the organization were not completely unfounded. Both Garrison and the AASS had advocated for disunion before. Garrison claimed that the Constitution, and the union it created, was an empty promise of what the founding fathers intended for the United States.¹⁹⁵ Many Garrisonian abolitionists also promoted disunion during the annexation of Texas. They reasoned that if the United States allowed Texas to join the country, it would be as a slave state. This meant that slavery would spread, and slave power would gain more political influence.¹⁹⁶ This sect of abolitionists argued that the United States

getting involved with politics contributed to the institutions that oppressed women and freed Blacks as well as upheld slavery. This was an aspect of his beliefs that many freed Black activists, most notably Frederick Douglass, and the abolitionists who formed the Republican Party. Garrison's support of John Brown's actions at Harper's Ferry further made him a controversial figure. For more information on Garrison, see: Sinha, *The Slave's Cause*; Henry Mayer, *All on Fire: William Lloyd Garrison and the Abolition of Slavery* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 1998); Varon, *Disunion*.

¹⁹⁴ Frank Otto Gatell, "Postmaster Huger and the Incendiary Publications," *The South Carolina Historical Magazine* 64, no. 4 (1963): 194-195; Varon, *Disunion!*, 102-105.

¹⁹⁵ Varon, *Disunion!*, 152-154.

¹⁹⁶ Slave power was a theory that the South controlled political power in the United States. One element of this is attributed to the population boost they obtained through the Three-Fifths Compromise. Because slaves counted as three-fifths of a person in censuses, slaveholding states had more power in the House of Representatives. Another part of this theory concerned the South and their threats of disunion. Because the United States was still relatively young and one of the first countries to attempt a representative democracy, they needed to keep the states from leaving to prove themselves to the world stage. Southern states exploited this political anxiety to further amass

had an obligation to prevent the spread of slavery. If slavery was allowed to spread, some abolitionists stated that disunion might be the only moral option for them. This Northern argument reemerged during the debate over the annexation of Kansas and Nebraska.¹⁹⁷ The South threatened disunion far more often than the North or abolitionists did. Based on a shared past rooted in distrust, Southerners accused the North of attempting to destroy the union for their own gain.

By the end of July, North Texas had been whipped into a frenzy over the possibility of abolitionist incendiaries. Articles on the fires often changed who was the mastermind and how many incendiaries were involved.¹⁹⁸ The narratives became bigger and the conspiracies more insidious. A letter to *The Weekly Telegraph* claimed that an abolitionist was hiding in each North Texas county plotting to destroy its communities. According to the article, these abolitionists dispatched nearly one hundred enslaved people to burn down various towns and households in the region.¹⁹⁹ In the same newspaper, a different letter from a Waxahachie merchant claims that two white abolitionists and around twenty slaves were responsible for the fires.²⁰⁰

Most of the testimonies published by newspapers describe suspected arsonists as slaves. Occasionally the authors state that there were numerous unnamed witnesses. However, these claims are vague regarding the number of witnesses, their backgrounds, and how these people found themselves in situations to witness arson. Many articles discuss hundreds of slaves being brought in for questioning to reveal if they saw anyone suspicious who could have been involved

power and force through policies that only benefitted them. For more information see David Brion Davis, *The Slave Power Conspiracy and the Paranoid Style* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1970); Varon, *Disunion*.

¹⁹⁷ Varon, *Disunion!*, 121-124, 165-169, 181, 255; Sinha, *The Slave's Cause*, 416, 470-474.

¹⁹⁸ Reynolds, *Texas Terror*, 34-68.

¹⁹⁹ Charles R. Pryor, "Letter from Dallas. A Most Diabolical Plot! Unheard of Scoundrelism!! Fire! Murder! Destruction!!! Startling Developments!!!! Full Particulars," *The Weekly Telegraph* (Houston, TX), July 31, 1860.

²⁰⁰ "Later from Northern Texas. Conspiracy Discovered in Waxahachie. Two White Men Hung," *The Weekly Telegraph* (Houston, TX), July 31, 1860.

or if anyone forced them to start fires.²⁰¹ It is possible that the unnamed witnesses in some of these articles were enslaved people, but there is no evidence to back this claim. As discussed in chapter 3 of this thesis, slaveowners often forced their slaves to confess to their involvement in crimes. Southerners knew that slaves could be easily intimidated and exploited to perpetuate any narrative that benefitted Southern whites' political goals.²⁰²

Around the end of July, Pryor sent reports out to other newspapers stating that Dallas and the other towns of North Texas had formed vigilance committees. The purpose of these groups was to watch for, and apprehend, any suspicious people who intended to harm the region's communities.²⁰³ However, these groups were often overzealous in their watchfulness. These vigilantes closely watched any newcomers suspected of having Northern origins. The suspected abolitionists were questioned and watched until they were deemed no longer a threat. Vigilance committees did not discriminate in their watchfulness. Southerners from other towns or states were similarly watched and questioned. This was because newspapers published conspiracy theories of abolitionists coming into their communities with disguises and false identities to commit their crimes.²⁰⁴

²⁰¹ "The Late Conflagrations," *The San Antonio Ledger and Texan* (San Antonio, TX), July 28, 1860; "Further Particulars," *The Weekly Telegraph* (Houston, TX), July 31, 1860; "Abolition Incendiaries in Texas;" "Incendiary Attempts," *The San Antonio Ledger and Texan* (San Antonio, TX), August 4, 1860; "The Late Fires," *The Civilian and Gazette Weekly* (Galveston, TX), August 7, 1860; "More of the Up-Country Excitement- The Vigilance Committee Doing Their Work," *The Weekly Telegraph* (Houston, TX), August 7, 1860; "Incendiarism— Meeting in Matagorda," *State Gazette* (Austin, TX), August 11, 1860; "Public Meeting at Gay Hill, Washington County," *The Weekly Telegraph* (Houston, TX), August 14, 1860.

²⁰² Ray, "The Excitement in Collin County;" Reynolds, *Editors Make War*, 104-106; "The Herald and Late Improvements;" Reynolds, *Texas Terror*, 54-77.

²⁰³ "Further Particulars;" "More of the Up-County Excitement- The Vigilance Committee Doing Their Work," *The Weekly Telegraph* (Houston, TX), August 7, 1860; "The Late Fires," *The Civilian and Gazette* (Galveston, TX), August 7, 1860; Reynolds, *Texas Terror*, 55-77.

²⁰⁴ Reynolds, *Editors Make War*, 100-104; "More Incendiarism in This County," *Navarro Express* (Corsicana, TX), August 25, 1860; "Another Upright Judge," *The Southern Intelligencer* (Austin, TX), October 10, 1860.

The vigilance committees' reign over North Texas quickly became violent. Many communities assembled to discuss the fate of abolitionists or rebellious slaves.²⁰⁵ On October 10, Austin's *The Southern Intelligencer* reported on Judge R.L. Waddill's ruling regarding the incendiaries of the fires and any other possible abolitionists in the region. Waddill decreed that anyone who attempted "the preaching of abolition doctrines, tampering with slaves and circulating abolition books &c., for the purpose of insurrection" should be chased after and "brought to justice."²⁰⁶ The verbiage of the decision was vague. The vigilance committees of North Texas could have interpreted the "justice" Waddill spoke of in many different ways, which, more than likely, included mob justice and lynching.

On August 11, *The Navarro Express* reported on a public meeting held on July 26 in Chatfield. The primary purpose of the gathering was to discuss slavery, abolition, and the recent fires in North Texas. The meeting began with a justification of slavery that countered Northern "Black Republicans'" claims that it was immoral as well as a political and social evil. Those involved in the meeting then argued that the arsonists who destroyed the communities of North Texas were connected to abolition, and, by extension, the Republican Party. They argued that Republicans celebrated the perpetrators of Bleeding Kansas and the raid on Harper's Ferry. Acting for the safety of their community and as a warning to potential criminals, the meeting resolved that all abolitionists committing crimes in Chatford, and any rebellious slaves assisting them, would be immediately executed.²⁰⁷

The period after the fires saw multiple reports of hangings, or other general violence towards alleged abolitionists and the slaves that supposedly helped them. These articles claim

²⁰⁵ "Public Meeting at Chatfield," *The Navarro Express* (Corsicana, TX), August 11, 1860; "Public Meeting at Gay Hill;" "Another Upright Judge."

²⁰⁶ "Another Upright Judge."

²⁰⁷ "Public Meeting at Chatfield."

that executed individuals were accused of some sort of violence towards the area in which they were found. Most of the accusations were related to the various fires across North Texas. However, occasionally the executioners claimed that the accused individuals were involved in additional violent conspiracies. One such instance was when two white men were hanged on July 21. Those in Waxahachie suspected they were abolitionists and had a sinister plot. The article claimed that the two men planned to burn the town of Waxahachie in a similar manner to how many Texans believed abolitionists destroyed Dallas. In addition to this, the plan also intended to free slaves and force them to murder their masters. A local merchant found a letter written in German, which vigilance committees believed supported their suspicions.²⁰⁸

There were many other instances of similarly sanctioned violence against those suspected of abolition and potential destruction. On July 31, 1860 *The Weekly Telegraph* reported that around eighty slaves were whipped for their failure to report the arsonists of the Dallas fires and their conspirators. The article also stated that ten slaves accused of leading the insurrectionists were likely to be hung.²⁰⁹ Austin's *State Gazette* republished an article from the *Hempstead Courier*. On July 28, 1860 the newspaper expressed their sympathies to the people in North Texas. The article then describes an event that took place in Chapel Hill earlier in July. The community saw three men often conversing with slaves and chased them off. Two of the men were hung in Navarro County, and the article suspected that the third man was in Fort Worth. The author states that the people of Chapel Hill did not request for the men to leave. Instead, the residents chose to hang them as soon as they gathered enough evidence to justify their decision.²¹⁰ There were many other instances in which North Texas towns chose immediate

²⁰⁸ "Later From Northern Texas."

²⁰⁹ "Further Particulars."

²¹⁰ "From Hempstead Courier," *State Gazette* (Austin, TX), August 4, 1860.

violence against all who could disrupt their communities.²¹¹ These frenzied anxieties over abolition and the North made Texas more susceptible to arguments in favor of secession.

In the months after the North Texas fires, newspaper publishers increased the rate that they included pro-secession articles. Most of them referenced the upcoming election of 1860 and their hope that the general voting public would not elect the Republican candidate, Abraham Lincoln.²¹² Many of the discussions surrounding secession also reexamined previous Southern threats of nullification and secession in the previous decade.²¹³ During the summer of 1860, more newspapers also discussed Texan state politicians and candidates that advocated for secession.²¹⁴ One of these politicians was Alexis T. Rainey, a former Texas senator from Anderson County who resigned his seat in February.²¹⁵ Some rejected Rainey's beliefs in Texas secession.²¹⁶ However, the Southern states who seceded following Lincoln's election attempted to further persuade the public into accepting disunion.

Charles B. Dew's *Apostles of Disunion: Southern Secession Commissioners and the Causes of the Civil War* argues that various states' committees sent speakers to influence other Southern states to leave the United States. South Carolina followed through with its threat and

²¹¹ "Later From Dallas," *State Gazette* (Austin, TX), August 4, 1860; "Incendiary Attempts &c.," *The San Antonio Ledger and Texan* (San Antonio, TX), August 4, 1860; "The Late Fires;" "Vigilance Committee Doing Their Work;" "Incendiarism—Meeting in Matagorda;" *The Navarro Express* (Corsicana, TX), August 11, 1860; "Incendiarism," *The Navarro Express* (Corsicana, TX), August 11, 1860; Reynolds, *Editors Make War*, 104-117; Reynolds, *Texas Terror*, 54-77; Gallagher, *The Confederate War*, 148-149.

²¹² "Democratic Ratification Meeting!," *The Weekly Telegraph* (Houston, TX), July 24, 1860; "Ratification Meeting in Houston," *The Democrat and Planter* (Columbia, TX), July 24, 1860; "Speech of Gen. Waul," *The Weekly Telegraph* (Houston, TX), July 31, 1860; "Return of Col. M. Flourney," *State Gazette* (Austin, TX), August 4, 1860.

²¹³ George W. Smyth, "Speech of Hon. Geo. W. Smyth," *The East-Texas Clarion* (Jasper, TX), July 21, 1860; "Voters! Remember the First Monday in August, 1860!," *The Colorado Citizen* (Columbus, TX), July 28, 1860.

²¹⁴ Smyth, "Speech;" "Ratification Meeting in Houston;" "Harris," *State Gazette* (Austin, TX), July 28, 1860; "Speech of Gen. Waul."

²¹⁵ William DeRyee and R.E. Moore, *Texas Album of the Eighth Legislature, 1860*, (Austin: Miner, Lambert, & Perry, 1860); "Hon. A.T. Rainey on The Stump," *State Gazette* (Austin, TX), July 28, 1860.

²¹⁶ *The Navarro Express* (Corsicana, TX), August 31, 1860.

was the first to secede from the United States after Lincoln was elected.²¹⁷ The first commissioners were sent from Mississippi, Alabama, South Carolina, Georgia, and Louisiana to explain why these states seceded and persuade other states to join them.²¹⁸ As more states seceded from the Union, these newly independent entities sent out more commissioners to further convince the rest of the south.²¹⁹ In early 1861, Alabama, Louisiana, and South Carolina sent James Martin Calhoun, George Williamson, and John McQueen to persuade Texas to leave the Union.

Alabama's commissioner, Calhoun, was the first of the three that attempted to influence Texas' politics. His tactic was more focused on Governor Sam Houston than on the general public. This is most likely because the Texan politician was one of the few figures in the state who continued to oppose disunion. Calhoun wrote to the governor in an attempt to convince him that secession was the best way to preserve the white Southern way of life. Calhoun said that his home state of Alabama wanted what was best for its sister state, as their destinies as slaveholding institutions were the same. Calhoun's goal was to convince Houston to speak in favor of leaving the United States during the Secession Convention of Texas. He argued that secession was the only way to save the South's white population from "the utter ruin and degradation" guaranteed by Lincoln's administration. This attempt to sway the governor failed, due to Houston's firm loyalty to the union.²²⁰ However, despite this major political disagreement, the governor welcomed Calhoun to stay with him for the month of February.²²¹

²¹⁷ Charles B. Dew, *Apostles of Disunion: Southern Secession Commissioners and the Causes of the Civil War* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2016), 4-5, 11.

²¹⁸ *Ibid*, 18-21.

²¹⁹ *Ibid*, 18, 20.

²²⁰ *Ibid*, 58; James Martin Calhoun, Sam Houston, "Correspondence Between Hon. J.M. Calhoun, Commissioner from Alabama, and Gen. Sam Houston, Governor of Texas," *The Civilian and Gazette* (Galveston, TX), January 22, 1861.

²²¹ Sam Houston, "Extracts from the Governor's Message," *The Standard* (Clarksville, TX), February 9, 1861.

John McQueen was the last commissioner South Carolina sent to spread their message of disunion.²²² The South Carolinian representative spoke at the convention in favor of a Southern confederacy. Austin's *State Gazette* reported on McQueen's statement that the combined resources and military force of the Southern slave states was the only way to stave off the Black Republican threat. He also accused the federal government of being incompetent and unable to protect the South.²²³ On April 8, McQueen wrote the president and convention assembled in in Charleston, South Carolina. In his letter, he claims that his time in Texas was incredibly successful and that the people welcomed him warmly. He then states that his points on Lincoln, the Black Republicans, and abolitionist attacks were well received. He concludes his letter, stating that he successfully persuaded the Texas convention to unanimously vote in favor of secession.²²⁴

Williamson was the only commissioner Louisiana sent out and he was the last to arrive in Texas after the convention had ended. On March 23, the *State Gazette* reported the Secession Convention of Texas met after adjournment. Those involved with the meeting submitted Williamson's correspondence with the president of the convention, Oran M. Roberts, as well as other letters from other Confederate states' representatives.²²⁵ According to Dew, most of the Louisiana commissioner's arguments were based on the close economic relationship between the two states. Thus, it was in Texas' best interests to secede, Williamson argues, as the Southern states assumed that the United States would become more hostile to slave states under Lincoln's presidency.²²⁶

²²² Dew, *Apostles of Disunion*, 47.

²²³ *State Gazette* (Austin, TX), February 9, 1861.

²²⁴ John McQueen, "Letter to the President and Convention of South Carolina assembled at Charleston, April 8, 1861" in the *Journal of the Convention of the People of South Carolina Held in 1860, 1861, and 1862* (Columbia: R.W. Gibbes, 1862), 176-178; Dew, *Apostles of Disunion*, 47-49.

²²⁵ "Sixteenth Day," *State Gazette* (Austin, TX), March 23, 1861.

²²⁶ Dew, *Apostles of Disunion*, 98-101, Sandbo, "Secession Movement," 42.

On February 1, 1861, the members in the Secession Convention of Texas voted to secede from the United States with a vote of one hundred and sixty-six to eight.²²⁷ The Texan and outside forces in favor of disunion had finally convinced the wider masses that disunion was the only way to save their culture, their economy, and their wellbeing. Importantly, Texans found secession attractive because they had been taught to fear the North and abolitionists. For years prior to the state's vote for secession, newspapers bombarded their readers with stories about diabolical abolitionists, like Brown or Garrison, as well as treacherous Republicans who wanted to destroy Southern culture and rip away their political power. The North Texas fires and the accusations of an abolitionist plot brought the fear of John Brown closer to Texans' homes, which made the threat of abolition more real to them. The newspaper editors successfully primed their readers into a state of panic that made secession a desirable option.

²²⁷ Walter L. Buenger, *Secession and the Union in Texas* (Austin: University of Texas Press), 147-149.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

The dry and arid conditions in North Texas made the area prone to wildfires prior to 1860. The environment was filled with dry tall grasses, shrub-like foliage, and often was subject to droughts.²²⁸ Denton County legislators knew how susceptible the area was to fire and passed acts to reduce the spread of wildfires during the dry North Texan summers.²²⁹ However, the introduction of pyro-phosphorus matches, better known as prairie matches, further endangered the region to fires. These matches were prone to catching fire from just heat. During the unusually hot summer of 1860, these matches self-ignited spreading fire throughout the region.²³⁰

Texans entertained negative views of abolitionists before both the 1860 fires and the 1861 Secession Convention. There had been multiple instances prior to 1860 that North Texas communities tried or expelled suspected abolitionists. The South assumed the entire Northern region of the United States was as fervently abolitionist as John Brown. They assumed anyone who was not completely in favor of slavery or Southern rights was a traitor. This was why a percentage of Texans did not trust Governor Sam Houston despite his claim that he was in favor of slavery and states' rights. His refusal to completely oppose Northern and moderate politicians made some conflate his political passiveness with support of abolition.

The summer of 1860 left many Texans anxious and suspicious of the Northern states. Houston attempted to delay a convention concerning Texas' possible secession for a prolonged period. However, when Judge Oran M. Roberts pushed for an assembly to vote on the matter in

²²⁸ Bates, *History and Reminiscences*, 434-442; Weniger, *Explorers' Texas*, 187-199.

²²⁹ Bates, *History and Reminiscences*, 92-94.

²³⁰ Reynolds, *Texas Terror*, 202-206.

the months following the North Texas fires, the matter could no longer be impeded.²³¹ Many Texans were anxious to cut ties from the Union and join the other states who seceded after Lincoln's election²³².

To represent one's district at the Secession Convention was to decide the fate of the state. Would Texas stay with the United States and risk further abolitionist attacks? Would the state secede and keep the institution of slavery safe, but risk destroying the Union as a whole? In the preparations for the secession convention, the various districts throughout Texas nominated their representatives.²³³ Dallas held a meeting on December 15 to nominate their delegates for the upcoming state convention. Ellis Merrill Stackpole and Charles R. Pryor were included in the list of potential representative nominees.²³⁴ These two shaped and warped the North Texas fires' narrative. They spread stories that claimed abolitionists descended on the region and sowed destruction in their wake.²³⁵ If Dallas had elected Stackpole and Pryor to represent the district, they may have used the Dallas fires as an example to further convince Texas to secede from the union. However, despite the two men's absence at the convention, Dallas' representatives, E.P. Nicholson, Pleasant Taylor, and W.S.J. Adams were part of the majority who voted in favor of secession.²³⁶

²³¹ Buenger, *Secession*, 142-149.

²³² "Declaration of Causes: February 2, 1861, Texas State Library and Archives Commission, last modified August 25, 2011, <https://www.tsl.texas.gov/ref/abouttx/secession/2feb1861.html>; "Secession Convention to Houston," March 12, 1861," Texas State Library and Archives Commission, last modified March 3, 2015, <https://www.tsl.texas.gov/governors/earlystate/houstonconvention.html#:~:text=The%20Texas%20legislature%20called%20a,passed%20overwhelmingly%20on%20February%2023.>

²³³ Ibid, 142-147.

²³⁴ "To the Citizens of Dallas County," *Dallas Herald* (Dallas, TX), December 12, 1860.

²³⁵ Reynolds, *Editors Make War*, 97-117; Reynolds, *Texas Terror*, 30-53.

²³⁶ *Journal of the Secession Convention of Texas 1861* (Austin: Austin Print Co., 1912), 21, 25-26; Texas Convention, *Declaration of the Causes Which Impel the State of Texas to Secede from the Federal Union: Also the Ordinance of Secession* (Austin, TX: Herald office, 1861), Pdf. <https://www.loc.gov/item/95139713/>.

Although Dallas' proximity to the fires was a potential motive for their votes in favor of secession, Denton's representative was not swayed this way. Former governor James W. Throckmorton from Collin County represented Denton County. He was one of the eight who voted against secession despite the backlash at the convention.²³⁷ Denton's resistance to disunion may have been attributed to their early realization that abolitionists were not responsible for the fires. Originally Dentonites thought that abolitionists set the fires that burned their town and others nearby.²³⁸ However, other towns discovered and witnessed prairie matches self-combust and quickly burned the surrounding structures. These communities told those nearby, which shifted Denton's perception of its own fire.²³⁹

The difference between Denton and Dallas' handling of the North Texas fires serves as an interesting comparison. Dentonites knew the root cause of the fires, trusted the witnesses from surrounding towns, and voted against disunion. Dallas did not acknowledge the truth behind the fires and instead, allowed a false narrative of the fires to spread throughout the state. These narratives created a zeitgeist of anxiety throughout Texas. The narrators who pushed the abolitionist arsonist story, most notably Pryor and Stackpole, used it to fill their readers' minds with fear of the North. The summer events of 1860 serve to show how those with influence over mass media can mutate a narrative to meet political ends. The differences in the narratives, the weight of their voices, and the votes of the two counties' representatives displayed how influential the *Dallas Herald's* pro-secessionist fantasy of abolitionist incendiaries was in influencing the vote for secession.

²³⁷ Bates, *History and Reminiscences*, 107-108.

²³⁸ *Ibid*, 69.

²³⁹ *Ibid*, 348-349.

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