The Hidden Importance of Dallas: Anxiety, Media, and Texas Secession

by Melissa Queen

Texas has one of the most unique histories of the continental United States, yet the public knows little regarding the state's third largest city, Dallas. Michael Phillips author of *White Metropolis,* described Dallas as, "too small in the 1860s and 1870s to merit extensive consideration in the histories of the Civil War and Reconstruction, too Southern to be placed in the context of the great labor battles of the 19th century, and too Western to be incorporated into the monographs on the Southern desegregation struggle in the mid-twentieth century."[1] Founded in the 1840s, Dallas was buried beneath decades of railroads, oil economies, and booming businesses. Often missed, is the hidden treasure of Civil War history that is Dallas, Texas. Fueled by a media embellished rumor of northern abolitionists and slave rebellions, the chaos that surrounded The Great Dallas Fire of 1860, thrust the city into a role of political importance, helping lead the state of Texas to secession

The historiography surrounding Dallas is incredibly scarce and often biased. Much comes from the founding families' memoires that have been rewritten either as books, or news articles. An example was Frank M. Cockrell's grandfather, Alexander Cockrell, one of the first settlers in the city. In 1944 Frank Cockrell published a series of articles for *The Dallas Sunday News* called *History of Early Dallas.* The articles helped describe events of early Dallas using information comprised from his grandfather's memoires. Most commonly seen, are histories like Philip Lindsley's, *A History of Dallas and Greater Vicinity* (1909), which is a brief description of political events and discourse in Dallas and the surrounding towns. However, modern historians have aimed to increase the studies regarding individual cities of Texas. Michael Phillip's 2006 book, *White Metropolis: Race, Ethnicity, and Religion in Dallas 1841-2001,* attempts to bring Dallas into a bigger picture. It primarily discusses the emergence of racism throughout the city and how major events over a 60-year period affected the white ideology and the effect on today's local society. The most recent study of Dallas' impact on Texas is Donald Reynold's *Texas Terrors: The Slave Insurrection Panic of 1860 and The Secession of the Lower South* (2006), which provides the best example of the Dallas Fire. Reynolds focuses on the political causes for Texas secession, but scarcely explains the deeply rooted racial biases that will contribute to Pryor's ease of mass panic. By combining the racial tensions along with the political influence Dallas had, the city can be seen as a

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[1] Phillips, Michael. *White Metropolis: Race, Ethnicity, and Religion in Dallas, 1841-2001,* (University of Texas Press, 2006), 1.

vital location during the Civil War.

Texas was a late blooming state. Originally part of Mexico, slavery in the region had been protected since the 1500s and compared to its southern counter parts like Georgia and Louisiana slavery in Texas was small.[2] Most of state was comprised of ranches and family farms due to its "blackland soil, universally admitted to be the best in the country."[3] Slaves were few in numbers and often treated better; Dallas offers a great example of Texas' unique slavery. Founded in 1841 by John Neely Bryan, Dallas was a community of small farms, having limited necessity for a large labor force. Slaves in Texas were often respected as kin, like Smith, property of one of the first Dallas families, the Gilberts. Mable Gilbert held just one slave and as far as Dallas historians can tell, Smith was likely related to him. This verdict was reached through the recorded documentation in the 1850 federal census where Smith is claimed as a relative.[4] While certainly areas of Texas such as Galveston, incorporated plantation slavery, for the most part North Texas slavery was relatively tame.

This is not to say that Texas slavery was by any means simple. People like Stephen F. Austin tried consistently to turn Texas into a free territory. Failing in these endeavors, Texas was formally entered into the Union as a slave state in 1845.[5] By this time, the slave population exploded in Dallas. Slaves were now sharing smaller quarters, and clothing diminished in quality.[6] In 1846 Dallas had 45 slaves, by 1850 there were over 200, and within ten more years, the city would increase to over 1,000 slaves.[7] The statewide discussion on slavery began raising more questions, and Dallas County began feeling the national pressures of slavery more than any other Texas town.[8]

Texas was never an equal opportunity state. Its racial ambiguities have almost always dominated its decisions, but the rapid increase in slavery brought with it an upsurge in racial tensions. The first Dallas historian, John Henry Brown, portrayed white elites as progressive, and colored people as savages in his book *History of Dallas County, Texas: From 1837 to 1887*.[9] The ever-growing bias and fears of the white elites

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[2] Campbell, Randolph. *An Empire For Slavery: The Peculiar Institution in Texas 1821-1865* (Louisiana State University Press, 1989), 10.

[3] Hazel, Michael V., *Dallas: A History of Big D* (Texas State Historical Association, 1997), 1.

[4] Sanders, Barrot Stevens, *Dallas, Her Golden Years* (Sanders Press, 1989), 32. (Sanders provides an excellent example of Dallas history through memoires. He researched numerous family accounts and documents to create his narrative. While it is not an academic book it led to the creation of the Dallas Historic Society.)

[5] Campbell, 27.

[6] Campbell, 138-139.

[7] Prince, Dr. Robert, *A History of Dallas From a Different Perspective* (Nortex Press, 1993), 14.

[8] Kimball, Justin F. *Our City: Dallas* (Kessler Plan Association of Dallas, 1927), 25.

[9] Phillips, 4.

would continue to rise and engulf the majority of Dallas citizens, creating an epicenter for media outlets. *The Dallas Herald* was essential in spreading the fears. Created in 1849 by Latimer and Wallace, the newspaper went through several proprietors until the position landed in the lap of a well-known Democratic doctor from Tennessee, Charles R. Pryor.[10] Contributing to the *Herald* long before accepting the editor position, Pryor was a well-known secessionist. In his time as editor, he would push a racially fueled paranoia that circulated Dallas and much of the state of Texas throughout the 1860s.

Dallas was overwhelmingly racist, and like many southern areas in the midst of Civil War, conflict was often stirred by the distress of white elites. Texas had been separating itself by race as early as the 1830s when laws preventing free blacks from settling in certain counties became legal.[11] By adopting such laws, Dallas was attempting to create a "white aristocracy atop a permanent black underclass."[12] To make the racial ideologies worse, reports of black on white violence were publicized in the papers more frequently beginning in the 1850s. The stories of slave murderers were usually embellished to cause an emotional response from readers, even before the emergence of Pryor. However, by the time Pryor became the sole editor of the *Dallas Herald,* Dallas and the surrounding towns were filled with skittish, racially biased whites awaiting the worst.

Charles R. Pryor was extremely instrumental throughout Texas politics. As early as 1857 Pryor was being recognized in Dallas' highly influential Democratic Party.[13] Once he was editor of the *Herald,* Pryor made significant political connections to the editors of the *Austin State Gazette* and other Texas newspapers. Becoming an increasingly powerful Democratic voice in Texas, Pryor's quest for political fame and success were apparent. In 1859, the *Herald* published an update on Colonel M. T. Johnson, a well-known ranger and politician of Tarrant county. The publication stated Johnson's stance on Sam Houston, and that he "WILL NOT SUPPORT HIM."[14] Johnson had no desire for this information to be published, but Pryor willfully ignored his requests and sent the information to his close colleagues. While the *Austin Gazette* still held Pryor in high regards, this would not be the last time that the *Herald* editor would fabricate, or exaggerate a story. Throughout the rest of the 1860s, Charles Pryor remained an important figure in Texas politics. However, Charles R. Pryor was a secessionist, and he was not the only secessionist in a high-level media position. By 1860

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[10] Lindsley, Philip. *A History of Greater Dallas and Vicinity* (A Lewis Publishing Company – Chicago, 1909), 57.

[11] Cockrell, Frank M. *History of Early Dallas* (Dallas Sunday News – originally published weekly installments, 1944), 62.

[12] Philips, 19.

[13] Latimer, James W. "Democracy of Dallas" Dallas Daily Herald, March 21, 1857 Pg. 1.

[14] Marshall, John F. "Col M.T. Johnson Will Not Vote for Gen. Sam Houston". Austin State Gazette, July 30, 1859. Pg. 2.

most of the politicians and editors in Texas were active Democrats, believing secession was essential to Texas. They also agreed, that secession would only occur if there was a unilateral agreement from a major slave state that it was necessary. They decided it had to come out of a severe conflict, one of disastrous conditions, one that creates an emotional response.[15]

Dallas was just barely making its mark when, for several years, Texas experienced a severe drought. The summer of 1860 was perhaps one of the worst drought conditions, "the drought had cut off the crops and left many counties with barely any grain."[16] On July 8, 1860, between 1:00pm and 2:00pm, a fire started in the brand new W. W. Peak drugstore of Dallas County. With the hot conditions, citizens were unable to control the flames and nearly every part of the twenty-year-old town was destroyed. The office of the *Dallas Daily Herald* was the first building to fall victim to the flames, followed by several others of Dallas' most important structures. "The Court House, is the only building left standing on the square."[17] Thanks to the courage of Dallas citizens that rushed together to save the cities' central building. Previously on July 5, Henderson County had burned to the ground.[18] On the same day as Dallas, Denton was also victim to a massive fire and both Tyler and Jefferson saw fires that month. The cause of the fire in Dallas was never determined. According to witness Emma Baird, the fire began in a couple of boxes outside of the drugstore.[19] Michael Phillips stated it began in a trash pile out back, while others simply claim it began somewhere inside the warehouse.[20] Donald Reynolds' *Texas Terrors,* has one of the most supported assumptions when he describes the prairie matches. In several accounts, witnesses were recorded discussing a new match that was extremely flammable and with the hot conditions were known to ignite.[21] Charles R. Pryor however, was about to create a paranoia of northern abolitionists starting slave insurrections in the state.

Tensions were already high for many in Dallas County well before the fires. The onset of the flames increased the pressures. While most of the Dallas population were not slave owners, they had firm beliefs in property rights. With Abraham Lincoln as a possibility for president, people were becoming more fearful by the day. Emma Baird, the daughter of George Baird, a popular Dallas politician at the time of the Great Fire, was one of the few remaining witnesses alive in the 1940s for Frank M. Cockrell to interview for his series *History of Early Dallas*. Baird states that she could still vividly

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[15] Reynolds, Donald E. *Texas Terrors: The Slave Insurrection Panic of 1860 and the Secession of the Lower South* (Louisiana State University Press, 2007), 169-170.

[16] Marshall, John F. "Abolition Conspiracy". Austin State Gazette, September, 1860. Pg. 3.

[17] Marshall, John F. "The Town of Dallas Destroyed". Austin State Gazette, July 14, 1860. Pg. 1.

[18] Marshall, John F. Austin State Gazette, July 7, 1860.

[19] Cockrell, 77.

[20] Phillips, 27.

[21] Reynolds, 201.

recall the fire and its crazy aftermath. The day after the blaze she remembers "small groups of men, with inflamed minds, swearing vengeance on the perpetrators of the crimes, gathered on the street corners, in the streets and in the courthouse."[22] The people of Dallas had begun to protest, but their dissents soon turned to chaos as freedmen were targeted, slaves were punished, and northern Christians were blamed. "Charles R. Pryor, the ultra-southern editor of the Dallas *Herald*, did more than any other individual to spread the panic"[23] Immediately after the destruction of his press, he began writing to other large cities to spread the news of the Dallas arsonists. The first place to receive his letter was the *Austin State Gazette* and on July 14, 1860, it was published. Blame had been placed on northern abolitionists.

Racial prejudice was typically accompanied by a fear of abolitionism. Any time freedom for blacks was on the horizon, whites feared the violence that could follow. In his letters regarding the destruction of Dallas, Pryor claimed that the Lincoln administration had been sending missionaries from the newly entered free state of Kansas. "Men – aye, and women too; have gone there to tamper with the slaves. They put arms, ammunition, and poison in their hands, and excite the slaves to use them in the destruction of the whites."[24] The northern abolitionists were said to preach freedom to slaves and claimed to be free they must turn against their masters. This was an easy assumption for Pryor to make. Dallas was already anxious, and multiple negative mentions of Kansas had appeared in the *Dallas Herald* prior to the fire. August of 1859 was the first time there was mention of preachers and by the end of 1859 Kansas was everywhere in the papers. The rumors stemmed from other Southern states; but tensions in Dallas were so high, a public meeting was called to discuss the problems associated with the Kansas preachers well before they stepped foot on Texas soil. Later that same month, a heated article showed Pryor's disgust with Kansas when the state allowed the admission of black children into schools.[25] On countless other occasions in 1859 the *Herald* put emphasis on northern abolitionists and slave insurrections. At the same Dallas meeting in August 1859, a captured preacher, charged with starting a slave rebellion, by the name of Solomon McKinney was said to have escaped.[26] Local John Bell, well known as a "southern man with northern principles," was also heavily critiqued for his opinions on slavery.[27] News outlets throughout the state of Texas, led by Pryor and other Democratic editors, were feeding stories of abolitionist motives in order to gain political strength. But what occurred was a fierce level of disorder because of deeply embedded social apprehensions.

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[22] Cockrell, 76.

[23] Campbell, 225.

[24] Pryor, Charles R. "The Texas Excitement". The Dallas Herald, October 24, 1860. Pg. 1.

[25] Pryor, Charles. "The Climate of Texas" *Dallas Daily Herald*, August 17, 1859. Pg. 2.

[26] Pryor, Charles – The Dallas Daily Herald – October 24, 1860.

[27] Pryor, Charles – The Dallas Daily Herald – October 24, 1860.

Protests throughout Dallas turned violent. Slaves had begun to be whipped and questioned about the origins of the fire. Northerners were told to steer clear of the south, while free blacks were hunted and hanged. With the type of prior ideologies and media stories conducted, Dallasites concluded that the fire had to of been started by disobedient, rebellious, and dangerous slaves at the hands of northern abolitionists. The chaos had spun so out of control that a judge from Waxahachie, Nat Buford, was called to assist. Buford asked for there to be a just investigation on the perpetrators, but Dallas citizens were too far into the paranoia to listen. The Committee of Vigilance was created in order to discover the "arsonists", slave owners were forced to punish all of their slaves, and new limitations were put onto freedmen.[28] In the midst of the panic, three well-known Dallas slaves were forced to take the blame.

The unfortunate circumstances of three slaves named Cato, Sam Smith, and Pat Jennings' lives likely lead to their convictions. Both Cato and Sam Smith were owned by the Miller family. Uncle Cato, as he was known, was a highly regarded slave with an immense amount of respect around the city, and given much more freedom than most. Sam on the other hand, was notorious around the town for constantly stealing, standing up to white men, and creating issues. Similarly, Pat Jennings was usually in the center of trouble as well. It is feasible the Committee targeted these men because of their positions in society.[29] On July 24, 1860 Cato, Sam, and Pat were hanged on the banks of the Trinity River and buried in the gallows, signaling a continued period of violence and destruction throughout North and Central Texas.[30]

On August 4, 1860, the *San Antonio Ledger* published an article about the hangings of Cato, Sam, and Pat. In this periodical, they claim there could have been as many as ten perpetrators, and that up to twenty more "negroes" were in line to be hanged.[31] In the same issue, the Ledger mentions insurrection plots in Ellis, Tarrant, Denton, Pilot Point, and mentions a fire in Waxahachie. The "Mob Law" was soon passed that allowed punishment on anyone thought to be involved in a possible insurrection.[32] The *Austin State Gazette* commented that Texas was under a "mobacratic" attitude. In September, the *Herald* called upon men to travel to Dallas to for assistance with strangers from the north as chaos had ensued. However, blacks were not the only ones targeted, preachers from the north were in many ways in more danger than slaves and freedmen. "The circumstances which have recently occurred are sufficient to warrant the citizens and public authorities of this county in using the utmost vigilance to prevent mischief."[33] The fears of abolitionists were increasing as fires engulfed the

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[28] Phillips, 29.

[29] Phillips, 30.

[30] Marshall, John F. "Wide Awake". Austin State Gazette, August 4, 1860. Pg. 7.

[31] Sweet, George H. *San Antonio Ledger*. August 4, 1860. Pg. 2.

[32] Marshall, John F. "State Items" *Austin State Gazette*, October 13, 1860, Pg. 1.

[33] Marshall, John F. "Wide Awake" *Austin State Gazette*, August 4, 1860, Pg. 2.

state, and vigilante committees rose up in nearly every county. A letter was discovered after the fires in Denton, addressed to Andrew Bewley, a preacher from the north, who settled sixteen miles north of Forth Worth.[34] Attention was immediately placed on Bewley as the prime suspect for starting the Texas slave insurrections. The letter, which will later be regarded as the Bailey Letter, "developed a plan to assail the institution of slavery in Texas, not only by insurrection and the murder of slave owners; but by desolating the whole State, - destroying stores and towns and rendering the people helpless" and was signed by William H. Bailey.[35] Those close to Bewley pointed out several problems with the letter and contradictions in the accusations, including the fact that he did not preach against slavery.[36] Anthony Bewley was hanged on September 13, 1860 but at a depressing cost.[37] People were in panic mode, media and secessionists like Pryor, were fueling the flames from the ashes of a burned city.

The *Dallas Herald* resumed press in October of 1860. The violence was settling down, but stories still fixated on the prevalent racial tensions that dominated Dallas citizens. On November 14, 1860, as most newspapers do the week after elections, the *Herald* was engrossed by the government and what the new "Black Republican President" could bring to the nation.[38] Already repulsed by the Lincoln administration, Dallasites were distraught over the results. The *Herald* calls the election "sickening" and later predicts the dissolution of the Union stating the North and South would be bitter rivals.[39] Beyond that, "grave fears were felt by many and openly expressed by the *Herald* that Texas would become Africanized."[40] Directly after the election, Dallas saw another onset of protests. Farmers entered the courthouse with their daughters who proceeded to hold up banners showing the names of every state in the Union that disagreed with the election of Abraham Lincoln. These protests were not violent like the aftermath of the fires, but continued until politicians could reach a conclusion. Eventually, it was decided "the people of Dallas County will not submit to an administration of the government by Abraham Lincoln, and that we call upon our state to arise, declare their independence and prepare to defend their liberties."[41] The city of Dallas, along with a sizable portion of the state of Texas was in the middle of chaos from statewide suspicions of fire based slave rebellions. Lincoln, who wanted to end slavery, came into power at the very time the suspected rebellions were occurring. The pandemonium that

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[34] *Handbook of Texas Online*, Donald E. Reynolds, "Bewley, Anthony," accessed December 11, 2016, http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/fbe71.

[35] Marshall, John F. "State Items" *Austin State Gazette*, November 17, 1860, Pg. 1.

[36] Reynolds, 168.

[37] Reynolds, 152.

[38] Marshall, John F. "Abolition Conspiracy". Austin State Gazette, September 16, 1860. Pg. 1

[39] Pryor, Charles. "The Election" Dallas Daily Herald [Dallas]. November 14, 1860, Pg. 3.

[40] Lindsley, 78.

[41] Lindsley, 64.

resulted was too much for the citizens of Dallas. Anxieties reached an all time high as farmers feared the news reaching their property and increasing the already abundant madness. Dallas was already preparing to leave the Union.

Dallas was historically a center for trade; but through the aftermath of the Great Fire, became an epicenter for news. Now, it was becoming a domineering force in the resistance against the new Republican President. People around Dallas, and eventually most of Texas, began to show their support by wearing a blue ribbon with a gold star, representing the priority of state over Union. On December 12, 1860, a statewide convention was called in order to discuss the protesting state and the ongoing destruction. Closely mocking the political meetings in Dallas, the final resolution was the "sovereign will of the people of Texas."[42] The debate for Texas to leave the Union was being put into the hands of the people. Those that signed the final draft included sixty of Dallas' top politicians such as Captain John J. Good and Mayor of Dallas George W. Guess. This was far more than any other county in attendance.[43] Such elite names and significant numbers show a certain political influence Dallas had on the rest of the state.

Texas was still a frontier in the 1860s, and in many ways was inaccessible to the Union during the Civil War, enabling the state to witness little actual fighting. Being key spots for battles against Mexico, cities like Austin and San Antonio were far more widely known among southern states. Dallas, on the other hand, was a menial trading town, until it was thrown into political dominance following the fires. Alongside its new position, Dallas had no major confederate outposts, it was relatively safe, and much easier to access for confederate leaders than areas like Austin, Houston, and San Antonio. Beginning in 1861, prior to Texas seceding from the Union, Dallas held crucial Confederate meetings of "Southern Independence."[44] Dallas' vitality was proven when in 1861 the ratification of provisional president Jeffrey Davis, occurred in one of the cities' southern meetings. By March of 1861, in the annual state conference held in Austin, the state voted to secede from the Union and join the confederacy.[45] The fire may seem menial to history today, but is one of the most prudent elements to understanding the past of Dallas and the Lone Star State. The impact of the fire trickled through the interconnecting web of Texas counties launching Dallas into a place of leadership. Yet, none of this would have been possible without the brilliant, and unethical, methods of secessionist editors and politicians like Charles R. Pryor. Well before Pryor had become editor of the *Herald* he made his political opinions well known. Which was a standpoint that most citizens of Dallas, especially the white elites,

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[42] Pryor, Charles. *The Dallas Herald*. December 26, 1860.

[43] Lindsley, 64.

[44] Lindsley, 68.

[45] Prince, 20.

agreed with. Nevertheless, through the statewide Panic of 1860, Pryor utilized his position in the media, and the prevalent racial biases of the populous, to sway the opinions of the masses. Successfully placing the city of Dallas in an influential role in politics. This may not have been Pryor's initial goal, but the already ubiquitous racial and social opinions of Dallas citizens made the racism and fallacies transparent.

Newspapers can provide historians with valuable primary source information, but the news has almost always been finicky. Since the dawn of press, legitimacy of information has been questioned. Even today, President Donald Trump fights against "fake news" making the claim that journalists rarely publish the truth. Texas in the 1850s and 1860s was no different. Leaning largely on the information provided by Charles Pryor, newspapers continuously ran stories with biased opinions and embellished truths. Pryor was overzealous on many occasions, for example, the early send off of Colonel M.T. Johnson's letter and the Bailey letter. The Bailey letter was one of the most circulated pieces of evidence in the papers that demonstrated northern abolitionists impeding on Texas farmers. However, it was largely falsified. The biggest issue with the Bailey letter was that there was no record of a William H. Bailey, and no abolitionist would be naïve enough to list so much detail in a letter.[46] Andrew Bewley was not an abolitionist, but was tried and hanged as one. In a piece of evidence hidden from the public until after the hanging, was a letter from Bewley to his wife stating "I feel no guilt, from the fact that I have done nothing to cause that feeling."[47] Regardless, people continued to follow the fallacious news stories even when presented with evidence disproving their claim. Uncertainties of slave rebellions were still flaring out of control.

As the abolitionist fears continued to deepen in Texan's minds, Pryor reached out to the north pleading that they stay out of southern affairs. "We respectfully ask our Northern friends – our Northern Methodist friends, especially, by what law was it that men went through Texas tampering with the Slavism inciting them rebellion, insurrection, and murder, and that they might accomplish these things providing them with arms, ammunition, and poison?"[48] Unexpectedly, the north responded, furthering the false rumors sparked in the Dallas press. "Thus it is the South, virtually inert and inventionless, has lagged behind the North, and is now weltering in the cesspool of ignorance and degradation."[49] The north was quick to dismiss the claims of missionaries sent to create slave insurrections, but southerners would never cease to place the blame on the north. By the mid 1860s, the fires had died out, but the aftermath continued to shape the culture of North Texas and the history that developed from it.

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[46] Reynolds 158.

[47] Reynolds, 163.

[48] Pryor, Charles. "The Texas Excitement" *Dallas Daily Herald,* October 24, 1860, Pg. 2.

[49] Pryor, Charles. "The Stupid Masses in the South" *Dallas Daily Herald,* January 4, 1861, Pg. 2.

History tends to leave out the undesirable events. The details surrounding the fires of Dallas fit into that adverse category. Developed on the extreme racial ideologies and fears of abolitionist rebellions, editors were able to create a paranoia from The Great Dallas Fire that shook the entire state. With embellished tales and inaccurate facts engulfing the newspapers, historians in the past found the events to be unworthy of much attention. Furthermore, society has never been ready to accept the past for what it is and to build from our mistakes. Besides Donald E. Reynolds *Texas Terrors*, which is largely forgotten, the last time this story received recognition was in 1981 when over 200 people protested to memorialize the three slaves, Cato, Sam, and Pat, that were hanged. To no avail, the endeavor failed. Twenty years after the fight for civil rights, society was still not yet ready to embrace such a horrific past. Is it time now? Has society progressed enough that we can begin to memorialize our disgraceful pasts? Without knowledge and respect for the horrors of history, the future seems bleak. Hidden histories like the Dallas fire are incessantly buried beneath what is deemed important. However, our society continues to be fractured, and progress requires the understanding of both the beneficial and destructive aspects of our pasts.