Most African Americans were brought as slaves to work the larger plantations of Fayette County. They formed a significant portion of the area’s population by the time of the Civil War. Following emancipation, many former slaves remained on the land as sharecroppers, while some with more skills and education enjoyed a brief period of political power. In the 1890s, a white backlash stripped African Americans of many political and social gains. Through it all, the African American community was sustained by the pillars of family, religion, and education.

Interviews conducted during the 1930s by the federal government’s Works Progress Administration [WPA] gave former slaves a voice to tell their own history. Silvia King was kidnapped and sold at auction in New Orleans to a Fayette County planter. Her narrative evokes the horror and degradation of the slave experience:

“I was married and had three children before I was stolen from my husband. . . . I worked like a slave were in that boat forever, but we came to land, and I was put on the block and sold. I found out afterward from my white folks it was in New Orleans. We were all chained, and they stripped all our clothes off, and the folks who were going to buy us came around and felt us all over. If any . . . didn’t want to take their clothes off, the man got a long, black whip and cut them up bad. I was sold to a planter who had a big plantation in Fayette County, right here in Texas. I was scared and couldn’t say anything—cuz I couldn’t speak English. They chained us together and marched us up near La Grange in Texas. Mamie Jones had gone ahead, and the overseer marched us. That was an awful time, because we were all chained up, and what one did all had to do when one got tired or sick the rest had to drag and carry him. . . . Mamie Jones and old miss found out about my cooking and took me into the house to cook for them . . . but I was a very young woman when I was young, and when they got to a tight place, I helped out in the fields.”

Silvia King interview, ca. 1930s. “Texas Story for youth, WPA Records

During the years of the Republic of Texas (1836-1845) the slave population increased by 450 percent. By the eve of the Civil War, slaves constituted a third of the population of Fayette County. Thirteen of them belonged to Samuel K. Lewis at Winedale. The plantation bell regulated the slave’s work day from “can see to can’t.” Few images exist of slavery in the area, but this compelling portrait shows two former slaves from neighboring Austin County.

Following the Civil War, African Americans in Fayette County and surrounding areas allied with German and Czech political groups to achieve a degree of political power on the local and state levels. They found particular acceptance among the German and Czech immigrants, most of whom had cared nothing for slavery, secession, or the war. Neighboring Colorado and Washington counties remained under Republican control until the 1880s, largely as a result of black-German coalitions. Symbolic of the political and social relationship that developed between area blacks and Europeans is this studio scene where former slave Tom Lee and Czech farm worker Fred Svecina share a drink together. A white Democratic insurgency throughout the region, however, drove these alliances out of power through violence and intimidation.

Although economic and political repression of the 1890s and early 1900s conspired to hold back their progress, African American communities of Fayette County relied on the sustaining institutions of the family, fraternal societies, and the church. The roots of the Rhone Family, for example, ran deep in the Winedale area, where they farmed, did business, and taught school for several generations. Early portraits in the family papers reflect a solid middle class life. African American churches of central Texas served as moral and social centers for the community.