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Lafayette Walker: Not a Republican Lapdog, but a Pitmaster

Lafayette Walker (1822 – 1902), an enslaved black man in Tennessee before the Civil War, became a soldier for the Union in 1861. After the war, he was regarded as a political activist, as a community leader capable of controlling who the next mayor of San Antonio would become, blacksmith, and a “barbecue artist.” The argument here does not lie in what exactly his bbq tasted like or what a black man was doing identifying as a republican. The argument goes much deeper and shows that he did not care he was black or a slave, but instead he showed a black man could become powerful in politics and not some republican lapdog. Who was Lafayette Walker as a member of the San Antonio community and what exactly his life was like as a political activist?

This is to say that what kind of life did this man have, but also what work did he do for the community of San Antonio. His work with bbq is a history of its own, but at the same time his work in his community is also vital to note. Given that the south in general has an almost religious relationship to bbq itself, it helps illustrate how important it is to culture which in turn shows its relationship to community. Even beyond that there is a political aspect to Lafayette’s life. He was a black man who was a republican, but what did that mean for him? Was the fact that he was a black man a hindrance to him being effective at gaining political recognition or did this help his case? The life of Lafayette Walker demonstrates that though his life began in

slavery, he paved a way for black people to assert agency in politics while contributing to Black food ways in San Antonio.

Slavery in Tennessee

In Tennessee, slaves were denied the right to own property in 1834, including horses, land, cattle, or any personal possessions.¹ Slaves were also not allowed to use any type of arms unless they were permitted by their masters for the sole purposes of hunting.² Slavery here was not a different case compared to other parts of the country, but by understanding that Tennessee was no exception helps understand where Walker came from. He lived in Tennessee for roughly 27 years which means he did spend his childhood enslaved in Tennessee.

While it is not known exactly how Walker attained his freedom, we can guess that he moved to Texas around 1849 based on the 1867 voter registration list.³ He lived in the city of San Antonio for 12 years.⁴ So it is possible that he gain his freedom by going to Texas or that he gained his freedom and then moved to Texas. The more likely possibility is that he moved to Texas because his master had moved to Texas from Tennessee. Considering there was a section of the Underground Railroad that did branch off to Texas, this is also a possibility as to how he came into Texas, especially given the conditions of slavery in Tennessee or any southern state for that matter. Walker sought to not just escape for freedom, but to make a difference.

Black Men in the Union Army

¹ Imes, William Lloyd. "The Legal Status of Free Negroes and Slaves in Tennessee." *The Journal of Negro History*, Jul., 1919, Vol. 4, No. 3 (Jul., 1919), pp. 257.

² Ibid. 257.

³ Texas, U.S., Voter Registration Lists, 1867-1869 for Fayette Walker. Ancestry.com

⁴ Ibid.

Books discussing the Civil War and specifically about black men fighting in the Civil War reads very racial and diminutive of the service of black men. In *The Journal of Negro History*, “Negroes showed a ‘marked eagerness’ to volunteer...child-like nature....A shining rifle and a uniform were irresistible.”⁵ The author then goes on to explain that slaves would then cease to come forward because the novelty no longer amazed them.⁶ Given that they treated them like children and already stripped them of their humanity by being slaves already then it only makes sense they would not want to serve. They were given a paltry sum for their hard work and dedication. Even though their freedom was promised, they were still not treated equally. To call slaves child-like insinuates some sort of disingenuous call to arms so the Union would then need a different tactic to gain slaves in the military. W.E.B. DuBois wrote that the idea of slaves to fight and participate was not to stop working, but instead it was to stop the economy of the plantation system.⁷ The stereotype of blacks being passive or domesticated under their masters was a concept that no longer had relevance in history. Instead what it showed was a resilience and willingness to serve when freedom was on the line.

Walker most likely enlisted for a similar reason because he saw firsthand the effects of slavery in Tennessee and Texas and knew he could fight against the injustices of slavery. Walker and his brethren in the cause shared a similarity in continuing to assert agency within the broad scope of the American Dream. After the war would end and slaves would gain their freedom and Walker would go on to live in Bexar County for the rest of his life and play an active role in the City of San Antonio.

Location in Bexar County

⁵ Mohr, Clarence L. "Bibliographical Essay: Southern Blacks in the Civil War: A Century of Historiography." *The Journal of Negro History* 59, no. 2 (1974): p. 183. Accessed April 7, 2021.

⁶ Ibid, p. 183

⁷ Ibid, p. 185

Walker's main story comes from his life in San Antonio as a political activist, community activist, and BBQ Pitmaster. There is an 1874 Freisleben Map that gives an approximate location as to where his property of residence and blacksmith shop were.

The Freisleben map shows where Lafayette possibly lived, given the information the deed to his land had. The two red arrows on the map show the land was subdivided which fits the theory of where his place of residence was located.⁸ The land and residency was placed on the deed itself, but Walker's residence and blacksmith shop in the city directory is listed as being two separate locations. This map is difficult to read, but it does fit the directory and details of the land deed enough to go off of this theory. His land deed does state the location being northwest of the main plaza and north of the Alazan Creek, a rough penmanship that shows the plot of his land coincides with the map.

The deed stated that a Lottie Walker bought the property from an M.A. Maverick, who was deceased by the Bexar County Sheriff at the time.⁹ The deed grants land a mile and three quarters North West of the main plaza on the Alazan Creek.¹⁰ This land ties in to the Dignowity lands that were a predominantly owned by black men land at the time. What is impressive is that this land given to Lafayette Walker was forever his unless he sold it and it was allowed to be inherited by his heirs if he had any. Of course purchasing this land is also impressive, but he was also a private in the Civil war so it would make sense he had the money to buy it. He is referred to as a colonel in the *San Antonio Light* articles and by members of the community, but he never attained this rank given he was a black man. This could speak to the level of respect the community had for him.

⁸ 1874 Freisleben Map

⁹ *Land Deed. July 21, 1879*, Bexar County Clerk's Office, 1879

¹⁰ *Ibid*

Now while his respect could have been derived for a number of reasons to earn that title, it is possible it was a mix of things. One would be his military service that showed he was a battle hardened man who was well regarded for having served. The other reason would be his ability to control votes in San Antonio politics in such a manner as to control who the mayor would be. Walker had lived in San Antonio for over a decade and was a property owner and was a respected business owner who was also a veteran. This only shows more reasons why his level of respect was so high and why he was able to lead the party from the sidelines, but effectively from the sidelines. This all leads to his political activism and participation in the community of San Antonio and just how influential he was.

BBQ and the Culture of BBQ

How does the story of man who grew up a slave, served in the Civil War, and gained a prominent spot in the political life of San Antonio relate to BBQ? The BBQ aspect of Walkers life is based on cultural perseverance and community. The cultural aspect is how BBQ has been a staple in not only southern culture, but how it has persevered and relates to black culture as a whole. The community aspect comes in when discussing the importance of how BBQ has always tied community's people from all walks of life together. First is the history of BBQ and how it still connects to Walkers life.

The origin of BBQ can be found from the time man could put meat over a fire and use wood of some kind to help smoke it. In Kimberly Kasper's "Preserve and Add Flavor: Barbecue as Resistance in Memphis." *In Black Food Matters: Racial Justice in the Wake of Food Justice*, she writes about the importance of BBQ as a means of resistance. The reason that this source is used is to show the way barbecue is more than just a way to prepare food, but it is also a cultural topic that can tie in to racial justice. This is because of how heavily ingrained barbecue is in

certain parts of black culture and it is evidenced strongly in Memphis. Barbecue is a result of finding out different ways to cook meat and the cultures that have added to this cooking style. “Contemporary barbecue culture, as explicitly mentioned in Texas, embodies a model of multiculturalism that has overlooked that situated knowledge of African communities and their contributions.¹¹ Kasper discusses how barbecue has almost been claimed by the “backyard bro” and forgotten the origins of barbecue. Barbecue originated in native cultures from all over the U.S., but the black history behind it is that it was a part of slave diet and a big part of the African American identity at the time. It would make sense that Walker would be able to cook BBQ if it was such a staple part of slave diets. BBQ is a broad overall food way and can be cooked in various ways as long as it involves wood and smoked meat. But it is the importance of BBQ being able to bring a sense of community and tradition that is important.

There is a level of passion that the food world has for barbecue that seems almost religious like and places a heavy and significant value to it. The cultural significance of this cooking style is not something discussed here, but what is discussed is the various interpretations barbecue has because of the cultural diversity. It also does play on the importance that cuisine has on society and that it is almost like its own language and that it is capable of speaking to almost anyone¹². Barbecue is no exception in just how important it is across America as an icon, but also the detail that different regions have that differentiates their barbecue over someone else’s. BBQ is able to bring people together and even if people might disagree on politics or religion, that seems to disappear when there is a juicy brisket or savory rack of ribs in the room.

¹¹ Kasper, Kimberly. ““PRESERVE AND ADD FLAVOR””: Barbecue as Resistance in Memphis.” In *Black Food Matters: Racial Justice in the Wake of Food Justice*, edited by GARTH HANNA and REESE ASHANTÉ M., p. 185. Minneapolis; London: University of Minnesota Press, 2020

¹² Schmid, Albert W. A., Jessica Ebelhar, and Loreal “Butcher Babe” Gavin. “Barbecue.” In *Burgoo, Barbecue, and Bourbon: A Kentucky Culinary Trinity*, 39-58. Lexington, Kentucky: University Press of Kentucky, 2017.

Food is language all human beings can speak that is devoid of color or culture and it helps bring a sense of community to any setting. Walker saw this and when the gatherings for freedman's day or Juneteenth came around, it is possible that Walker was willing and always able to cook BBQ for the gatherings.

Political Activism and Community Participation

One of the documents that helps show his involvement in politics is a newspaper article, "Registration of Voters", January 2, 1895, *San Antonio Light*, 1895. This article's main purpose in being on this list is that it shows just how active in registering for voting the Walker was and that he was a very active member in politics for the Republican Party. The article mainly talks about how the first day was not a large turnout for registration, but they did not that color and nationality was mentioned. One of the first people to be registered was Lafayette Walker and he was listed as a Negro for his race. His address here does not really match the location of the map before or the deed so it is possible he moved or did not own the property that he has in the deed vs the registration..

An actual document that further supports this is, *Texas, U.S., Voter Registration Lists, 1867-1869 for Fayette Walker*. Ancestry, 1867 – 1869. This document just shows the details of his voter registration around the first time that he could vote. Regardless, this document provides further proof of his residence in San Antonio and how long he had lived here up until that point which was 18 years he had lived in the state, 12 in the county, and 4 in the precinct.¹³ This helps provide a timetable for his birthdate as well since no birth certificate has been found so far in my research, which is estimated to be around 1822. Which makes sense given that slaves did not have birth certificates. This document helps show his commitment to voting in

¹³ *Texas, U.S., Voter Registration Lists, 1867-1869 for Fayette Walker*. Ancestry, 1867 – 1869

elections, but also helps give us a better idea as to where he was located in San Antonio. The bulk and meat that help show his political activism lie in a few *San Antonio Light* articles.

In 1884, an election for mayor was coming up and a workmen's club convened to nominate delegates to run for the election.¹⁴ Credentials from multiple people were presented and discussions took place that would determine who was best to run for the position. One such member in attendance who was not running was Lafayette Walker. Walker was an extremely renowned individual in the black community, he was a blacksmith, former soldier in the Civil War, and also a BBQ pit master. But more than that he was a staunch republican political activist whose opinion was sought after by many members of the community and his opinion held sway over who would get elected. This meeting was no exception, in the first mention of Walker being there it was mentioned when he voiced his opinion, attention was drawn to him. Finally when people were ready to go home when the meeting was taking too long he demanded the ballots be counted immediately to settle on a nomination instead of it being suspended.¹⁵ However, he was still called to attention by the leader of this meeting and that he needed to reign in his behavior. This was due to him being vocal, but it was also possibly because he was a black man in the Republican Party, and his fellow members thought he could be controlled. However, that was never the case with Walker and he continued to be outspoken and a very vocal individual. He asserted agency as a vital member to the community as well as being a prominent political activist. This would not be the only time he was seen in a political meeting and he would attend more and only a few were actually documented.

¹⁴ *A Lively Time: The Circus Yesterday Afternoon at Krisch's Hall. December 31, 1884*, San Antonio Light, 1884.

¹⁵ Ibid

A convention for democrats was held inside the courthouse and spectators were allowed, but prominent members from the Republican Party attended as well.¹⁶ These members were also from the workingmen's committee, and notably, Lafayette Walker attended as well. His opinion was respected, but Democrats were still wary of him because of his presence. At one point an independent attendant who knew of Walkers reputation called for him to make a speech about the ongoing meeting. This was met with people calling for the independent man to sit down repeatedly.¹⁷ This is partially conjecture, but given his prominence in the Republican Party, it is possible that Walker's ability to speak was strong enough to sway the crowd. Why else would there be many who booed for showed their displeasure for this man? It is because they knew what kind of influence he held, which was enough to control who the next mayor of San Antonio would become at the time. Since he was a workers union leader, he knew the ins and outs of the working man's life and used that to his party's advantage. One more recent article, one as of 2017 briefly mentions Walker as being almost like a mafia boss.

In Vincent T. Davis' article, "Historic African American neighborhood evolved into San Antonio's East Side," mentions this in a pretty good manner. This secondary source is fairly recent and recounts the history of San Antonio and the black community that is tied to it. Lafayette Walker does make an appearance here and the way he is mentioned seems almost like mob boss. "Wielded control of votes...Walker literally controlled who could become mayor in San Antonio during the Reconstruction period¹⁸. This only goes to show that Walker is even mentioned on occasion, albeit a rare occasion, as being a power house of political activism. The *San Antonio Light* article's further evidence this by how often he is mentioned at being at

¹⁶ *City Election: The Democrats in Convention Assembled, January 6, 1885*, San Antonio Light, 1885.

¹⁷ Ibid

¹⁸ Davis, T. Vincent. Historic African American neighborhood evolved into San Antonio's East Side, December 14, 2017. San Antonio Express News. 2017.

political gatherings. Given his prominence would mean that he should be partially mentioned even more than this and he was.

Kenneth Mason who published his work, *African American History and Culture: African Americans and Race Relations in San Antonio, Texas, 1867 – 1937*. This book mentions Walker many times and shows that he was a blacksmith and member of the workingmen's community, which was heavily republican. It also evidences the political activism and prowess allowed him to take charge when needed to make sure the right people were elected in to office. He was also mentioned as being a member of the Loyal Union League.¹⁹ Walker was active since 1867 in politics, the primary sources only help substantiate this claim with the news articles and his voter registration and show his level of involvement. Walker was also involved in organizing Juneteenth celebrations, leader of the Loyal Union League, and agent of the Austin-based Freedmen's Press.²⁰ There is also a newspaper article that does further show his involvement in such celebrations as well that give proof to his involvement.

In the article, *Levelheaded: Henry Clay Smith Gives the Colored Brother Wholesome Wisdom*, it mentions Walker's involvement in community celebrations of black heritage. Here one of the committee members, a black man by the name of Henry Clay Smith, is talking about the upcoming meeting and committee. This would be formed for the thirty first celebration of the Emancipation Proclamation and that he is proud of the outpouring of support. This is from members of the community and even white members who do not condone slavery and celebrate alongside each other. What is so important about this is the fact that Lafayette Walker is

¹⁹ Mason, Kenneth. *African American History and Culture: African Americans and Race Relations in San Antonio, Texas, 1867 – 1937*, Edited by Graham Russell Hodges. Garland Publishing 1998.

²⁰ Ibid.

mentioned as being on the first committee for the celebration in 1866.²¹ Even more notable here is immediately mentioning free barbecue that was served as a result of the first celebration. It is possible that Walker cooked barbecue and served his community. In a few of the available sources, when there is barbecue and community mentioned, Walkers name is also mentioned. The next article that mentions his participation is one that also shows off his ability as an orator.

The article is, *Freedman's Day: The Twenty – Fourth Anniversary of the Freedom of the Negro Race Today*. A lot of black members of the community took to the streets to attend this festival as well. Even black people outside the community attended and crowded the resorts near the area the festival was held.²² Lafayette Walker was one of the orators that was speaking at this festival as well. No food was explicitly mentioned, just that games took place on the tennis court and baseball games so it is unknown if he also cooked for this occasion. Though his ability to cook is not particularly mentioned in this article, it does help show that they wanted him not only to possibly organize it, but to also speak here. At the committee for the democrat party they wanted him to speak as well in the earlier part of this paper. So it is possible that his ability to speak was well regarded, which speaks that he was more than a blacksmith. There is still another article that does show another gathering that Walker was a part of that does mention BBQ again that can tie Walker to possibly being the cook for this event as well.

That article was, *The Colored Citizens Emancipation Celebration at Fest's Garden, June 14, 1889*. This festival was held to celebrate the emancipation proclamation, food was made, described as a feast. It would be no surprise if BBQ was not cooked by Lafayette Walker given that he was also known for his skill at BBQ. He was primarily there to serve as one of the

²¹ *Levelheaded: Henry Clay Smith Gives the Colored Brother Wholesome Wisdom, May 9, 1897*, San Antonio Light, 1897.

²² *Freedman's Day: The Twenty – Fourth Anniversary of the Freedom of the Negro Race Today*. June 19, 1889, San Antonio Light, 1889.

speakers as well as read part of the Proclamation. This shows that his skill at speaking was on par with other professors, Doctors, and reverends for him to be one of the speakers present at this festival. It also shows that his involvement in his community was a constant part of his life no matter what aspect it was in.

One interesting thing to add about Walker, that is mostly conjecture, is since he was a blacksmith he could have possibly made his own equipment. To make BBQ you need some sort of pit or grill as we know today, and to do so you need to have someone who knows how to shape metal to fit that requirement. Walker was a blacksmith so it is possible that he made his own smoker or type of grill at the time for BBQ purposes. The other aspect in learning how to BBQ is to know the exact style and flavor needed to make it. The origin of BBQ was possibly part of the slave diet early on in the slave culture of the United States. Given that Walker was a slave it is possible that he learned this craft and process while he was still a slave in Tennessee. Having learned the craft of smithing coupled with knowledge BBQ meant that he had a great understanding of what was needed to make BBQ. The next section will primarily discuss the importance of black men in politics, but also the Republican Party and how they were able to assert agency. Walker is just one prime example of many who were able to navigate this field, but there were others as well who were able to overcome adversity just as he did.

Black Men in the Republican Party

Black men in the Republican Party were very vocal about asserting their own agency in the party and making sure their voices were heard. They did not wish to make their own party or separate from the herd, but instead wanted to be equals just as much as their fellow white men. The reason for this was because they wanted rights and freedoms owed to them by the very fact they were human beings. One of the best lines of dialogue that exemplifies is from the book,

Black Organizing, Print Advocacy, and Collective Authorship: The Long History of the Colored Conventions Movement. “The greatest riches in all America have arisen from our blood and tears: - and will they drive us from our property and homes which we have earned with our blood?²³” This movement was more than just asking for more rights or more opportunities. This movement was to ask for basic rights and opportunities that were owed to them because they were human beings the same as every white man and woman. This was a very early form of the Civil Rights movement and it showed that this thought of equality was even prevalent pre Civil War Antebellum era. United States History was said to be a history strewn with blood and built upon the bones of thousands of slaves, for that reason it warrants black men and women have equal opportunity.²⁴ This was about Black education, employment, and claims to equal rights even when the opposition or even their own people said they did not²⁵. It is this early form of asserting agency for themselves that shows it did not matter that they were subjugated under the yoke of slavery. Instead this showed that true equality was more than them just being granted their freedom, it also meant they needed to take part in politics.

Lafayette Walker was not part of this the colored convention movement, but his very participation in politics and activism shows he followed through with the essence of the movement. On top of that it was the fact he was also a Republican the same way the Colored Movement organizers were Republican. This was the party they allied themselves with because it was not only the party that granted them their freedom and fought for it. It was also the party that they aligned their ideologies with the most and allowed them some freedoms. However, it

²³ Foreman, P. Gabrielle. "BLACK ORGANIZING, PRINT ADVOCACY, AND COLLECTIVE AUTHORSHIP: The Long History of the Colored Conventions Movement." *In The Colored Conventions Movement: Black Organizing in the Nineteenth Century*, pp26. Edited by Foreman P. Gabrielle, Casey Jim, and Patterson Sarah Lynn, 21-71. CHAPEL HILL: University of North Carolina Press, 2021.

²⁴ Ibid, p. 26

²⁵ Ibid, p. 26

can also be said that this freedom that was granted to them came with the price of subservience, but in a different matter. Instead of being a slave and property to their white masters, some would become slaves to their party. This meant that they would be expected to vote a certain way and not deviate from the party lines if they were given instruction. This was not always the case and black men who could vote would, with the help of their wives who could not, make sure that their voices were heard and they would get their chance to partake in politics. Gabrielle Foreman, the author of "BLACK ORGANIZING, PRINT ADVOCACY, AND COLLECTIVE AUTHORSHIP: The Long History of the Colored Conventions Movement." *In The Colored Conventions Movement: Black Organizing in the Nineteenth Century*, states that.

“In the face of that exclusion, Blacks not only lobbied for full civil rights within political structures that continually spurned them, but also advocated for parallel developments in Black community, capacity, and institution building within the continental United States and outside of it.²⁶”

If Blacks were able to mobilize and gather even before the antebellum period, then it only meant they would be able to do more during antebellum. But was there genuine support from white counterparts who sought to free slaves and was all of it with good intentions?

Walker would also face a similar problem, early on in this paper one of the articles Walker being called to attention and simmer down in his vocal expression of calling for a vote. At the same time he was booed for being called to speak at a Democratic convention for Democrats only because, he was not white (most likely) or a Democrat. However, this is not exclusive to Walker and the aforementioned slavery to the Republican Party was something that happened often. “The GOP enjoyed sustained support from African Americans because of

²⁶ Ibid, p. 30

loyalty to the ‘party of Lincoln’ – a loyalty that would persist for six more decades.²⁷” It was this loyalty that was more than just loyalty, the white men in the Republican Party wanted their allegiance. Regardless of this history, black men and women alike would make their voices heard and further assert their agency within the party and beyond the party. Walker was only one person who exemplified this to such an extent as being a political activist and community activist. One of the parts of his community life was his BBQ cooking skills, which are never expressly detailed, but when BBQ is mentioned, so is Walker. However, BBQ is more than just a food, it is a cultural icon and almost a religious part of history.

Conclusion

Walker was a man who was able to navigate life with purpose and a determination to do better for his fellow man. He was regarded as a political powerhouse, well regarded speaker, respected individual, and the BBQ artist. This showed that he, as a black man and former slave asserted his agency and even dominated politics from the sidelines without ever having to get explicitly hands on. By just being involved showed that regardless of the level in which a black person is involved in politics, it matters so long as they get involved. He did this to make sure that all black men and women had an opportunity to take part in the way they were governed and held every right to do so. Though his name is not widely known in history, his story is important in showing the agency that blacks asserted even as early as he did within politics. He exemplified the spirit and determination of Blacks who sought out to make a name for themselves or just wanted to have a piece of the American Dream the same way they could have a piece of BBQ.

²⁷ Hughey, Matthew W., and Gregory S. Parks. "The Grand Old Party and African Americans: A Brief Historical Overview." In *The Wrongs of the Right: Language, Race, and the Republican Party in the Age of Obama*, pp. 19. New York; London: NYU Press, 2014.

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