

Caleb Thomas' Log Cabin By John Benedict

On a bluff overlooking the Cibolo Creek in Boerne there stands today a small one-room log cabin built by Caleb Thomas between 1910 and 1918.¹ Most of what we know of Caleb is what he told others—his oral history. Caleb was born into a life of enslavement in about 1848 in or near Vicksburg, Mississippi.² He was an African-American who served as a house boy to this owner. His owner did not set his slaves free in 1863 as dictated by Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation, rather he set Caleb and the rest of his slaves free in 1865 at the end of the Civil War. Buying and selling African-Americans into enslavement in the USA had been a practice beginning about 1619 in Jamestown.³ In 1863 there were an estimated 4 million enslaved African-Americans in the USA. In Texas about 30% of the population was estimated to have been enslaved African-Americans.



Caleb's Cabin about 2016
The fire place is on the north side of the cabin.
Photo by Mark Holly

When Caleb Thomas was set free he was about 18 years old, and he walked from Vicksburg to Galveston.⁴ We do not know how he arrived in San Antonio or the circumstances under which he was hired to work for Dr. John Bennett (or Bonnett) Herff (1878-1959), the son of Dr. John Adolph Herff (1850-1882) and the grandson of Dr. Ferdinand Ludwig von Herff (1820-1912). There is a Historic Marker for Dr. Ferdinand L. Herff located at 33 Herff Rd. near his Boerne summer home, now part of the Cibolo Nature Center and Historic Herff Farm.

Dr. Ferdinand Herff at one time owned much of the land around and south of Boerne. He gave each of his sons a piece of land to build a summer home on along what is now Herff Rd. and Old San Antonio Road. John Bennett Herff received the land when his father, Dr. John A. Herff, died suddenly at 33 years old from appendicitis. All three were medical doctors in San Antonio.

In 1902 Dr. John B. Herff married Florence Harris (1880-1953) in St. John's Episcopal Church, in St. Louis, where she was born and raised. After marriage Florence came to live with John in San Antonio. By 1910 John B. Herff's practice had been going well so he and Florence decided to build a summer home on their Boerne property.

¹ Juanita Herff Drought Chipman. 2009. *The Passing of Gifts*. Self-published. Page 227

² Chipman. Page 254.

³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Slavery_in_the_United_States

⁴ Chipman. Page 254.

John B. Herff and Florence had three children, Carol was born 1904 died 1922, Florence Ilse was born 1906 died 1984, and Jean was born 1910 died 1996. Caleb was part of a team hired to care for the children, which included two maids, Anna and Marie. Caleb began building his log cabin in 1910 and finished it about 1918.



Carol Herff, maid Marie, Jean and Ilse Herff
Circa 1914

Ilse kept a journal and Juanita Herff Drought Chipman quotes from Ilse Herff's journal, in her 2009 book, "The Passing of Gifts". Ilse Herff says, "*Caleb built it (the cabin) for mother (Florence Herff), just like the one he had lived in when he was a slave. He chopped down the trees for the logs, made the mortar with straw, caliche and milk, built a stone fireplace and made a fine one-room cabin. He had quarters in the garage and we used the log cabin for a playhouse. Caleb chewed tobacco and would spit into the fire. Spitting into the fire fascinated us. None of us could spit as forcefully as Caleb, and we usually ended spitting on our own chins.*"

"We had great fun playing house in the log cabin. We had a tiny wood stove placed in the fireplace, and we actually cooked on it. Later (when the Carol and Ilse went away to boarding school) Caleb used it (the cabin) to live in. He saddled our horses, rode with



us on the ranch and carried a gun to protect us from snakes. He took us fishing, was very kind, and loved us all."

"Caleb told slave stories to all of us. He had a cruel master, who beat his slaves on their bare backs until they were blistered, broke the blisters and put salt on them. This did not happen to Caleb because he was a 'house boy' who took care of the master's children."⁵

The cabin is a single room measuring about 12 feet long by 9 ft

wide with a door on the west and two windows. The peak of the roof is about 9 ft above the ground. The logs are cedar and oak, the roof is cedar shingles.

Caleb died about 1930. We do not know where he is buried. This historic cabin is being recorded with the Texas Historic Commission and the Texas Archeological Research Laboratory at University of Texas, Austin.

Fire place in Caleb's cabin
Probably reconstructed since originally built

⁵ Chipman. Page 276.