

“A SECOND DEGREE OF SLAVERY”:

HOW BLACK EMANCIPATION FREED THE DEEP SOUTH’S POOR WHITES

by

KERI LEIGH MERRITT

(Under the Direction of James C. Cobb)

ABSTRACT

Because antebellum southern history has been interpreted primarily through studies of slaves and planters, poor whites remain understudied. Generally defined as owning neither land nor slaves, poor whites comprised between 30 and 50 percent of the South’s white population on the eve of secession. By the 1840s and 50s, slavery had notably reduced the demand for white laborers, creating a large underclass of impoverished whites who spent long periods of time unemployed or underemployed. Poor whites could not compete – for jobs or living wages – with profitable slave labor. Their rampant poverty sometimes led to the familiar accompanying psychological and social ills of alcoholism, domestic violence, and criminal activity. Preferring to live outside of society and sometimes outside of the law, poor whites made inviting targets for a southern legal system dominated by slaveholders, who generally incarcerated them for behavioral, non-violent “crimes” like trading, drinking, and other social interactions with slaves and free blacks.

Poor whites’ discontent had reached a critical point in the few years before secession, as they began forming labor unions and demanding freedom from competition with blacks, at times even threatening to withdraw their acceptance of slavery. Ultimately, this divisive socio-

economic inequality between whites helped to push planters to the brink of Civil War. Although many poor whites objected to the Confederate cause, slaveholders used threats of imprisonment or vigilante violence to impress them into service. During Reconstruction, poor white workers were finally able to compete in a free labor economy. And while freedmen waited in vain for forty acres and a mule, poor whites were granted land from the Homestead Acts. Black freedom also brought an end to the high rates of incarceration for poor whites who had threatened the stability of slavery. Instead, African Americans became the primary targets of the southern legal system, but their punishments were much more extreme and vicious than they ever had been for poor whites. Black emancipation, therefore, heralded many new freedoms for poor whites, while African Americans realized they now occupied poor whites' former place at the bottom of "free" society.

**INDEX WORDS:** Poor Whites, Slavery, Poverty, Labor, Unemployment, Living Wage, Class Consciousness, Criminality, Incarceration, Vagrancy, Civil War, Anti-Confederates, Reconstruction, Emancipation

“A SECOND DEGREE OF SLAVERY”:  
HOW BLACK EMANCIPATION FREED THE DEEP SOUTH’S POOR WHITES

by

KERI LEIGH MERRITT

B.A., Emory University, 2003

M.A., University of Georgia, 2007

A Dissertation Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of The University of Georgia in Partial  
Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

ATHENS, GEORGIA

2014

© 2014

Keri Leigh Merritt

All Rights Reserved

“A SECOND DEGREE OF SLAVERY”:  
HOW BLACK EMANCIPATION FREED THE DEEP SOUTH’S POOR WHITES

by

KERI LEIGH MERRITT

Major Professor: James C. Cobb

Committee: Stephen Berry  
Ronald E. Butchart  
Stephen A. Mihm

Electronic Version Approved:

Maureen Grasso  
Dean of the Graduate School  
The University of Georgia  
May 2014

*For Henry*

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
INTRODUCTION .....	1
CHAPTER	
1 MATERIAL REALITIES.....	29
2 THE DEMORALIZATION OF LABOR.....	96
3 CRIMINALITY AND THE FAILURE OF SEGREGATION.....	170
4 POVERTY AND PUNISHMENT.....	237
5 CLASS CRISIS AND THE CIVIL WAR .....	286
CONCLUSION: A “NOBLER” EMANCIPATION.....	346
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	366

## INTRODUCTION

*The liberation of five millions of 'poor white trash' from the second degree of slavery, and of three millions of miserable kidnapped negroes from the first degree, cannot be accomplished too soon...It now behooves us to take a bold and determined stand in defence of the inalienable rights of ourselves and of our fellow men, and to avenge the multiplicity of wrongs, social and political, which we have suffered at the hands of a villainous oligarchy...If to-day we could emancipate the slaves in the Union, we would do it, and the country and everybody in it would be vastly better off to-morrow. Now is the time for action; let us work.*  
– Hinton Helper, 1857<sup>1</sup>

At an Organization of American Historians meeting over forty years ago, famed scholar Eric Foner urged a panel of Civil War students “to take a new look at the social and economic structure of the Old South.” The best way to accomplish this massive undertaking, Foner asserted, was through innovative research on nonslaveholding whites, “the least studied of all our social classes.” While much of the South’s history has been interpreted through studies on slaves, planters, and even yeomen, poor whites still remain understudied – four decades after Foner’s initial request. Generally defined as owning neither land nor slaves, poor whites comprised somewhere between 30 and 50 percent of the South’s white population in the few decades preceding the Civil War. Since the mid-1990s, several good social histories about antebellum poor whites have been published, but they have yet to be synthesized, or incorporated into nineteenth-century history writ large.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Hinton Rowan Helper, *The Impending Crisis of the South: How to Meet It* (1857; reprint, New York: A.B. Burdick, 1860), 32-33.

<sup>2</sup> Eric Foner quoted in Fred Arthur Bailey, *Class and Tennessee’s Confederate Generation* (Chapel Hill: North Carolina, 1987), 17; Charles C. Bolton, *Poor Whites in the Antebellum South: Tenants and Laborers in Central North Carolina and Northeast Mississippi* (Durham: Duke, 1994), 5.

With no direct ties to slavery, poor whites had long posed a threat to the maintenance of the peculiar institution. The tumultuous decade of the 1830s brought sweeping social changes to America, especially with the rise of abolitionism. Supposedly ushering in an era of universal white male suffrage, the thirties ended with a significant financial panic that helped further concentrate wealth. By the close of the decade, the older slave states no longer benefitted from the inexpensive sale of “public” lands, and some of the poorer landholders had lost their farms. Planters began buying up the acreage around them, largely consolidating the region’s landholdings. The 1840s thus ushered in a new set of problems for nonslaveholding whites, right on the heels of the economic recession. By this time, the profitability and profusion of plantation slavery had rendered most unskilled white workers superfluous. Like their forefathers, most poor whites had spent their lives working in agriculture, only to find their services no longer required, with the exception of the bottleneck seasons of planting and harvest. Shut out from most agricultural work, therefore, many poor white laborers spent the late-antebellum period experiencing long bouts of unemployment or underemployment.<sup>3</sup>

Slavery had already driven the wages of southern white laborers well below those of their northern counterparts, but even more detrimentally, it decreased the demand for white farmers, tenants, day laborers, and even mechanics, creating a large underclass of white people who were unable to find work or earn a living wage. As poor white Isaac Grimes remembered, consistent employment “was awful scarce. Couldn’t hardly get work [and] wages [were] so low – I have worked that time for \$5.00 a month and board. Worked with oxens, all [I] could get for work.”

---

<sup>3</sup> Most studies that focus on antebellum laborers have tended to concentrate a slightly higher class of workers, like those with artisanal skills. Other scholars have lumped poor whites into a broad nonslaveholder category. See Michele Gillespie, *Free Labor in an Unfree World: White Artisans in Slaveholding Georgia, 1789-1860* (Athens, GA: Georgia, 2000), J. William Harris, *Plain Folk and Gentry in a Slave Society: White Liberty and Black Slavery in Augusta’s Hinterland* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana, 1985), Timothy J. Lockley, “Partners in Crime: African Americans and Non-slaveholding Whites in Antebellum Georgia,” in Matt Wray and Annalee Newitz, eds., *White Trash: Race and Class in America* (New York: Routledge, 1997), and Timothy James Lockley, *Lines in the Sand: Race and Class in Lowcountry Georgia, 1750-1860* (Athens: Georgia, 2001).

Another laborer from Georgia complained that “the slaveholders could get the slave for almost nothing and the poor young men like myself, could not get a job.” Occasionally this rampant poverty led to the well-known psychological and social ills that tend to accompany it, from depression, fatalism, and apathy to alcoholism, domestic violence, and criminal activity. Completely removed from many of the privileges of whiteness, poor whites were essentially “masterless” men and women in a rigidly hierarchical world held together by mastery. This fact deeply troubled the region’s slaveholders.<sup>4</sup>

Indeed, the daily realities of this sizable poor white class strongly suggest that the institution of slavery was greatly detrimental to their livelihoods, and that they consciously recognized its negative impact on their lives. Kept uneducated and mostly illiterate, poor whites had few chances to rise out of poverty. Industrialist-turned-historian James Ford Rhodes compared the South’s poor whites to northern laborers, concluding that “they were in material things abjectly poor; intellectually they were utterly ignorant; morally their condition was one of groveling baseness.” As the antebellum period wore on, some particularly disillusioned poor whites chose to drop out of the workforce altogether, preferring to live on the fringes of society. As Governor James Henry Hammond reported to the South Carolina Institute in 1850, many poor whites were able to “obtain a precarious subsistence by occasional jobs, by hunting, by fishing, by plundering fields or folds, and too often by what is in its effects far worse—trading with slaves, and seducing them to plunder for their benefit.” This illicit trading with slaves, coupled with the high numbers of young, propertyless white men drifting from county to county in search of work, caused slaveholders to begin selectively enforcing behavioral laws, especially in places with both high slave populations and recent influxes of transient whites. By insisting

---

<sup>4</sup> Colleen M. Elliot and Louise A. Moxley, eds. *The Tennessee Civil War Veterans Questionnaires*, Vols. 1-5. (Easley, SC: Southern Historical Press, Inc., 1985), Vol. 3, 966; Vol. 3, 1057.

that poor whites be arrested for vagrancy, buying liquor on a Sunday, or engaging in lewd behavior, slaveholders were able to incarcerate nonslaveholders whenever they needed to reinforce subordination to their authority. Poor whites' increasingly frequent bouts with local law enforcement officials helped brand them as hardened, troublesome criminals, characterized, as A.N.J. Den Hollander put it, by "laziness, carelessness, unreliability, lack of foresight and ambition, habitual failure and general incompetency."<sup>5</sup>

In an incendiary book published in 1857, Hinton Helper, a white nonslaveholder from North Carolina, claimed that five million poor southern whites suffered "a second degree of slavery" precisely because of the enslavement of blacks. One of the region's only outspoken abolitionists at this point, he instantly became infamous throughout the country. *The Impending Crisis of the South* made a variety of convincing arguments for slavery's detrimental impact on the lives of the region's nonslaveholders. According to Helper, a small but very wealthy group of slaveholders lorded over the region, controlling politics and dominating the economy. Deeming the planters "a disgrace and a curse to humanity," he refuted the pro-slavery argument point-by-point, asserting that no free white could compete with slave labor. Contrary to planter claims that black slavery boosted the status of all whites, Helper realized that slave ownership mattered much more than white skin when determining southern social status, and thus classified nonslaveholders as a distinct class. Slaveholders immediately banned *The Impending Crisis* from the South, burning Helper in effigy and threatening his life. Planters' overzealous reaction to Helper's ideas strongly suggests that his theories may have been more accurate than previously assumed. Indeed, poor white southerners not only possessed class consciousness, but as the

---

<sup>5</sup> James Ford Rhodes, *History of the United States from the Compromise of 1850 to the McKinley-Bryan Campaign of 1896*, Vol. 1, 1850-1854, (New York: Macmillan Company, 1920), 344, Web; quoted in George M. Weston, *The Poor Whites of the South* (Washington, D.C.: Buell & Blanchard, 1856), 3, Web.; A.N.J. Den Hollander, "The Tradition of 'Poor Whites,'" in W.T. Couch, ed., *Culture in the South* (Chapel Hill: North Carolina, 1935), 414.

antebellum period wore on, they increasingly became overtly resentful of slaveholders. Class tensions between white southerners in the Deep South, therefore, ultimately helped push slaveholders to the threshold of Civil War. Planters and pro-slavery men were already strenuously defending the peculiar institution from attacks by northern abolitionists and the slaves themselves. When poor whites created a three-front battleground in the 1840s and 50s, slaveholders had few viable alternatives other than secession to protect their main source of wealth and revenue.<sup>6</sup>

Certainly by the late antebellum period, poor southern whites had few opportunities to rise above the economic station into which they were born. As E.B. Seabrook wrote in 1867, under slavery “The poor white, instead of being an active, vital member of the organism of society, was merely an excrescence upon its body. Useless to others, he became helpless to himself.” Because slavery’s association with agricultural and manual labor “rendered toil ignoble in the estimation of the whites,” Seabrook held, poor white laborers adopted “a wilful, determined indolence, which actually became the badge and ensign of their independence.” The lives (and deaths) of poor whites were often chaotic and unpredictable. For a meaningful proportion of them, some combination of material want, hunger, illiteracy, involvement in criminal activity, and problems resulting from alcohol abuse reinforced these self-perpetuating cycles of poverty. Writing almost one hundred years after Hinton Helper, historian Richard Morris critiqued the assumption that white skin entitled an individual to freedom in the slave South. Instead, he claimed, “two-thirds of that white population which was ‘free’ in name never fully enjoyed the fruits of that freedom.” Slavery, Morris concluded, had “seriously undermined

---

<sup>6</sup> Helper, *The Impending Crisis*, 32-33; 191.

the economic security of white labor in the slave states and left ugly scars upon the character and temperament of the ruling class.”<sup>7</sup>

These sentiments, of course, directly contradicted writers who had primarily focused on racism as an antidote to class tensions between white southerners. W.J. Cash, the South Carolina-born journalist, published *The Mind of the South* in 1941. He argued that even during the antebellum period, a racist “proto-Dorian bond” united all southern whites, no matter how lowly or impoverished they were. Slavery may have been detrimental to poor whites in certain, limited ways, Cash admitted, but it still elevated their social status. Identifying a “very positive factor” of slavery, he presented the Old South as a region where “the old basic feeling of democracy was preserved virtually intact.” He concluded that slavery

elevated the common white to a position comparable to that of, say, the Doric knight of ancient Sparta. Not only was he not exploited directly, he was himself made by extension a member of the dominant class – was lodged solidly on superiority, which, however much the blacks in the ‘big house’ might sneer at him, and however much their masters might privately agree with them, he could never publicly lose.

Exactly thirty years later, historian George Fredrickson made very similar claims, positing that a “herrenvolk democracy” united all classes of whites in racism. As long as poor whites had slaves to look down upon, Frederickson argued, they would always go along with slaveholders’ wishes. He further held that the “savage ideal” of white supremacy kept poor whites from allying with

---

<sup>7</sup> E. B. Seabrook, “Poor Whites of the South,” *The Galaxy Volume*, Issue 6 (Oct. 1867): 685; Richard M. Morris, “The Measure of Bondage in the Slave States,” *The Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 41, No. 2 (Sept. 1954): 240. Many recent works on poor whites concern the interactions they had with slaves and free blacks, especially focusing on the underground economy. Much of this newer history stemmed from the call for research in Eugene D. Genovese, “‘Rather Be a Nigger Than a Poor White Man’: Slave Perceptions of Southern Yeomen and Poor Whites,” in Hans L. Trefousse, ed., *Toward a New View of America: Essays in Honor of Arthur C. Cole* (New York: B. Franklin, 1977), 79-96, Jacqueline Jones, “Encounters, Likely and Unlikely, Between Black and Poor White Women in the Rural South, 1865-1940,” *Georgia Historical Quarterly* LXXVI (Summer 1992): 333-353, Ted Ownby, ed., *Black and White Cultural Interaction in the Antebellum South* (Jackson: Mississippi, 1993), and Alex Lichtenstein, “‘That Disposition To Theft, With Which They Have Been Branded’: Moral Economy, Slave Management, and the Law,” *Journal of Social History* 21 (Spring 1998), 413-40.

blacks; instead, they were presented as rabid racists who chose to self-segregate. Even the poorest whites, both Cash and Fredrickson believed, would never be at the bottom of the social pyramid as long as blacks were enslaved or denied certain “white” rights and privileges.<sup>8</sup>

Since poor whites comprised such a sizable percentage of the Deep South’s white population, it was only natural for travelers to speculate about their ethnic and cultural origins. Even historian A.N.J. Den Hollander claimed that poor whites were prime examples of the “persistent force of ‘ancestral degeneracy.’” Most travelers concluded that poor whites were either descendants of indentured servants, or the English debtors who helped colonize Georgia. Emily Burke, a well-educated New Englander, moved South in the 1840s to teach at Savannah’s Female Orphan Asylum. In accordance with the popular beliefs of the day, Burke believed that Georgia’s poor were the direct lineal descendants of the paupers James Oglethorpe brought to America:

The same crushed spirit that will ever suffer one to accept of a home in an alms house, seems to have been transmitted down to the present...they never have had the power to acquire an education or wealth sufficient to raise them above their original degradation or enable them to shake off that odium they have inherited from their pauper ancestry. They have no ambition to do any thing more than just what is necessary to procure food enough of the coarsest kind to supply the wants of the appetite, and a scanty wardrobe of a fabric they manufacture themselves.

Yet even with such an unflattering description, Burke understood that some of the factors contributing to poor whites’ poverty were beyond their control. “The present institutions and state of society in the South are calculated to paralyze every energy of both body and mind,” she wrote. Poor whites “are not treated with half the respect by the rich people that the slaves are, and even the slaves themselves look upon them as their inferiors.” As abolitionists had been saying for years, it was circumstance, not some type of scientific inferiority or intrinsic

---

<sup>8</sup> W.J. Cash, *The Mind of the South* (1941, reprint; New York: Vintage, 1991), 38; 39; 39; George M. Fredrickson, *The Black Image in the White Mind: The Debate on Afro-American Character and Destiny, 1817-1914* (New York: Harper and Row, 1971).

degradation, which kept the poorest whites locked into continuous cycles of impoverishment. As one scholar asserted, the opponents of slavery “put forward the notion that the poor white trash of the South were victims of the immoral slave economy,” an argument that the slaveholders rarely addressed.<sup>9</sup>

Although questions over ethnic roots may interest sociologists, the more important question facing historians is who, exactly, qualified as a poor white. While this topic has been debated for decades, scholars still have not quite reached consensus. According to Mildred Mell, the earliest writer to have used the term was David Ramsay, who in 1809 published a *History of South Carolina*. The term gained widespread notoriety in the works of Harriett Beecher Stowe, especially in *Key to Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1854) and *Dred: A Tale of the Great Dismal Swamp* (1856). Matt Wray, an authority on poor whites, wrote that Stowe did more to “popularize, nationalize, and internationalize the phrase poor white trash than anyone in antebellum history.” Although Stowe obviously harbored some sympathy for the slaves she wrote about, it seems that her austere Presbyterian upbringing would not allow her to have similar feelings for the South’s poor whites. Instead, Stowe regarded them as violent and prone to criminal activities, a “miserable class” who are “utterly ignorant, and inconceivably brutal.”<sup>10</sup>

Former slaves held a wide range of interesting perspectives about poor whites, ranging from hatred to sincere empathy. H.C. Bruce, who spent twenty-nine years as a slave, noted that poor whites were in a “position of quasi slavery,” and would only refer to them as “nominally free.” Dr. George Washington Buckner echoed Bruce’s sentiments, telling his WPA interviewer

---

<sup>9</sup> Den Hollander, “The Tradition of ‘Poor Whites,’” 414; Emily P. Burke, in Alan Galloway, ed., *Voices of the Old South: Eyewitness Accounts, 1528-1861* (Athens: Georgia, 1994), 279-80; Matt Wray, *Not Quite White: White Trash and the Boundaries of Whiteness* (Durham: Duke, 2006), 18.

<sup>10</sup> Mildred Rutherford Mell, “A Definitive Study of the Poor Whites of the South,” (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of North Carolina, 1938), 92; Wray, *Not Quite White*, 57; quoted in *Ibid.*; Wray further noted on page 37 that the term “cracker” became common-place in the late eighteenth century, and “virtually all references are imbued with connotations of criminality and unlawfulness.”

that even “land owners that owned no slaves were considered ‘Po’ White Trash’ and were scarcely recognized as citizens within the state of Kentucky.” Slaves frequently commented on their masters’ treatment of poor whites, and often adopted their masters’ attitudes towards them. Whether or not a poor white was considered “trash” was not solely determined by economic standing. If a poor man had more affluent kinfolk, secured longer-term employment like tenant farming, and kept himself out of trouble and away from slaves and free blacks, he could possibly escape the pejorative moniker. As Alabaman Gabe Hines simply put it, “there is a big difference in being poor and quality and being just po’ white trash.” Nearby in Mississippi, Jerry Eubanks recalled there being “plenty of po’ white neighbors. They rented land from rich land owners. We called them home-raised folks.”<sup>11</sup>

Poor whites, therefore, were undoubtedly a basic part of southern society. Generally speaking, historians have tended to overlook them in their assessments of the nineteenth century South. Beginning in the 1920s, scholars like Paul Buck, W.O. Brown, and Avery Craven wrote about the southern poor, but their analyses were often compromised by racism, as well as a desire to “redeem” the South through a subjective retelling of history. Casting the vast majority of white southerners as either slaveholders or poor whites, these scholars rarely mentioned yeomen landholders or the burgeoning professional middle classes of the Deep South’s towns and cities. Their analyses would remain unchallenged until an aggrieved southern apologist undertook to rewrite the historical record in an effort to redeem the tarnished memory of his beloved Dixie.<sup>12</sup>

---

<sup>11</sup> Quoted in Jeff Forret, *Race Relations at the Margins: Slaves and Poor Whites in the Antebellum Southern Countryside* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana, 2006), 24; Dr. George Washington Buckner, in George P. Rawick, ed., *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography* (Westport, CT.: Greenwood, 1972-79), Vol. 6 (IN), Part 2, 28; Gabe Hines, *Ibid.*, Vol. 6 (AL), Part 1, 180; Jerry Eubanks, *Ibid.*, Vol. 6 (MS), Supplement, Series 1, Part 2, 690.

<sup>12</sup> See W.O. Brown, “Role of Poor Whites in Race Contracts of the South,” *Social Forces* 19, No.2 (Dec. 1940), 258-268, Paul H. Buck, “The Poor Whites of the Ante-Bellum South,” *The American Historical Review* 31, No. 1

In 1949, Frank L. Owsley effectively shifted the focus of generations of historians away from the numerically more significant poor whites and onto South's rural middling classes. *Plain Folk of the Old South* challenged the traditionally-accepted belief that the South was a land of three classes (black slaves, poor whites, and elite planters). Attempting to prove that slavery had had almost no effect on nonslaveholding whites, Owsley erroneously asserted that the vast majority of white southerners owned land. Although he never revealed his precise methodology, Owsley used "church records, wills, administration of estates, county-court minutes, marriage licenses, inventory of estates, trial records, mortgage books, deed books, county tax books, and the manuscript returns of the Federal censuses" to make his claims. Using a sampling technique, Owsley concluded that by 1860, 80 to 85 percent of the "agricultural population" owned land. Thus, he determined, plain folk included herdsman, small slave-holding farmers, nonslaveholding landowners, and even well-off tenant farmers. Owsley held that this amalgamation of white southerners shared folkways and traditions, migratory patterns, and often, political beliefs. His most controversial ideas concerned patterns of southern immigration and the plain folk's relative political and social equality with their planter neighbors.<sup>13</sup>

Owsley also inaccurately contended that agriculture, not slavery, drove the small farmers of the antebellum South onto less productive lands. Plain folk wanted to herd cattle and hogs, he argued, and had no desire to own land like planters. Once plantation owners began erecting fences and cordoning off land, it was only natural for the plain folk to withdraw farther into the woods and forests so their herds could roam free. "It was agriculture, then, and not slavery—as

---

(Oct. 1925), 41-54, Avery O. Craven, "Poor Whites and Negroes in the Antebellum South," *The Journal of Negro History* 15, No.1 (Jan. 1930), 14-25.

<sup>13</sup> Frank L. Owsley, *Plain Folk of the Old South* (1949; reprint, Baton Rouge: Louisiana, 1977), 6; 16. For other monographs on the middling classes of the antebellum period, see: Bill Cecil-Fronsman, *Common Whites: Class and Culture in Antebellum North Carolina* (Lexington: Kentucky, 1992), Steven Hahn, *The Roots of Southern Populism: Yeoman Farmers and the Transformation of the Georgia Upcountry, 1850-1890* (New York: Oxford, 1983), and Stephanie McCurry, *Masters of Small Worlds: Yeoman Households, Gender Relations, and the Political Culture of the Antebellum South Carolina Low Country* (New York: Oxford, 1995).

has been said repeatedly in the discussion of the pastoral economy of the frontier—that drove the herdsmen from frontier to frontier and finally into the pine barrens, hill, and mountains,” he concluded. Realizing that other scholars might take him to task for such unsubstantiated claims, Owsley insisted that “because of the great forests [plain folk’s] herds of cows and droves of hogs were seldom to be seen by anyone passing hurriedly through the country.” Modern scholars, of course, have largely nullified Owsley’s herding thesis. As Charles Bolton and others have found, the vast majority of southerners from all classes had historically worked as farmers, farm laborers, and tenants.<sup>14</sup>

Furthermore, Owsley completely dismissed the possibility of class consciousness among poor or nonslaveholding whites. Much like W.J. Cash, Owsley wrote that “with rare exceptions they did not regard the planters and men of wealth as their oppressors. On the contrary, they admired them as a rule and looked with approval on their success.” Thus, he claimed, plain folk “assumed, on the basis of much tangible evidence, that the door of economic opportunity swung open easily to the thrust of their own ambitions and energetic sons and daughters.” For Owsley’s plain folk, economic and social mobility seemed possible and even likely. His sturdy landowners were supposedly independent, self-sufficient farmers, and the presence of racial slavery had little to no bearing on their lives. Indeed, Owsley worked tirelessly to prove how insignificant and benign slavery had been. “But the greater part [of southern whites] remained landowning farmers who belonged neither to the plantation economy nor to the destitute and frequently degraded poor white class,” he concluded. “They, and not the poor whites, comprised the bulk of the Southern population from the Revolution to the Civil War.”<sup>15</sup>

---

<sup>14</sup> Owsley, *Plain Folk*, 51; 36; Bolton, *Poor Whites*, 8.

<sup>15</sup> Owsley, *Plain Folk*, 133; xx.

Owsley's motives for writing about plain folk instead of poor whites, however, were hardly above reproach. As one of the Nashville Agrarians, Owsley had committed himself to presenting the South as a land of Jeffersonian ideals. He romanticized the small landowning farmer and resisted most every aspect of the New South, from industrialization to the changing racial hierarchy. More importantly, Owsley wanted to discredit neoabolitionist historians who had emphasized the hegemony of the Old South's planter class and the resulting degradation of other whites. The antebellum South, Owsley asserted, was undoubtedly democratic in nature. Slavery had not caused white southerners any harm, regardless of whether or not they owned slaves. Instead, he maintained, slavery was actually beneficial for all whites, regardless of economic class or social status. By maintaining that most nonslaveholders owned land, Owsley attempted to refute writers like Hinton Helper and Frederick Law Olmstead, who recognized how detrimental slavery was to poor whites. Mainly due to Owsley's influence, the majority of contemporary histories on non-elite white southerners have focused solely on landholding yeomen farmers, classifying them as "common whites." No matter the term, though, farmers who owned slaves and/or land had much more in common with planters than they did with poor whites. Despite the excellent but limited recent work on poor whites, though, the larger narrative of southern history is not yet liberated from Owsley's myths. Historians have managed to free much of southern history from the distortions of Confederate apologists, but current scholars should take note that Owsley's musings on poor whites were also very much a part of the racial agenda revealed in his essay in *I'll Take My Stand*, which referred to freedmen "who could still remember the taste of human flesh." Then, in his 1940 presidential address to the Southern Historical Association, Owsley asserted that the primary cause of the Civil War was the "egocentric sectionalism" of northerners. At the time, he was saying what many white

southerners – and white southern historians – wanted to hear. Owsley’s idyllic version of history unquestionably helped restore the legacy of their forefathers, whether slaveholders or not, from historic reality. A dozen years after his SHA address, Owsley again confirmed that his long-seated prejudices were still alive and well. Writing to a colleague, he condemned the national Democratic Party as a “conglomeration of minorities—‘Big Labor,’ ‘Big Nigger,’ [and] ‘Big Jew.’” Until historians no longer feel obliged to refute Owsley’s work, the scholarship on southern poor whites will remain incomplete. As Stephen A. West put it, accepting the fact that poor whites “accounted for the majority of the region’s non-slaveholders during the antebellum era means challenging how historians have understood the slave society of the American South.”<sup>16</sup>

Only within the last twenty-five years have revisionist scholars begun to focus specifically on poor whites. Led by the pioneering work of Charles Bolton, historians like Victoria Bynum, Stephen A. West, and Jeff Forret have already challenged the accepted “Old South” historical canon. Before figuring out how many southerners qualified as poor whites, though, a working definition must be established. The most standard, and likely the most commonly accepted definition of poor whites remains Charles Bolton’s, which simply classified them as whites who owned neither land nor slaves. He estimated that poor whites made up at least 30 to 50 percent of the region’s population. Since there were slightly over 8 million whites in what would eventually become the Confederacy, Bolton’s estimates meant there were between 2.5 and 4 million poor whites in the Old South. However, a few small problems arose due to the limits of using a strictly economic definition. As A.N.J. Den Hollander noted, while “Not all

---

<sup>16</sup> All three Owsley quotes appear in James C. Cobb, “‘On the Pinnacle in Yankeeland’: C. Vann as a [Southern] Renaissance Man,” *Journal of Southern History* 67, No. 4 (Nov. 2001): 732; see Frank Lawrence Owsley, “The Irrepressible Conflict,” in *Twelve Southerners, I’ll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition* (1930, reprint; Baton Rouge: Louisiana, 1977); Stephen A. West, *From Yeomen to Redneck in the South Carolina Upcountry, 1850-1915* (Charlottesville: Virginia, 2008), 44-5.

[poor whites] were squatters or tenants...the possession of some barren tract made small difference.” Writing a dozen years after Bolton, Jeff Forret expanded the definition of a poor white, noting the importance of “character and not wealth alone.” Taking into consideration antebellum southerners’ use of the term, Forret’s definition combined both qualitative and quantitative factors. Moreover, Forret estimated that one-fifth of all landless, slaveless poor whites qualified for the “trash” designation. These impoverished people lived a dire hand-to-mouth existence, sporadically trading with slaves and free blacks in an interracial “underground economy” to supplement their meager incomes. This dissertation follows the definition proposed by Jeff Forret, although it assumes that the estimates of past scholars are probably a little low. Charles Bolton recently revealed that even he likely underestimated the number of poor whites. Census records, he said, had “always under-counted the poor and the mobile, and that was undoubtedly true in the antebellum period.” As Ulrich B. Phillips confirmed, “These listless, uncouth, shambling refugees from the world of competition were never enumerated.”<sup>17</sup>

Thus, while census records provide accurate numbers of planters, landholding yeomen, and slaves, poor whites were generally much harder to count, throwing percentage totals off for the entire southern population. As any historian who has spent time working with antebellum census records can confirm, poor whites frequently show up in one census, then disappear in the next, perhaps resurfacing years later in subsequent enumerations. Census taking in the rural South was hardly a science. Poor whites often lived in the backwoods and on the fringes of society. Their homes may not have been close to main roads and thus not visited by census takers

---

<sup>17</sup> See Bolton, *Poor Whites*, Victoria Bynum, *Unruly Women: The Politics of Social and Sexual Control in the Old South* (Chapel Hill: North Carolina, 1992), and Forret, *Race Relations*. Bolton, *Poor Whites*, 5; David Brown, “A Vagabond’s Tale: Poor Whites, Herrenvolk Democracy, and the Value of Whiteness in the Late Antebellum South.” *Journal of Southern History* 79, No. 4 (Nov. 2013): 808; Den Hollander, “The Tradition of ‘Poor Whites,’” 412; Forret, *Race Relations*, 10-11; Conversation between Charles Bolton and Keri Leigh Merritt at the 2011 Southern Historical Association in Baltimore, Maryland. Repeated with email permission from Dr. Bolton, dated 2/18/14; quoted in Brown, “A Vagabond’s Tale,” 801.

at all. Some poor whites were so distrustful of government that they simply avoided anyone who approached their homes. Because so many poor whites were not enumerated, historians will never truly know what percentage of the white population poor whites comprised. On the other hand, scholars do know that slaveholders only accounted for about a quarter of the South's white population on the eve of secession. This number was down from 36 percent just a decade earlier. Not only were fewer southerners *becoming* slaveholders, but out of people who had once owned slaves, a decent proportion was unable to *remain* part of the master class. Wealth – in the form of land, cash, or slaves – was becoming more and more concentrated in the hands of the super-rich. In the cotton Deep South, as William Barney found, “approximately 40 percent of the slaves, farm value, cotton output, and total agricultural wealth were controlled by the top 5 percent of the farming population.” Figures like these ultimately led Barney to deem secession a “result of the oligarchic concentration of wealth.”<sup>18</sup>

Thus, on the eve of the Civil War, if census records show that between 30 and 50 percent of southern whites owned neither land nor slaves, and about 25 percent of whites were slaveholders, then between 25 and 45 percent owned land but remained slaveless. These figures, however, varied greatly even within single states. In the mountains, pinewoods, and wiregrass regions, where percentages of slaves were low, landholding rates were generally more egalitarian, much like the Upper South states. In high slave, plantation-belt areas, however, the proportion of total landholders fell, while the proportion of poor whites likely rose, as they hoped to gain employment from the bigger slaveholders. While all the antebellum Deep South states were more similarly populated than they were different, there were slight variations in the percentages of slaves, slaveholders, and nonslaveholders.

---

<sup>18</sup> John B. Boles, *The South through Time: A History of an American Region, Volume I* (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1999), 221; William L. Barney, *The Secessionist Impulse: Alabama and Mississippi in 1860* (Princeton: Princeton, 1974), 4.

South Carolina's demographics were the most anomalous of the Deep South states, as it held the distinction of having the most concentrated proportion of slaveholders in the nation. By the 1850s, slightly over half of South Carolina's white citizens owned slaves, making it the first state with that distinction. Only the Appalachian districts of Pendleton, Greenville, and Spartanburg contained populations with less than 20 percent slaves. As Manisha Sinha's research indicated, the state's slaveholding rates were so high in part because so many poor, landless whites had migrated west. From 1830 to 1850, South Carolina's white population actually decreased as many small farmers lost their land and thus moved to places like Alabama, Mississippi, and Texas. Even after this wave of migration, however, a large proportion of South Carolina's whites remained poor. Industrialist William Gregg estimated their numbers at one-third of the total white population in the 1850s, enough to alarm planters over increasing class tensions. Sinha wrote that as secession neared, "growing demands for popular elections and mechanics' petitions against 'slave competition' made the planter elite skittish."<sup>19</sup>

In neighboring Georgia, about one-third of the white population owned slaves on the eve of the Civil War. In his study of Augusta's hinterlands, William Harris estimated that poor whites made up 30 to 40 percent of the region's white population. "Laborers, tenant farmers, and women in factory or other semi-skilled work accounted for most of the household heads among the poor," he wrote. Wealth was obviously concentrated in the hands of slaveholders. According to Peter Wallenstein, slaves comprised about 40 percent of Georgia's total population, and represented nearly half the state's wealth. Even within the slaveholding classes, the most affluent whites owned the vast majority of Georgia's wealth, with the richest 20 percent owning over 90

---

<sup>19</sup> Manisha Sinha, *The Counterrevolution of Slavery: Politics and Ideology in Antebellum South Carolina* (Chapel Hill: North Carolina, 2000), 12; 12; 11; quoted in Robert R. Russel, "The Effects of Slavery upon Nonslaveholders in the Ante Bellum South." *Agricultural History* 15, No. 2 (April 1941): 122; Sinha, *The Counterrevolution of Slavery*, 135.

percent of the state's slaves, and the top .1 percent of the population (between 1,700 and 2,300 individuals) holding one hundred or more slaves.<sup>20</sup>

As more sparsely-settled western states, Mississippi and Alabama nonetheless had socio-economic profiles similar to the older state of Georgia. In Mississippi, for example, Christopher Olsen found that 20 percent of white male household heads owned neither land nor slaves. Furthermore, William Barney's figures for the Magnolia State suggested the presence of two main groups of nonslaveholders: a middling class comprised of both landowning yeomen farmers and a "small group of urban tradesmen," and the "less fortunate" poor whites who did not own land. He estimated the number of landless poor at 20 to 25 percent of the white population. "Many of this group were found in the pine barrens, living off the forests by hunting, fishing, herding cattle and hogs, or tapping the pines for turpentine," he wrote, while others worked as general laborers. Regardless of their occupations, Barney concluded, their "Economic prospects...not bright to begin with, deteriorated as the slave economy matured." In Alabama, by 1860 the wealthiest 2 percent of white families owned more than 28 percent of the state's total wealth. These numbers were consistent throughout most of the Deep South, where the richest 2 percent owned almost a quarter of the region's personal property and almost 29 percent of all real estate. Because the region's wealth was so unequally distributed, though, a rather large proportion of white men remained landless throughout their lives. In Louisiana, three out of five families lacked the means to own land, and historian Roger Shugg claimed that a "surprising minority could hardly have been anything but squatters."<sup>21</sup>

---

<sup>20</sup> James C. Cobb, *Georgia Odyssey* (Athens: Georgia, 1997), 19; Harris, *Plain Folk*, 77 (Harris defined "poor" as owning less than \$250 in property); Peter Wallenstein, *From Slave South to New South: Public Policy in Nineteenth-Century Georgia* (Chapel Hill: North Carolina, 1987), 14 (462,000 slaves out of 1,057,000 total population); 14; 19.

<sup>21</sup> Christopher J. Olsen, *Political Culture and Secession in Mississippi: Masculinity, Honor, and the Antiparty Tradition, 1830-60* (New York: Oxford, 2000), 133; Barney, *The Secessionist Impulse*, 38-9; 4-5; Roger W. Shugg, *Origins of Class Struggle in Louisiana: A Social History of White Farmers and Laborers during Slavery and After, 1840-1875* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana, 1939), 86.

Despite older scholarship that simply assumes the absence of anything akin to class consciousness, poor whites were both aware and resentful of their social and economic position. And not only did such feelings exist, but they became enough of an issue by the late-1850s to help push slaveholders to the brink of secession. But first, to fully establish whether or not poor whites harbored class consciousness, two terms deserve more careful definitions. For both “class” and “class consciousness,” this dissertation follows the definitions set forth by E.P. Thompson in his seminal history of the English working class. “By class,” he wrote, “I understand an historical phenomenon, unifying a number of disparate and seemingly unconnected events, both in the raw material of experience and in consciousness.” Viewing class not as a thing, but instead as a relationship, Thompson claimed that in “the years between 1780-1832 most English working people came to feel an identity of interests as between themselves, and as against their rulers and employers.” This feeling, of course, formed the basis of class consciousness. Thompson ultimately defined the term as “the way in which these experiences are handled in cultural terms: embodied in traditions, value-systems, ideas, and institutional forms.” According to these definitions, antebellum poor whites unquestionably possessed class consciousness, and class tensions had reached dangerous levels by the time of secession.<sup>22</sup>

As of yet no scholar has been able to convincingly argue that poor whites exhibited a broad sense of class consciousness. Historians of middling and lower class whites have long been divided over this issue. J. Wayne Flynt, for example, believed that poor whites were just as racist as other southern whites, and therefore inclined to rally to the defense of all southern institutions, regardless of how those institutions affected their wealth and livelihoods. Poor whites, Flynt held, “generally were neither exploited nor mistreated by the aristocracy; they were

---

<sup>22</sup> E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963, reprint; New York: Vintage, 1966), 9; 11; 11; 10.

simply ignored...not overtly oppressed.” Conversely, both Michael Johnson and J. Mills Thornton concluded that class anxiety *did* exist in the Old South, but they also believed that by the time of the Civil War these tensions had been suppressed by race, republicanism, and fear of Yankee rule. Charles Bolton and Bill Cecil-Fronsman basically agreed with these analyses, but they further posited that kinship ties and religion helped to meld the various white classes together. The emergence of a true southern middle class of merchants, lawyers, and doctors, along with a well-established class of sturdy land- and slaveholding yeomen, certainly complicated any kind of “common white” solidarity. Eugene Genovese and Elizabeth Fox-Genovese wrote that since yeomen aspired to become planters, “they were led step by step into willing acceptance of a subordinate position in society.” Poor whites, however, were not so easily led, as they had little incentive to follow.<sup>23</sup>

A small group of scholars, however, have long argued that poor whites possessed at least a degree of class consciousness. Largely inspired by Genovese’s theories, historians like Fred Arthur Bailey claimed that the question was moot, as “the poor, the plain folk, and the planters were [all] class conscious.” The situation of poor whites was similar to that of slaves in that there was no major, overt resistance to the existing order. However, just as slaves feigned illness, broke tools, or worked at a slow pace, poor whites also resisted affluent whites in similar ways. Although there were no generally recognized, well-coordinated acts of mass resistance, poor whites were still intellectually aware of the region’s deepening inequality. Indeed, their daily realities made class differences painfully clear. Class consciousness, of course, does not always translate into action. It can simply be an awareness of inequity. Although slaveholders tried

---

<sup>23</sup> J. Wayne Flynt, *Dixie’s Forgotten People: The South’s Poor Whites* (Bloomington: Indiana, 1979), 11; Michael P. Johnson, *Toward a Patriarchal Republic: The Secession of Georgia* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana, 1977), 143; J. Mills Thornton, III, *Politics and Power in a Slave Society: Alabama, 1800-1860* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana, 1978); Bolton, *Poor Whites*; Cecil-Fronsman, *Common Whites*; Eugene Genovese and Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *Fruits of Merchant Capital: Slavery and Bourgeois Property in the Rise and Expansion of Capitalism*, (New York: Oxford, 1983), 263.

desperately to keep the region under a strict system of censorship, class consciousness still arose. “With all this, the mere blind instincts of human nature filled these people with a dim consciousness of the falsity of their position, and a vague sense of injury, which was displayed in a deep, sullen hatred of the upper class,” E. B. Seabrook explained in 1867. Poor whites harbored “a hatred, however, which the planters were always able to repress, at least so far as any active demonstration was concerned, by that power which intelligence of the highest order must always have over the grossest ignorance, and unbounded wealth over abject poverty.”<sup>24</sup>

For the purposes of this dissertation, the Deep South refers to South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, and Mississippi. Louisiana’s complex racial hierarchy was obviously too different from its sister states to be fully included, but examples from it, as well as from the bordering states of Tennessee and North Carolina, are occasionally used. Due to their high rates of illiteracy, poor whites left virtually no written records. This dissertation, therefore, relies on a wide variety of primary research, from county-level sources like superior court minute books and court cases, to coroner’s inquests, jail records, and “Poor House” reports. Newspapers, penitentiary records, state court documents, statutes and proposed laws, census records, petitions for pardons, petitions to southern Governors, slave narratives, Civil War veterans’ questionnaires, travelers’ accounts, and writings from abolitionists and slaveholders helped form a more complete picture of the lives of the Deep South’s poor whites.

This study utilizes two sets of records that require some explanation. Both the Tennessee Civil War Veteran’s Questionnaires and the Works Progress Administration (WPA) slave narratives were recorded more than half a century after the end of the Civil War. The Veteran’s Questionnaires, gathered between 1915 and 1923, resulted in responses from 1,650 former

---

<sup>24</sup> Bailey, *Class*, 67; Seabrook, “The Poor Whites,” 866.

soldiers. The vast majority of these men fought for the Confederacy, and the responses included men from every economic class. Furthermore, the questionnaires were sent to all veterans residing within the state during World War I, so some of the responses actually came from men who had grown up in the Deep South during the antebellum period. Although the questionnaires rely heavily on memory, they are one of the only sources that allow the voices of poor whites to be heard. Each veteran was required to list how much property and how many slaves he or his family owned at the time of the Civil War. They were also pointedly questioned about issues regarding class tensions and labor relations. For the slave narratives, originally conducted between 1936 and 1938, writers and journalists employed by the Roosevelt Administration interviewed over 2,300 former slaves. This group of records is even more problematic than the Veteran's Questionnaires, because the WPA interviewers were almost exclusively white, causing many freedpeople to choose their answers carefully. This self-censorship was apparent in Liza McGhee's case. Having spent her childhood as a slave in Mississippi, McGhee told her interviewer that she "[w]as hesitant about talking freely as she feared the white people were planning to enslave her again." Like the Veteran's Questionnaires, though, the slave narratives are among the best sources historians have. Both of these sets of records provided invaluable information about Reconstruction, and the birth of the New South. Furthermore, since the veteran's writings are peppered with misspellings, missing punctuation, and little regard for grammar, and the slave narratives were written in a demeaning "dialect" style, following the lead of historian Steven Hahn, I have taken the liberty to change spellings and verb tenses, although I never changed a single word or in any way altered their meanings.<sup>25</sup>

---

<sup>25</sup> Elliot, *Tennessee*; Rawick, ed., *The American Slave*; Liza McGhee, *American Slave*, Vol. 9 (MS), Supplement, Series 1, Part 4, 1402; see Steven Hahn, *A Nation under our Feet: Black Political Struggles in the Rural South from Slavery to the Great Migration* (Cambridge: Harvard, 2003), 10.

Finally, concerning the topic of racism among poor whites, I have chosen simply to allow the historical record to speak for itself. In the vast majority of cases, poor whites seemed far more likely to get along with slaves and free blacks than to self-segregate or demonstrate any kind of overt racism. Despite the few antebellum travelers who commented on the racist ways of poor whites, most of the conjecture about this supposed racism has come from historians who have based their analyses on post-emancipatory race relations. By merely transferring the racism of post-Reconstruction poor whites back upon antebellum poor whites, modern scholars may have obscured some of the complexity of American history. Rather than demonstrating a pattern of vicious, overt racism, poor whites continually interacted with slaves and free blacks on frequent bases, and likely considered those relationships a routine part of daily life.

The one antebellum topic that that did produce some racial tension between slaves and poor whites, however, was labor. While most of the time poor whites seemed to direct their anger at slaveowners instead of at the slaves themselves, there were occasional instances of racial violence between the two groups of workers. By taking too little account of the convincing array of evidence indicating that poor and even lower-middling class whites realized that competition with slaves harmed their jobs, lowered their wages, and detrimentally impacted their lives, scholars have unfortunately overlooked a very important part of southern history. Instead of recognizing labor relations as a complicating issue between black and white workers, past historians have generally presented an incomplete and inaccurate version of the region's social relations, especially given their unqualified acceptance of poor whites as the South's most virulent racists. Instead, stories of poor whites and slaves eschewing the dictates of racial etiquette by drinking, colluding, trading, and sleeping together are too prominent in the available primary sources to support overarching assumptions that poor white racism in the antebellum era

was as virulent and pervasive as it appeared to be after emancipation. On the contrary, poor whites and blacks, both blocked from the formal economy, formed their own economy, creating personal relationships between the two groups while leaving slaveholders with the dreaded task of attempting to establish segregation. This mission would ultimately prove impossible, as Jeff Forret wrote, since “Individual poor whites may have at times identified with individual slaves, viewing them as darker-skinned reflections of themselves, brothers and sisters in a fraternity of shared economic deprivation.”<sup>26</sup>

Perhaps the most difficult part of this project was determining how to tell the story of poor whites topically, across time and space. Chapter One examines the daily material realities of the Deep South’s poor whites. From housing, food, and family structure to gender roles, education, and religion, lower class whites had very different life experiences from other regional whites. Deemed “poor white trash” by planters and slaves alike, these people cobbled together a meager existence with none but very occasional employment. Slavery economically crippled most poor white southerners, causing many of the poorest to disengage completely from society. A masculine subculture of primal honor, predicated on substance abuse and frequent displays of aggression and violence, further helped to distinguish poor whites from their more affluent counterparts. Due to myriad reasons, therefore, poor whites were increasingly spending greater parts of their lives in dire poverty. As E.B. Seabrook wrote shortly after the Civil War, “It is impossible to elevate in the scale of mental improvements a people who are at the same time barred from material progress.”<sup>27</sup>

---

<sup>26</sup> Forret, *Race Relations*, 141.

<sup>27</sup> Seabrook, “The Poor Whites,” 687. Over the past few years the growing fields of neuroscience and biology have been scientifically confirming the work of historians and social scientists on poverty. One recent study seemingly proves that poverty does, in fact, directly interrupt and impair cognitive function. Defining poverty as the “gap” between an individual’s material needs and having the resources to alleviate those needs, Anandi Mani and his team of scientists determined that “poverty-related concerns consume mental resources.” In addition to life’s everyday tasks and labors, poor people were constantly distracted by trying to balance expenses with income. They spent

Chapter Two continues exploring these themes, focusing specifically on labor. It examines the different types of jobs that poor whites held and shows the beginnings of white unrest over competition with slaves and free blacks – an issue that would eventually reach near-crisis proportions by the time of secession. In a culture where honor was everything, poor white men struggled to earn a living wage because of competition with forced, unfree slave labor. Often unable to find steady employment, they frequently traveled about in search of short-term work or seasonal agricultural jobs. When poor whites finally had to accept the fact that slaves dominated the southern labor market, some of them became so disillusioned that they chose to drop out of the labor force entirely. Instead of participating in the formal economy, increasing numbers of poor whites began living away from “civilized” white society, hunting, fishing, stealing, and trading with slaves in an informal underground economy. Thus, poor whites became more than just a nuisance to planters. Slaveholders were tangibly losing assets, but more importantly, they were losing control over their slaves.

The next two chapters focus on aspects of the Deep South’s criminal justice system. Chapter Three begins by confirming the immense and pervasive power of slaveholders, as lawmakers and law enforcers. Slave owners dominated the region’s politics, and even had ways to disenfranchise poor whites whom they did not want to vote. Furthermore, slaveholders used their positions of power to keep tight control over the poor white population, policing and jailing those who could possibly cause trouble or disrupt the established hierarchy of the South. They generally charged poor whites with non-violent, behavioral “crimes” like vagrancy, trading with

---

valuable time everyday making mental tradeoffs, juggling priorities, and worrying about the short-term future. Mani’s team of researchers ultimately concluded that “Being poor means coping not just with a shortfall of money, but also with a concurrent shortfall of cognitive resources. The poor, in this view, are less capable not because of inherent traits, but because the very context of poverty imposes load and impedes cognitive capacity.” This cognitive deficit, the researchers found, was comparable to losing a full night of sleep, or the loss of thirteen IQ points. While these findings certainly do not absolve poor people from bad decisions, they do help explain *why* they may make those choices. Anandi Mani et. al., “Poverty Impedes Cognitive Function,” *Science* 341, 976 (Aug. 2013): 976; 976; 976; 980.

blacks, selling liquor to slaves, gambling, “lewd” behaviors, and public drunkenness. The point of many arrests was neither to punish nor reform; instead, planters used these laws to dominate and scare poor whites into docility, jailing them for months or years at a time – often without the chance to stand trial. The chapter also examines the rampant rates of alcoholism in antebellum America, a particularly disastrous disease for poor whites.

Similarly, Chapter Four begins by explaining the southern system of punishment and incarceration. While most southern jails and penitentiaries were well-established by the late antebellum period, other more barbaric forms of punishment were still occasionally used. Perhaps most shockingly, there are multiple documented cases of poor white convicts being publically whipped as late as the 1840s and 50s, generally for non-violent crimes like bastardy and simple larceny. Finally, several of the Deep South states continued jailing debtors, including those individuals who could not pay court fines and fees from their own arrests. In some areas, poor white debtors and criminals were actually auctioned off to other white citizens in exchange for the use of their labor. Essentially indentured servants, these white men helped blur the lines of white privilege in a slave society. Indeed, the practices of publicly whipping and auctioning off debt-ridden white men likely frightened some poor whites into quietly accepting the deep inequities inherent in the slave system.

Chapter Five focuses on the lead up to secession, the Presidential election of 1860, and the Civil War. Given all of the injustices that poor whites were facing by the late antebellum period, they became increasingly upset – and more militant – about their exclusion from the southern economy. Already largely pushed out of agricultural jobs because of slavery, many poor white laborers became unwilling to allow blacks access to industrial and construction jobs, sectors of the economy which were beginning to rely on slave labor. Thus, poor white workers

began holding small conventions throughout the Deep South. Forming “associations,” or nascent labor unions, they demanded protection from competition with slaves. Occasionally these groups threatened to withdraw their support for slavery altogether, making overt threats about the stability of slavery as an institution, and the necessity of poor white support for that stability. As poor whites became more angry about their exclusion from the southern economic system, planters realized the urgent need to finally address class tensions. By the eve of war, affluent southerners tried to scare poor whites into supporting secession by claiming that emancipation would produce “starvation” wages for whites, and render them the social equals of African Americans. Slaveholders further warned of an all-out racial war between the two underclasses, claiming that poor whites would be slaughtered by the thousands.

Once the Civil War began, some poor whites still actively refused to support the slaveholders’ cause. Planters did not hesitate to use violent and aggressive methods to force dissenters to join the armed forces, policing nonslaveholders under the auspices of vigilance committees and Minute Men organizations. Cases of threatened jail time for desertion, treason, and vagrancy were widespread. Far from being actively pro-Confederate, most poor whites had little or no choice but to support the war effort – they were at the mercy of the slave owning oligarchy. As poor white soldier John Dinsmore remembered, “When the Civil War began to come up the non-slaveholders wasn’t allowed to say anything... They was kept down as much as possible.” Yet by forcing poor whites to fight, the Confederacy suffered incredibly high rates of desertion. This fact, coupled with increasing numbers of small scale revolts by groups of nonslaveholders throughout the region, ultimately helped ensure the Union’s victory.<sup>28</sup>

The Conclusion examines the crucial post-war period, showing that former slaves were not the only southerners who benefitted from emancipation. Just as Hinton Helper claimed that

---

<sup>28</sup> Bolton, *Poor Whites*, 158; Elliot, *Tennessee*, Vol. 1, 45-6.

poor whites suffered a “second degree of slavery” in the antebellum period, the post-bellum era “freed” poor whites in several important ways. Most importantly, poor white workers were finally able to compete in a free labor economy, which at least provided them with a potential opportunity to improve their economic situation. “But another great element of productive power in the South is now to be brought into action,” one Georgia paper opined, “the labor of poor white men who have heretofore been completely idle for want of employment. They will find agricultural labor to be creditable, in the absence of negro slavery, as well as highly remunerative.” Furthermore, while newly emancipated slaves waited in vain for their fabled 40 acres and a mule, poor whites took full advantage of the Homestead Act and the Southern Homestead Act, finally entering the ranks of landholders.<sup>29</sup>

Following the ratification of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments, former slaveholders began employing various means to make even the poorest whites feel superior to blacks. African Americans were voting, sitting on juries, and holding office. Despite the tendency of many poor whites to support the Republican Party in the years following the war, a bi-racial alliance had almost no chance of long-term survival in the lawless Deep South. Largely due to intense vigilante violence from groups like the Ku Klux Klan, poor whites quickly learned to toe the line of racial segregation. There were too many bloody reprisals if they did not. As poor whites became increasingly included in the spoils of white privilege, though, black Americans realized that they had emerged from one kind of slavery only to suffer the “second degree of slavery” that poor whites had long endured. Freedpeople became the former slaveholders’ new targets for victimless “crimes” like vagrancy. Indeed, while wealthy white slaveholders had used several different methods to monitor and mitigate the behaviors of poor whites, during the earliest years of Reconstruction, former slaveholders adapted these methods to

---

<sup>29</sup> Helper, *The Impending Crisis*, 32-3; “The South,” *Daily Intelligencer* (GA), Nov. 28, 1865, p. 1.

gain control over post-bellum freedmen and women, politically, socially, and economically. There was a critical distinction, however, between how white and black criminals were treated. The consequences for blacks were much more extreme, vicious, and violent than they had been for poor whites. The post-bellum South was an extremely chaotic, violent, racist society for blacks, because they now stood as the principal threats to the prevailing order. Waters McIntosh, who spent his childhood as a slave in South Carolina, clarified who, precisely, benefitted from the end of slavery. As a boy McIntosh sang a song called “Rather be a nigger than a poor white man.” After gaining legal “freedom,” however, he changed his tune. “It was the poor white man who was freed by the war,” concluded McIntosh, “not the Negroes.”<sup>30</sup>

---

<sup>30</sup> Mell, “A Definitive Study,” 2-3; Waters McIntosh, *American Slave*, Vol. 2 (AR), Part 5, 20.

## CHAPTER ONE: MATERIAL REALITIES

*The lords of the lash are not only absolute masters of the blacks, but they are also the oracle and arbiters of all non-slaveholding whites, whose freedom is merely nominal, and whose unparalleled illiteracy and degradation is purposely and fiendishly perpetuated.*  
– Hinton Helper<sup>1</sup>

*The slave-holder knows wherein lies his power to enslave one class and trample upon another. He scatters abroad prejudice...And in order to do this, he scatters abroad ignorance, shrouding the whole region in a veil of mental darkness, debarring the poor freeman from the opportunity of educating his children; for ignorance, prejudice and crime are a triumvirate of tyranny, acting and reacting upon, producing and re-producing each other.*  
– J.G. Palfrey<sup>2</sup>

During the third year of the Civil War, a young Yankee captain named George Pepper described the poor whites that he encountered throughout the Deep South: “They resembled the images of a frightful dream, rather than living men, women and children,” he began. “Their voice is peculiar. They speak in a low, pulling, whining tone, that is most distressing to hear. In fact, the poor of this section are as ignorant, filthy and wretched as can be found anywhere in the world.” Pepper’s observations represented a familiar refrain echoed by travelers and journalists in the few decades before the Civil War. Northerners and upper class southerners repeated the same several points about poor whites: they were lazy, dirty, ignorant, immoral, and often drunk. Later, even early professional historians perpetuated this stereotype. In 1935, scholar A.N.J. Den Hollander wrote “There is something wrong with [the poor white], something inferior, possibly, in his blood. He eats clay; he goes barefoot and has the ‘ground itch’; his lips, beard, and chin are

---

<sup>1</sup> Hinton Rowan Helper, *The Impending Crisis of the South: How to Meet It* (New York: Burdick Brothers, 1857), 43.

<sup>2</sup> J.G. Palfrey, “American Slavery – Its Effects upon the Non-slave-holding Population of the South,” *The North Star* (NY), March 10, 1848.

yellow with tobacco juice; and he often has a little 'blind tiger' on hand to drink or sell." Some of these descriptions certainly had credibility, but the reasons and causes behind these labels need to be explored in historical context. Poverty, transience, and hunger very rarely reflect a fulfillment of one's ambitions. Instead, these societal ills are generally created, and then perpetuated, by a combination of governmental policies, economic forces beyond an individual's control, and the constraints of social structure. As slavery became more and more profitable, the Deep South's already substantial inequality worsened. Especially during the late antebellum years, poor whites had little chance of ever rising above the class they were born into, no matter how hard they worked, or how intelligent or talented they were. Because slavery rendered them superfluous as anything other than common laborers, and the powerful planter oligarchy controlled the political and economic systems, poor whites became trapped in cycles of poverty that became life sentences.<sup>3</sup>

Wage inequality is generally seen as the determinative factor of class, but in reality, *wealth* inequality is absolutely essential to understanding economics, especially in antebellum America. The South had the "only slave system in the New World in which the slaves reproduced themselves," meaning that wealth in slaves was multiplied with the birth of every child. The more slaves a planter owned, the more money he stood to make, simply by allowing nature to take its course. Thanks in no small measure to the cotton boom of the 1850s, affluent slaveholders grew wealthier as the value of slaves continued to rise. This rise in prices made it increasingly hard for nonslaveholders to purchase slaves, thus barring them from entrance into the slaveowner class. Without slaves, and without the training or education to become members of the professional class, wealth in real estate was clearly important, as it was almost exclusively

---

<sup>3</sup> George W. Pepper, *Personal Recollections of Sherman's Campaigns in Georgia and the Carolinas* (Zanesville, OH: Hugh Dunne, 1866), 271; A.N.J. Den Hollander, "The Tradition of 'Poor Whites,'" in W.T. Couch, ed., *Culture in the South* (Chapel Hill: North Carolina, 1935), 403.

the only avenue to avoiding dependency on others. By the 1830s, landholdings in older states like South Carolina and Georgia continued to consolidate, blocking aspiring and enterprising men from entering the propertied class. Furthermore, as white male suffrage expanded during the Jacksonian period, blurring the lines of class and privilege, factors like financial independence became central to southern masculinity.<sup>4</sup>

As Thomas Jefferson had envisioned in his idealistic vision of an agrarian republic, the primary way for Americans to achieve personal autonomy was through land ownership. Yet the ancestors of many poor whites – indentured servants, debtors, and low-wage laborers – arrived in America without any wealth, and many of their heirs struggled for generations to rise out of poverty. Their attempts at upward mobility were thwarted at almost every turn by the inequities in wealth and power fostered by slavery. Large slaveholders may have preferred to have nothing to do with poor whites, but by the late-antebellum period necessity forced them to take action. Because poor whites' economic interests were so at odds with the maintenance of slavery, planters made sure that lower class whites remained nearly powerless. In response, poor whites attempted to assert some control over their own lives – lives that were in no small measure proscribed by the southern oligarchy; lives largely beyond their control. Thus, the actions of poor whites are best understood within the context of their daily lives. These people existed in a land of concentrated and ostentatiously displayed wealth, yet they rarely owned more than a few articles of clothing, some tools, and perhaps a couple of pieces of furniture. Few ever received the chance for an education, even fewer earned enough money to buy land, and almost all were doomed to remaining poor throughout their lives. Much as the abolitionists claimed, the institution of slavery was greatly detrimental to the well-being of a large percentage of southern

---

<sup>4</sup> Eugene Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Vintage, 1974), 57; James P. Schmidt, *Free to Work: Labor Law, Emancipation, and Reconstruction, 1815-1880* (Athens: Georgia, 1998), 60.

whites. Although poor whites were never subjected to the daily horrors and degrading humiliations of enslavement themselves, they suffered tangible socio-economic consequences as a result of living in a slave society.<sup>5</sup>

Hampton Cheney of Rapides, Louisiana, was born into wealth and privilege as the son of a grand planter with 125 slaves. He stated that in his agricultural community opportunities were rare “for a poor young man to find sufficient employment whereby he might save enough to buy himself a farm.” But Cheney contrasted this lack of socio-economic mobility in high slave areas with regions that had smaller percentages of slaves. In Tennessee, he continued, “where there were fewer slaves...there were probably many more opportunities for a man to make and save money.” Slavery’s existence – no matter how minimal in any given area – reduced the chances for white laborers to move up from the bottom rungs of society into the landholding middling classes. And in areas with high percentages of slaves, like much of the Deep South, upward mobility was an unattainable dream for the vast majority of poor whites.<sup>6</sup>

To fully appreciate the struggles that antebellum poor whites faced, the wealth inequalities and demographics of the Deep South must first be understood. Historically, almost all non-landholding agricultural laborers, as well as the poorer landed farmers, suffered times of great hardship and hunger. As Robert Jütte found in early modern Europe, families generally experienced cycles of poverty, peaking early on when they had several young children to feed. By the time these children had become teenagers and were able to help contribute to the household as laborers, many families experienced a period of economic independence. Then, when grown children left the home to start their own families, parents generally entered another

---

<sup>5</sup> See Thomas Shapiro, *The Hidden Cost of Being African American: How Wealth Perpetuates Inequality*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2004.

<sup>6</sup> Colleen M. Elliot and Louise A. Moxley, eds. *The Tennessee Civil War Veterans Questionnaires*, Vols. 1-5 (Easley, SC: Southern Historical Press, Inc., 1985), Vol. 2, 493-502.

stage of poverty, lasting until their deaths. Thus, extreme poverty was felt most acutely by the very young and the very old. While these cycles certainly held true for poor whites in the Deep South, by the later antebellum period a convergence of governmental policies, an economic depression, and the profitability of slavery left poor whites with few opportunities to ever rise out of the lowest class – even in the primes of their working lives.<sup>7</sup>

By 1860, the average free adult male in the United States owned \$2,500 of property. But extreme wealth inequality throughout the country meant that in reality, a small percentage of wealthy people were very rich, and a large percentage of the lower class were very poor. Indeed, the top 1 percent of the population held 30 percent of the nation's real estate, and the top 2 percent held 40 percent of all land. Conversely, the poorest Americans generally owned less than \$100 in personal wealth. Lee Soltow determined that about one-third of the country's population owned "little more than clothing and perhaps some petty cash," and were consistently unable to save any money in a given year. Many, in fact, had "dissavings," as few poor people managed to obtain some semblance of economic or social mobility throughout their lives. Furthermore, wealth averages among white Americans remained relatively constant from the beginning of the young republic until the Civil War, meaning the proportion of poor people remained unchanged. The North, of course, also had a very economically stratified society, but nothing that rivaled the extreme disparity of wealth pervading the South. Wherever the peculiar institution existed, inheritable slave property created a non-porous class barrier. And due to the increasing price of slaves in the later antebellum period, inequality became further concentrated in the decade before secession. As Peter Wallenstein established, in the year before the Civil War, 56 percent of the country's aggregate personal estate was concentrated in the South. Cotton was king, slave labor was profitable, and slave prices were rising. In the aggregate, Dixie had become the wealthiest

---

<sup>7</sup> Robert Jütte, *Poverty and Deviance in Early Modern Europe* (New York: Cambridge, 1994).

region in America. Yet once again, the bulk of this wealth was concentrated in the hands of a very small group of slaveholders, while the pool of less affluent whites was growing larger by the day. “Despite the fact that the South boasted of its freedom from pauperism, because slavery was supposed to provide all white men with cheap labor and all colored men with subsistence,” wrote Roger Shugg, “there were nevertheless many paupers, as well as the poor whites who constituted as a class the slum element of the South.” The extent of their often-lifelong poverty was both pitiful and shocking, especially as they lived in one of the richest areas of the nineteenth century world. Surrounded by extravagant wealth and pretention, Helper complained, many poor whites “grow up to the age of maturity, and pass through life without ever owning as much as five dollars at any time.”<sup>8</sup>

For the wealthiest whites, however, life was different. In 1860, the Deep South’s poorest half of the population held only 5 percent of its wealth. By contrast, slightly over a thousand families accounted for nearly half of the entire region’s wealth. To put this in stark numeric terms, William E. Dodd estimated that among the cotton states in 1850, “A thousand families received [a total of] over \$50,000,000 a year, while all the remaining 66,000 families received only about \$60,000,000.” Several factors obviously added to this extreme economic disparity, but each factor ultimately stemmed from slavery. As Ransom and Sutch found, on the eve of the Civil War slaves accounted for 60 percent of all agricultural wealth in the five cotton-producing states of South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana. While the average cost of a slave was around \$800 in 1860, slave prices rose greatly throughout the fifties due to the

---

<sup>8</sup> Lee Soltow, *Men and Wealth in the United States, 1850-1870* (New Haven: Yale, 1975), 3; 93; 142-3; 44; 59; 25; 24; In terms of purchasing power, a dollar in 1860 would be worth about \$28.50 in 2012 terms, meaning the average wealth for men in America was about \$71,250. See [measuringworth.com](http://measuringworth.com); Peter Wallenstein, *From Slave South to New South: Public Policy in Nineteenth-Century Georgia* (Chapel Hill: North Carolina, 1987), 19; Roger W. Shugg, *Origins of Class Struggle in Louisiana: A Social History of White Farmers and Laborers during Slavery and After, 1840-1875* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana, 1939), 59; Helper, *The Impending Crisis*, 381.

cotton boom. A prime field hand, for example, would have cost between thirteen and fifteen hundred dollars in 1850, and up to three thousand dollars on the eve of secession, when slaves comprised almost \$4 billion of the South's wealth. Confirming these figures, Gavin Wright tabulated that the "average slave owner held nearly two-thirds of his wealth in the form of slaves." Since slaves comprised the majority of slaveholders' fortunes, it is important to note that among the slaveowners, slaves were unequally distributed, and were becoming more so in the decade before secession. Soltow found evidence of a "slight increase" in the concentration of slave ownership in the decade before secession, writing that "The number of slaves per slaveholder was higher in 1860 than in 1850 whereas the number of slaves per adult male was lower." John Boles's data indicated an even more pronounced concentration. "The percentage of southern families who owned slaves," he wrote, "decreased from 36 percent in 1830 to...25 percent in 1860, and the size of slaveholdings was increasing." The richest planters were buying up more slaves, increasing their numbers of laborers, while some of the smaller yeomen farmers slipped back to nonslaveholder status following economic hardship.<sup>9</sup>

After buying up more slaves, the region's plantation owners ostensibly needed more land to work them. In addition to a widening gap in wealth due to slave property, real estate also became concentrated in the hands of the most affluent southerners during this time. This consolidation of landholdings greatly diminished the chances for landless whites to purchase farms, and thereby enter the yeoman class. While only two-fifths of white Americans owned real estate in the mid-nineteenth century, opportunities for the landless to eventually become owners

---

<sup>9</sup> Quoted in David Williams, *Bitterly Divided: The South's Inner Civil War* (New York: New, 2008), 11; quoted in Robert R. Russel, "The Effects of Slavery upon Nonslaveholders in the Ante Bellum South," *Agricultural History* 15, No. 2 (April 1941): 113; Jenny Bourne, "Slavery in the United States," Economic History Association Encyclopedia. Web. <http://eh.net/encyclopedia/slavery-in-the-united-states/>; quoted in Gavin Wright, *Old South, New South: Revolutions in the Southern Economy Since the Civil War* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana, 1986), 19; Soltow, *Men and Wealth*, 142; John B. Boles, *The South through Time: A History of an American Region, Volume I* (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1999), 221; Wallenstein, *From Slave South*, 14.

were diminishing. In 1850, the minimum price for one acre of unimproved southern land was \$1.25. Seemingly not exorbitant at that price, most land purchases were much larger and more expensive.<sup>10</sup>

Furthermore, many land sales, including those from the federal government, specified a minimum number of acres for a single sale. This number was often set as high as 80 or 160 acres. In Alabama, for example, the smallest purchasable lot was 40 acres. While some poor whites certainly had enough money to purchase a small farm of ten or twenty acres, few had the cash available to purchase anything much bigger. But even at \$1.25 an acre, lower and middling class southerners simply could not compete with the spate of land speculators, who often bought up the best tracts of land before they were even available to the public at auction. Improved farmland, of course, was completely out of reach for poorer southerners, averaging \$11.42 an acre. As William Barney found, like the “older” South, soil exhaustion “was a major problem in Alabama and Mississippi on the eve of the Civil War.” Nevertheless, in Mississippi the most eroded lands sold for \$5 an acre, while “fresher lands” cost between \$10 and \$20.” To make matters even worse for the lower class whites struggling to become landowners, the value of improved farm acreage more than doubled during the 1850s. Needless to say, as time wore on, fewer and fewer landless whites were financially able to afford land. With no history of intergenerational wealth, little to no savings, and dwindling opportunities to purchase, landless southerners had little choice but to remain so. The purchase of a few unimproved, paltry acres would have required an industrious poor white to save almost all family earnings over a period of months or even years. With the growing ranks of slaveless, landless poor whites, however, slaveholders realized they had a potentially explosive population in their midst. As Manisha

---

<sup>10</sup> Soltow, *Men and Wealth*, 174; Charles C. Bolton, *Poor Whites in the Antebellum South: Tenants and Laborers in Central North Carolina and Northeast Mississippi* (Durham: Duke, 1994), 23.

Sinha wrote, “The increase in the number of nonslaveholders during the 1850s threatened to create an internal free-labor challenge to slavery.” Planters understood this threat in no uncertain terms, and began taking steps to prevent such challenges.<sup>11</sup>

Thus, as wealth became more and more unequally distributed, it became easier for slaveholders to amass larger and larger plantations. Governmental economic policy greatly benefitted the already-rich. Originally, poor whites were scattered throughout the Deep South, primarily as squatters. But as the antebellum period wore on, they became more and more concentrated in the foothills and mountains of Appalachia, and the pineywood, wiregrass region in the southern parts of Georgia, Alabama, and Mississippi. They also flocked to the cities and large number of burgeoning towns in search of work. However, the geographic mobility of the poor was not a matter of their own volition. Slaveholders were strategically buying up as much land as possible, pushing the least affluent yeomen off the land, turning them into tenants and day laborers, thus increasing the percentage of white southerners who qualified as “poor.” Clement Comer Clay, who served as Governor of Alabama in the mid-1830s, wrote, “Our wealthier planters, with greater means and no more skill, are buying out their poorer neighbors, extending their plantations, and adding to their slave force. The wealthy few...are thus pushing off the many who are merely independent.” Mainly due to the removal of Native Americans, land in the 1820s and 30s was relatively inexpensive in the Deep South states. But then financial disaster struck in 1837, condemning many small landholding yeomen farmers to the ranks of landless poor whites. Furthermore, at the request of Andrew Jackson, Congress had passed the Specie Circular Act in 1836, making it much harder for poorer farmers to purchase land. The act

---

<sup>11</sup> Soltow, *Men and Wealth*, 24; Wayne Flynt, *Poor but Proud: Alabama's Poor Whites* (Tuscaloosa: Alabama, 1989), 4-5; Soltow, *Men and Wealth*, 22; William L. Barney, *The Secessionist Impulse: Alabama and Mississippi in 1860* (Princeton: Princeton, 1974), 12; 13; Manisha Sinha, *The Counterrevolution of Slavery: Politics and Ideology in Antebellum South Carolina* (Chapel Hill: North Carolina, 2000), 135.

stipulated that the government would accept only gold or silver for land sales. Even banknotes were turned down, meaning that middling and poorer Americans could no longer buy on credit. Saving enough to buy land outright – especially good quality farm land – became extremely difficult for white Americans who started life out with little or no wealth inheritance. At the same time, the average size of yeomen farms declined by nearly 20 percent. As land values rose, Steven Hahn found, “fewer farm units could be parceled out viably among several heirs.” This land shortage meant that many sons of yeomen farmers began their adult lives without owning any kind of real estate, causing them to fall into the category of poor white laborers and tenants. By the eve of secession, Hahn discovered, much of the upcountry had a surplus of propertyless men wandering around in search of work. In fact, the white population in the area increased by close to one-fourth in the ten years leading up to the Civil War.<sup>12</sup>

“Driven off the fertile lands by the encroachment of the planter,” wrote James Ford Rhodes, poor whites thus “farmed the worn-out lands and gained a miserable and precarious subsistence.” Conversely, as affluent slaveholders increased their landholdings, they also increased their slaveholdings, and thus, their overall wealth. Continually adding to their growing fortunes, wealthy southerners became highly mobile and sentimentally detached from their ancestral homelands. They moved frequently and invested as little as possible in their communities, since much of their tax money would have gone to infrastructural projects like building roads and bridges, or funding public school systems for all white children. As Gavin Wright aptly wrote, “the passionate southern attachment to the soil was a post-Civil War phenomenon. Slaveholding farmers and planters moved from place to place so often they seldom had time to sink roots.” In the decades leading to secession, therefore, this strikingly uneven

---

<sup>12</sup> Quoted in George M. Weston, *The Poor Whites of the South* (Washington, D.C.: Buell & Blanchard, 1856), 5; Williams, *Bitterly Divided*, 11; 11; Steven Hahn, *The Roots of Southern Populism: Yeomen Farmers and the Transformation of the Georgia Upcountry, 1850-1890* (New York: Oxford, 1983), 49.

distribution of land ownership undeniably added tension to class relationships between southern whites. The rich became richer, but with slavery's profitability, it was a zero-sum game for less affluent whites. Without land or the opportunity to acquire it, lower-middling and poor whites sank more deeply into poverty, their employment prospects largely in the hands of the slaveholders.<sup>13</sup>

Planters often realized that buying up the small farms around their own homes would help keep their slaves more isolated from lower class whites. George Henderson, who spent his childhood as a slave in Kentucky, remarked, "My folks was sure quality. Master bought all the little places around us so he wouldn't have any po' white trash neighbors." Likewise, Acie Thomas's interviewer noted that "it was the habit of the Folsoms to buy out these people whenever they could do so by fair means or foul, according to his statements. And by and by there were no poor whites living near them." According to other slaves and travelers, Thomas's "by fair means or foul" statement seemed to hold true. As he traveled through Alabama, northerner James Redpath met a poor farmer who had to move because his wealthy slaveholding neighbors bought up all the land surrounding his small farm and then began charging exorbitant passage rent. The man could not even get out to the main road without paying several tolls. The poor farmer alleged that the slaveholder was only charging passage rent in an effort to run him off the land. Plus, the planter's slaves consistently stole from the man's farm, and when he complained to the overseer, the overseer told him to shoot the slaves who were stealing. But if he shot the offending slaves, the poor farmer reasoned, he then would have to pay the planter the market value of the slave, a fee he certainly could not afford. Poor farmers and small

---

<sup>13</sup> Quoted in Fred Arthur Bailey, *Class and Tennessee's Confederate Generation* (Chapel Hill: North Carolina, 1987), 12; Wright, *Old South*, quote on vi-vii.

landholders, it seemed, had little recourse in their dealings with powerful planters. Slaveholders controlled every aspect of southern society – including the local judicial system.<sup>14</sup>

Several ex-slaves confirmed that planters did, in fact, fleece small landowners of their holdings when they got the chance. Knowing they could almost always count on the backing of local judges and law enforcement officials, slaveholders were easily able to manipulate the system to their economic advantage. As one freedman told his Fisk University interviewer:

Sometimes the niggers would turn the white man up – when the white man say, “Take this sack of flour or sugar and hide it behind the bush, and I’ll get it after dark,” and the nigger would go and tell the master that he told him to get him a sack of something and hide it for him... And that night he would come cross the old white man carrying a sack and say, “What is it [you] got in that sack. A pig, or a sack of corn?”

Apparently, after the planter confronted the poorer man about receiving stolen goods from a slave, he would simply tell the offender that he would not press charges – if, of course, the thief would simply skip town immediately. Sam Stewart, an ex-slave from North Carolina, also remembered slaveholders using this tactic. “Some of the slave owners, when a poor white man’s land joined theirs and they wanted his place would have their Negroes steal things and carry them to the poor white man, and sell them to him,” reported Stewart. “Then the slave owner, knowing where the stuff was... would go and find his things at the poor white man’s house. Then he would claim it, and take out a writ for him, but he would give him a chance. He would tell him to sell out to him, and leave, or take the consequences,” he recalled. Needless to say, this

---

<sup>14</sup> George Henderson, in George P. Rawick, ed., *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography* (Westport, CT.: Greenwood, 1972-79), Vol. 7 (KY), 7; Acie Thomas, *Ibid.*, Vol. 3 (FL), 327-8; James Redpath, *The Roving Editor, or Talks with Slaves in the Southern States*, John R. McKivigan, ed. (1859; reprint, University Park: Pennsylvania, 1996), 255.

tactic probably worked quite well. As Stewart concluded, “That’s the way some of the slave owners got such large tracts of land.”<sup>15</sup>

Despite planters’ best efforts to keep their slaves geographically isolated from poor whites, however, segregation between the two groups was almost impossible to achieve. Nevertheless, slaveowners continued to try. Eugene Genovese famously contended that slaveholders encouraged slaves’ disparaging attitudes about poor whites. As ex-slave Ruben Fox said, “Master sure didn’t allow no poor white trash around here.” A woman who spent time as a slave in Mississippi remembered “plenty [of] poor white trash living around us, but old Miss sure wouldn’t allow me to play with them. She tell me, if she catch me with them children, she [was] going to wear me plumb out.” Planters had good reason to encourage slaves’ notions of superiority over poor whites. If slaves considered impoverished whites to be lazy and degenerate, perhaps they would be less likely to associate with them. Realistically, slaveholders could never fully prevent bi-racial social interactions, sexual relationships, and business transactions in the underground economy, but by keeping their plantations isolated they could at least attempt to reduce the rates of incidence. Mary Ella Grandberry, who grew up in Alabama, responded, “There was no po’ white trash in our community; they were kept back in the mountains.” Still another man commented, “The po’ white folks couldn’t even come on our place...My father’s white folks would not have a poor white man on the place.” And Prince Johnson recalled “they didn’t allow no po’ white trash to light on our place; we weren’t even allowed to associate with them.”<sup>16</sup>

---

<sup>15</sup> “When It’s Right to Steal From Your Master,” *American Slave*, Vol. 19 (Fisk), 34; Sam T. Stewart, *Ibid.*, Vol. 11 (NC), Part 2, 319.

<sup>16</sup> Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, 22; Ruben Fox, *American Slave*, Vol. 6 (MS), Supplement, Series 1, Part 2, 772; Callie Washington, *Ibid.*, Vol. 10 (MS), Supplement, Series 1, Part 5, 2187; Mary Ella Grandberry, *Ibid.*, Vol. 1 (AL), 164; “Free Negro,” *Ibid.*, Vol. 18 (Fisk), 315; Prince Johnson, *Ibid.*, Vol. 9 (MS), 78.

Aside from much of the white population becoming permanently landless, grave economic stratification meant that in material terms, the poorest southern whites lived similarly to slaves. As economic historians like Eugene Genovese and Raimondo Luraghi have shown, slaves' material lives were not far removed from those of European peasants. As valuable property, though, slaves were generally protected from severe hunger and starvation. It was in the slaveholders' best interests to keep their workers well fed and healthy, and many of the wealthier planters regularly employed a physician to help sick and injured slaves heal and recover. These material standards of living were generally not enjoyed by the Deep South's poor whites, who owned very little property. They often scraped together a meager living based on bare subsistence.<sup>17</sup>

Economist Lee Soltow proposed that on the eve of secession, about one-third of white Americans owned no more than clothing and small sums of petty cash. The impoverished "are very poor in terms of the assets they own," he wrote. Owning next to nothing meant that poor whites were even more removed from the day-to-day realities of the yeomen farmers and emerging southern middle class. Charles Bolton found that by 1860, even slaveless yeomen in North Carolina's central Piedmont owned, "on average, four to five times more personal property than their poor white neighbors." Evidence gleaned from debtors' records show that poor whites' most commonly owned property included farming tools, hogs, furniture, and kitchen utensils. For instance, in 1839 John Crosland applied for insolvency in South Carolina. His worldly belongings included 87 cents, 3 pairs of scissors, and the "wearing apparel of self and wife." The same year William Griffin was listed as owning "1 fore plane, 1 jack plane, 1 smoothing plane, 1 handsaw, 1 iron square, 3 chisels, [and] the wearing apparel of himself and his two little children." And in 1857 Fairfield District officials listed Berry Swan as an insolvent

---

<sup>17</sup> Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, 59.

debtor. His only possessions were his clothing. Ex-slaves also confirmed just how severely impoverished many poor whites were. In Mississippi, Julius Jones recalled having white neighbors who “were sure bad off. When they moved, they put their belongings in little wagons and had dogs pull them...they didn’t have no other way to get from place to place.”<sup>18</sup>

Given how little they actually owned, poor white homes were generally of very poor quality, commonly described as crude, one room shacks made of logs and mud. Travelers often commented on the horrible conditions of poor white dwellings. Impoverished whites “usually lived in one-room cabins, the logs unhewn and inadequately chinked. Frequently there was no window of any kind, and almost certainly there would be no glass window,” reported one source. “There was no floor but the bare earth; the furniture seldom included more than a bedstead or two, a rough pine table, a rough homemade chair or two, and perhaps an improvised cupboard and sometimes a spinning wheel...All were dirty and unkempt.” Ex-slave Ed McCree confirmed this description, noting that “Slave quarters were lots of log cabins with chimneys of criss-crossed sticks and mud. Poor white folks lived in houses like that too.” Yankee soldier George Pepper added his voice to the chorus, pointing out the extreme differences in white living quarters:

The state of the habitations of the poor in many parts of Georgia, is a libel on the humanity of their more wealthy superiors. A fine dressed lawn, surrounded with miserable cabins and hovels of the poor, nothing can reflect more discredit on the character of the dominant class, than such a contrast. The lordly mansion and park want their most beautiful appendages, when filthy and unwholesome huts are substituted for clean and comfortable cabins; and pleasure grounds are nicknamed, when at every step of your progress, and at each opening of the prospect, your eyes are pained by dwellings for laborers not half so convenient as the wigwam of the savage.

---

<sup>18</sup> Soltow, *Men and Wealth*, 24; Bolton, *Poor Whites*, 34; Fairfield District, Court of Common Pleas, Petitions and Property Schedules of Insolvent Debtors, 1805-1861 (SCDAH); Julius Jones, *American Slave*, Vol. 6 (MS), Supplement, Series 1, Part 3, 1221-2.

Historian Guion Griffis Johnson similarly described the deplorable abodes of poor whites. Some of their living quarters sounded even worse than slave cabins. “They often lived in abandoned outhouses, some with only a clay floor and no means of ventilation or light except the door,” he wrote. But they never seemed to escape this extreme poverty, as their “personal property was almost negligible and they were constantly in debt either to their landlord or the keeper of the cross-roads store.” Even tenant farmers, who supposedly lived decent, respectable lives, sometimes faced material realities that differed little from the poorest whites. While tenants may have lived in slightly better houses than day and wage laborers, the rent the landlord charged for the use of the house, tools, and seed kept many of these families in cycles of debt. William Beard, the son of a nonslaveholding tenant farmer, purported that “renter[s] had no chance to save anything. Slaveholders were the only men that could make enough money to do anything.” Men who owned neither land nor slaves were realizing that their loss generally meant slaveholder gain.<sup>19</sup>

Avery Craven found several similarities between the material lives of poor whites and slaves. Their cabins differed “little in size or comfort,” both comprised of chinked logs and generally one room. Furthermore, both groups “dressed in homespuns, went barefoot in season... The women of both classes toiled in the fields or carried the burden of other manual labor and the children of both early reached the age of industrial accountability.” Even the food they prepared and ate “was strikingly similar.” While most non-land owners experienced periods of hunger throughout the antebellum period, the most impoverished poor whites dealt with food shortages on a fairly regular basis. Since poor whites generally had little or no access to fertile

---

<sup>19</sup> Edgar W. Martin, *The Standard of Living in 1860: American Consumption Levels on the Eve of the Civil War* (Chicago: Illinois, 1942), 132; Ed McCree, *American Slave*, Vol. 4 (GA), Part 3, 58; Pepper, *Personal Recollections*, 271; Guion Griffis Johnson, *Ante-Bellum North Carolina: A Social History* (Chapel Hill: North Carolina, 1937), 569; Elliot, *Tennessee*, Vol. 1, 300.

land, they often had to purchase or trade for food. Although they obviously supplemented their diets by hunting, fishing, poaching, and foraging, not having enough to eat was a constant worry for a percentage of the white population. Travelers often commented on the limited selection and quantities of food among the poor. One thought that poor white southerners “lived almost entirely on corn bread and bacon.” In Georgia, reported Craven, another visitor “was served coffee without sugar, fried bacon, and corn bread mixed with water only; there were no vegetables, butter, or other foods.” When poor whites did grow or acquire vegetables, they closely approximated slave fare: the most common included sweet potatoes, Irish potatoes, cabbages, peas, beans, and okra, and occasionally leafy greens like collards. Furthermore, since planters and grocers basically were able to charge exorbitant prices for foodstuffs given their virtual monopolies, it is not surprising that poor whites most commonly purchased food; besides liquor, pork was the most popular commodity. Meat was a luxury for the southern poor, white and black, but the low prices of stolen goods made it more accessible.<sup>20</sup>

Even with the underground economy, though, poor whites were not strangers to hunger. Instead, food shortages were a part of daily life; they were even expected during certain parts of the year, especially the dead of winter. Ebenezer Pettigrew, a wealthy planter from Washington County, North Carolina, alerted other slaveholders to the plight of the poor masses in the early 1840s. At least half of Tyrrell County’s 6,000 white inhabitants, along with the “lower part of Washington County,” Pettigrew wrote, would be “without bread” by the first of January, 1843. He further reported that large numbers of these people “are without money, without credit, and the most of them without property.” Historian Edward Ayers confirmed that the cotton boom of the 1850s did little to help the poorest southern whites. Indeed, some white people really did die

---

<sup>20</sup> Avery O. Craven, “Poor Whites and Negroes in the Antebellum South,” *Journal of Negro History* 15, No.1 (Jan. 1930): 16-17; Martin, *The Standard*, 59-60; 63; Jeff Forret, *Race Relations at the Margins: Slaves and Poor Whites in the Antebellum Southern Countryside* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana, 2006), 81.

of outright starvation, as Savannah's Board of Health reported. But the problem was not only confined to crowded, immigrant-filled cities. It was widespread throughout the entire region. Industrialist William Gregg's 1851 address to the South Carolina Institute called upon wealthier whites to begin taking heed of the region's impoverished masses, asking, "Shall we pass unnoticed the thousands of poor, ignorant, degraded white people among us, who, in this land of plenty, live in comparative nakedness and starvation?" To be sure, he continued, "Many a one is reared in proud South Carolina, from birth to manhood, who had never passed a month in which he has not, some part of the time, been stinted for meat. Many a mother is there who will tell you that her children are but scantily provided with bread." Just a few years prior to secession, Hinton Helper even went so far as to blame the thefts committed by poor whites on the peculiar institution. Nonslaveholders, he claimed, were struggling to feed themselves and their families. They had few options other than stealing, "because they are impoverished and depressed by the retrogressive and deadening operations of slavery."<sup>21</sup>

Not all slaveholding southern families were unsympathetic on this count, though. In several court proceedings involving poor whites, wealthier neighbors were asked how many times they supplied a particular person with meat or corn. It was not uncommon for each small community to have multiple families who would go door to door asking for food on a regular basis. Both slave narratives and Confederate soldier questionnaires referred to the frequency of edible donations from the region's rich. Robert Floyd claimed that slaveholders "would kill beef or mutton and send some to the [poor] neighbors without any cost." Ex-slave Coleman Smith echoed this observation: "when my master killed beefs he divided it with poor white people." And Melvin Smith from Beaufort, South Carolina, said that poor whites had so little to eat that

---

<sup>21</sup> Quoted in Johnson, *Ante-Bellum North Carolina*, 69; Edward L. Ayers, *Vengeance and Justice: Crime and Punishment in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century American South* (New York: Oxford, 1984), 82; quoted in Helper, *The Impending Crisis*, 377-8; 49.

“Master all the time send them meat and bread and help them with their crop... Sometimes they even come to see the niggers and eat with us. We went to see them, too, but we had more to eat than them. They were sorry folk.” Adeline Jackson even remembered one “poor buckra... [who] was a God-forsaken looking man that master or mistress always give something.” Still another freedwoman from Georgia recalled “a white widow woman who lived near our place, and she had two boys. Missus let them boys pick them some peas when we would be picking, and we would run them off, because we didn’t like po’ white trash. But Missus made us let them pick all they wanted.” Wealthy slaveholders clearly had to help support poor whites through periods of severe deprivation.<sup>22</sup>

State and local governments made weak attempts to address the South’s poverty problems through a series of poor laws in the late antebellum period. While most of the region’s laws aimed to control or punish the poor white population, a minority of them offered small charitable concessions, from poor/common school funds to the construction of almshouses and orphanages. According to Seth Rockman, southern “poor houses” were initially only built for children, the elderly, and the infirm, but by the mid-1820s poor whites “in their twenties, thirties, and forties were two-fifths of those seeking admission. By 1830, that figure had reached three-fifths.” Thus, just as the Jacksonian Era supposedly lifted up the common man, some of the South’s able-bodied white work force were applying for governmental assistance just to survive. Jeff Forret found that on the eve of the war, “nearly eleven thousand individuals in Virginia, the two Carolinas, and Georgia, counted among the South Atlantic region’s official ‘paupers.’ The overwhelming preponderance of these were white women of all ages, with no visible means of support.” Although large numbers of poor white adults may have applied for some form of relief,

---

<sup>22</sup> Elliot, *Tennessee*, Vol. 2, 826-7; Vol. 5, 1973-4; Melvin Smith, *American Slave*, Vol. 13, Part 3, 290; Adeline Jackson, *Ibid.*, Vol. 3 (SC), Part 3, 2; Georgia Smith, *Ibid.*, Vol. 4 (GA), Part 3, 283.

less than one percent of whites ever received help. Timothy Lockley found that this small group of white southerners consisted of “the truly incapable, namely, those who would most likely have died without support.” Southern governments typically only helped the blind, “insane,” and severely physically disabled, as well as certain orphaned or abandoned children.<sup>23</sup>

By 1860, as many as one-third of Georgia’s counties – especially those with cities or towns – had established poor houses and asylums. The Muscogee Asylum for the Poor committed itself to educating impoverished children, “at least in reading and writing.” Hancock, a county in the heart of Georgia’s black belt, probably had the most comprehensive program: it levied an extra tax to establish quarters for the poor that included dormitories, a kitchen, a chapel, and a school, as well as enough land for a garden, orchard, vineyard, and pasture for two milk cows. But Hancock’s program was an anomaly. In most parts of the South, almshouses were generally filthy, underfunded cesspools of illness. “A list of the sick in the poor house” in Adams County, Mississippi revealed that diseases like hepatitis and typhus and disabilities like blindness were commonplace. A few of the “sick” were gunshot victims, but the large majority were incapacitated by diarrhea. Physicians ran the poor house, but being sick there was a virtual death sentence. The almshouses rarely sheltered healthy young males or even able-bodied females; they generally only contained “but a few imbeciles and cripples.”<sup>24</sup>

While the southern states continued to offer underfunded, lackluster, and vague “solutions” to the problems caused by extreme poverty, private charitable donations became an

---

<sup>23</sup> Seth Rockman, *Scraping By: Wage Labor, Slavery, and Survival in Early Baltimore* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 2009), 211; Forret, *Race Relations*, 197; Timothy Lockley, *Welfare and Charity in the Antebellum South* (Gainesville: Florida, 2007), 16.

<sup>24</sup> *Acts of the General Assembly of the State of Georgia*. Passed at Milledgeville, at a session in November and December, 1858: e.g. 185, 186, 190; 1845: 131; 1847: 133; 1858: 190; Wallenstein, *From Slave South*, 48; In the 1850 census, 1,036 Georgia paupers received the sum of \$27,820 for previous year (averages \$26.85 per person). Furthermore, the majority of counties that did not offer institutional assistance at least had some form of poor relief—usually cash or supplies. Adams County, Poor House Records, 1821-3, MDAH; Lockley, *Welfare and Charity*, 195.

important part of white-on-white paternalism. Historian Timothy Lockley documented more than 600 antebellum benevolent societies in the slave states. In the most comprehensive work on southern charity to date, he proposed that slaveholders used charity to “demonstrate to poor whites that there were some privileges to which they were entitled merely because of their race.” Interestingly, women led the effort to build some sort of charitable safety net beginning in the early 19th century, sustaining their work throughout much of the antebellum period. Much like the northern charities, affluent southern men’s “increased interest and involvement” only grew noticeable in the 1840s, although Lockley gave no real explanation for this timing. Well after the supposed great equalizing of white men during the Jacksonian era, the support of charitable efforts by planters came on the heels of a decade of hardcore abolitionist sentiment and sectional strife. Perhaps slaveholders realized they needed to find ways to keep the poor loyal to them – and to slavery. Even as wealth inequality continued to grow over the next two decades, planters could ensure that poor whites depended on them for survival. This gratitude, however misplaced, was likely effective. In fact, Lockley rightly posited that white welfare was intended to signal that “the southern elite were the only ones with the best interests of the white poor at heart.”<sup>25</sup>

Although Lockley was correct in most of his analysis of southern charities, aspects of southern masculinity – namely, honor – should have had a more prominent role in his thesis. Frederick Law Olmsted observed in the 1850s that the southern poor “are not generally anxious to be admitted [to an almshouse]... They usually consider it a deplorable misfortune which obliges them to go to it.” Young, able bodied poor whites were surely more than a little humiliated to have to seek financial help. In a world of extravagance and extreme wealth, not to mention a world where manhood was defined by the ability to provide for one’s family, they doubtless felt like failures, both as men and as *white* men. Private sources of aid may have been

---

<sup>25</sup> Lockley, *Welfare and Charity*, 3; 114; 6; 216.

less public than governmental assistance, but the fact that most of the region's charities were run by women deserves greater scrutiny than Lockley affords it. The southern code of masculine honor surely would have discouraged at least some impoverished (but still fiercely independent) white men from taking economic assistance from *women*. Furthermore, a deep-set sense of white honor undermined the main point of Lockley's study, that charity and welfare provided poor whites "fewer reasons to feel disaffected with the status quo," functioning as "important elements in the creation and maintenance of the 'solid South.'"<sup>26</sup>

While very few poor whites ultimately received personal charity from planters, a sizable percentage were both figuratively and economically indebted to slaveholders. Some of the most important practices that continued to reinforce the paternalist relationship between rich and poor whites concerned money lending and the extension of lines of credit. Banks were relatively scarce in the rural Deep South, and even if poor whites lived in cities or towns, they would rarely have the collateral to qualify for a loan. Planters had loaned money or granted credit to poor whites for generations, and the practice seemed to grow in accordance with the diversifying economy in the late antebellum period. One nonslaveholder recalled that "some of the rich men help[ed] young men buy farms by loaning them money...without interest." Cigarette magnate R.J. Reynolds' father, a wealthy tobacco plantation owner, apparently "helped many [nonslaveholders] by loaning [them] money to educate themselves and started others by loaning them money." As Lockley pointed out, "Loans tied the non-elite to the elite with bonds of obligation since by accepting credit, debtors entered into a patron/client relationship with lenders." Loans inextricably bound poor whites to the plantation gentry, economically, legally – and potentially even politically. It is certainly conceivable that a lender would threaten to call in

---

<sup>26</sup> Frederick Law Olmsted, *A Journey in the Seaboard Slave States: With Remarks on Their Economy* (New York: Dix and Edwards, 1856), 700; Lockley, *Welfare and Charity*, 217.

overdue debts if the debtor began to displease him in some manner. At the very least, the creditor would rack up court and legal fees owed by the poor white, who would be declared insolvent and put in jail. It is easy to imagine scenarios in which the lending planter would advise – or even threaten – a debtor into voting a certain way, especially if the debtor was a tenant. Furthermore, being dependent upon a planter for housing and food surely guided the way a debtor lived his life. Essentially a foreshadowing of the crop lien system, these types of credit relationships became cyclical and perpetual. Once the initial debt was established, the creditor could easily raise interest rates or sell or rent goods at exorbitant prices. Without other means of establishing credit, the debtor was forced to take the credit from the planter on the planter’s terms – terms that often financially bound the poor white to the planter for his entire life. Historian Richard Morris held that the “Principal forms of coercive labor service to which the poor whites of the South were subject stemmed from peonage, a relationship based upon debt.” Charles Bolton confirmed these findings decades later, writing that many employers used their “economic clout as a creditor to encourage poor debtors to sign on as laborers.” The bonds of debt were incredibly tight, and the only way for poor whites to escape “such debilitating credit relationships was to move farther west. Many did.” Indeed, there was a mass exodus westward of small farmers who had lost their land and grown tired of being in debt and working for others. In Jefferson County, Mississippi, for example, about 87 percent of nonslaveholders moved between the 1850s and 60s. The dream of western autonomy – far away from the stain of slavery – must have been incredibly seductive.<sup>27</sup>

For the poor whites who remained in the Deep South, some were lucky enough to receive acts of personal charity from affluent planters. In veterans’ interviews, sons of slaveholders

---

<sup>27</sup> Elliot, *Tennessee*, Vol. 4, 1511-2; Vol. 5, 1823-4; Lockley, *Welfare and Charity*, 153; Richard M. Morris, “The Measure of Bondage in the Slave States,” *The Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 41, No. 2 (Sept. 1954): 225; Bolton, *Poor Whites*, 26; 105; Barney, *The Secessionist Impulse*, 39.

claimed that their families “often financially aided” nonslaveholders. Stephen Hows of Davidson, Tennessee, had “known my father to let men starting out in life have a cow and calf or mules on a credit, rent their land and help them in many ways.” W.R.H. Matthews wrote that slaveholders “frequently loaned money or mules to tide [poorer whites] over hard places. Frequently these favors were rendered unsolicited without note on interest frequently accompanied with offer of land to work.” Given the lack of an effective welfare system run by state or local government, there were times slaveholders had to intervene to keep poor whites from extreme hunger and homelessness. The son of a Savannah planter, John Pickard, remembered: “My father bought a piece of land for the timber to make rails and Mother moved these four poor families on it and they lived there for years without rent...Father called it ‘Mary’s poor farm.’” This type of charity was sometimes successful in helping poor whites eventually escape the grips of poverty. Pickard’s father, for instance, “helped these [poor] young men buy farms and one of them married a slave owner’s daughter. Other slave owners did as much or more.” Freedmen interviews occasionally confirmed this level of dependency between some poor and rich whites. Walter Long from South Carolina reported, “Many was the poor white folks that ‘most lived on Master John.’”<sup>28</sup>

More common than complete financial dependence, however, was the extension of smaller charitable acts, sometimes in the form of planters paying for the educational pursuits of promising young lower-middling and poor whites. Generally, a wealthy benefactor would select a young boy who had shown intelligence and a good work ethic and offer to pay for his schooling or for his apprenticeship to a tradesman. Nathaniel Harris, whose family owned five slaves, recalled that his father “aided many of the poor to get an education. He helped several

---

<sup>28</sup> Elliot, *Tennessee*, Vol. 2, 671; Vol. 3, 1168; Vol. 1, 257; Vol. 4, 1733-4; Walter Long, *American Slave*, Vol. 3 (SC), Part 3, 119.

deserving boys to go to school. One man he educated is now a minister, still preaching the gospel among the poor of the mountains.” Another son of a small planter claimed that poor whites “were encouraged and frequently were helped in procuring an education. My father maintained at his own expense a poor neighbor boy until he acquired a fairly good education.” And William Carson, the young master on a plantation of over two hundred slaves in Louisiana, wrote that his father sent a poor young man to school, college, and theological seminary, eight to ten years of education in all.<sup>29</sup>

Other charitable contributions from wealthy southerners included the “lending” of slaves and the donation of goods in kind. In the first instance, planters would allow a slave or a small group of slaves to go over and work for a poor white – either for a period of days to help him with planting or harvesting, or for a specific job, such as construction of a house or barn. William Pursley, the son of a slaveholder, remembered that his father would “take a bunch of slaves to help a neighbor less fortunate in log rolling and other work on the farm. Mother has sent negro girls for weeks to stay with a sick neighbor.” Of course, it was probably more common for a planter to send these resources to a struggling but landowning yeoman farmer than to a truly impoverished white who did not own land. But the practice did tie the beneficiary of the charity to slavery. Even if the poorer or middling white did not own a slave, “borrowing” unpaid laborers from a planter inexorably linked the nonslaveholder to the peculiar institution. At the very least, this exchange gave the poorer person a feeling of importance. Not only were they recognized by planters as members of society worthy of charity, they also became, but for a brief moment, masters themselves. This singular event was likely transformative for a non-slaveowner, especially in terms of his attitude towards slavery and slaveholders.<sup>30</sup>

---

<sup>29</sup> Elliot, *Tennessee*, Vol. 3, 1021-3; Vol. 5, 2037; Vol. 2, 464-6.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol. 4, 1783.

Although there is a history of private charitable acts in the antebellum Deep South, the vast majority of poor whites never received any form of relief or assistance, from either the upper classes or the government. On the contrary, it must have seemed to them that the slaveholders were only concerned with their own interests, and they would have to fend for themselves. In this cruel, hard world, some poor whites turned to illegal activities in order to survive. Understanding the extent of poor white poverty helps determine how commonly poor whites and blacks must have interacted in the underground economy. Poor whites often needed food, and slaves had access to plantation property, and at times had their own produce to sell. Thus, state governments frequently drafted laws preventing poor whites from having contact with slaves, and the most obvious regulations concerned peddling and trading. In his study on bi-racial crime in the Carolinas and Virginia, Jeff Forret found an “inverse relationship between a white person’s wealth and his or her likelihood of engaging in the unlawful trade with slaves.”<sup>31</sup>

Octavia George, s freedwoman interviewed by the Works Progress Administration, remembered that poor whites “could not own slaves and they had rich plantation owners.” She believed “that those poor white folk are to blame for the Negroes stealing because they would get the Negroes to steal their master’s corn, hogs, chickens and many other things and sell it to them for practically nothing.” Another man, who had been enslaved in Georgia, recalled that “Old Big Andy Angel’s white folks had him put in jail a heap of times, because he was a rogue and stole everything he could get his hands on. Nearly everybody was afraid of him.” While Andy may have only stolen goods for personal use, the extent of his theft suggests that he may have also been selling these items to other poor southerners. A plethora of sources reveal that planters

---

<sup>31</sup> Jeff Forret, “Slaves, Poor Whites, and the Underground Economy of the Rural Carolinas,” *Journal of Southern History* LXX, No.4 (Nov. 2004): 785.

detested this underground biracial trade network. Their anger, however, probably stemmed as much from social anxieties as economic losses.<sup>32</sup>

The presence of the underground economy only strengthened planters' desire to keep slaves and poor whites separate. In fact, the southern gentry encouraged their slaves to loathe poor whites; if blacks felt superior to poor whites, slaveholders hoped, they would likely avoid having contact with them. In the few decades before secession, slaves regularly ridiculed poor whites, even face to face. Henry Bibb, a fugitive slave, wrote that poor whites "were generally ignorant, intemperate, licentious, and profane." Historian Eugene Genovese determined that it "was probably the slaves who dubbed the poor whites 'trash'" because blacks considered them "the laziest and most dissolute people on earth."<sup>33</sup>

Countless interviews with freedmen, along with fugitive slave narratives and third-party accounts, seem to affirm Genovese's conclusion. Many times blacks' disrespect and disdain for poor whites seemed to center on poor whites' illiteracy, work ethics, and moral habits, not their economic worth. Traveler Whitelaw Reid spoke to one newly freed man who weighed in on poor whites' lack of both education and ambition: "They haven't learned, because they don't care; we, because they wouldn't let us." Slaves also realized that poor whites' alleged immoralities added reasons for strict segregation. One African American woman recalled that her masters "didn't never allow us niggers to mix with what they called the po' white trash; they always said they would learn us how to steal and drink; it was the truth, too." Nan Stewart remembered that her "poor white neighbors weren't allowed to live very close to the plantation as Marse Hunt wanted the cultured slave children to be raised in proper manner." Telling slave children that they

---

<sup>32</sup> Octavia George, *American Slave*, Vol. 13 (OK), 111-2; John F. Van Hook, *Ibid.*, Vol. 4, Part 4 (GA), 78.

<sup>33</sup> Bill Cecil-Fronsman, *Common Whites: Class and Culture in Antebellum North Carolina* (Lexington: Kentucky, 1992), 89; quoted in John W. Blassingame, *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford, 1979), 306-7; Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, 22.

needed to act socially “better than” or “above” poor whites surely challenged slaveowner teachings of inherent racial inequality. This type of hierarchy – predicated on ever more complicated formulas of race and class – likely caused many African Americans to reflect upon their masters’ proslavery theories based on the notion of white racial superiority. These theories became less and less convincing with the unavoidable recognition of the South’s white poor. Ella Kelly, enslaved in South Carolina, attempted to make sense of the region’s competing prejudices against both blacks and poor whites. Kelly proposed that “there are three kinds of people. Lowest down is a layer of white folks, then in the middle is a layer of colored folks and on top is de cream, a layer of good white folks. Suspect it’ll be day way ‘till Judgment day.”<sup>34</sup>

Of course, slaveholders’ main motivation in keeping the two groups separate was more serious than concerns over simple larceny and trading in the underground economy. Upper class southerners recognized the danger in poor whites’ non-conformity and disconnectedness from slavery. Several of the African Americans interviewed after the Great Depression talked about the strained relationships between whites of different classes, demonstrating how easily disaffected poor whites could easily disrupt the lives of planters. Samuel Andrews, an ex-slave living in Florida, told his interviewer that he ran away twice, but his master declined to whip him upon his return because “he was apprehensive that he might run away again and be stolen by poorer whites and thus cause trouble.” The richer whites, Andrews related, “were afraid of the poorer whites”; if the latter “were made angry they would round up the owners’ sheep and turn them loose into their cotton fields and the sheep would eat the cotton, row by row.” He concluded that “the relationship between the rich and poor whites during slavery” was comparable to “that of the white and Negro people today.” Undoubtedly, the scariest scenario for

---

<sup>34</sup> Nan Stewart, *American Slave*, Vol. 12 (OH), 88; “Now Supported by Children She Raised” *Ibid.*, Vol. 18 (Fisk), 215; Ella Kelly, *Ibid.*, Vol. 14 (SC), Part 3, 82.

planter involved any hint of a growing empathy and compassion between the two underclasses. Indeed, slaveholders' greatest fears involved blacks and poor whites forming *personal relationships*. Reverend Squire Dowd remembered that "The white folks rode to church and the darkies walked, as many of the poor white folks did. We looked upon the poor white folks as our equals. They mixed with us and helped us to envy our masters. They looked upon our masters as we did."<sup>35</sup>

Other ex-slaves commented on the deep social divide between rich and poor whites, pointing out some of the humiliations poor whites suffered. Jesse Williams, who had been enslaved in South Carolina, reported, "We had a good master and mistress. They were big buckra, never associated with poor white trash." And John Smith, a North Carolinian, remembered that "The poor white folks done tolerable well but the rich slave owners didn't allow them to come on their plantations." Instances of planters denying poor whites access to their homes seemed to particularly delight slaves. They often pointed such incidents out to their interviewers. Rosa Starke's master "Had a grand manner; no patience with poor white folks. They couldn't come in the front yard; they knew to pass on by to the lot, hitch up their horse, and come knock on the kitchen door and make their wants and wishes known to the butler." For all the pleasure slaves seemingly took in criticizing poor whites, though, very real friendships and relationships between the two groups continually threatened to traverse the boundaries of race. As Lockley wrote, "in areas such as the workplace, dramshop, and brothel, where there was no reason for maintaining racial distinctions, racial lines could become blurred and permeable." Likewise, Jeff Forret described the relationship as a complex, "curious mix of love and hate, equality and inequality. At times, shared economic deprivation and impoverishment tempered racial hostilities and drew slaves and poor whites together into civil, cordial, and even intimate

---

<sup>35</sup> Samuel Simeon Andrews, *Ibid.*, Vol. 3 (FL), 13; Reverend Squire Dowd, *Ibid.*, Vol. 11 (NC), 267.

and loving relationships.” Thus, he concluded, “slave and poor white interaction both reinforced and challenged southern racial boundaries.”<sup>36</sup>

Despite planters’ best efforts, therefore, slaves and poor whites in plantation areas had quite a bit of interaction – and some of those relationships, of course, were sexual. Although there were cases of relationships between poor white men and black women, most historians have studied the more commonly reported sexual interactions between poor white women and black men. Ira Berlin found that beginning in colonial times, the largest incidence of interracial sex in America occurred between white servant women and black men, and often resulted in illegitimate babies. By the late antebellum period, Eugene Genovese asserted, “white women of all classes had black lovers and sometimes husbands in all parts of the South, especially in the towns and cities.” Certainly for poor white women, personal interactions with black men were relatively common; some of these interactions surely led to romantic or sexual encounters. As Jeff Forret found, “Court records show that poor white women participated directly in the slave-poor white economy more than female slaves apparently did. Poor white women heading their own households comprised perhaps as much as 20 or 25 percent of all poor whites connected with the illicit trade.” Given these large numbers of poor white women who traded with black slaves on a regular basis, interracial sex was all but inevitable. When poor white men were gone for weeks or months at a time, their “wives” had to make ends meet as best as possible. Whether poor white women turned to black men as romantic lovers, or whether sexual favors were part of

---

<sup>36</sup> Jesse Williams, *Ibid.*, Vol. 14 (SC), Part 4, 204. John Smith, *Ibid.*, Vol. 11 (NC), Part 2, 273-4; Rosa Starke, *Ibid.*, Vol. 14 (SC), Part 4, 147-8; Timothy James Lockley, *Lines in the Sand: Race and Class in Lowcountry Georgia, 1750-1860* (Athens: Georgia, 2001), 29; Forret, *Race Relations*, 15.

the trade involved in the underground economy, one thing is certain: interracial sex between the lower classes happened with relatively frequency.<sup>37</sup>

Former slaves sometimes commented about these mixed-race relationships. One woman remembered an African American man who had been lynched in her community: “He was just like a heap of other young fool men, he was fooling around with the ‘po’ white trash,’ and he had been putting up with this old white woman.” Perhaps, though, the poor white woman had real feelings for her black lover, because “the very morning he was to be hung, this old white woman hussy come to the jail and said he was innocent.” Freedwoman Adeline Johnson recalled another incident that happened near her plantation. A particular poor white woman “had no living. Nigger men steal flour or a hog, take it and give it to her. She be hungry. Pretty soon a mulatto baby turned up. Then folks want to run her out of the country.” During his travels through Georgia, Frederick Law Olmsted also took notice of poor white “harlots,” noting that “very slight value is placed on female virtue among this class.” There must always be enough women, he reasoned, so poor that “their favors can be purchased by the slaves.” Even worse, he reasoned, the biracial offspring of these poor white women “must be constitutionally entitled to freedom.” Since infants born in the antebellum period automatically took on the freedom status of their mothers, any baby born to a poor white woman would be considered free, even if the baby was biracial. Poor white women’s potential to augment the free black population doubtless disturbed slaveowners a great deal. The prostitution of poor white women, therefore, caused antebellum planters great worry, and women suspected of selling their bodies were routinely prosecuted

---

<sup>37</sup> Ira Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone: The First Two Centuries of Slavery in North America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard, 1998), 44-5. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, 422; Forret, *Race Relations*, 88. For information on interracial relationships in the nineteenth century South, also see Martha Hodes, *White Women, Black Men: Illicit Sex in the Nineteenth Century South* (New Haven: Yale, 1997).

throughout the antebellum Deep South, especially if they were suspected of sleeping with black men.<sup>38</sup>

Often directly related to interracial sex is the little-explored prevalence of infanticide, especially when the race of the deceased infant was in question. A full length study of the topic would undoubtedly add a new dimension to historians' understanding about race and the frequency of interracial sex. Just a cursory review of coroner's reports and inquisitions from the late antebellum period reveals that among white women, infanticide was far from an uncommon occurrence. Even though, as Genovese noted, "With childbirth deaths so common from natural causes, the deed could not easily be detected," many cases reveal the obvious, brutal murders of mixed-race babies by their white mothers. Whether these killings were meant to protect the woman's honor or save her from legal prosecution, or whether they were supposed to "save" the baby from having to grow up as black in a white world, will never be known. Yet it is obvious that the birth of an interracial child could completely ruin a white woman's entire life, essentially causing her to be banished from society. Some women, therefore, took drastic measures to control their own lives.<sup>39</sup>

In Hancock County, Georgia, the body of an infant was discovered in September 1857. Wrapped in a cloth and buried in the mud, the tiny baby girl had been delivered by a doctor and was later found dead. Catherine Celestine Lewis, the baby's mother, had been deeply disturbed by her pregnancy and even attempted suicide before she went into labor. Margaret Youngblood, a witness who lived with Lewis, testified that "the doctors proposed to stop it at what it was at...for fear that she might yet kill herself on account of the case." Thus, the doctor had apparently attempted to perform an abortion, even though the fetus was "over seven months

---

<sup>38</sup> "Sold from the Block at Four Years Old," *American Slave*, Vol. 19 (Fisk), 70-1; Adeline Johnson, *Ibid.*, Vol. 2 (AK), Part 4, 56; Olmsted, *A Journey*, 507-9.

<sup>39</sup> Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, 497.

gestation.” The mother had been alone when the child died, but one of the only other witnesses, John Stone, made the startling confession that the doctor tried to keep everyone silent about the birth. “Dr. Jones remarked to me that they wanted to keep this matter a secret,” Stone testified, and “I observed that it is nonsense, for I heard of it before.” That “it” that Stone had heard about likely alluded to the baby being interracial. Although nothing in this particular case ever specified that the baby girl was mixed race, certain code words spoke for themselves. The extreme levels of secrecy requested, along with the pregnant mother’s attempted suicide, could mean little else. As John Stone tried to leave Lewis’s home, Margaret Youngblood ran after him, imploring him to “say nothing about this,” just as the doctor had ordered. Stone attempted to deflect her request by laughing and saying that “it was a matter of no importance.” Youngblood then countered threateningly, replying that “no person knows of this but you and Dr. Jones, and we who are here.”<sup>40</sup>

Giving birth to a mixed race child in the antebellum Deep South, it seems, was a very risky and traumatic undertaking, as two cases out of South Carolina affirm. A few months before Catherine Lewis’s case, Matilda Reynolds was investigated for killing her newborn in Edgefield District. Reynolds was around thirty years old, married to a landless farmer in his mid-fifties, and was the mother to numerous children. In April, when Matilda Reynolds went into labor, Amanda Riddle attended her. She was present for the birth of a “very large and healthy” baby boy, who was so animated that he “sucked on a piece of meat.” The next time she saw the child, Riddle claimed he looked “darker,” prompting her to declare, “I am of opinion it is mixed blood and thought so from the first moment I saw it.” Another witness who lived with family admitted that the new mother had asked for laudanum from the local doctor. Laudanum, a common

---

<sup>40</sup> “Body of an Infant, Sept. 16, 1857,” Coroner’s Reports, Hancock County, GDAH.

prescription for sickness and pain in the antebellum period, was opium dissolved in alcohol. Upon receiving the laudanum, Reynolds mixed it with catnip tea, and spit it into her baby's mouth, killing the child with an overdose of opioids. As the final witness, Dr. Matthew M. Abney testified. He said that Matilda's older son came to him for laudanum, and inquired if his mother could give some to the baby. "I told him not a drop, the child had no use for laudanum to give it none," Abney reported. The doctor concluded his testimony with another damning piece of evidence, confirming that Matilda's child had "all the marks and appearances [that] indicate mixed or African blood." Despite overwhelming evidence of infanticide, though, it does not seem as if any further legal action was taken against Matilda Reynolds. While her personal life was likely left in shambles, she escaped from the ordeal legally unscathed.<sup>41</sup>

Reynolds, of course, was not the only poor white woman to experience this ordeal of a coroner's inquest after killing her bi-racial baby. In 1854, a similar scenario took place in the state's upcountry. There, Elizabeth Campbell, a poor white girl about seventeen years old, had given birth to a baby girl. Quite morbidly, when she had been asked several weeks prior to delivery if she was pregnant, Campbell responded that "if she was nobody should ever see it." Although Campbell was alone when she delivered the baby, testimony from the midwife, who arrived sometime after the birth, indicated that the baby *was* born alive – and killed maliciously. The midwife reported that by the time she got to Campbell's home, the child was dead. Yet her tiny body was still warm, and marked by finger-sized bruises. Another witness scandalously provided the motive for the infanticide by professing she "cannot say whether the child was or is a white child or a colored child." With Pandora's Box wide open, subsequent witnesses all

---

<sup>41</sup> "April 19, 1857 - Infant male of Matilda Reynolds," Edgefield County, Coroner's inquisition books, 1844-1902, SCDAH (underlining in original); W.J. Rorabaugh, *The Alcoholic Republic: An American Tradition* (New York: Oxford, 1979), 177; "April 19, 1857 - Infant male of Matilda Reynolds"; Seventh Census of the United States, 1850: Edgefield County, South Carolina.

weighed in on whether or not they thought the baby girl was mixed race. Against overwhelming evidence to the contrary, the inquest declared that the infant had died “by misfortune or accident.” Perhaps the jury wanted to downplay the topic of interracial sex as much as possible. Maybe they were tacitly approving of the ways these women ultimately did what was necessary to protect southern society from the menace of “free black” children.<sup>42</sup>

Unfortunately, there are literally scores of these interracial infanticide cases throughout every county of the Deep South. Victoria Bynum demonstrated in *Unruly Women* that the prospect of poor white women giving birth to free black babies was too fearsome for some planters to bear. Indeed, relationships involving black men and poor white women often lead to arrests. But slaves and free black men were rarely charged with raping white women of any class before the Civil War. Forret found that between 1830 and 1865 in Virginia, “perhaps as few as thirty-six slaves were hanged for the rape or attempted rape of a white woman. The numbers were even smaller in the less populous states of North and South Carolina.” Poor white women “proved far more likely to charge a slave man with committing a sex crime,” Forret continued, adding that “[s]urely some of these allegations were false.” Still, a few poor white women, it seems, attempted to use rape as a deflection of their guilt in interracial relationships during the late antebellum period. If the woman conceived a child, however, the rape defense was generally negated since medical literature at the time held that the female orgasm was necessary for conception. Overall, planters seemed likely to give black men a chance at defending themselves

---

<sup>42</sup> “Dead female infant of Elizabeth Campbell,” Greenville County, Court of General Sessions, Coroner’s Inquisitions, 1849-1941, SCDAAH; Seventh Census of the United States, 1850: Greenville County, South Carolina; Eighth Census of the United States, 1860: Greenville County, South Carolina. Despite her young age, Campbell had a three year old son already, and had previously said if she “ever had another child she would kill it.” Turner Duncan, the poor white man who had first found the infant’s lifeless body, claimed the baby was “a black child.” A forty year old illiterate, propertyless farmer with nine children, Duncan was convinced the baby had been murdered, despite the fact that her tiny body had been ravaged by dogs and hogs before he found it. After the inquest was over, life did not seem to improve much for Campbell. The 1860 census records list her as a 23 year old seamstress with no property. She lived with her mother and several other families in a large house owned by a relatively well-off farmer.

against rape charges in the antebellum period, “typically grant[ing] accused black rapists the due process under the law that they would be systematically denied after the Civil War.” Because the slave was first and foremost a valuable laborer, if the slaveholder wanted to punish the accused rapist, they likely did it without the interference of the government. From the economic perspective of a slaveowner, whipping the offender was much preferable to hanging him. Planters had no desire to needlessly execute a valuable laborer for the rape of a lowly white woman until after emancipation, when poor white women finally enjoyed the full privileges of female whiteness, and black men were no longer financial assets.<sup>43</sup>

Conversely, when poor white men raped or slept with slave women, their offspring would be considered slaves, legally, socially, and economically – factors that likely helped relax planter attitudes towards poor white male/black female sexual relationships. Forret claimed that these interactions took place far more commonly than the legal records would lead historians to believe. Poor white men, it seemed, did have the social prerogative – as white men – to rape black women who had no legal recourse. When the relationship was born of mutual desire and choice, these pairs were rarely charged with sexual criminal acts at all, with one exception. When poor white men slept or lived with *free* black women, their offspring would be free blacks, too, occasionally causing planters to charge the lovers with criminal acts.<sup>44</sup>

Poor whites’ sexual relationships with upper class white southerners were seemingly infrequent when compared to their interracial relationships, and they were usually limited to wealthy men and poor white women. Although occasional relationships and even rare marriages between the two groups occurred, whites in the Deep South generally courted and married people from the same socio-economic class. Upper class men, however, had the power and the

---

<sup>43</sup> Victoria Bynum, *Unruly Women: The Politics of Social and Sexual Control in the Old South* (Chapel Hill: North Carolina, 1992); Forret, *Race Relations*, 190; 206.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 189.

money to engage in various sexual relationships with poor white women, from outright rape to prostitution to a concubine-type of relationship. These relationships could be economically beneficial to the female, but they could also be based solely on the overwhelming power of the wealthy white male. In a world where rape was a daily fear among slave women, it is not hard to imagine that poor white women had similar fears when coming into contact with powerful men. Christine Stansell found that in antebellum New York, working class women often had to go outside the household economy to help the family earn a living, putting them into frequent contact with upper class men, many of whom paid their wages. Rape in this type of power dynamic was common and almost psychologically accepted as a part of life for the seemingly powerless. Women in these situations, Stansell argued, faced dual hurdles of dependency – being women *and* being poor. They had no real recourse in the legal system, whether for justice in rape cases or for issues concerning child support. Poor white John Hank reported that his mother “was a lone woman with seven children to maintain – the man that was said to be my father had negroes and property and never did anything for me.”<sup>45</sup>

Bynum theorized that poverty “defeminized” antebellum southern women in several ways; they were considered sexually “deviant” or depraved as a matter of course, and always assumed to be promiscuous. South Carolinian ex-slave Sena Moore confirmed this assertion: a “good white lady told me one time, that a bad white woman is a sight worse and more ‘low downer’ than a bad nigger woman can ever get to be in this world.” Poor whites’ sexual relationships and marriages to other poor whites likely formed the foundation to these types of sentiments, for a variety of reasons. Perhaps most importantly, the majority of poor whites never formally married – in the church or legally. Scholars like Bynum deemed these “informal and

---

<sup>45</sup> Christine Stansell, *City of Women: Sex and Class in New York, 1789-1860* (New York: Knopf, 1986); Elliot, *Tennessee*, Vol. 3, 996.

fleeting marriages” consistent with “the precarious nature of domestic life in a region known for its economically distressed and highly transient laboring population.”

In this ever-changing, violent, often drunken environment, poor whites needed to be flexible in their living arrangements. In contrast to the low divorce rates of the upper class, poor whites’ relationships were similar to slaves’ in some respects. Many of the men lived “abroad” for at least part of the year working short-term jobs or looking for employment, leaving women and/or oldest children alone to head households. And poor whites were far more likely than the upper or even yeoman classes to have multiple partners, or short-term “spouses” throughout their lives. Slaves, of course, often had no choice in these matters, and in some ways poor whites did not have much of a choice, either. Their circumstances dictated behavior that made simple survival the paramount objective. Edward Isham’s wife, for example, had been abandoned by her husband as he escaped the law. It was only natural for her to find another man to support and provide for her – regardless of the institution of marriage. When Isham and her new lover fought over her, she could not have been more proud – they were confirming her worth in a world that rendered her valueless. As Bynum wrote, poor white women often found the “ability to manipulate or instigate male struggles over ‘ownership’ of them” as a “major sphere of power.” Seeing two men engaging in violence over them gave poor white women a sense of importance.<sup>46</sup>

Poor white men, however, did not just fight *over* women. At times they fought *with* women. At other times, they were simply abusive. Cases of egregious domestic abuse, while relatively infrequent in southern court papers, appear with regularity in coroner’s records.

---

<sup>46</sup> Bynum, *Unruly Women*, 109-110; Sena Moore, *American Slave*, Vol. 3 (SC), Part 3, 211; Victoria Bynum, “Mothers, Lovers, and Wives: Images of Poor White Women in Edward Isham’s Autobiography, in Bolton and Culclasure, eds., *The Confessions of Edward Isham: A Poor White Life of the Old South* (Athens: Georgia, 1998), 68; 89.

Despite all restrictions on poor white men's autonomy and power, it seems they were given free rein to control their wives and children in violent fashion. Local governments and the criminal justice system were slow to intervene in domestic disputes. Even when they finally did, the abusive men had a decent chance of walking away from murders without being charged for a single crime. The prevalence of binge drinking by the middle antebellum period certainly contributed to incidents of domestic violence, especially in severe cases. James Pitts, a mechanic from Memphis and the son of overseer, admitted that out of the poor whites in his community, there "were a few who would lie and steal, get drunk and lie in the gutter and abuse their families."<sup>47</sup>

Pitts's claims are well supported by the hundreds of cases appearing in coroner's records across the region, where horrific domestic abuse seemed to go hand in hand with severe alcohol abuse. Maria Stephens, who died at the hands of her husband Robert in 1833, had lived a miserable existence in constant fear for her own safety. One neighbor testified that she had recently found Maria hiding out in the briar patches, claiming "her husband was in a state of intoxication, and had been in a great rage, and seemed to vent it at her." As reported by a poor white boy who was bound out to the Stephenses, on the day of her death Maria's husband Robert had beaten "his wife with a wagon whip, for about half an hour, sometimes turning the butt and striking her on the head." Just a few years later, Jenny Smith of Laurens, South Carolina, died from similar circumstances. The coroner described bruises on Jenny's corpse that were three to four weeks old, as well as new bruises on her neck "about the size of the end of a man's finger." Although one witness testified that Jenny's husband John had severely choked her two days before her death, and another witness told of how John had thrown Jenny onto a rock, wounding

---

<sup>47</sup> Elliot, *Tennessee*, Vol. 4, 1739-40.

her abdomen and breast, John Smith was absolved of all wrongdoing. Despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary, the coroner's report concluded that Jenny Smith died from "disease."<sup>48</sup>

In an uncertain world filled with death and violence, physical pain was an accepted part of poor southerners' daily lives. And physical brutishness, it seems, was fully tolerated in a slave society. Historian Stephanie McCurry proposed that yeoman farmers derived their sense of white masculinity from the "inviolability of the household, the command of dependents, and the public prerogatives of manhood." As the undisputed "master" of his home, she argued, the yeoman was able to experience a modicum of the power that the patriarchal planters held, and that was enough to keep their interests aligned. Poor whites, on the other hand, were constantly on the move searching for work, and thus could not always function as masters of their own homes. When they were home, though, local law enforcement clearly allowed them some leeway and autonomy, especially when it came to reprimanding their wives and children. And with or without alcohol, some poor white men were abusive.<sup>49</sup>

Domestic violence, though, was not limited to women; anger could turn physical and be directed at anyone less powerful, especially young children. Thomas Woolbright, a notably abusive man from Union District, South Carolina, brutally killed his son Henry in 1843. Henry's short life had been filled with vicious abuse; he had lived in constant terror of frequent assaults from his father. One of the first witnesses in the coroner's inquest testified that Thomas "was generally cruel and hard on the deceased and often abused by language some of his children

---

<sup>48</sup> "April 20, 1833," Laurens County, Court of General Sessions, Coroner's Inquisitions, ca. 1800-1901, SCDAH; The poor, abused woman stated that "she had suffered a thousand deaths...[and] that she wished to go live with her people." While she had previously kept her family from knowing how badly her husband abused her, Maria was ready to tell them and move back home. Confessing that she "would have killed herself" long ago "if she had not believed in the existence of God," Maria Stephens was truly ready to flee her dangerous situation. Tragically, before she made it to safety, her short life ended. On the night of her death, her husband Robert "swore that he wished she was dead and in hell." A witness corroborated that Robert's abuse had been frequent, as he often "beat her until she could not stand...running her off and keeping her out at nights."; "Jan. 7, 1839," *Ibid.*

<sup>49</sup> Stephanie McCurry, *Masters of Small Worlds: Yeoman Households, Gender Relations, and the Political Culture of the Antebellum South Carolina Low Country* (New York: Oxford, 1995), 304.

calling them bastards and [there] have been bruises on the deceased before.” Henry’s mother Milly admitted that Thomas had “disowned” Henry “as his child and had always a great spite at it and often whipped it for groaning and pulled its hair.” The pitiful child was so terrified of his father that he “was never inclined to eat anything often Tom abused him so bad.”<sup>50</sup>

In a chillingly similar story, young Warren Kirkland of Edgefield, South Carolina, was beaten to death by his father, William Kirkland in 1858. The 1850 census listed William Kirkland as a propertyless farmer from Georgia with five children to feed. At the time of the murder, William would have been in his early thirties; Warren was only nine. As the coroner’s inquest into Warren’s death unfolded, witnesses recounted his father’s violent history. Mrs. Benjamin Barton recalled that on the day of Warren’s passing, the boy’s father “had beaten him severely that morning.” She further claimed that William Kirkland’s deceased wife had known that she eventually would die at the hands of her violent husband. The inquest ended with the questioning of William Kirkland, Jr., the older brother of Warren. After confirming that his father used to beat his mother “very severely,” William Jr. explained that one week before his brother’s death, his father beat the boy “very severely of the head with an old heavy chain.” Then, two days before Warren died his father beat him with the chain again over the head. The poor child likely died from excessive bleeding of the brain, yet somehow the inquest ruled that young Warren came to his death “by means unknown.”<sup>51</sup>

---

<sup>50</sup> “1843 Henry Woolbright,” Union County, Court of General Sessions, Coroner’s Inquisitions, 1806-1965, SCDAH. Sibley Woods, who lived near the Woolbrights, revealed that she noticed a skinned place on the child’s back three days before he died. The wound “looked like it might have been done by dragging.” Henry’s mother, Milly, confessed that her husband had whipped the boy and “kicked it and it fell in the ashes.” The burn from the fire pit left a large blister on Henry’s left leg, but Thomas Woolbright never stopped abusing the child.

<sup>51</sup> “Nov. 16, 1858,” Edgefield County, Coroner’s inquisition books, 1844-1902, SCDAH; Seventh Census of the United States, 1850: Edgefield County, South Carolina; Nell Irvin Painter, *Southern History Across the Color Line* (Chapel Hill: North Carolina, 2002), 6. Mrs. Barton further testified that William “was in the habit of severely beating” young Warren, and the abuse had become especially frequent since his mother’s death. Another witness, Mrs. Burkhalter, added that Mrs. Kirkland “was afraid that after she was dead and gone, her husband would beat her son Warren to death.”

While many poor whites doubtless never experienced such abuse, a poverty-ridden, often-weakened family structure still left the majority of poor children with few opportunities at ever improving their station in life. As economists, social scientists, and historians have demonstrated repeatedly, inequality is not solely dependent on differences in income. Instead, disparities in inherited wealth left the playing field so unequal that poor whites had very little hope of ever rising above the class into which he was born. A southern child born into affluence in the antebellum period generally could count on living in a two-parent household, having a warm place to sleep, adequate clothing, and enough to eat. Because their diets were better they were much healthier than their poorer white counterparts, who commonly suffered from pellagra, rickets, hookworm, and other vitamin deficiencies. Wealthy children not only benefitted from the finest material goods, but they also had the ability to spend their formative years getting an education – not laboring in a field to make the families’ rent, or attempting to help keep the family fed.

Perhaps the most staggering hurdle for poor white children to overcome was that they received little to no education, and most of them remained illiterate throughout their entire lives. As Hinton Helper famously wrote, “Thousands of them die at an advanced age, as ignorant of the common alphabet as if it had never been invented.” Moreover, travelers and writers did not hesitate to comment on the entrenched ignorance of the region’s poor whites. During the Civil War, Union soldier George Pepper wrote that the Deep South’s poor “are the most illiterate and depraved creatures I ever saw--mentally and morally. I don't remember of ever having seen their equal. Their conception of God, of redemption, and of this war, are heathenish.” Northerners had long heard about how slaveholders refused to implement comprehensive education systems, but confronting the reality of the slave South’s class divide was surely jarring. Pepper continued

writing, in apparent disgust, over a Georgia family “who were so ignorant that they could not tell their ages. Captain Hill...tells me that he conversed with an old woman of seventy years, who could not tell the ages of her children. She had never seen a shirt-collar.” Even a fellow southerner admitted poor whites “have among them nothing that can be called religion or education.”<sup>52</sup>

William Eskew, the son of a nonslaveholder, described his education as “very poor for it was pay school and poor children could not pay the price per head.” Several ex-slaves also commented on the wealth disparity between whites who received formal education. George Ward of Mississippi reported, “At first the rich white folks sent children to the female college, and the poor white people didn’t go to school.” If poor white children were lucky enough to receive some sort of education, it was often just for a couple of weeks or months of the year. One poor white from Tennessee explained that “A poor man had a hard time to qualify himself for business. When I began going to school our free schools never went longer than two months in the year. My parents was poor [so] I hardly ever [had] more than one month and a half schooling in the year.” Ex-slave Isaac Johnson confirmed this lack of literacy. Out of all whites, he reckoned, “only about half or less than half, could read and write then. There were very few poor white folks who could read and write.” Thousands of antebellum court records support Johnson’s contention. The vast majority of people charged with crimes, as well as many witnesses to crimes, were only able to provide an “X”—their mark—as a signature. Historian Richard Morris noted that over fifty percent of white workers at a Graniteville mill signed their name with a mark. And though Hinton Helper numbered illiterate native white southerners at about half a million, his figures were likely low given their basis on census returns. Indeed, measuring

---

<sup>52</sup> Helper, *The Impending Crisis*, 381; Pepper, *Personal Recollections*, 242-3; M.D. Conway, *Testimonies Concerning Slavery* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1855), 122.

literacy by asking individuals whether or not they can read and write is a deeply flawed policy from the start: few people freely admit their own ignorance to a stranger, especially one employed by the government, and especially so when they live in a prideful, honor-based society.<sup>53</sup>

The overwhelming majority of the white poor, it seems, were grossly uneducated. Many of them never received enough of an education to even sign their names. Thus, left wallowing in ignorance, poor whites had little chance to become anything else in the world besides unskilled, low-wage laborers. By continuing to allow the illiteracy of the white masses, slaveholders wittingly or not reinforced this cycle of poverty. They also recognized that this lack of education among the poor would help them maintain their position at the top of society. As Hinton Helper wrote, “There is but one way for the oligarchy to perpetuate slavery in the Southern States, and that is by perpetuating absolute ignorance among the non-slaveholding whites.” This ignorance undoubtedly decreased poor whites’ ability to understand the more complicated arguments against slavery, and certainly precluded them from clearly formulating their own reasons to oppose the institution. In 1857, one abolitionist western North Carolinian expressed his frustration over being unable to communicate with poor whites. “The more I think and see of slavery the more I detest it...I am determined to oppose slavery somewhere,” he lamented, “But for the unfathomable ignorance that pervades the mass of the poor, deluded, slavery-saddled whites around me, I would not suppress my sentiments another hour.”<sup>54</sup>

Aside from slaveholders’ lack of interest in universal education for white children, there were other reasons that prevented large percentages of nonslaveholders from becoming literate.

---

<sup>53</sup> Elliot, *Tennessee*, Vol. 2, 778; George Ward, *American Slave*, Vol. 10 (MS), Supplement, Series 1, Part 5, 2177-8; Elliot, *Tennessee*, Vol. 3, 969-70; Isaac Johnson, *American Slave*, Vol. 11 (NC), Part 2, 17; Morris, “White Bondage,” 195, footnote 17; Helper, *The Impending Crisis*, 291.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 373; quoted on 375.

Poor white children, Helper wrote, were “effectually excluded from the institutions of learning by their poverty.” For instance, the relative isolation of many poor whites certainly added to their difficulty in attaining an education. Living on the fringes of communities and in the backwoods and mountains was hardly conducive to traveling to and from the school house, if there was one. But geographic isolation was not the biggest problem. Several factors helped preclude many poor whites from ever achieving functional literacy. First, because poor white families often depended on the labor of their children for survival, poor children rarely had the luxury of actual “time” for education. Whether at home, in the fields, or hired out for wages, most children were essential as laborers in poor white households. If these children were fortunate enough to ever attend school, they generally attended short-term public and subscription schools, which according to Fred Bailey, “met for just several weeks, after planting season and before fall harvest time.” Second, a public school system had to be funded, meaning that wealthy southerners would have to raise the tax money. Not surprisingly, very few members of the slaveholding gentry wanted to pay more in taxes to educate the children of poor people who paid little to no taxes at all. Although each state had a different system, no Deep South state had a truly effective means of public education.<sup>55</sup>

In 1850, the United States listed one in ten men as illiterate. The South clearly had the worst rates of white illiteracy in the nation, due to the lack of a comprehensive educational system. As James C. Cobb found, only 35 percent of region’s whites were enrolled in school in 1860, compared with 72 percent throughout the rest of America. The average school year was also 70 percent longer outside of the slave South. The majority of the area’s poor whites, therefore, received little or no education throughout the entire antebellum period. Even the few states that attempted to implement universal education faced challenges from every direction,

---

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 399; Bailey, *Class*, 46.

especially concerning funding. North Carolina's school system, one of the South's only publically-funded ventures, was unfortunately both ineffective and rife with fraud. Established in the 1840s, much of the program's money was embezzled. Other public funds were used by private schools for wealthy children. Louisiana's Constitutional Convention of 1845 did provide for the permanent endowment of free schools, but it funded the endeavor by placing a \$1 poll tax on white males, effectively disenfranchising thousands of poor whites and ensuring the schools would be underfunded. Tennessee's fledgling system was fraught with problems as well; the 1860 census revealed that the yearly per capita expenditure for children attending private schools was \$25.93, compared to only \$2.02 for children in public, or "subscription," schools.<sup>56</sup>

While South Carolina never implemented a system of universal education for white children, the city of Charleston passed a law in 1856 to establish common schools. Yet again, the attempt was highly ineffective, as census records reveal that very few students ever attended these schools. In Mississippi, late-antebellum Governor Albert Brown attempted to establish schools for poor white children, but his efforts proved fruitless. As Timothy Lockley found, "pressure from various counties led to...a fracturing of the system into confusing and disparate parts." In antebellum Georgia, only about half the state's enumerated white children were receiving any type of education in the decade before the Civil War, and the 1850 census listed over 40,000 illiterate adults. Instead of establishing common or public schools, Georgia created a "Poor School Fund" to help offset the cost for students who did not have the money to attend the aptly named "pay schools." Basically, poor children could attend any school, and the teachers would then bill the Poor School Fund, "just as they charged the parents of paying pupils." The Poor School Fund, however, was grossly underfunded. By the early 1850s, less than 4 percent of

---

<sup>56</sup> Soltow, *Men and Wealth*, 22; James C. Cobb, *Away Down South: A History of Southern Identity* (New York: Oxford, 2005), 51; Bolton, *Poor Whites*, 55; Shugg, *Origins of Class Struggle*, 70; Bailey, *Class*, 46.

the state's budget was allocated to education. The state's laws tended to read more like guidelines that ceded the majority of details to the counties. And since each district ran its own school system, Peter Wallenstein wrote, officials in each county could choose how to spend the money, causing "educational provisions to vary greatly within the state." Finally, a group of North Georgia politicians including Governor Joseph Brown, whose constituents included greater proportions of slaveless whites, proposed a new Education Act in 1858. It committed \$100,000 from Western & Atlantic railroad earnings to help fund a state system of common schools, and was passed by the Georgia legislature over adamant planter opposition.<sup>57</sup>

Slaveholders clearly had rational economic reasons for not funding a system of universal education for whites. But their most important incentive for keeping nonslaveholders illiterate was maintaining the slave system. One traveler to the region echoed the sentiments of many of the abolitionists from the 1830s and 40s: the "destruction of slavery would follow inevitably the education of the poor whites." This belief had become a refrain for northern and European radicals and was even touted by Hinton Helper, but the slaveholding oligarchy had managed to keep the vast majority of poor whites illiterate throughout the antebellum period. Even with all of their censorship laws, southern planters still worried the poor would read about universal rights, discover how badly they were being treated, and band together with people of the same economic class. If poor whites were literate, they had better opportunity to discover and understand abolitionist arguments, and other appeals made directly to them as laborers and oppressed white men. They could read about the evils of slavery and about the wages northern workers earned, leading (at the very least) to a discontented white underclass. The information poor whites might have gleaned from reading could have also been shared with black

---

<sup>57</sup> Lockley, *Welfare and Charity*, 186; 192-3; 195; Wallenstein, *From Slave South*, 63; 48; 67-8; 68.

southerners, bringing the chances of a black/poor white coalition to a very uncomfortable level for planters.<sup>58</sup>

Virginia-born M.D. Conway, one of the few outspoken southern abolitionists, revealed how poor white illiteracy benefitted slaveholders. His 1855 tract scandalously alleged that slaveholders deliberately kept poor whites uneducated. After publishing a pamphlet on the necessity of free schools in his home state, Conway's work was "virulently attacked as an effort to introduce into the South the worst phase of New-England society—as an effort to make a 'mob-road to learning.'" Indeed, Conway wrote, the slaveholders "plainly declared" that poor whites "must be kept ignorant; for if they were educated, they would revolutionize Southern society. After this I felt that the wretchedness and ignorance of the poor whites around me... were deliberately fostered by the higher classes. The matter assumed the nature of the battle between two classes." While many other southern politicians were loath to discuss the ignorance of the poor white masses in the first place, pro-slavery ideology tacitly endorsed the illiteracy of all whites not directly involved in slavery. To safely maintain the peculiar institution, the spread of knowledge had to be controlled and curtailed. The literacy and enlightenment of nonslaveholders, pro-slavery men contended, could easily lead to the rise of southern abolitionism.<sup>59</sup>

Certainly, in a slave society, words *were* dangerous. Any utterance against the southern labor system—a system predicated on slavery—could have endangered the job prospects, lines of credit, and even the life and liberty of the speaker. Given slaveholders' overt defensiveness, *any* complaint within a slave society was liable to be misinterpreted. Poor white laborers had to monitor carefully what they said, and the complete absence of a universal education system

---

<sup>58</sup> Edmund Kirke, *Among the Pines, or, South in Secession Time*. (New York: J.R. Gilmore, 1862).

<sup>59</sup> Conway, *Testimonies Concerning Slavery*, 33; 34; quoted on 33.

denied them the option of privately, or even anonymously, committing their thoughts and opinions to pages. In an age where almost all Americans are literate, it is difficult to fully comprehend the power vested in the written word. Denied their chance for literacy, poor whites found it difficult to amass knowledge or to express their opinions without worries over slaveholder retaliation.

Interestingly, on the eve of secession several prominent southerners began advocating the case of universal education for white children, as there was a growing concern over the widening chasm between economic classes, owing to the rise in slave prices. This cleavage, of course, could ultimately threaten the institution of slavery. William H. Stiles of Georgia promoted the cause of common schools “to elevate the indigent white...our failure to educate the poor whites among us, and thus fit them for employments better suited to their caste, they have in certain cases been driven to similar occupations with slaves.” This, he wrote, led them to believe that “the existence of the negro among us was injurious to them.” As the possibility of disunion and war arose, slaveholders attempted to win the support of the poor whites, who would be expected to provide the bulk of any significant southern military force. By offering the poor the possibility of an education, and better-paying, “non-slave” jobs, affluent southerners actively, though quite belatedly, courted increasingly disaffected whites. Indeed, slaveholders’ apprehension over poor whites’ allegiance to the peculiar institution was further revealed in North Carolina, where Calvin H. Wiley delivered a report on public education in 1860. Essentially warning that there was as much danger from the prejudice existing between rich and poor whites as there was between master and slave, Wiley first established that “The peace of every social and political system depends on a just recognition of the mutual dependence of every rank on each other, and of the mutual obligations which this interest imposes.” However, by denying basic services like

education to a large percentage of southern whites, slaveholders were ultimately putting their property – and perhaps their lives – in jeopardy. A deepening divide between the region’s haves and have-nots needed to be dealt with, even if it meant affording more governmental services to the poor. These actions were necessary, Wiley concluded, because any attempt “to widen the breach between classes of [white] citizens [was] just as dangerous as efforts to excite slaves to insurrection...”<sup>60</sup>

Slave insurrections were a constant and intense concern among southern planters, and closely correlated to their fears was the possibility that literate poor whites would teach black southerners to read and write. Planters had a vested economic interest in keeping slaves illiterate, but poor white nonslaveholders did not. And even slaves would have had the ability to pay poor whites – either in cash or in kind – for the education. Literate slaves and free blacks historically had been the instigators and leaders of slave rebellions, and slave owners devised strict legal codes preventing any black person from learning or being taught to read or write. As northern clergyman-turned-politician J.G. Palfrey wrote, “The poor white man will learn that his rights are wrapped up in the same bundle with the black man’s, and that the rights of the one cannot be violated without affecting those of the other.” Blaming the southern gentry for keeping poor whites illiterate, Palfrey tied the oppression of slaves to the oppression of white men. “Turn to the laboring freemen South of the Potomac,” he pleaded to apathetic Yankees, “and if you care nothing about the slaves, care for your own color.”<sup>61</sup>

The illiteracy of poor whites was often mentioned in tandem with their apparent lack of religion. The inability to read the Bible, combined with insufficient finances to actually buy the book, certainly added to their indifference. Perhaps more importantly, because they often lived in

---

<sup>60</sup> Quoted in Johnson, *Ante-Bellum North Carolina*, 79.

<sup>61</sup> J.G. Palfrey, “American Slavery – Its Effects upon the Non-slave-holding Population of the South,” *The North Star* (NY), March 10, 1848.

the backwoods and on the outskirts of town, many poor whites would have had a long journey to church. As Union soldier George Pepper explained, much of their lack of religion stemmed from isolation: “The country is comparatively barren, and little inhabited.” He recalled talking to one “family from North Carolina, who never saw a church, never heard a sermon, and had never heard of the Redeemer.” Although it is likely that most poor whites believed in a monotheistic God and perhaps even considered Jesus as their Christ and Savior, organized religion did not seem to be an important factor in their lives, perhaps less important than folklore and other “pre-modern” ways of thinking.<sup>62</sup>

Industrialist William Gregg raised this point in 1851. Claiming that nearly one half of all of South Carolina’s whites were idle and unproductive, Gregg recommended that “Christianizing” the poor would help turn them into useful laborers. In reality, however, labor was actually another factor that may have kept poor whites from Sunday morning services. While illiteracy, physical distance, and social segregation explained part of poor whites’ seeming apathy towards organized religion, it is also important to note that Sunday was a working man’s only day off. Considering that employers usually paid wages on Saturdays, some workers were likely too exhausted to be bothered with anything other than resting or indulging in earthly pleasures, like drinking, gambling, and carousing. Others were simply too hung over to show up to a Sunday morning service. When poor whites do appear in church records throughout the Deep South, it is often in reference to their being reprimanded. From the more benign offenses of drinking to excess, fighting, and living a sexually sinful life to more overt acts of defiance, like defecating in the middle of the sanctuary, poor whites were regularly suspended or ejected from congregations and sometimes even charged with crimes. Well known for their weariness towards anything “organized” or “institutionalized,” poor whites may have viewed the church in the same

---

<sup>62</sup> Pepper, *Personal Recollections*, 242.

way they viewed government: with unease and trepidation. As Bertram Wyatt-Brown observed, “Many...displayed indifference, if not overt hostility, toward ‘institutional religion’ generally. Evangelicals’ unwavering strictures against the sinfulness of drinking, fiddling and dancing—all among many poor whites’ favorite pastimes—deterred them from embracing evangelical religion en masse. And poor whites as a group never proved particularly dogmatic.”<sup>63</sup>

Given all of the reasons poor whites had to eschew organized religion, they frequently participated in tent revivals and mass meetings, likely due to social reasons. Whether visiting with old friends and family members, courting new beaux, or selling alcohol and produce to other revivalists, mass religious meetings undoubtedly attracted many poor whites, if only for the “frolic.” While historians will probably never arrive at an accurate estimate of how many poor whites attended church on a regular basis, they do know that some poor whites clung to beliefs and superstitions attributable to the pre-modern era. A small number of this population was staunchly opposed to any type of organized religion. Poor white Edward Isham recalled a tiny town on the north Georgia/Alabama border: “No preacher could ever live in Pinetown, one lived there once and they tore down his fences and run him off.” Some poor whites were more than just intolerant of organized religion; they even took drastic measures to keep it out of their communities. The majority of poor whites, however, were not as overt in their behaviors. They simply had no reason to be involved in church. They could not read, they likely did not have decent Sunday attire, and they may not have understood the Scriptures. As late as 1852, Georgia’s Honorable J.H. Lumpkin described poor whites as that “degraded, half-fed, half-

---

<sup>63</sup> Quoted in George M. Weston, *The Poor Whites of the South* (Washington, D.C.: Buell & Blanchard, 1856), 3; Wyatt-Brown quoted in Forret, *Race Relations*, 65.

clothed, and ignorant population—without Sabbath Schools, or any other kind of instruction, mental or moral.”<sup>64</sup>

Hinton Helper, of course, based part of his argument on the pre-modern ways of the uneducated and illiterate poor whites. “Poverty, ignorance, and superstition, are the three leading characteristics of the non-slaveholding whites of the South,” he opined. Poor whites’ superstitions appeared similar to the ones reported in slave narratives. “All are more or less impressed with a belief in witches, ghosts, and supernatural signs,” Helper wrote. “Few are exempt from habits of sensuality and intemperance, nor have anything like adequate ideas of the duties which they owe either to their God, to themselves, or to their fellow-men.” Thus, from the few accounts concerning religion and superstition, a decent percentage of poor whites probably still viewed the world in pre-modern ways on the eve of the Civil War. Perhaps this mindset helped further isolate the poor from the problems of the wider, capitalist, rapidly-modernizing world. As an 1855 editorial out of Washington, D.C. pointed out, “Anti-Slavery men have long insisted that Slavery is almost as much the curse of the poor white man as of the slave—for it deprives him of education, of labor, of freedom of thought, and religious instruction.” However, the writer lamented, “it has been impossible to reach this class....we trust that the day is not distant when they will begin to act.”<sup>65</sup>

Taking all of these topics together – wealth, land, material realities, education, and religion – the extent to which poor whites had been removed or segregated from southern white society becomes very clear. Wayne Flynt, one of the only scholars to confirm this self-awareness

---

<sup>64</sup> Bolton and Culclasure, eds., Edward Isham, 10; quoted in Helper, *The Impending Crisis*, 378.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 381; also see David Brown, “Hinton Rowan Helper: The Logical Outcome of the Nonslaveholders’ Philosophy.” *Historical Journal* 46, I (2003): 43: “Helper’s assessment confirmed that some non-slaveholding communities, particularly those in backcountry and mountain regions, were essentially pre-modern in orientation, based upon strong kin networks, limited geographical mobility, local exchange in a moral economy, and non-rational belief systems.”; “Mobbing the Methodists,” *The National Era* (D.C.) Aug. 2, 1855.

among poor whites, wrote that they “had a profound understanding of their own self-interest. They also had a fierce class consciousness that even casual observers noticed.” Many abolitionists attempted to use this class consciousness to their advantage. By playing upon the fears and interests of poor whites, they tried to forge feelings of common interest between slaves and poor white laborers. The appeals of abolitionists to the poor still need more scholarly examination, but historians do know that their attempts generally failed for two reasons: one, there were problems with distribution of materials due to strict censorship laws, and two, the masses remained illiterate. Still, the dichotomy between whites who owned slaves and whites who did not remained ominous in the antebellum period, growing worse during the cotton boom of the 1850s. Reaching troubling proportions following the economic recession of 1857, poor whites’ sense of economic injustice ultimately helped push slaveholders into seceding from the Union. This distinction between classes of whites was extremely pronounced in heavily slave areas and thus seemed most intense in the Deep South’s cities and plantation-belt. Living in the foothills of Appalachia, one slave owner noticed a clear difference in social relations between whites in the plantation region and the overwhelmingly nonslaveholding community of Sequatchie, Tennessee. “There was no clannishness, nor snobbishness here between these two classes, such as I witnessed farther south,” he stated. People from the Deep South confirmed his observations.<sup>66</sup>

The enormously wealthy Hampton Cheney observed how different groups of nonslaveholders were treated in the highly stratified Deep South. “Men who did not own slaves,

---

<sup>66</sup> Flynt, *Poor but Proud*, 7; Elliot, *Tennessee*, Vol. 1, 310. One of the only outspoken southern foes of slavery, Cassius Clay, began publishing an abolitionist newspaper, the *True American*, in Lexington, Kentucky in 1845. Apparently the paper’s articles “were so effective in arousing the non-slaveholding whites – the group to which its appeal was directed – that the ‘slave oligarchy’ of the Bluegrass organized a mass-meeting of citizens and suppressed the paper by shipping its press and types to Cincinnati.” See David L. Smiley, “Cassius M. Clay and the Mississippi Election of 1875,” *Journal of Mississippi History* XIX, No. 4, (Oct. 1957), 255.

if they were well bred, honorable men, who conducted themselves properly, **and were not offensive in their opposition to slavery**, were well-received by the planters as their equals,” he purported. “Men at public gatherings, who did not own a slave, mingled freely and on an equal footing with those who did,” he reiterated, but if – and only if – the poorer whites “did not make themselves offensive on the subject of slavery.” The simple fact that Cheney effectively repeated that southern men must not be “offensive in their opposition to slavery” twice in a very short answer reveals how important it was for a nonslaveholder to back the peculiar institution. A poor or even middling-class man could be hard-working, God-fearing, and from a “quality” family, but if he had a problem with slavery, he would never be welcomed among the Deep South’s planters. Conversely, another son of a slaveholder pointed out class-based animosity, but blamed poor whites for most of the divide: “Those who didn’t own the slaves hated those who did. As usual they didn’t mingle freely...Antagonism was mostly the fault of the nonslaveholders.” While the region’s poor had obvious reasons to be jealous and resentful of slaveholders, they generally viewed class relationships as dictated by slaveholders. C.W. Hicks remembered that slaveholders “considered themselves to be in a separate class, simply because they owned slaves [and this] was shown by their visits and close friendships being mainly with slave holding families.” Yet Hicks did not limit that “separate class” to just planters: “Some of the slave owners did not show that spirit, but all who owned as much as one negro seemed to feel that they were in a separate and higher class than the common people.” A poor North Carolinian also divided whites into classes by whether or not they owned slaves, declaring that slaveholders were “proud, haughty, and did not mingle with poor people but whipped their slaves like brutes.” It seemed relatively universal to speak in terms of slaveholder/nonslaveholder when speaking of class in the South. The economic needs and political wants of white southerners were truly

predicated on this contrast; whether or not one owned a slave dictated so much about his life – his chances at economic success, at having access to education, and even remaining free from hunger and poverty.<sup>67</sup>

Countless nonslaveholding Civil War veterans spoke about the lack of opportunity for poor whites in their veterans' interviews. Confederate George Wray of Sumner, Tennessee remembered that “opportunities were not very good for a poor boy but if they had will power and push enough some few could battle with difficulties and get ahead enough to own a home or business of his own.” Poor white boys, Wray said, “had very little encouragement or help from the slave owners. If they made good it was by hard labor and careful management.” Federal soldiers from the state echoed this sentiment: nonslaveholders were “not encouraged very much” because planters refused “to elevate the poor boy very high.” Anderson Roach recalled that “when a slaveholder hired a nonslaveholder he was principally looked at as being no better than a slave and was treated as one... The slaveholders kept the poor class of people down as much as possible.” Poor whites, therefore, *did* compare their plight to slavery, or they spoke about worries that they might one day become slaves themselves. George Payne claimed that slaveholders “tried to keep [the poor men] down so they could make slaves of them.” Payne’s sentiment, though dramatic, nonetheless expressed a concern among poor whites about living on the bottom rungs of an unfree society.<sup>68</sup>

Unquestionably, poor whites were ostracized from white society in significant ways. Planters treated them very differently than they treated slaveholding, or nonslaveholding but “respectable,” yeomen. And even though small slaveholders were hardly seen as equals to the planters, Eugene and Elizabeth Genovese concluded that because they aspired to become

---

<sup>67</sup> Elliot, *Tennessee*, Vol. 2, 493-502; Vol. 3, 1245; Vol. 3, 1090; Vol. 5, 1931-2.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol. 5, 2242; Vol. 1, 1; Vol. 1, 107; Vol. 4, 1710-2.

plantation owners, yeomen “were led step by step into willing acceptance of a subordinate position in society.” Every slaveholder, it seemed, no matter if he owned but one slave, cast his lot with the region’s planters. His ownership of human property led him to believe that his interests were inextricably bound to those of other slaveowners. Moreover, a true southern middle class of merchants, lawyers, and doctors had become well established in the Deep South by the mid-antebellum era. The strong presence of these middle classes signified the financial success of slavery. Almost all of the men in this class either directly or indirectly made their money from the region’s cash crop economy, linking them to affluent planters and altering the South’s relationship between black and white, poor and wealthy. The Proto-Dorian Bond did bind the new middle and upper classes together in white solidarity. Any “pandering” by the affluent planters – for votes, support, or anything else – was likely done at this level; wealthy slaveholders had almost no direct involvement of this sort with poor whites. According to historian David Brown, Hinton Helper, the “only southern intellectual to theorize and conceptualize nonslaveholders fully as a distinct class,” knew that the poorest whites were illiterate and “cut off from wider society.” Because the truly poor made such unlikely class revolutionaries, Helper directed *The Impending Crisis* at the more affluent yeomen farmers, who could actually help shape the future of the region.<sup>69</sup>

This deep division within white society – affluent land- and slaveholders on one side, lower-middling and poor whites on the other – helps explain the difference between the classes and their conceptions of honor. The preeminent scholar on southern honor, Bertram Wyatt-Brown, argued that the South differed fundamentally from the North because of the prevalence of honor. From the late colonial period through the end of the nineteenth century, he held, the

---

<sup>69</sup> Brown, “Hinton Rowan Helper,” 49; 42; Eugene Genovese and Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *Fruits of Merchant Capital: Slavery and Bourgeois Property in the Rise and Expansion of Capitalism* (New York: Oxford, 1983), 263; Brown, “Hinton Rowan Helper,” 39; 44.

American South was distinctive because it contained elements of pre-modern culture. The North had evolved and industrialized by the Jacksonian period, shattering the bonds of order and deference that existed in a traditional, agricultural society. The South, however, remained largely rural, leaving primitive, masculine honor as one of the very few ways to make society predictable. Living in smaller, agricultural communities, a man's honor was his worth; it was his credit, almost independent of his wealth. Its importance cannot be overvalued. In face-to-face societies, honor determined a man's rank and place. Physical manifestations of honor were vital, and many whites defended or proved their honor with violence. The "type" of violence chosen by the men was generally indicative of their class. From the time of the early republic, slaveholders attempted to distinguish themselves as upper class by a genteel code of manners. By the later antebellum era, dueling became the socially appropriate way for the upper class to solve disputes over honor. Rough and violent fighting, therefore, functioned as a way for the lower classes to prove their social significance. Thus, according to Wyatt-Brown, wealthy whites ruled themselves according to the tenants of gentility, while the poor remained wedded to the brutal concept of primal honor.<sup>70</sup>

Simply living in the early to mid-nineteenth century was enough almost to numb an individual to violence and death. For the overwhelming majority of southerners, life was predicated on hardship, sickness, and the loss of loved ones. Honor thrived in places like the rural South, wrote Wyatt-Brown, since it developed from "a fatalistic world view," in which pain and suffering were an accepted and expected part of life. No white southerners, of course, suffered more than the poor. Historian Elliot Gorn noted the strong correlation between poor white men and the most brutal types of violence. "Rather than be overwhelmed by violence, acquiesce in an oppressive environment, or submit to death as an escape from tragedy," Gorn

---

<sup>70</sup>Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *Honor and Violence in the Old South* (New York: Oxford, 1986).

asked, “why not make a virtue of necessity and flaunt one’s unconcern? To revel in the lore of deformity, mutilation, and death was to beat the wilderness at its own game.” Owing no slaves, no property, and little else, poor white men’s culture of drunken fights and tipping shop brawls provided a way to socially structure their worlds. It gave some sense of meaning and order to lives that were generally chaotic and unpredictable. Choosing “not to ape the dispassionate, antiseptic, gentry style but to invert it,” lower class white men rejected dueling for the “rough-and-tumble,” or, simply, “gouging.” These incredibly brutal fist fights, which ended when one opponent was knocked out or unable to continue, were “no holds barred” affairs that often involved biting, choking, head butting, and the “sine qua non of rough-and-tumble fighting,” gouging out an opponent’s eye. “Eye gouging,” concluded Gorn, “was the poor and middling whites’ own version of a historical southern tendency to consider personal violence socially useful—indeed, ethically essential.”<sup>71</sup>

Among the white underclass, therefore, fighting and drinking and generally acting “tough” became the way by which poor white men gauged their honor. The liquor trade and alcoholism will be discussed at length in Chapter Three, but the importance of alcohol to many of these bloody fights cannot be overstated. As one scholar wrote, “a group’s preference for a particular drug and appreciation of its properties were determined by the group’s ideology, values, and psychological set. The caste that valued aggressive behavior drank alcohol.” Elliot Gorn further explained this common connection between liquor and violence:

With families emotionally or physically distant and civil institutions weak, a man’s role in the all-male society was defined less by his ability as a breadwinner than by his ferocity. The touchstone of masculinity was unflinching toughness, not chivalry, duty, or piety. Violent sports, heavy drinking, and impulsive pleasure seeking were appropriate for men whose lives were hard, whose futures were unpredictable, and whose opportunities were limited.

---

<sup>71</sup> Quoted in Elliot J. Gorn, “‘Gouge and Bite, Pull Hair and Scratch’: The Social Significance of Fighting in the Southern Backcountry,” *The American Historical Review* 90, Supplement to Vol. 90 (Feb. 1985): 40; 32; 41; 20; 42.

Fights in the poor white community provided relief from the boredom of daily life, a form of free and lively entertainment. More importantly, though, they helped create a way of measuring a man's worth without relying on occupation or wealth. Fighting also proved a poor white man's strength and virility to all men, regardless of race or class. Edward Isham, who moved every few months in search of work, leaving a string of "wives," lovers, and illegitimate children throughout Georgia and Alabama, served as a good example of a poor white man trying to feel some sense of honor within southern society. Victoria Bynum wrote that Edward Isham "seemed to take pride in shocking genteel society. Unable to achieve economic or political prowess, he instead intimidated others with his toughness and fists." Bynum viewed Isham as a typical poor white, at least psychologically. Most poor white men probably shared his obsession with proving self-worth through violence and physicality. Since power and wealth in southern society depended on continually beating black people into submission, it is hardly surprising that poor whites would structure their worlds around violence as well. Gorn concluded that "brutal recreations toughened men for a violent social life in which the exploitations of labor, the specter of poverty, and a fierce struggle for status were daily realities."<sup>72</sup>

The impoverished white characters in southern literature strengthened these violent, drunken stereotypes of poor white men. In William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom*, as poor white Thomas Sutpen traveled from Virginia into the Deep South, he realized "the difference not only between white men and black ones, but... a difference between white men and white men, not to be measured by lifting anvils or gouging eyes or how much whiskey you could drink and then get up and walk out of the room." Sutpen's first encounter with high culture made an indelible

---

<sup>72</sup> Rorabaugh, *Alcoholic Republic*, 179; Elliot J. Gorn, "'Gouge and Bite, Pull Hair and Scratch': The Social Significance of Fighting in the Southern Backcountry," *The American Historical Review* 90, Supplement to Vol. 90 (Feb. 1985): 36; Victoria Bynum, "Mothers, Lovers, and Wives," 68; Gorn, "'Gouge and Bite,'" 22.

impression on him; he devoted the rest of his life to attaining wealth and status. He realized that amassing great fortunes in land and slaves rendered the more primal culture of honor dependent upon violence and drunkenness not only irrelevant, but uncouth. Men found other, more “civilized” ways of proving their masculinity; they no longer had to resort to their base, primitive instincts. Stories from the Southwestern Humorists, led by Augustus Baldwin Longstreet, certainly presented poor whites in this fashion. Perhaps the best known poor white character, Ransy Sniffle, first appeared in Longstreet’s *Georgia Scenes* in 1835. Sniffle, a rail-thin illiterate drunk who consistently involved himself in the affairs of others, loved nothing more than violence and fighting. “He never seemed fairly alive except when he was witnessing fomenting, or talking about a fight,” wrote Longstreet. “Then, indeed, his deep-sunken grey eye assumed something of a living fire...”<sup>73</sup>

According to sociologist Matt Wray, stereotyping poor whites as extraordinarily violent helped planters distinguish the poor as racially non-white, or “not quite white.” Poor whites’ lack of “whiteness” was mentioned by both travelers to and residents of the Deep South. Olmsted declared that poor whites’ “skin is just the color of the sand-hills they live on,” Hundley said they were the “color of yellow parchment,” and Fanny Kemble wrote several times about their “yellow mud complexion.” Some poor whites’ yellowish hues were due to vitamin deficiencies in their diets, while others probably appeared jaundiced from alcohol abuse. Regardless of the causes, though, by categorizing poor whites as *not* white, slaveholders could classify the poor as racially inferior. Scientists later learned that the yellowish tint to poor whites’ skin actually resulted from malnutrition and disease. A substantial lack of nutritional iron led to dirt eating,

---

<sup>73</sup> William Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!* (New York: Vintage, 1986), 183; Susan J. Tracy, *In the Master’s Eye: Representations of Women, Blacks, and Poor Whites in Antebellum Southern Literature* (Amherst: Massachusetts, 1995), 177; Augustus Baldwin Longstreet, *Georgia Scenes* (New York: Harper & Bros., 1897); Michael E. Price and Carol M. Andrews, “Georgia Humorists,” *New Georgia Encyclopedia*. 21 August 2013. Web. 13 January 2014.

otherwise known as the “poor man’s malady,” causing some poor whites to contract hookworm. Others contracted the disease by walking around barefoot. Poor whites’ economic poverty, therefore, added to the sickly color of their skin.<sup>74</sup>

While poor whites were certainly not black like slaves, they did not live, nor act, nor look like wealthier whites. Instead, they occupied a tenuous middle ground – planters accorded them certain rights because of the paleness of their skin, but their actions and poverty surely disbarred them from the unfettered privileges of whiteness. Conceivably poor whites’ “yellowness” classified them “scientifically” as near “yellow” mulattoes, or perhaps just above the intellect and functioning of “yellow” Native Americans. In fact, Olmsted commented that poor whites’ “habits are very much like those of the old Indians” because they “are quite incapable of applying themselves to any steady labor.” Poor whites, like most southern Indians, survived by hunting and fishing and maintaining small subsistence gardens. Many of them exhibited no signs of a capitalist work ethic; they worked to live and spent their time off doing what they pleased. Poor whites, therefore, were different and separate from all other whites. Perhaps for this reason, throughout much of southern literature, poor white men were described as “dark and swarthy” ruffians. Living in filthy hovels and supposedly abusing their wives and children, these men served as a constant threat to the plantation system. They fit in nowhere; their mere presence indicated trouble for planters.<sup>75</sup>

Ex-slaves certainly considered poor whites as somehow separate from other whites. They frequently commented on the “quality” of their own white family members or ancestors, usually

---

<sup>74</sup> Matt Wray, *Not Quite White White Trash and the Boundaries of Whiteness* (Durham: Duke, 2006); Daniel R. Hundley, *Social Relations in Our Southern States* (New York: Henry B. Price, 1860), 271; Frances Anne Kemble, *Journal of a Residence on a Georgia Plantation in 1838-1839* (New York: Harper, 1863); Paul H. Buck, “The Poor Whites of the Ante-Bellum South.” *American Historical Review* 31, No. 1 (Oct. 1925): 45; J. Wayne Flynt, *Dixie’s Forgotten People: The South’s Poor Whites* (Bloomington: Indiana, 1979), 34.

<sup>75</sup> Olmsted, *A Journey*, 452; Susan Tracy, *In the Master’s Eye*, 185.

to distinguish their own blood lines from those of poor whites. Delia Thompson of South Carolina said that her father's "pappy was a white man, and no poor white trash neither." And Reuben Rosborough told his interviewer that his grandfather was a white man, and then quickly qualified his statement: "We come on one side from the F.F.V.'s. I'm proud of that, and you can put down there's no poor white trash blood in these old veins, too." Upper class whites were not the only southerners to classify poor whites as racially inferior to the wealthy – blacks did so as well. As nonslaveholders in a world based on slavery, as white laborers in a culture that equated blackness with work, poor whites had no logical place in southern society. Neither slaves nor slaveholders really knew how to classify them, and at times the status and circumstances of poor whites would be equated with blacks and vice versa. Laura Thornton, enslaved in Arkansas, brought up the fluidity of racial labels when she recalled that nonslaveholders in her area "called Eford's colored people poor white folks because he was so good to them... Old Tom Eford never worked his hands extra. That is the reason they called his niggers poor white folks." Poor whites' dubious racial classification was not only limited to individuals – it was institutionalized as well. Interestingly, prison records list white inmates' skin shade in addition to age, occupation, and place of birth. For whites, entries varied from "fair," "light," and "medium" to "sallow" and "dark." Many county court and local jail records classified whites in the same manner. The descriptions are strikingly similar to planters' slave lists, where "chattle" descriptions included "black," "mulatto," "yellow," and "gingercake." Furthermore, many advertisements for runaway slaves described the bondsmen and women as "very white," "a white negro," or "nearly white"; one even described an absconder as having "straight hair, and a complexion so nearly white that it is believed a stranger would suppose there was no African blood in him." Even in the most rigidly structured slave societies, racial categories were constantly in flux. And after so many

decades of sexual relationships between whites and blacks, a rigid definition of race became more and more useless, even as it became more and more important to the prevailing hierarchy.<sup>76</sup>

Certainly by the 1850s, slaveholders increasingly had trouble distinguishing lighter-skinned African Americans from poor whites. White and black southerners, who had been sexually intimate with each other for centuries, had become so racially mixed by the mid-antebellum period that planters truly did not know what to do. American slavery had always been based upon race, but as newspaper advertisements for runaway “white slaves” suggest, the notion of racial slavery itself was being challenged in the final decades before the Civil War. Questioning a white person’s racial purity had long been a staple of both southern humor and personal ridicule. A well-known lawyer’s trick was to accuse an opposing witness of being mixed race. Even if there was no substance to the claim, it was an incredibly embarrassing ordeal for the person testifying. Moreover, as time wore on courts began to hear cases over whether certain slaves were white or black. Historian Walter Johnson uncovered the story of Jane Morris, a blonde haired, blue eyed teenager who sued for her freedom in New Orleans. Morris claimed she was a white girl “because she looked that way.” While Georgia and South Carolina based racial assumptions on hearsay and observation, a few states like Louisiana tried to use blood quantum fractions. In the slave South, Johnson wrote, black “blood” distinguished white-looking people from “really white ones, to distinguish what was performance from what was the performance of essence...” Conversely, white blood was *not* enough to distinguish someone was white, to allow them to enjoy the benefits of whiteness. Economic class functioned as the determinant. Poor whites were not treated as fully privileged white people in a world based on

---

<sup>76</sup> Delia Thompson, *American Slave*, Vol. 14 (SC), Part 4, 161; Reuben Rosborough, *Ibid.*, Vol. 14 (SC), Part 4, 15; Laura Thornton, *Ibid.*, Vol. 2 (AK), Part 6, 325; Central Registration of Convicts, 1817-68, GDAH; Olmsted, *A Journey*, 640-1.

black slavery. Rather they were considered annoying, troublesome pariahs – potential threats to the continuance of slavery and the claims of white superiority.<sup>77</sup>

For these reasons, southern laws placed increasingly strict racial regulations on sex, drinking, and gambling, further monitoring poor whites and blacks and keeping them separated. These tighter controls ultimately culminated in the free black “self-enslavement” laws of the 1850s. Simply put, southern legislatures ordered free blacks to move out of their states. If they failed to flee by a certain time, they would be forced to choose a master, effectively re-enslaving themselves. Slaveholders were trying desperately to restructure their society into white and black, but strict racial dichotomies were no longer applicable in an increasingly racially-mixed world. Planters needed a black/white, slave/free division to order southern society, but by the late antebellum period the Deep South had changed so much that a simple demarcation was no longer possible. All of this racial uncertainty – non-slave black people, effectively enslaved white people, and growing proportions of interracial people – sent tremors through the once heavily stratified southern social hierarchy. Cases turning on an individual’s race began peppering southern dockets. Johnson estimated that judges were asked “hundreds of times to stabilize the visible confusion of a hybrid reality into the stable degrees of difference demanded by a ruling class that wanted to see the world in black and white.”<sup>78</sup>

In 1859, shortly after the “white” Jane Morris was sold as a slave, Washington, D.C.’s *National Era* ran a story about a similar case in Alabama. Apparently, two poor white women from neighboring Georgia were abducted and sold into slavery across state lines. Patience Hicks, a seventeen year old farm laborer, and her mother, Casey Ann Hicks, headed a large family of

---

<sup>77</sup> Walter Johnson, “The Slave Trader, the White Slave, and the Politics of Racial Determination in the 1850s,” *Journal of American History* 87, No. 1 (June 2000): 13; 14; 21.

<sup>78</sup> Jack Kenny Williams, *Vogues in Villany: Crime and Retribution in Ante-bellum South Carolina* (Columbia: South Carolina, 1959), 96; Johnson, “The Slave Trader,” 13; 14; 21; 20; 21; 23.

children who were “all destitute of means.” Having been employed on a plantation, Patience pleaded, she “is considerably sunburnt, which makes her appear rather dark.” Although the probate judge ruled in the Hicks’ favor, confirming the women’s status as free white people, the “master” who purchased them was set free with no penalty except to pay the women’s court costs. These types of cases, no matter how rare, highlighted the failure of race as a physical basis for determining who was a slave – and who was liable to become a slave. “How many of the hundred thousand illiterate poor whites of Virginia have been thus disposed of in the Southern [slave] markets we are unable to say,” the *National Era* journalist lamented. But there were “doubtless a good many...proof of freedom is thrown by the laws of Alabama, or by the practice of her courts, upon her poor whites.” Poor whites, the paper tried to explain, now held the burden of proof in determining their own status as free white people.<sup>79</sup>

Thus, by the time of the Civil War poor whites’ race constituted privilege only in their dealings with blacks. As Stephen Berry wrote, “In a racist society the race card is not always played. It doesn’t have to be, because it is always available to be played...Race is the elephant in the room, and it can blow its trumpet as soon as it’s called upon.” Berry was surely correct – in structured interracial dealings, race trumped *everything* else. But that race card did not prevent poor whites from feeling empathy for slaves, or from considering certain blacks as friends or desiring them as lovers. Furthermore, as the antebellum period continued, telling the races apart became more difficult, and slaveholders worked harder to control and segregate the two underclasses. The benefits of whiteness did not extend to a large percentage of poor, nonslaveholding, non-landowning whites. Indeed, they were certainly not slaves, but poor whites

---

<sup>79</sup> “White Slavery in Alabama,” *National Era*, Sept. 15, 1859; also see Lawrence Tenzer, and A.D. Powell, “White Slavery, Maternal Descent, and the Politics of Slavery in the Antebellum United States.” Paper presented at University of Nottingham Institute for the Study of Slavery, July/August 2004.

had relatively fewer rights as *whites*, per se; instead, their class status doomed them to continuing cycles of poverty, and limited their civil rights as white Americans.<sup>80</sup>

---

<sup>80</sup> Stephen Berry, Review of *Race Relations at the Margins: Slaves and Poor Whites in the Antebellum Southern Countryside*, by Jeff Forret. *Reviews in American History*, Vol. 35, No. 3 (Sept. 2007), 383.

## CHAPTER TWO: THE DEMORALIZATION OF LABOR

*Every white man who is under the necessity of earning his bread, by the sweat of his brow, or by manual labor, in any capacity, no matter how unassuming in deportment, or exemplary in morals, is treated as if he was a loathsome beast, and shunned with the utmost disdain.*

– Hinton Helper<sup>1</sup>

*Fearfully as slavery bears upon the blacks of the South, its effects upon the vast majority of the whites is no way less dreadful.*

*Slavery degrades all labor, and with it all laborers.*

– *The North Star*<sup>2</sup>

Former slave and abolitionist leader Frederick Douglass famously wrote that “by encouraging the enmity of the poor, laboring white man against the black,” the slaveholder “succeeds in making the said white man almost as much a slave as the black slave himself. The difference between the white slave, and the black slave, is this: the latter belongs to one slaveholder, and the former belongs to all the slaveholders, collectively... Both are plundered, and by the same plunderers.” This double enslavement, Douglass concluded, resulted from each white laborer being “robbed by the slave system, of the just results of his labor, because he is flung into open competition with a class of laborers who work without wages.” Douglass’ interpretation, although elegantly stated, was nowhere near novel. Poor white laborers had been compared to, and at times, even referred to, as slaves. Indeed, Hinton Helper made that specific argument his main call-to-arms for the great masses of nonslaveowning white laborers. Asserting that no free white worker could compete with slave labor, Helper destroyed the pro-slavery argument, purposefully challenging the domination of the region’s slaveholders. His main

---

<sup>1</sup> Hinton Rowan Helper, *The Impending Crisis of the South: How to Meet It* (1857; reprint, New York: A.B. Burdick, 1860), 41.

<sup>2</sup> “The Poor Whites of the South,” *The North Star* (NY), March 1, 1850.

argument rested in large part on labor theory: poor whites simply could not compete – for jobs or for living wages – with profitable slave labor.<sup>3</sup>

Although life had never come easy for the region's poor, the financial upheaval of the Panic of 1837 devastated the vulnerable lower classes. Many of the few who were lucky enough to own small plots of land before the financial crisis suffered through foreclosure, and were bought out by the most prosperous plantation owners. Other less affluent whites lost personal property, some lost their homes, and still others lost jobs. Then, further concentrating wealth, the cotton boom of the 1850s helped the richest slaveholders become richer, while the poorest continued to flounder. Upward mobility became increasingly elusive. Charles Bolton found that in the North Carolina Piedmont, 90 percent of landless laborers in 1850 were still landless in 1860. With "very little chance of improving their economic situations," poor whites were forced to become short-term or day laborers. Yet at the same time that they were being pushed off the land, poor whites were also being largely shut out of farm work. Forced from performing the agricultural work their ancestors had engaged in for centuries, poor whites born into the post-Jacksonian South increasingly became wage laborers. But even in new industries, there were simply not enough jobs to keep poor whites at a level of full employment. Rarely did they have long-term contracts or jobs; most laborers were hired daily, weekly, or seasonally, leaving many of the poor underemployed for parts of the year. Moreover, many white men had to travel widely to find job opportunities, abandoning their homes and families for periods of time to take short-term work. They often took the South's dirtiest, most dangerous jobs, deemed "too hazardous for Negro property." Even as poor whites attempted to enter construction, mechanical, factory, and various other jobs, they were constantly made aware of the thousands of readily available black

---

<sup>3</sup> Frederick Douglass, *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* (Boston: De Wolfe & Fiske Co., 1892), 180; Helper, *The Impending Crisis*, 32-3.

strikebreakers waiting to take their places should they ask for better wages or desire safer working conditions.<sup>4</sup>

For some lower class white workers, the prospect of competing with slave labor for the rest of their lives was too unsettling to handle. Instead of continuing to work for poverty-level wages, they chose to migrate west, away from slavery and towards a better standard of living. When he was still a boy, Abraham Lincoln's family packed up their meagre belongings and moved to the free state of Illinois from slavery-ridden Kentucky so that his father, Thomas Lincoln, could have a chance to earn a living wage. This migration would profoundly shape young Abraham's worldview, and would continue to influence his ideas about slavery, as well as its impact on free white labor. Serving as a prime example of the migratory pattern of less affluent whites, the Lincolns were lucky to escape the slave South.

For the poorest whites, however, moving an entire family was often unrealistic. If they did not have resources saved up, or if they wanted to move to an area where they did not have kinfolk or friends, the prospect was daunting and economically unfeasible. For those poor whites left in the Deep South to compete with slave labor, the future appeared quite grim. Effectively excluded from the labor market, some of the lower class withdrew from society, preferring to hunt, fish, and forage for a minimal subsistence. Significant numbers of disaffected poor whites also turned to illegal activities, trading with slaves in the underground economy. A few gave in to their basest impulses, preferring to dull the harsh realities of their lives with vices like alcohol abuse. Still others were so plagued by poverty that they spent periods of time desperately hungry. In 1845 Georgia's *Columbus Enquirer* reminded its readers, "It is a solemn truth, to be remembered, that the poor are miserable, and often hungry sufferers, when they are compelled to

---

<sup>4</sup> Charles C. Bolton, *Poor Whites in the Antebellum South: Tenants and Laborers in Central North Carolina and Northeast Mississippi* (Durham: Duke, 1994), 14; Richard M. Morris, "The Measure of Bondage in the Slave States," *The Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 41, No. 2 (Sept. 1954): 223; 228.

go in search of capitalists, to ask for employment.” These white laborers knew enough about the world to comprehend the influence of slavery on their lives. It drove down their wages and rendered their former agricultural jobs obsolete, stunting business ventures outside the realm of agricultural growth, therefore impeding both technological and industrial development. Gavin Wright has argued persuasively that the antebellum South failed to industrialize significantly not simply because of a lack of manufactory expertise but because slave-owning labor lords were reaping consistently strong returns by using their labor force to grow cotton. Affluent men had no need to focus their attentions on other forms of money-making; they were becoming rich off of their slaves in terms of both annual earnings and rising slave prices, and without the added risk of opening and operating a new business.<sup>5</sup>

Interestingly, though, southern industrialists actually earned a slightly higher rate of return than planters did throughout the late antebellum period. One study estimated that in 1860, an “acceptable” rate of return for planters hovered around 10 percent, while southern manufacturers averaged profits of 26 percent. Planters’ reluctance to take advantage of this larger profit margin, James Cobb wrote, was probably largely due to “a simple preference for a relatively secure investment (slaves and land) over a potentially more lucrative but also more risky one (stock in a new factory).” Still, there was also a possibility that their decision was also driven by certain social or political concerns about industrialization. Slaveholders likely had legitimate concerns about transforming the mostly rural, agricultural South into a society that more closely resembled the manufacturing-driven North. According to Cobb, the “key to understanding the restricted size for the South’s industrial sector was not the absence of viable

---

<sup>5</sup> “Let Us Reason Together,” *Columbus Enquirer* (GA), July 16, 1845, p. 1; Gavin Wright, *Old South, New South: Revolutions in the Southern Economy since the Civil War* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana, 1986), 19; 25.

investment opportunities but the tendency of planters and slaveholders, the region's wealthiest investors, to shun manufacturing in favor of agriculture."<sup>6</sup>

Ultimately, the South's failure to industrialize at a more rapid rate meant that poor, unemployed or under-employed whites had few available options to earn a living wage within the region. George Weston wrote in 1856 that "the complaint of low wages and want of employment comes from every part of the South." But southerners did not have to be educated or even literate to understand why lower class whites continued to struggle throughout the region. As ex-slave James Deane put it, "The poor white people...were worse off than the slaves, because they could not get any work to do, on the plantation the slaves did all the work." Because of this obvious preference for slave labor, class tensions became a very serious problem for slaveholders in the few decades before secession. Writing in 1954, Richard Morris was one of the earliest historians to definitively establish a link between the Deep South's slave societies and the nominal, quasi-"freedom" of poor whites. In language reminiscent of Helper, Morris concluded that "a significant segment of the southern labor force of both races operated under varying degrees of compulsion, legal or economic, in a twilight zone of bondage." Poor white laborers in the slave states, he claimed, "dwelt in a shadowland enjoying a status neither fully slave nor entirely free."<sup>7</sup>

While heavily slave areas like the plantation belt of the Deep South were especially rife with class conflicts, problems over inequalities arose between groups of whites wherever slavery existed. Fred Arthur Bailey uncovered a great deal of information concerning this friction

---

<sup>6</sup> James C. Cobb, *Industrialization and Southern Society: 1877-1984* (Lexington: Kentucky, 1984), 8; 8-9; 8. Also see Fred Bateman and Thomas Weiss, *A Deplorable Scarcity: The Failure of Industrialization in the Slave Economy* (Chapel Hill: North Carolina, 1981).

<sup>7</sup> George M. Weston, *The Poor Whites of the South* (Washington, D.C.: Buell & Blanchard, 1856), 4; James V. Deane, in George P. Rawick, ed., *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography* (Westport, CT.: Greenwood, 1972-79), Vol. 8 (MD), 9; Morris, "The Measure of Bondage," 220.

between slaveholders and poor white laborers, especially over labor issues. Most of these tensions centered on problems over slave competition, wages, and work ethic. Based on the Tennessee Veterans Questionnaires, Bailey found that only 6 percent of respondents knew slaveholders who “went into the fields with their slaves.” Furthermore, only 2 percent “pointed out that slaveowners performed important functions other than manual labor.” The vast majority of those interviewed, it seems, had little respect for planters as productive, working members of society. Instead, about 1 in 5 poor whites concluded that slaveholders rarely worked at all, and a surprising 14 percent of planters confirmed these observations.<sup>8</sup>

Conversely, and contrary to the persistent stereotype of poor whites as lazy and shiftless, only 4 out of 1,223 Confederate veterans “condemned [the poor] for their idleness.” Class relations in Tennessee were similar to those in other Upper South states. Indeed, at an 1832 session of the Virginia House of Delegates session, Representative Charles J. Faulkner spoke out against the evils that slavery inflicted on free white labor, although he was clearly targeting a more middling class audience. Slavery “banishes free white labor, it exterminates the mechanic, the artisan, the manufacturer. It deprives them of occupation, It deprives them of bread,” the future U.S. Senator opined. “Must the country languish, droop, die, that the slaveholder may flourish? Shall all interests be subservient to one—all rights subordinate to those of the slaveholder? Has not the mechanic, have not the middle classes their rights—rights incompatible with the existence of slavery?” Of neighboring North Carolina, historian Guion Griffis Johnson observed that “social distinctions and class interests were definite enough to give rise to friction.” Especially during the later antebellum period, yeomen and skilled laborers joined the ranks of poor whites, becoming “increasingly resentful” of slaveholders’ attitudes. “They were ready to admit the superiority of the upper classes in matters of education, manners, and dress,

---

<sup>8</sup> Fred Arthur Bailey, *Class and Tennessee's Confederate Generation* (Chapel Hill: North Carolina, 1987), 68.

but they would never admit that these superficial things made them any ‘better,’” Johnson held. The class tensions evident in these Upper South states, where the slaveholding class was relatively smaller, suggests that in the Deep South, the chasm between whites from decidedly more economically disparate classes was deep – and widening.<sup>9</sup>

Indeed, both nonslaveholders and former slaves pointed out this class-based inequality between southern whites time and time again. Often commenting on the haughty, disdainful manner of wealthy slaveholders and the dire, sometimes pitiful, circumstances of poor whites, respondents clearly understood class division in the Old South. Poor white Confederate veteran Robert Lackey observed this distinction, writing “Them that was able had slaves to work for them but the poor class of people was almost slaves themselves – had to work hard and live hard.” Rosaline Rogers, who grew up a slave in South Carolina and Tennessee, attempted to make sense out of the great divide between slaveholders and nonslaveholders. She recalled, “The wealthy slave owner never allowed his slaves to pay any attention to the poor white folks, as he knew they had been free all their lives and should be slave owners themselves. The poor whites were hired by those who did not believe in slavery, or could not afford slaves.” William Eskew, the son of a poor white nonslaveholder, described how economic inequality unmistakably set the tone for social relationships, and even dictated political participation. He reported bluntly that “There was no neighboring with the poor man and rich man. No poor man held office. There was no chance for a young poor man for his wages was so low he could not save anything.” By the late antebellum period, therefore, class tensions were rising and even seemed to threaten the primacy of race, eroding the supposedly sacred bonds of white privilege. Problems over white labor – the absence of full-time work, the lack of opportunities in general, and the inability of

---

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*; Helper, *The Impending Crisis*, 177; Guion Griffis Johnson, *Ante-Bellum North Carolina: A Social History* (Chapel Hill: North Carolina, 1937), 78; quoted in *Ibid.*

many laborers to earn a living wage – created a potentially explosive society. Complete with large percentages of slaves *and* a sizable, disaffected poor white underclass, a constant state of anxiety descended on much of the Deep South in the years preceding secession. If these two classes ever banded together against their common oppressors – as they had before repeatedly throughout America’s short history – they threatened the fortunes, the power, and even the lives of the region’s slaveholders.<sup>10</sup>

Understanding this anxiety helps to explain why so many slaveholders became preoccupied with segregating the two groups. When it came to labor practices, this separatism made rational economic sense. Southern planters undoubtedly preferred slave labor to the work of poor whites. Time and time again slaveholders commented on blacks’ superior work ethic and their willingness to follow commands. Marcus Toney, the son of a wealthy family owning thirty-five slaves in Lynchburg, Virginia, admitted that only if they needed additional help would planters “engag[e] the whites. As a general proposition, the slaveholders, were a class unto themselves.” Even nonslaveholding yeomen farmers showed surprisingly little inclination to hire other white workers. As one Confederate veteran remembered, “There were a family of free negroes whom father hired and they lived on father’s place ever since... father hired free negro and Indian labor and sometimes a white hired man or two.” While there were myriad reasons why both planters and employers preferred slave labor, the most common was that poor whites were often defiant, refusing to take orders from a “master.” The sense of emasculation bred by

---

<sup>10</sup> Colleen M. Elliot and Louise A. Moxley, eds. *The Tennessee Civil War Veterans Questionnaires*, (Easley, SC: Southern Historical Press, Inc., 1985), Vol. 4, 1316; Rosaline Rogers, *American Slave*, Vol. 6 (IN), Part 2, 165; Elliot, *Tennessee*, Vol. 2, 778.

being driven like a slave fueled poor whites' insubordination, whether consciously or sub-consciously.<sup>11</sup>

As Robert Starobin found, "slave labor was not less efficient than the free labor available...Physical coercion, or the threat of it, was an effective slave incentive." Economists Robert Fogel and Stanley Engerman confirmed this fact, noting that the typical slave field hand was, on average, "harder-working and more efficient than his white counterpart." Violence, it seemed, was an extremely effective incentive. One Mississippi planter bragged that by using slaves, "there is no haggling or striking for wages, no contention about hours. Uniformity, obedience, and wholesome discipline, make the labor of the South." Indeed, slavery had become so profitable in the few decades before the Civil War that black labor was commonly employed in factories and even in the skilled trades. According to Michele Gillespie, as early as the 1820s and 30s, white southern artisans began having trouble finding employment. Although this fact was due in part to the ready availability of cheap, northern-made goods, much of the skilled tradesmen's problems arose from competition with slaves. Combining black and white workers in the same jobs, Gillespie purported, was becoming "a far more common sight by the late antebellum period." Adding more problems to the growing tension between poor white and black labor, planters pursued the practice of hiring out slaves, whether they possessed a certain skill, or were excess laborers during the lay-by times of the agricultural season. While some of these slaves were hired out to neighboring yeomen and small farmers, by the time of secession state and local governments and industrial companies began "renting" slaves. While a few states passed laws to tax slave hires, most of these tax rates were never enforced. Georgia, for example, had strikingly high rates of slave-hire taxation, totaling over \$100 per year per slave, but there is

---

<sup>11</sup> Mildred Rutherford Mell, *A Definitive Study of the Poor Whites of the South* (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of North Carolina, 1938), 95-6; Elliot, *Tennessee*, Vol. 5, 2066; Vol. 4, 1355-6.

no evidence of any slaveholder actually paying this tax. Instead, according to Richard Morris, the laws were intended to discourage slave hiring, as the practice was “frequently a condition precedent to emancipation.”<sup>12</sup>

Unfettered by these laws, during the 1840s and 50s slave hirings rose by 50 percent, a rate proportional to the increasing value of slaves. The abolitionist Hinton Helper numbered slave “renters” at 160,000 people, deeming these slave-employers “third-rate aristocrats— persons who formerly owned slaves, but whom slavery, as is its custom, had dragged down to poverty, leaving them, in their false and shiftless pride, to eke out a miserable existence over the hapless chattels personal of other men.” Employers throughout the South, whether involved in construction, manufacturing, or agriculture, had concluded that using slave labor – even in the form of hiring – was more economically efficient than hiring poor whites. “Thus,” wrote Starobin, “no matter how inefficient slave labor may have been, it was not less efficient than the free labor available to Southerners at the time.” Poor white and even skilled laboring southerners, of course, took immediate notice of how the institution of slavery, which had already pushed them out of agriculture, was now obstructing their employment in various other jobs. Furthermore, no matter how uneducated poor whites were, they still understood that competition with slaves drove the price of their labor down. As A.J. Ferrell, a poor white Tennessean replied, if planters “had not owned slaves a man working as I was could have secured better wages.”<sup>13</sup>

Yet planters did have another reason for keeping poor whites separate from their slaves. Many of them believed that poor whites “demoralized” slaves by laboring so infrequently. As

---

<sup>12</sup> Robert S. Starobin, *Industrial Slavery in the Old South* (New York: Oxford, 1970), 154; Robert W. Fogel and Stanley L. Engerman, *Time on the Cross: The Economics of American Negro Slavery* (Boston: Little, Brown, & Co., 1974), 5; quoted in Starobin, *Industrial Slavery*, 210; Michele Gillespie, *Free Labor in an Unfree World: White Artisans in Slaveholding Georgia, 1789-1860* (Athens: Georgia, 2000), 136; 131; Morris, “The Measure of Bondage,” 234-5.

<sup>13</sup> Helper, *The Impending Crisis*, 147; 149; Starobin, *Industrial Slavery*, 155; Elliot, *Tennessee*, Vol. 2, 806-7.

one slaveholder explained, “the intercourse of *these people* with the negroes was not favorable to good discipline.” Poor whites, he thought, could not command slaves’ respect, and thus would weaken the prevailing racial hierarchy. This idea of “demoralization” is important: if slaves realized how little poor whites had to work to lead lives that differed only slightly from their own material realities, surely they would become more discontented. Furthermore, if enslaved blacks recognized the absolute differences—both economically and socially—between poor whites and all other whites, they would naturally question the ideological privileges associated with the idea of white supremacy. Poor whites not only undermined slavery through crime, miscegenation, and personal relationships with African Americans, but they also served as a constant reminder that race in itself did not constitute any type of “scientific” superiority.<sup>14</sup>

As much as slaveholders would have liked to avoid it, however, bi-racial work did happen, and with relative frequency, especially during the bottleneck seasons of planting and harvesting. Ex-slave Frank Menefee recalled that “The poor white people around there used to help us work.” The nature of this type of work, of course, forced the poor white laborer to have *some* sort of a personal relationship with their African American co-laborers. Many affluent whites, including journalists, abolitionists, and even pro-slavery southerners, commented on this “degradation” of poor white laborers, and it deserves a closer analysis. One citizen of New Orleans wrote that white laborers were “generally regarded as of the lowest; and in a slave State, this standard is ‘in the lowest depths, a lower deep,’ from the fact, that, by association, it is a reduction of the white servant to the level of their colored fellow-menials.” Eugene Genovese uncovered a case in Mississippi where the sons of a poor white man were helping their family make ends meet by working as laborers on a big plantation. Apparently they “became too

---

<sup>14</sup> Quoted in Frederick Law Olmsted, *A Journey in the Seaboard Slave States: With Remarks on Their Economy*. (New York: Dix and Edwards, 1856), 674.

solicitous of the slaves alongside whom they were picking cotton,” and for that sin, the boys “were nearly lynched as ‘Negro sympathizers.’” Their story was likely replicated in every county in the Deep South throughout the late antebellum period, as it became clear to planters that having two sizable underclasses within one society was potentially dangerous. Indeed, these instances of working side by side with slaves probably did more than anything else to solidify notions of white inequality and class consciousness among poor whites. Doing the same work as a slave – for very little remuneration – forced poor whites to confront how little their skin color actually mattered. Furthermore, this practice made it possible for poor whites to identify with slaves as fellow laborers, possibly becoming empathetic to their plight, and perhaps becoming abolitionists. Whether in the fields or in the factory, poor white workers had long noticed the fading distinctions between them and their enslaved co-laborers. Certainly by the 1840s and 50s, planters were granting favored slaves more freedoms, like hiring out their own labor, learning artisanal trades, and selling produce they raised during their free time. Simultaneously, freedoms and opportunities that most white Americans generally took for granted were slipping out of reach for many of the Deep South’s poor whites: wealth became even more concentrated at the top, prospects for upward class mobility dwindled, job competition increased, and extreme poverty seemed to worsen.<sup>15</sup>

By the late-antebellum period both the jobs held by southern poor whites and the terms of their employment varied considerably. Whether being paid by the day to chop wood, or given room, board, and \$10 a month to help out seasonally, or sharecropping a wealthy planters’ extra land, poor whites earned their livelihoods in a variety of ways. Individuals and families lived in a

---

<sup>15</sup> Frank Menefee, *American Slave*, Vol. 1 (AL), 279; quoted in Helper, *The Impending Crisis*, 380; Eugene D. Genovese, “‘Rather Be a Nigger Than a Poor White Man’: Slave Perceptions of Southern Yeomen and Poor Whites,” in Hans L. Trefousse, ed. *Toward a New View of America: Essays in Honor of Arthur C. Cole* (New York: B. Franklin, 1977), 85-6.

constant state of uncertainty, unsure of how long their current status would last and how they might procure the next job – and sometimes even the next meal. Seth Rockman found that in the more urban Upper South, the “vagaries of the preindustrial urban economy almost assured that a wage-earning man would teeter” between “self-support and constant and absolute dependence.” In the Deep South’s slave states, poor whites were simply unable to count on any sureties in their lives, leaving them highly stressed.<sup>16</sup>

Furthermore, as Rockman pointed out, in early America wage labor had been considered a “temporary expedient for a young man or immigrant to earn enough money to acquire land and attain a more stable yeoman’s competency.” By the late antebellum period, this dream of upward mobility rarely came true for the wage laborers of the Upper South, and it was an even less attainable goal for the poor whites of the Deep South. Even for hard-working, industrious laborers, the once-revered American dream had become completely elusive. Feelings of hope for a brighter future gave way to worries about the cost of meat and corn. Optimism about better opportunities for one’s children turned into feelings of worthlessness for parents who were dependent upon their children’s labor. Economist Robert Margo found that the entire United States was witnessing a decrease in real wages in the dozen or so years preceding secession. Throughout the antebellum period, wages grew slightly in the long run. However, Americans felt “considerable variability in the growth rate in the short term.” Put simply, real wages began rising in the 1820s, but then they stopped growing or even began reversing by the late 1830s. Wages then increased sharply for a few short years in the early 1840s, but from late 1840s through the late 1850s, real wages fell. Margo noted that his own findings complemented Robert Fogel’s research, which characterized “this final period before the Civil War as a ‘hidden

---

<sup>16</sup> Seth Rockman, *Scraping By: Wage Labor, Slavery, and Survival in Early Baltimore* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 2009), 75;

depression' for free labor." Robert Starobin's conclusions supported this theory as well. "The wages of common white workers did not increase appreciably between 1800 and 1861," he wrote.<sup>17</sup>

While few historians and economists have extensively studied wage rates in the antebellum South, these preliminary figures do show that wage rates were lower in areas where slavery thrived. Just as Hinton Helper had so forcefully argued, southern wages remained lower than northern wages throughout the entire antebellum period. As economist Stanley Lebergott tabulated, in 1850 a farm laborer residing in New England could expect to earn \$12.98 per month, while the same worker in Georgia would only be earning \$9.03, or \$7.72 in South Carolina, or \$7.21 in North Carolina. These wage differentials cannot solely be explained by regional differences in the cost of living, as there was also a sectional divide between real wages, an estimate of money's purchasing power. As Robert Margo explained,

The South also lagged behind the North in real wage growth. As a result, there emerged a real wage gap for common labor favoring the North in the 1830s. The timing of the emergence of the gap suggests an important causal role for early industrialization, which was concentrated initially in the Northeast. Although the North-South wage gap narrowed somewhat in the 1850s, the low-wage South was already a feature of the American economy before the Civil War.<sup>18</sup>

One the eve of secession, therefore, wages had risen slightly for southern laborers, but not enough to be competitive with the northern wage rates. Guion Griffis Johnson used census record statistics to compare average wages in 1860 for various types of laborers. She claimed that Alabama's averages were representative of most the South, and determined that Mississippi housed the highest paid laborers in the region as the population was far less dense. The only

---

<sup>17</sup> Rockman, *Scraping By*, 75-6; Robert A. Margo, ed., *Wages and Labor Markets in the United States, 1820-1860* (Chicago: Chicago, 2000), 143-4; Starobin, *Industrial Slavery*, 158.

<sup>18</sup> Lebergott, Stanley. "Wage Trends, 1800-1900," in *The Conference on Research in Income and Wealth*, eds., *Trends in the American Economy in the Nineteenth Century*. Princeton: Princeton, 1960), 457; 453; Margo, *Wages and Labor Markets*, 155.

northern state Johnson included in her analysis was Indiana, which had lower wages than its northeastern counterparts. According to her figures, an agricultural laborer earned the following average rates, including board in a single month: in the United States, \$14.73, in Indiana \$13.71, in Alabama \$12.41, in Mississippi \$16.66, and in North Carolina a meager \$10.37. In the case of general day laborers, they averaged daily without board: \$1.11 in the U.S., 98 cents in Indiana, 96 cents in Alabama, \$1.26 in Mississippi, and 77 cents in North Carolina. Robert Starobin estimated that the daily wages of common laborers in the South in 1860 ranged from 75 cents to \$2, averaging about \$1 a day. By contrast, skilled workers earned between \$2 and \$5 a day, averaging around \$3. The “bulk of unskilled white workers” that Starobin studied netted about \$310 per year. While these figures provide a general understanding of wage rates, even historians’ numbers fluctuate widely. According to Johnson’s figures, a North Carolina farm laborer could earn less than \$125 a year, working full time – a far cry from Starobin’s average of \$310. Still, many personal accounts by poor whites indicate that daily wages were actually much lower than these scholars’ estimates. Laborers in both South Carolina and Georgia were complaining of making less than forty cents a day without room and board. At times they were paid as little as 25 cents a day. One Tennessee politician claimed that in Lowell, Massachusetts, men were paid 80 cents a day, and women made \$2 a week. Comparatively, in Tennessee, he claimed, male laborers never earned more than 50 cents a day, while females capped out at \$1.25 a week. U.S. Representative Thomas L. Clingman of North Carolina made similar statements, pointing out that a main difference between New England and the South was that in the slave states, labor was “one hundred per cent cheaper. In the upper parts of the State, the labor of either a free man or a slave, including board, clothing, &c., can be obtained for from \$110 to \$120 per annum.” These numbers were closer to Hinton Helper’s, who claimed to have “found

sober, energetic white men” in North Carolina earning only \$84 a year for agricultural work, “including board only.” As for white women laborers in the South, Johnson concluded that female domestics made an average weekly wage of \$1.85 in the United States, \$2.08 in Alabama, \$2.25 in Mississippi, and \$1.08 in North Carolina. Again, these numbers were much higher than the reports coming from contemporaries. Frederick Law Olmsted noted that most white female domestics in the region earned a paltry \$3 to \$6 per month.<sup>19</sup>

The low wage levels seemed to have caused much strife by the later antebellum period. Many Confederate veterans wrote about this class division, directly connecting the slave South’s problems to its increasing economic inequality. Nonslaveholders worked especially hard, they claimed, for wages that would not cover basic living expenses. These soldiers directly linked unlivable wages to a more generalized class-driven discontent. Ezekiel Inman, the son of a non-slaveholder, remembered that “Negro and poor white men did the work. Slaveholders [were] above working class people...[and] did not mingle with those that did not own slaves. They considered themselves in a better class.” In stark opposition to the leisurely pursuits of planters, Inman remembered, poor whites scrambled to find work, even though the opportunities for wage laborers were “very poor. Fifty cents a day was the best wage.” Another former soldier, J.W. Bradley of Sumner, Tennessee, stated that “The poor young man had a poor chance to save any money.” With wages averaging 25 to 40 cents per day, combined with the fact that it was “very difficult to get a job,” he concluded that “The slaveholder never gave the poor young man but little encouragement.” One North Carolinian, whose father owned one slave, made a similar point. “A poor man did not get enough for his work to clothe himself decent,” he surmised. They only earned “\$7 to \$8 a month. Had to be a good hand to get that.” Still another poor white

---

<sup>19</sup> Johnson, *Ante-Bellum North Carolina*, 70; Starobin, *Industrial Slavery*, 158; quoted in Weston, “The Poor Whites,” 4; *Ibid.*, 5; Helper, *The Impending Crisis*, 380; Johnson, *Ante-Bellum North Carolina*, 70; Olmsted, *Journey*, 99.

claimed to have worked for \$5 a month with board, confirming that job opportunities for non-slaveholders were “awful scarce.” And when Charles Ross was asked about “a poor boy’s chances” for rising out of the lower class, he stoically answered, “It was not good, [the poor boy] had to work his way at 50 cents per day and sometimes not that much. [It was] a life and death struggle for a poor boy.”<sup>20</sup>

Of course, the primary reason southern employers could afford to pay white workers such low wages was the cost effectiveness of slavery. Slaveowners, and increasingly, slave “employers,” simply made more profit using black enslaved labor. Abolitionist George Weston reminded the nation that slaveholders “own a vigorous and serviceable body of black laborers, who can be fed for \$20 per annum, and clothed for \$10 per annum; who can be kept industrious and preserved from debilitating vices by coercion, but no means inapt in the simpler arts, naturally docile.” This fact should concern slaveholders, he continued, because it impoverished such a larger proportion of southern whites. “[S]uch is the terrible, the overwhelming, the irresistible competition,” Weston lamented, “to which the non-property-holding three quarters of the whites at the South are subjected, when they come into the market with [slave] labor.” Slave labor was so profitable that no matter how low white wages sank, it was still cheaper to hire slaves. As Robert Starobin estimated, with food, board, clothes, and “supervision,” white industrial laborers cost industrialists about \$335 a year, while slaves working the same jobs cost about one-third that price.<sup>21</sup>

Furthermore, historians still have not determined how, precisely, white laborers were actually paid. In all likelihood, most payments to laborers in antebellum South involved a combination of credit and payment in kind, as the amount of actual currency in circulation

---

<sup>20</sup> Elliot, *Tennessee*, Vol. 1, 368-9; Vol. 2, 522-3; Vol. 3, 966; Vol. 5, 1881-2.

<sup>21</sup> Weston, “The Poor Whites,” 5; Starobin, *Industrial Slavery*, 158.

fluctuated greatly depending on time and place. This method of payment was strikingly similar to the way black freedmen would be paid after emancipation. Daniel Hundley reported that among the South's poor whites, money "is almost a perfectly unknown commodity." While small amounts of cash did occasionally exchange hands, many laborers were given promissory notes, or "book debt," for amounts still due to them. Local employers would allow the laborers to redeem their book debt in meat, corn, rent, or clothing. Charles Bolton found that many poor white laborers in North Carolina were compensated with country produce and flour. Other workers were issued bank notes, or a combination of book debt, cash, and foodstuffs. These promissory notes undoubtedly allowed the employer unprecedented amounts of power over the employee. As Seth Rockman pointed out, white laborers had a hard time quitting a job for fear of forfeiting wages they had already accrued. But when a former employer essentially held a laborer's wages long after the work had been completed, the worker was bound to both the honesty and the financial solvency of his old boss. And as long as these employers had the power to decide whether or not to honor old promissory notes, poor white laborers were completely at their mercy.<sup>22</sup>

Conversely, employers had good reason to control the amount of cash that poor whites kept in circulation. They certainly did not want their slaves selling items or services to poor whites and amassing large amounts of money. They also wanted to keep poor whites from becoming societal nuisances by enabling cash-fueled alcoholic benders. Indeed, many of the harshly enforced alcohol laws in the South, including the rule of no alcohol sales on Sundays, may have been influenced by the fact that poor whites generally received their wages Saturday evenings. Given the scant information historians have gleaned about the daily transactional lives

---

<sup>22</sup> Daniel R. Hundley, *Social Relations in Our Southern States* (New York: Henry B. Price, 1860), 471; Bolton, *Poor Whites*, 23; Rockman, *Scraping By*, 8.

of poor white laborers, questions concerning what they earned, how they found jobs, and what type of contracts bound them to their employers, still remain unanswered.<sup>23</sup>

Before the lives and labors of poor white men are examined, however, it is important to note that just like their northern wage labor counterparts, poor southern families were greatly dependent upon the labor of women and children. While records on these mostly illiterate individuals are extremely rare, historians now know enough to establish several general theories about their lives, especially concerning labor. At the most basic level, poor white women had the same major problem as poor white men: besides planting and harvest seasons, they had trouble finding jobs outside of cities and large towns, and even those places had experienced a shift towards slave hires by the later antebellum period. Furthermore, women's wages were much lower than men's, as employers assumed that females' incomes were supplementary to each family's primary (male) breadwinner. Well-compensated poor white women could expect to be paid at least one-third less than men in similar jobs, but many women made less than one-half of what their male kinfolk earned. Unfortunately, historians have very few records that give any insight into the working lives of the South's poor white women and children. Certain things, however, can be inferred from what is known about the lives of slave women and lower-middle class yeomen women. In general, most poor white women had the dual duties of working some type of manual labor during the day (while tending and nursing the children), and then taking care of their homes at night. Since a sizable percentage of poor white men were absent from their families for periods of time, and given the apparent impermanence of some poor white

---

<sup>23</sup> Timothy James Lockley, "Spheres of Influence: Working White and Black Women in Antebellum Savannah," in Susanna Delfino and Michele Gillespie, eds., *Neither Lady Nor Slave: working Women of the Old South* (Chapel Hill: North Carolina, 2002), 109.

“marriages,” poor white women occasionally had the weight of their entire families on their shoulders.

Household duties for poor white women were similar to the chores faced by slave women after a day of field work – making sure there was drinking water, keeping the fire going, cooking for and feeding the entire family, spinning, weaving and sewing clothes and bedding, and generally keeping the household running. If the family had access to land for a small garden of potatoes, corn, and vegetables, in all likelihood poor white women took care of that, as well. Many of these women accomplished these tasks on their “off” hours. During the days some of them worked long hours as farm or wage laborers. Just like poor white men, many women had to take multiple short-term jobs during any given year, especially during lag times in the agricultural season. As Charles Bolton wrote, “Census records often list unmarried, landless white women who headed households as having no occupation, but most of these poor white women did work in a variety of occupations—as farm laborers, as seamstresses, and, perhaps most often, as domestics.” These women generally worked in similar types of hard, backbreaking jobs as slave women, from cooking, cleaning, sewing, spinning, and weaving to hoeing, picking cotton, cutting wood and brush, and digging ore. One son of a grand planter remembered that in addition to slaves, “a white woman lived at our home who did all the weaving at so much per yard and I think it was 10 cents per yard.” Ex-slave Aleck Woodward talked about Sally Carlisle, a poor white widow who “weaved and taught the slaves how it was done. Master gave her a little house to live in, and a garden spot on the place, good woman. She showed me how to spin and make ball thread, little as I was.”<sup>24</sup>

---

<sup>24</sup> Bolton, *Poor Whites*, 38; Avery O. Craven, “Poor Whites and Negroes in the Antebellum South.” *Journal of Negro History* 15, No.1 (Jan. 1930): 17-8; Elliot, *Tennessee*, Vol. 4, 1367; Aleck Woodward, *American Slave*, Vol. 14 (SC), Pt. 4, 254-5.

Other poor women tried to make ends meet by working as hucksters, selling home-grown vegetables and poultry in town or urban markets. Many of the peddlers were Irish, and they often resold stolen goods they had purchased from slaves. Cyrus Jenkins encountered these “poverty stricken women” in Savannah. While strolling through the city, he wrote, he occasionally met a poor woman “with a basket on her arm with a few tomatoes a cabbage and a few [I]rish potatoes, just from the market house, perhaps with her forenoons earnings to feed a half dozen hungry children and perhaps a drunken vagabond husband.” Poor white women had to resort to these kinds of jobs because in most areas of the Deep South, they were shut out of many positions because of slave labor. As Timothy Lockley wrote, in 1860, “more than a thousand white women competed with a similar number of bondswomen and about two hundred free black women for a variety of skilled and unskilled jobs in Savannah.” This competition with slaves and free blacks meant poor white women’s wages were drastically lower than lower class northern women’s. They certainly could not keep a family from starvation with their labor alone. Children were useful as laborers, of course, but only after a certain age. For at least the first five or six years of a child’s life he or she was a financial burden, consuming a woman’s time, energy, and resources but not yet contributing anything to the family. Furthermore, breastfeeding an infant for the first year or two of life severely restricted a woman’s physical abilities, required her to consume many more calories, and cut hours of productivity out of her day. Despite all of these complications, however, hundreds of thousands of poor white women helped keep their families from dire poverty by working wage labor jobs.<sup>25</sup>

In the two decades before secession, the Deep South’s scattered industrial tycoons began hiring poor whites – especially women and children – to work in the cotton mills. As Michele

---

<sup>25</sup> Cyrus Franklin Jenkins, *Diary, June 11, 1861-March 30, 1862*. Troup County Archives, LaGrange, Georgia, 13; Timothy James Lockley, *Lines in the Sand: Race and Class in Lowcountry Georgia, 1750-1860* (Athens: Georgia, 2001), 74.

Gillespie found, despite the South's slow industrial start, by the 1850s development was "very much on the ascendancy." Young, childless teenage girls were their preferred workers, but employers could underpay all poor whites since they desperately needed jobs. In Randolph County, North Carolina, for example, women workers outnumbered men four to one in 1850, largely because the average monthly wage for a male operative was \$11 to \$15, while a female only earned between \$5 and \$8. This wage gap remained intact a decade later, when women earned about \$10 a month to men's \$20. Because they had so few other options for employment, poor white women were forced to accept whatever terms an industrialist offered. No matter how insignificant a sum, steady, reliable wages were preferable to none. And the possibility of earning money for a child's labor was extremely attractive to single mothers. As Gillespie established, "Widows and abandoned wives brought their children to these new factory towns in order to support themselves and their families—support that more often than not fell on the children rather than their mothers."<sup>26</sup>

As the South was a society predicated on violence and domination, rape and other forms of sexual assault were common. The frequent rapes of slave women would surely suggest that poor white women were victimized, too. With little to no recourse in the courts, poor women frequently had to accept that sexual violence would be a part of their lives. This likelihood, combined with few employment opportunities and no education, made prostitution a viable way for poor white women to make decent money in a short amount of time. For a small percentage of poor women, prostitution was a career. Some worked out of their own homes, and others lived at "bawdy" houses with other prostitutes. County court criminal records are peppered with arrests for women operating or living in "lewd" or "disorderly" houses. Census takers often

---

<sup>26</sup> Michele Gillespie, "To Harden a Lady's Hand: Gender Politics, Racial Realities, and Women Millworkers in Antebellum Georgia," in Susanna Delfino and Michele Gillespie, eds., *Neither Lady Nor Slave: working Women of the Old South* (Chapel Hill: North Carolina, 2002), 266; Bolton, *Poor Whites*, 40; Gillespie, "To Harden," 276; 271.

listed prostitutes as “seamstresses.” But most women who prostituted, Jeff Forret wrote, only “occasionally” sold sexual favors “to meet immediate [economic] needs and therefore did not appear in the census as prostitutes.” It seems likely that the vast majority of poor white sex workers sold their bodies only during incredibly dire times. Never intending to actually become prostitutes, they were simply unskilled laborers who needed to make quick money in an economy with very few jobs. For most poor white women, prostitution was a short-term, rare “job” of last resort, not a long-term career.<sup>27</sup>

As inexpensive as poor white women’s labor was, child labor always undercut it. While the growing number of textile factories began employing some of these children in the 1840s and 50s, others worked with their families as farm laborers. Additionally, throughout the late antebellum period a small percentage of poor white children in the Deep South were bound out as indentures, an arrangement not unlike slavery in many respects. These poor white children were not even lucky enough to remain in the custody of their families. Under southern law, local authorities had the power to remove children from indigent homes and indenture, or “bind them out,” to someone who paid the local government a fee. According to an 1841 South Carolina statute, the children of paupers, illegitimate children or those who may become chargeable to the locality, and those who “are liable to be demoralized by the vicious conduct and evil example of their mothers,” were all in jeopardy of being bound out as apprentice laborers. During their indenture, these poor white children provided years of free labor in exchange for learning a trade. Beginning as early as five years old, these children worked until the boys reached twenty-one years old, and the girls until eighteen years old or marriage. Much like its neighbors, the

---

<sup>27</sup> Jeff Forret, *Race Relations at the Margins: Slaves and Poor Whites in the Antebellum Southern Countryside* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana, 2006), 202-3.

Palmetto State offered no provisions about educating the indentured children, leaving the great majority of them illiterate and thus unable to escape the uneducated lower classes.<sup>28</sup>

In Mississippi, the overseers of the poor were authorized to bind out the children as apprentices until males reached eighteen years and females sixteen years. According to the 1840 law, which remained in place until Reconstruction, twice a year the overseers enumerated “poor orphans” and children “whose parents they shall judge incapable of supporting them, and bringing them up in honest ways.” All that was required from the “person to whom such apprentice shall be bound” was the bare minimum for the child’s survival – adequate food and shelter, and instruction in a useful “business or occupation.” While the practice of binding out poor white children was not widespread, it was not necessarily uncommon, either. Guion Griffis Johnson claimed that “numerous children of poor parents” in North Carolina “were apprenticed in almost every county of the State to serve their masters until they were of age,” and Timothy Lockley found that the rural county courts of Georgia averaged indenturing about five children per year. While few scholars have yet to truly explain the intricacies of this indenture system in a slave society, historian Richard Morris described these involuntary apprenticeships as “merely a device for cheap labor exploitation.”<sup>29</sup>

In practice, binding out varied greatly from community to community and from case to case. Since “[s]outhern states vested a broad jurisdiction in the county courts to apprentice poor orphans,” local judges determined how the system functioned at the local level, causing great inconsistency in every part of the process. Most of the Deep South had laws like Alabama’s, in

---

<sup>28</sup> *The Statutes At Large Of South Carolina* (Columbia, 1841) 10 vols. *The Making of Modern Law: Primary Sources*. Web. 15 August 2013; also see Morris, “The Measure of Bondage,” 223-4.

<sup>29</sup> Volney Erskine Howard, *The Statutes of the State of Mississippi of a Public and General Nature, with the Constitutions of the United States and of this State: And an Appendix Containing Acts of Congress Affecting Land Titles, Naturalization, &c, and a Manual for Clerks, Sheriffs and Justices of the Peace* (New Orleans, 1840), 145-6. *The Making of Modern Law: Primary Sources*. Web. 15 August 2013; Johnson, *Ante-Bellum North Carolina*, 70; Timothy James Lockley, *Welfare and Charity in the Antebellum South*. Gainesville: Florida, 2007), 25; Morris, “The Measure of Bondage,” 223-4.

which courts bound out poor white children whose parents were judged to be profane or unfit, or simply because they were considered bad influences. The wording of these laws left county judges with a great deal of power – essentially they could decide to remove a child from his or her home upon suspicion (or even speculation) of a parent’s “immorality.” Also used as a punishment for poor white adults who could not pay their court ordered fines and fees, this archaic practice could have served the interests of the southern oligarchy by allowing them to threaten or scare poor whites whenever they felt the need.<sup>30</sup>

The power of the upper class to take away someone’s children without legitimate, convincing proof of abuse or neglect raised a terrifying prospect – one that slaves lived with every day. Planters and lawmakers had long justified the practice by claiming that they were providing the best life possible for poor white children by giving them honest work, keeping them out of trouble, and teaching them the value of hard work. This defense mimicked the paternalism involved in American slavery: depriving a human being of his or her freedom was somehow a positive good. Despite the rhetoric, planters were able to give even lower-level tradesmen access to a type of unfree, extremely cheap labor – and gave them the ability to become “masters” to these poor white children. Needless to say, as Lockley wrote, there was never “a shortage of people willing to accept the charge of these children.” At the same time, slaveholders were able to use the prospect of indenturing a family’s children as a tool of social and political control.<sup>31</sup>

The entire idea of binding out children also blurred the line between freedom and slavery. The poor white youths who were bound out probably noticed certain commonalities between themselves and slaves: both were forced to work with no compensation, and both were unfree to

---

<sup>30</sup> James W. Ely, Jr., “‘There are Few Subjects in Political Economy of Greater Difficulty’: The Poor Laws of the Antebellum South.” *American Bar Foundation Research Journal* 10, No. 4 (Autumn, 1985): 863.

<sup>31</sup> Lockley, *Welfare and Charity*, 25.

make decisions about their lives. Although state and local laws supposedly protected the indentured children from severe bodily harm, and their period of servitude was finite, poor whites must have recognized similarities to the peculiar institution, as they would have been hard to ignore. Poor white veteran Marcus Wiks, who chose to fight for the Union, recalled a childhood spent in bondage. In Tennessee, if a man “was not worth one thousand dollars [planters] did not want him to stop on the highway and talk to his slaves...the slaveholders wanted to hire him at a low rate and traffic out his labor...I know this by self-experience I was hired out in 1854 and at the same place became a servant till I was twenty-one and took the fare as the slaves except sleeping.”<sup>32</sup>

Studying Charleston, economist John Murray wrote the only full-length study about the South’s antebellum “orphans.” These children were typically not orphans in the true sense of the word, as most of them had at least one living parent or extended family members. Most of the time, the children’s caretakers were simply too poor to care for them, and instead attempted to enroll them in the city’s Orphan House, where they would subsequently become bound apprentices. Mothers sponsored the majority of these children, and the fathers who did so were typically unskilled or semi-skilled laborers. Murray found that many parents “emphasized in their application letters not only poverty but their desire to instill some education in their children.” For most children at the Orphan House, though, this desire remained elusive, as “Almost three-fifths of the 2,000-plus children who came through the Orphan House before the Civil War left to enter a master’s house.” The remaining two-fifths apparently received some sort

---

<sup>32</sup> Elliot, *Tennessee*, Vol. 1, 136-7.

of rudimentary schooling, although it could not have been very effective considering that the student to teacher ratio was 215 to 1 by the 1850s.<sup>33</sup>

Furthermore, in the decade before secession, the Charleston Orphan House began experiencing frequent problems with its child laborers. Apparently “growing numbers” of apprentices “were either running away or being returned by their masters, who complained of their bad behavior and were willing to pay the Orphan House the standard penalty (sixty dollars for boys) to be rid of them.” Hardly an insignificant sum, the sixty dollar penalty reveals that these indentured children were quite unruly, likely resentful of their station in life. More importantly, at some point they may have become unwilling to endure the brutality of a master who was too quick to punish and too heavy-handed when he did. “Claims of physical abuse were about as common as those of breach of contract” in the Orphan House, and for this reason alone many indentures fled from bondage.<sup>34</sup>

One chilling example from Laurens District, South Carolina revealed the startling abuse of a child laborer. On October 30, 1853, a young boy named John Nickle was found dead, beaten to death by his employer. John Nickle was only five or six years old. According to witnesses interviewed in the coroner’s report, during the previous summer “the child’s mother consented for the child to live with William Hazel for his victuals and clothes.” Hazel appeared in census records a few years before the murder as a thirty year old landless farmer with a wife and no children. Perhaps approaching the upper economic tier of poor whites, Hazel was likely trying to make his way into the landed yeomen class, as he also boarded an eighteen year old farm laborer and apparently owned some livestock. Rebecca Hazel, William’s wife, testified that John Nickle had lived with the couple for about six weeks. At some point during that time the child had fallen

---

<sup>33</sup> John E. Murray, *The Charleston Orphan House: Children’s Lives in the First Public Orphanage in America* (Chicago: Chicago, 2013), 62; 85; 89; 146; 94.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 23; 168.

from a horse, becoming badly hurt, but Rebecca tried to nurse him back to health. When her husband returned home from travelling to the market and found the boy injured, he immediately began whipping the child for “lying out sick.” Sometime later John asked his employer for permission to go and visit his mother. After consenting to the visitation, however, Hazel apparently found that the child was hiding out “near the spring,” likely trying to avoid more violence. Upon finding the boy, William Hazel lost all self-control, beating the poor child mercilessly with a “large” switch that “had prongs.” Each witness claimed John Nickle had been “badly” or “severely” whipped on several occasions, and seemed unsurprised that these punishments finally culminated in the child’s death. Cornelius Puckett, John Nickle’s grandfather, refused to press charges against Hazel, asking that an inquest not be held. Perhaps if William Hazel had been a richer, more powerful slaveholder, or at least a respectable yeoman, the case would have been dropped. But the Coroner did decide to press charges, although the outcome remains unclear from the records. John Nickle’s abuse and murder suggests that some poor whites endured childhoods that differed little from slavery, living in a state of bondage where corporeal punishment was relatively frequent, and occasionally brutal enough to cause death.<sup>35</sup>

Although poor white men were paid more than women and children, they generally worked jobs that were just as demeaning and dangerous. Many poor white men labored in a variety of professions throughout their lives, picking up short-term work whenever and wherever they could. They had to function as jacks-of-all-trades, though by the later antebellum period job opportunities in agriculture became more and more limited to a small percentage of tenant farmers and daily or weekly laborers during bottleneck seasons. As these mostly-rural men were

---

<sup>35</sup> Laurens District, Court of General Sessions, Coroner’s Inquisitions, 1800-1901, SCDAH; Seventh Census of the United States, 1850: Laurens District, South Carolina.

forced to abandon agricultural labor, they made their way into the nascent southern industries and, along with slaves, helped build the region's infrastructure of roads, bridges, and railroads. Realizing that towns and cities offered many construction opportunities, some poor whites moved to more urban areas. This shift – from a rural, agricultural existence to one based on machinery, industry, and construction, must have been a jarring transition for people who had largely survived on the margins of a capitalist society. Indeed, this change not only revolutionized the working habits and labor patterns of poor whites, it also led them, step by step, into modernity. Steven Hahn was correct in his periodization of the 1850s as the decade in which Georgia's upcountry yeomen farmers were initiated into the market economy, simultaneously exposed to change and unpredictability in this new, modern world. Poor whites in the Deep South, though largely excluded from the benefits of the capitalist economy, also experienced this unsettling transition. Many watched helplessly as job opportunities dwindled and as slave labor continued to dominate the market, completely transforming their lives. As Chapter Five will demonstrate, this change in the labor force would eventually create a deep rift between upper and lower class whites in the Deep South – a division that would eventually help lead the region's militant young slaveholders towards secession.<sup>36</sup>

To fully understand the working lives of poor white men in the Deep South, a persistent myth must first be dispelled. While many historians assume that the ranks of overseers were filled with poor white men, this supposition is simply incorrect. Overseers generally came from the yeoman or middling classes. Sometimes the younger sons of affluent slaveholders even spent part of their early adulthoods learning to manage slaves, buying time until they could purchase their own land and slaves or acquire them through inheritance. Overseers were often paid well,

---

<sup>36</sup> See Steven Hahn, *The Roots of Southern Populism: Yeomen Farmers and the Transformation of the Georgia Upcountry, 1850-1890* (New York: Oxford, 1983).

and salaries that high would have priced a poor white out of the lower classes and into the middling classes. Few poor men would have had the opportunity for employment as an overseer in the first place, because overseers needed to know how to read and write, and they were also required to have basic math skills. As one of the WPA interviewers wrote, a good overseer was “supposed to have an education so that he could handle the finances of the plantation accurately, and to be possessed of a good moral character.” The average pay “was from three to five hundred dollars a year.” Taking the lowest figure, even \$300 a year comes out to \$25 a month, about twice as much as a poor white laborer could expect to earn if he found full-time employment. And while some slaves did refer to their overseers as poor white trash, those identifications were simply meant to degrade the overseer, demeaning his character and reputation by comparing him to “mean” and “low” whites. Such comments rarely had anything to do with the overseer’s actual economic class. As freedman George Fleming remembered, “No, they weren’t poor whites. All Master Sam’s overseers were good men. They lived with their families, and Master’s folks associated with them, too. They had good houses to live in.” Martha Colquitt echoed these sentiments, remarking that “Master Billie’s overseer lived in a four-room house up the road a piece from the Big House. Nobody thought about none of Master Billie’s overseers as poor white folks. Every overseer he ever had was decent and respectable. Course they weren’t in the same class with Master Billie’s family, but they were all right.” Still another woman, enslaved in Alabama, told her interviewer, “Mr. Munger was our overseer, but he had money of his own. He was better than most overseers, and there weren’t no poor white trash, them ornery buckers lived further back in the woods.” In South Carolina, Thomas Carlisle’s overseer Wash Evans “wasn’t no poor white trash, but he was kind of middling-like.” And Melvin Smith, who had been

enslaved in Georgia, recalled that his “overseer was mean.” Still, Smith concluded, he “wasn’t no poor white trash; he was up-to-date but he liked to beat on niggers.”<sup>37</sup>

America, and particularly, the American South, had a long and at times, romantic history with agriculture. From the earliest days of the republic the Jeffersonian dream of owning land was essentially a dream of freedom: to be free from hunger, free from debt, and thus free from dependence upon any other man. While this agrarian romanticism was never within reach for the majority of Americans throughout the young country’s history, landholdings in the Deep South had become deeply concentrated in the hands of a relative few by the later antebellum period. Historian James Bonner researched Hancock County, Georgia in 1850s, and discovered that the largest landholders were buying out the surrounding smaller farmers. Simultaneously, planters began forcing tenants and squatters off of their land so that they could plant more cotton, raised almost exclusively by slave labor. Bonner believed this land concentration originated with large slaveholders “acquiring more slaves and closing up the avenues by which landless farmers might acquire small landholdings. Many small farmers, thus thwarted in their efforts to become planters, or even landowners, were moving to new counties in the northern and western parts of the state, or to the southwest.” The poor whites who remained in the plantation belt, however, faced a bleak future. Charles Bolton’s research revealed that “even the limited shifts toward commercial agriculture during the antebellum years...had an immediate, strong, and negative impact on landless white households.” Thus, as cotton assumed its place upon the southern throne, a great land consolidation occurred. This concentration of resources, combined with the profitability of agricultural slave labor, meant that some poor whites became shut out of

---

<sup>37</sup> “Slavery – Compilation by Ruby Lorrain Radford,” *American Slave*, Vol. 13 (GA), Part 4, 329; George Fleming, *Ibid.*, Vol. 11 (NC & SC), Supplement, Series 1, 132; Martha Colquitt, *Ibid.*, Vol. 12 (GA), Part 1, 241; Dellie Lewis, *Ibid.*, Vol. 1 (AL), 257; Thomas Anderson Carlisle, *Ibid.*, Vol. 2 (SC), Part 2, 57; Melvin Smith, *Ibid.*, Vol. 13 (GA), Part 3, 292; Genovese, “Rather be a Nigger,” 80.

agricultural work completely. There were times, of course, when slaveholders used poor white farm labor to supplement their own field hands. Overwhelmingly, though, planters preferred slave labor on their plantations, and generally tried to keep white and black workers separate whenever they had the chance.<sup>38</sup>

Most poor white agricultural workers were known generically as farm laborers. Hired for short-term work, by the job, or by the day, poor white laborers often lived a precarious existence with no stability of income or promise of long-term work. One historian described “an outskirts of these day laborers” around every town, “some working faithfully year by year, others a day or two at a time to pick up just enough money for immediate use.” As the son of a small yeomen farmer, Thompson Glenn knew that things were different for whites who did not own any land. “For poor young men there was not anything to do but to hire to work,” he recalled.

Sharecroppers were generally considered laborers, as well, further complicating a full understanding of southern labor practices. Historians have also shown that farm tenancy, although far from common in the Deep South, did emerge before the Civil War. More frequently practiced in Upper South states like North Carolina and Tennessee, tenant farming involved a landless family “renting” land from a planter by essentially mortgaging a percentage of their future cash crop. This percentage typically ranged between 1/3 and 1/4 of the harvest. Frederick Bode and Donald Ginter used 1860 census returns to estimate that in Georgia’s eastern Piedmont, about 20 percent of farms were tenanted, while in the North Georgia mountains the number was upwards of 40 percent. Based on census records from the 1850s and 60s, Charles Bolton concluded that about a quarter of all of North Carolina’s farmers worked as tenants, especially “along the fall line of the rivers.” Tenancy was not a post-bellum phenomenon;

---

<sup>38</sup> Quoted in Susan J. Tracy, *In the Master’s Eye: Representations of Women, Blacks, and Poor Whites in Antebellum Southern Literature* (Amherst: Massachusetts, 1995), 7; Bolton, *Poor Whites*, 18.

instead, it was a well-established practice even before southern secession. Furthermore, these scholars concluded that planters used slaves to cultivate their best lands, and leased unimproved and soil-depleted lands to poor white tenants. Perhaps a few tenants were able to save small sums of money over time to buy land for themselves, but many more were economically ruined after one bad crop. As Guion Griffis Johnson explained, “as soon as the tenant pitches his crop and prepares his land, a constable comes and levies upon the growing crop, it is sold for a mere song, the creditor gets a few cents in the dollar of his debt.” Meanwhile, the “debtor, disheartened, either spends the year in idleness and dissipation or becomes a day laborer and secretly secures his wages beyond the reach of all creditors.” Cycles of indebtedness to the landlord thus left many poor whites beholden to their affluent creditors in myriad ways, not simply from an economic standpoint, but also socially and politically. Generally given the least productive land, tenant farmers in the antebellum South had the odds stacked against them. Trying to make an honest living by working hard seemed to matter little when trying to escape the blight of landlessness. Robert Bayless remembered that his propertyless father “farmed some at home on rented land.” And while the elder Bayliss “also worked away from home for the landlord upon whose property we lived and for others also,” he remained landless, at least until after the Civil War.<sup>39</sup>

But times had not always been as hard for less affluent whites. In the early antebellum period, a sizable percentage of poor whites, especially those who had access to a city or a town, helped make ends meet by peddling. Whether squatting on land or renting it, some lower class whites were able to raise a variety of fruits, grains, and vegetables. When their truck patches

---

<sup>39</sup> Johnson, *Ante-Bellum North Carolina*, 69; Elliot, *Tennessee*, Vol. 3, 909; Bolton, *Poor Whites*, 37; Johnson, *Ante-Bellum North Carolina*, 69; Bolton, *Poor Whites*, 28; Frederick A. Bode and Donald E. Ginter, *Farm Tenancy and the Census in Antebellum Georgia* (Athens: Georgia, 1987); Johnson, *Ante-Bellum North Carolina*, 69; Elliot, *Tennessee*, Vol. 1, 293.

came to fruition, or hunting season had been particularly good, poor whites sought to sell their excess wares in the marketplace. Michele Gillespie noted that many Georgia “‘crackers’ . . . pushed their two-wheeled carts loaded with eggs, chickens, hides, fruit, and tallow for as many as ten days through the piney woods to [Savannah and] sold their goods in the town market several times a year.” However, during the mid-1800s planters began worrying about itinerant vendors trading goods, liquor, and possibly abolitionist ideas with slaves.<sup>40</sup>

By the 1840s several Deep South states had enacted legal codes banning the practice without a direct permit or license from the locality. This requirement kept the majority of poor whites from legally selling their goods at all, as permit prices were exorbitant. In Georgia, for example, mandatory licenses for peddling ran as high as \$25 or \$50 a year, rendering it impossible for poor whites to legally sell their wares. These laws effectively blocked the poor from participating in the burgeoning capitalist economy, and ironically encouraged the illegalities of the underground market between slaves and poor whites. While exceptions to the licensing rules were made for a few “decrepit and infirm” or “infirm and indigent” men, these individuals were only allowed to vend their goods if they promised not to do business with slaves. Indeed, planter hysteria over the spread of abolitionist ideas seemed to be at the heart of all of the licensing laws. As fears over both slave and bi-racial rebellions intensified in the late antebellum period, traveling peddlers came under intense scrutiny. In 1859, for example, the citizens of Lafayette County, Mississippi pleaded with local officials to rid their community of these salesmen, deeming them “an intolerable nuisance to the community.” Itinerant hawkers, they held, were “irresponsible – having no interest in any locality – [and] commit any fraud in their cupidity may suggest, or avail themselves of the facilities afforded by the present system of

---

<sup>40</sup> Robert R. Russel, “The Effects of Slavery upon Nonslaveholders in the Ante Bellum South.” *Agricultural History* 15, No. 2 (April 1941): 113; Gillespie, *Free Labor*, 11.

license to tamper with, and corrupt the slaves – the fruitful source and the trunk of the underground railroad traffic.” By directly linking peddlers to abolitionism, the region’s slaveholders ended poor whites’ occasional relationships with the wider economy, effectively shutting them out of the modern world of commerce and capitalism. Instead, personal relationships between slaves and poor whites multiplied, and the underground economy flourished.<sup>41</sup>

Prevented from peddling and shut out of much of the region’s agricultural work, many poor white southern men simply considered themselves “laborers.” The fortunes of the poor white labor force were almost wholly dependent upon the productivity and work patterns of slaves. As Bolton concluded, white laborers “essentially served as a mobile work force that filled the temporary labor needs of prosperous yeomen and slaveholders...to augment slave work forces.” These poor whites would also pick up whatever “mechanical” work they could, augmenting their agricultural labor with jobs ranging from ditch digging to laying railroad track to working short stints in factories.<sup>42</sup>

Advertisements for laborers in the late antebellum period provide some insight into these types of jobs, as well as the frequency with which these white laborers worked side by side with slaves. Although blacks and whites had worked together on short-term, non-agricultural projects since colonial times, as the antebellum period wore on, employer preference for slave labor grew stronger. This trend became obvious as early as the Jacksonian period. In 1827, for example, the Savannah, Ogechee and Alatomaha Canal Company reported, “There are now employed on the line, about four hundred and forty-nine laborers; and, in addition, a proportion of mechanics. The principle part of the laborers are blacks.” The reason for this hiring discrepancy, the company

---

<sup>41</sup> *Acts of the General Assembly of the State of Georgia*, e.g. 1857: 282, 1859: 152, 156, 182; “Memorial of citizens of Lafayette in relation to itinerant peddlers,” Folder “Peddler and Hawkers,” MDAH.

<sup>42</sup> Bolton, *Poor Whites*, 14.

revealed, was largely due to the fact that slaves provided “a very effective and manageable force.” Unlike poor whites, slaves could not negotiate for higher wages, nor could they protest working conditions or decide to quit. Slaves could be violently “incentivized” to work, and were quickly returned to their masters without a chance of retaliation against the company should they be fired. For all of these reasons, southern employers had few reasons to seek out white laborers, except in cases of dangerous jobs where the loss of a slave life would be economically detrimental to the owner. By the mid-1830s, companies’ preferences for slave labor were obvious. The Pensacola and Columbus railroad advertised for workers in the *Columbus Enquirer*, stating that “Arrangements will be made with owners of negroes for any given time, and payments made whenever required.” And in 1852, an official from Georgia’s Muscogee railroad publicized the need for two hundred slave laborers, claiming to “pay the highest wages for Men, Women and Boys.” As the advertisement continued, however, the official sought to put slaveholders’ minds at ease by promising to segregate the slaves from poor white workers. “The negroes will be worked in companies,” he wrote, “separate and at a distance from any white laborers who may be employed on the line of work.”<sup>43</sup>

In part, slaveowners desired the segregation of white and black workers because they feared poor white men’s retaliatory actions against former employers. By the later antebellum period many of these actions had grown in boldness, as poor whites demonstrated their anger by destroying property and crops, stealing from their employers, and occasionally committing violent acts. As James Henry Hammond’s son Spann complained in his diary, he recently had a disagreement with a local wagoner he had employed. “Worthlessness & obstina[nt],” the wagoner had begun to destroy Hammond’s fodder. “White laborers,” he concluded, “are the

---

<sup>43</sup> “Savannah, Ogechee and Alatomaha Canal Company,” *Macon Telegraph* (GA), April 2, 1827, p. 3; “Laborers wanted for the Rail-Road,” *Columbus Enquirer* (GA), June 30, 1836, p. 3; “200 Negroes Wanted,” *Ibid.*, Jan. 20, 1852, p. 3.

hardest to get on with.” Another disagreement over employment in Mississippi ended in murder. In August of 1841, local papers reported, “A fatal affray occurred...between two young men.” Robert Shotwell had apparently hired William Benoit to do some work, but “a difficulty arose about his services. Angry words ensued, when Shotwell inflicted a wound upon the body of Benoit with a knife, of which he died the following day.” Despite their limited opportunities, therefore, white laborers did fight back against unfair labor practices, unpaid work, and other perceived slights from their employers.<sup>44</sup>

While white laborers’ anger over job competition and substandard wages was generally latent, at times it emerged in smaller, less overt acts against a current or former employer. Poor whites, much like slaves, would demonstrate their angst by breaking tools, working slowly, and occasionally stealing from their employers. Bertram Wyatt-Brown deemed these acts “Snopesian crimes” after the infamous poor white Snopes family in William Faulkner’s trilogy. Whether destroying property, harming or killing livestock or slaves, or burning down buildings, poor whites sometimes used destructive means to demonstrate their anger. In isolated cases, poor white men succumbed to their violent tempers and sought revenge. Poor white laborer Edward Isham was hanged for murdering a former boss who refused to pay him back wages. As Joseph P. Reidy wrote, “The dispute over wages that precipitated Isham’s demise demonstrates the links between a man’s labor, his possessions, and his honor, the defense of which might require physical force and perhaps the risk of death.” Perhaps unsurprisingly, the murder of the former employer was not the first time that Isham had reacted in a violent or destructive manner after suffering through a perceived wrong; he had previously destroyed the property of other bosses with whom he had disagreements. But Isham was not alone in his disdain for his employers.

---

<sup>44</sup> Quoted in J. William Harris, *Plain Folk and Gentry in a Slave Society: White Liberty and Black Slavery in Augusta’s Hinterland* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana, 1985), 68; Betty Couch Wiltshire, *Marriages and Deaths from Mississippi Newspapers* (Bowie, MD: Heritage, 1987), Vol. 2, 50.

“Spite-work always cured my distemper,” another convict reported after admitting he had cut off the manes and tails of his boss’s horses. According to Reidy, since the incident occurred following yet another dispute over wages, the poor laborer felt he had little choice but to retaliate in some manner. “Withholding a man’s wages threatened his honor,” Reidy concluded, “which in turn required compensation in property or blood.” These types of sentiments would come to find a new militancy in the 1840s and 50s as white mechanics began forming nascent labor unions, demanding certain terms and conditions from planters and politicians.<sup>45</sup>

Further complicating matters for slaveholders, the numbers of poor white laborers increased during the 1840s and 1850s, partly due to immigration into the region. While German immigrants had been steadily moving to the Deep South since the 1830s, they tended to be at least part of the lower-middling class; many of them eventually bought small tracts of land and worked as yeomen farmers. However, for low-wage, unskilled or semi-skilled jobs, the Depression of 1837 wreaked havoc. The labor market had only begun to turn around in the early forties when the Irish Famine struck in 1845. Cities and larger towns certainly experienced the brunt of Irish immigration, but the entire region would eventually have to deal with the immigrants themselves – as both laborers and voters.<sup>46</sup>

According to Lee Soltow, the Irish comprised “more than half the foreign-born poor and one-fifth of all poor in America’s urban areas.” But the Irish, like antebellum immigrants in general, overwhelmingly settled in the states north of the Mason Dixon. Even southerners understood why this was the case. Georgia’s *Columbus Enquirer* plainly stated in 1855 that “few immigrants come to the South; they remain at the North and are abolitionized. As a laborer, the

---

<sup>45</sup> Forret, *Race Relations*, 162; 184-5; Joseph P. Reidy, “The Worlds of Nineteenth-Century Condemned Men,” in Charles C. Bolton and Scott P. Culclasure, eds., *The Confessions of Edward Isham: A Poor White Life of the Old South* (Athens: Georgia, 1998), 108.

<sup>46</sup> Ira Berlin and Herbert G. Gutman, “Natives and Immigrants, Free Men and Slaves: Urban Workingmen in the antebellum American South,” *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 88, No. 5 (Dec. 1983): 1187.

negro stands in their way, and they know it.” While fewer people immigrated to the South due to the presence of slavery, the region did receive a substantial influx, especially in the port cities of Charleston, Savannah, and New Orleans. Indeed, thousands of Irishmen and women immigrated to the antebellum South. By 1860, half of the Savannah’s white residents were foreign-born, with one-third of the population from Ireland. Half of the city’s working white women had been born on the Emerald Isle. Timothy Lockley wrote that these immigrants usually “dominated the least skilled area of employment,” as 70 percent of Savannah’s white washers and ironers were Irish, as well as 80 percent of white domestics and servants, and more than 80 percent of white chambermaids.<sup>47</sup>

Irish immigrants, especially, tended to be young and single. The vast majority were between 20 and 27 years old; it was rare for someone over thirty to set out for America. Generally remaining in large port cities for several years before setting out into America’s interior, they shared a lot common to the South’s poorest whites, both economically and socially. Indeed, both the English and Americans alike referred to the Irish as “nigger[s] turned inside out,” an epithet meant to place them on a level just barely above slaves. In reality, many Irish immigrants associated freely with the South’s slaves and free blacks, trading, working, loving, and even living together. In his seminal book on the Irish in the antebellum South, David Gleeson found that Irish non-slaveholders maintained a variety of relationships with African Americans. Most “lived in close proximity to urban slaves,” and many more labored with blacks, whether digging canals, loading boats, working on the docks, or laying tracks for railroads. In New Orleans slave artisans occasionally even hired Irish workers. And just as with native poor whites, the South’s Irish often engaged in sexual relationships with free blacks and slaves. John

---

<sup>47</sup> Lee Soltow, *Men and Wealth in the United States, 1850-1870* (New Haven: Yale, 1975), 44; “From the Savannah Republican: Know Nothingism,” *Columbus Enquirer* (GA), May 29, 1855, p. 2; Gillespie, *Free Labor*, 167; Lockley, *Lines in the Sand*, 37; Lockley, “Spheres,” 111.

Brown, who had been enslaved in South Carolina, told his interviewer about his wife's Irish father, the overseer on their plantation. The young Irishman had immediately taken "a fancy" to his wife's mother, "a bright mulatto gal." Brown reasoned that "white women in them days looked down on overseers as poor white trash. He couldn't get a white wife but made the best of it by putting in his spare time honeying around Adeline's mammy."<sup>48</sup>

Unlike some native poor whites, however, as a group, the Irish usually became strong supporters of slavery. Many of them did form personal relationships with African Americans (especially free blacks) but Ireland's sons and daughters soon abandoned the idealism of social reformers and abolitionists like Daniel O'Connell in exchange for the chance at upward mobility. In fact, many Irish southerners likened abolitionists to their former oppressors, the English Protestants. Historian Noel Ignatiev even purported that the Irish's hatred of blacks was the crucial element of their acceptance into American society, both in the North and the South. Plantation mistress Fanny Kemble theorized in her letters that because the Irish "have been oppressed enough themselves," they tended to "be oppressive whenever they" got a chance. These "despisers of niggers" were described by many of their contemporaries as virulent racists.<sup>49</sup>

The southern gentry thus viewed the Irish much in the same way that they viewed native poor whites. Planters repeatedly stereotyped the Irish as dirty, ignorant, and lazy. In one particularly telling quote, Kemble compared the "stench" of a "negro house" to that of an Irish "hovel," concluding that the Irish were "almost a degraded class of beings as the negroes." One ex-slave even recalled the extremity of the destitution among local immigrants. He recalled that

---

<sup>48</sup> Soltow, *Men and Wealth*, 13; Berlin and Gutman, "Natives and Immigrants," 1187; David T. Gleeson, *The Irish in the South, 1815-1877* (Chapel Hill: North Carolina, 2001) 123; 26; John C. Brown, *American Slave*, Vol. 14 (SC), Part 1, pp. 127.

<sup>49</sup> Gleeson, *The Irish*, 94; Noel Ignatiev, *How the Irish became White* (New York: Routledge, 1995); Frances Anne Kemble, *Journal of a Residence on a Georgia Plantation in 1838-1839* (New York: Harper, 1863), Web.

under slavery, “the white people used to be awfully mean to the Jews and to the Irish. Sometimes the Irishmen used to slip around the cabins and fields and beg the slaves to keep them. They would say ‘Mr. give me a little something to eat or help me along a little.’ Sometimes the slaves would help them and sometimes they wouldn’t.” Regardless of the slaves’ beneficence, though, the freedman reported that the poor immigrants found no charity from the upper classes: “But whenever the masters would catch them on the plantation or around the cabins they would say, ‘What do you want here? Get off this place.’ Then they would kick and cuff them and drive them off. All the Irish would say, ‘Oh, my lord! Oh, my lord!’ and run away.”<sup>50</sup>

Needless to say, many slaveholders attributed the poverty of the Irish to their undesirable work ethic. Several planters that Olmsted met on his travels reported that German immigrants were good, steady laborers. The Irish, on the other hand, always thought they “knew more” than their “master,” and would often “directly disregard his orders.” And while the southern gentry agreed that a slave “could do twice as much work, in a day, as an Irishman,” they never hesitated to use disposable immigrant labor, especially when the jobs were dangerous or deadly. As W.O. Brown concluded in his study on poor whites, jobs like “Levee building and heavy roustabout work... were too unhealthy and dangerous to be done by the valuable slave. A dead Irishman merely added to the Kingdom of Heaven, while the loss of a slave subtracted from the capital investment.” Ditch digging, especially, was reserved for the “expendable” Irish, as accidents occurred frequently in this line of work. In 1839, for example, the *Macon Georgia Telegraph* reported, “One of the laborers employed on the Brunswick Canal, was accidentally drowned in Ellis’s Creek on the 20th inst. by the upsetting of a boat. His name was Michael Finnon, a native of Ireland.” These short blurbs notifying the public of the death of laborers were quite common in the late-antebellum period. But slaveholders’ expectations that these immigrants continue

---

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*; “Slave Who Joined the Yanks,” *American Slave*, Vol. 19 (Fisk), 121.

working for low wages in hazardous jobs led to some class tensions between employers and laborers by the 1850s. Former slave Elijah Hopkins alluded to this rising pressure, blaming immigrants for much of the problem: “The slaveholders were hard, but those people who come here from across the water, they bring our trouble. You can’t squeeze as much out of the poor white as you can out of the darkey.”<sup>51</sup>

But the slaveholders still tried to “squeeze” both races, by pitting slave and white workers against each other in competition over jobs, thereby reminding lower class whites that higher wages were an elusive dream, as planters and industrialists could always switch to slave labor. Gavin Wright’s influential study of the effects of slavery on the southern economy clearly demonstrated that because of slavery’s profitability, slaveholders had little incentive to build up other sectors of the economy, from industrial pursuits to the extraction of natural resources. However, in the decade or two before secession, the Deep South did make slow but steady progress towards building up those business sectors. Railroads were one of the region’s burgeoning industries by the 1830s, and even yeomen profited substantially from them, since they were better able to send their goods to market in an inexpensive manner. Originally, as the railroad companies began their expansion in Jacksonian period, jobs were offered to both whites and blacks, often at above-average wages. In sparsely populated Florida, for example, the West & Middle Florida Railroad began construction in the mid-1830s. Newspapers called for 500 laborers and 200 carpenters to be stationed near Appalachicola and Tallahassee. “All those who wish constant employment, and liberal wages, will do well to bend their course this way,” the announcement claimed. And if the advertised compensation was actually paid to employees, the paper was correct in its assessment: monthly wages for laborers supposedly ranged from \$20 and

---

<sup>51</sup> Olmsted, *Journey*, 269; 85; W.O. Brown, “Role of Poor Whites in Race Contracts of the South.” *Social Forces* 19, No.2 (Dec. 1940): 263; “Accident,” *Macon Georgia Telegraph*, March 5, 1839, p. 2; Elijah Hopkins, *American Slave*, Vol. 2 (AK), Par 3, 315.

\$25, while carpenters could expect to earn between \$35 and \$50. In 1837 the *Macon Georgia Telegraph* took out a similar want ad for 400 laborers to lay track about fifteen miles west of Savannah. Although the workers were required to “risk the weather” – surely a reference to the impending humid, sweltering summer heat – the state offered to remunerate each worker at \$20 a month, a much higher rate than farm laborers earned. A year and a half later, likely due to the Panic of 1837, the same paper impugned these wages, advising Georgia to “suspend her work until the Central and Monroe Rail Roads are completed, when laborers can be procured cheaper.” Yet these higher than normal wages were inflated for an important reason: railroading was back-breaking, injurious, sometimes deadly work. An 1837 article entitled “Melancholy Occurrence” reported that “six of the laborers on section 26 of the Georgia Rail Road, were killed, while excavating, by the falling in of the ground over their heads.” Two other laborers were “dangerously injured.” Although few scholars have closely examined the differences in hiring and practices and wages in the antebellum southern railroad industry, Hinton Helper claimed that by the late 1850s the North Carolina Railroad Company paid white workers \$12 per month, while slave masters received \$16 a month per slave. Perhaps the influx of immigrants, along with the growing numbers of impoverished southern whites, significantly lowered wages between the late 1830s and 1850s. Regardless of the cause, however, one thing was clear: poor white laborers had no recourse for their labor grievances.<sup>52</sup>

Railroad industrialists were not alone in pitting white and black laborers against each other. In the case of natural resource extraction, the work was grueling and extremely dangerous. The loss of life or limb was not an uncommon occurrence. An 1839 report out of Richmond,

---

<sup>52</sup> Gavin Wright, *Old South, New South: Revolutions in the Southern Economy Since the Civil War* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana, 1986), 28; Peter Wallenstein, *From Slave South to New South: Public Policy in Nineteenth-Century Georgia* (Chapel Hill: North Carolina, 1987), 38; “Look at This!!!,” *Georgia Telegraph*, Sept. 17, 1835, p. 3; “Notice to Laborers,” *Macon Georgia Telegraph*, April 20, 1837, p. 1; “Savannah and Memphis Railroad,” *Ibid.*, Nov. 19, 1839, p. 2; “Melancholy Occurrence,” *Ibid.*, Jan. 26, 1837, p. 2; Helper, *The Impending Crisis*, 380.

Virginia described an awful catastrophe at the Black Heath Coal Pits that caused “considerable destruction of human life.” A huge explosion, apparently “known as a ‘fire damp explosion,’” killed between “50 and 60 pit laborers and two overseers,” as well as “Three men at the mouth of the pit.” Perhaps the worst part of the entire story was that the incident occurred because of “want of proper precaution.” In Georgia, just half a year earlier, six men—three white and three black—suffered a horrific, on-the-job accident. While “the public hands were engaged at work upon the lower sewer...the banks caved in and buried six of their number...Every effort was made to rescue the unfortunate creatures from their untimely fate; but we regret to state that THREE only were saved.” If only three workers were saved, then three workers perished, literally suffocated by the weight of the world.<sup>53</sup>

Given the dirty and dangerous nature of these jobs, it became increasingly hard to find white men who were willing to risk their physical well-being for a job. Since poor whites were already largely excluded from agricultural work due to the profitability of slavery, affluent southerners needed to figure out a way to employ them, thereby keeping them out of the criminal underworld, and preventing them from becoming a financial burden to society. Henry Merrell, the supervisor of several textile operations, wrote in 1847 that the mills had “forced into active employment, and into something like discipline, a very unruly and unproductive class of white population, who, when idle, are, to say the least, no friends of the planter.” The institution of slavery, therefore, helped encourage affluent whites to actually implement industrial capitalism. Finding a different, non-agricultural “type” of labor for poor whites – whether mechanical or industrial – became a matter of central importance to the maintenance of a slave society. Ironically, the resounding success of cash-crop plantation slavery ultimately contributed to the

---

<sup>53</sup> “Awful explosion and loss of life,” *Macon Georgia Telegraph*, March 26, 1839, p. 3; “Horrible Catastrophe,” *Federal Union* (GA), Sept. 18. 1838, p. 3.

initial industrialization of the Deep South. As Tom Terrill explained, “A major factor in the industry’s growth and strength was an ample supply of usable, cheap labor, most of which by 1860 was native white.” While much of this labor was performed by poor white women and children, the mills did offer poor white men new employment opportunities, as well. Indeed, J. Wayne Flynt found that Alabama’s industrial expansion in the 1840s and 50s resulted in 10.5 percent of the state’s white males being employed in manufacturing by 1860. Whether in railroading, textile mills, gristmills, or sawmills, the worlds of poor white laborers were changing rapidly.<sup>54</sup>

South Carolina industrialist William Gregg knew that this untapped pool of white labor could make his mills very profitable. It was “only necessary to build a manufacturing village of shanties,” he wrote, “to have crowds of these poor people around you, seeking employment at half the compensation given to operatives at the North...[I]f they are too lazy to work themselves, [they] might be induced to place their children in a situation in which they would be educated and reared in industrious habits.” By the late 1840s, a series of articles in the *Scientific American* examined the plight of poor whites in the Deep South, noticing the change in the attitudes of white workers. Georgia’s laborers, the paper reported, “have no objections to working in cotton factories...but agricultural labor they consider nigger’s work.” A later essay echoed similar sentiments, holding “They are poor because they consider manual labor degrading and being poor they are also ignorant....Crackers, as they are called, reclaimed from their idle lives in the woods, are settled [now in the factories], and white labor only is employed, and the result so far we believe is encouraging.” At least for a period of several years, upper class southerners thought they had figured out a way to employ – and more importantly, pacify – poor

---

<sup>54</sup> Gillespie, “To Harden,” 277; Tom E. Terrill et. al., “Eager Hands: Labor for Southern Textiles, 1850-1860,” *The Journal of Economic History*, Vol. 36, No. 1 (Mar. 1976): 84; Wayne Flynt, *Poor but Proud: Alabama’s Poor Whites* (Tuscaloosa: Alabama, 1989), 19.

white laborers. For the most impoverished poor whites, textile mills became their only hope for survival without some sort of charity or assistance. As historian Richard Griffin explained, “Those to whom mill work most appealed were the large class of whites whose poverty was so abject that any opportunity for improvement was welcome.” Southern capitalists truly believed that the cotton mills “would be a greater charity than an orphan asylum, would serve to civilize and Christianize those who lacked opportunities to attend church or school, and become a haven for families ruined by drunken fathers...[it] meant decent food, clothing, and shelter for the first time in their lives.” Union veteran Marcus Wiks, who grew up the son of an unemployed drunkard in north-central Tennessee, remembered having to work industrial jobs to help the family make ends meet. Indeed, child labor in the mills meant that the Wiks family did not have to seek shelter in a poor house or indenture their young. In the summer young Marcus worked at a tobacco factory, and in the winter he labored at a carding factory. While he criticized slaveholders for not working, Wiks also admitted that “most of the poor class idled about until they had to jump out and work [for] a bushel of corn or a few pounds of meat.”<sup>55</sup>

To fully understand the racial dynamics of antebellum factory labor, however, the economics of agricultural history require explanation. During the 1840s, cotton prices were down, leaving a less intense need for slaves working in the fields. Slaveholders therefore began hiring out their surplus laborers, either as mechanics, artisans, or mill workers. By the 1850s, the cotton market was booming, and most slaves were pulled back onto the plantations to help grow the cash crop. As Gavin Wright found, “southern textile employment made *no further gain* between 1850 and 1860.” The vast majority of the region’s additional capital was immediately

---

<sup>55</sup> Quoted in Terrill, “Eager Hands,” 90; “A Curious Race in Georgia,” *Scientific American*, July 31, 1847; “Southern Cotton Mills,” *Scientific American*, May 26, 1849; Richard W. Griffin, “Poor White Laborers in Southern Cotton Factories, 1789-1865,” *The South Carolina Historical Magazine* 61, No. 1 (Jan. 1960), 30; Elliot, *Tennessee*, Vol. 1, 136-7.

shifted to cotton production. “Almost all of the slaves had been pulled out of the mills by 1860,” Wright concluded, “because their labor was so much more valuable in the fields.” By the time of the Civil War, the southern factories were dominated by white labor, but the industry simply did not employ enough people – or pay high enough wages – to help alleviate white poverty.<sup>56</sup>

According to one historian’s best estimates, only about 5 percent of slaves ever worked in industry, and Jeff Forret reasoned that a similar percentage of whites worked in the factories as well. And while the captains of industry, like William Gregg, initially deemed the mills a solution to poor white unemployment, most factories employed slaves in some capacity prior to the 1850s, when agricultural labor became more valuable. While the overwhelming majority of southern factory workers were white, many industrialists openly favored the supposedly “docile” labor of slaves. Gregg finally admitted that the majority of industrial “overseers...give the decided preference to blacks as operatives.” Abolitionist George M. Weston confirmed this fact, writing “The employment of slaves is common everywhere at the South, in factories and mining.” Historian Robert Starobin found that “many entrepreneurs were actually converting [sections of their labor force] from free to slave labor” during the 1840s, while a few others never converted to white labor in the first place.<sup>57</sup>

Southern captains of industry certainly appreciated the bi-racial composition of factory workers during this time, as they commonly used slaves as strikebreakers. One particular strike in 1856 by several hundred white dock workers in Savannah demonstrated the great efficacy of such a strategy, as the poor white laborers were immediately fired. There were plenty of slaves to take their places. Southern courts, of course, were never sympathetic to the plight of workers, and in many cases, Richard Morris held, they were “openly antagonistic.” Legally, strikers were

---

<sup>56</sup> Wright, *Old South, New South*, 127; 128.

<sup>57</sup> Starobin, *Industrial Slavery*, vii; Forret, *Race Relations*, 43; quoted in Weston, “The Poor Whites,” 5; *Ibid.*; Starobin, *Industrial Slavery*, 119-20.

only entitled to individual – not collective – rights, making the exploitation of “free” laborers easy. “As long as Negro slave labor was available,” Morris concluded, “the freedom of white workers to bargain collectively and take concerted action would be substantially curtailed. At the same time the marginal economic status of the white workers constantly kept them in jeopardy of coercive controls.”<sup>58</sup>

Thus, pushed out of former jobs in agriculture, and without enough industrial jobs to alleviate high levels of unemployment, poor white workers experienced a crisis of identity as laborers. Their jobs were rendered obsolete by cheaper, more exploitable labor, and they simply could not work hard enough to rise far out of poverty. These jacks-of-all-trades who cobbled together livings with multiple short-term jobs throughout the year began describing themselves as “mechanics.” By the 1840s, the term mechanic had come to encompass a wide variety of non-agricultural work. Although many historians use the word exclusively to describe skilled and semi-skilled laborers, people who lived during the late antebellum period generally considered anyone who worked with tools in non-farming jobs, no matter how unskilled, as mechanics. Whether building bridges and roads, laying railroad tracks, digging canals, or working in the building trades, mechanics were an incredibly important part of the southern labor struggle. Yet just as the ranks of white mechanics were growing, the number of slave mechanics started increasing. As Ronald Takaki confirmed, the cotton overproduction of the early 1840s caused a surplus of slave labor “which planters began to divert into the mechanic trades and thus intensified the competition” with white workers. Even when the cotton boom of the 1850s pulled

---

<sup>58</sup> Lockley, *Lines*, 74; Morris, “The Measure of Bondage,” 229.

many slave hires back to the plantations, there were still enough black mechanics in southern towns and cities to elicit complaints from aggrieved white laborers up until secession.<sup>59</sup>

Although tensions between black and white mechanics were evident as early as the 1820s, in the two decades before the Civil War, white mechanics' associations became more militant, ultimately helping to push slaveholders towards secession. And although the leaders of these labor unions were usually skilled, artisanal "master mechanics" who possessed some level of literacy, their speeches and demands were representative of the poor white unskilled laborers who rallied around them, clamoring for less competition from African Americans.<sup>60</sup>

Planters, of course, long considered mechanics "a great annoyance." For more than fifty years before Lincoln's election, white mechanics had petitioned their state and local governments for the right to unionize and for protection from competition with black labor. One of the earliest examples of class consciousness among poor white laborers appeared in an 1827 Macon, Georgia newspaper. Addressed as a "Letter to the Editor" from "A Mechanic," the article pitted white working men – society's "true" producers – against "soulless non-productives," men who made money off of the blood and sweat of their slaves. The article opens by lamenting that the Governor had ordered a second election for Justice of the Peace in Macon after a poor man won the office. This move, the mechanic stated, was intended "merely to disenfranchise laborers with respect to the right of suffrage, and to disqualify every poor man for an office of profit or honor." The letter further contended that the Governor and his cronies

very seriously urged, that, as Mr. Bates was a *poor* man, he would be apt to *retain* moneys collected *ex officio*; that a laboring man has no *business* with an *office*; and that a mechanic, and by parity of reason, a farmer, could *not* have information *necessary* to the exalted office of Justice of the Peace! On being informed of the

---

<sup>59</sup> Ronald Takaki, "The Movement to Reopen the African Slave Trade in South Carolina," *The South Carolina Historical Magazine*, Vol. 66, No. 1 (Jan. 1965): 41.

<sup>60</sup> John E. Murray, *The Charleston Orphan House: Children's Lives in the First Public Orphanage in America* (Chicago: Chicago, 2013), 148.

large majority which Bates obtained, a Troup gentleman...scornfully observed that he did not before know that the place contained *so many vagabonds!*...I am a laborer...Still, we, laborers, the farmers and mechanics, are unworthy of trust, and morally and mentally unfit for office! Yes—our only immunity is respectfully to tender our votes to the new monopoly of honor, and receive in return a drink of liquor and a shake of the hand from things that add neither to the capital nor strength of the country...at the polls, they condescend to call their superiors mentally, morally and physically, their equals; but at all other times treat us with a reserve and superciliousness, as if the Almighty had created us a distinct race, and stamped on our hearts inferiority and obedience! Yes—they only are endowed with faith and honesty and talent! We are the two-legged horses designed by nature to obey the bridle and obey the whip and spur in whatever course they may choose to ride us!

Conveying an angry determination to resist the oligarchic reign of the powerful slaveholders, the letter presented the interests of the affluent in direct opposition to the poor and middling classes. “Should that disastrous hour of tribulation and terror come, we *will* arm,” the mechanic threatened, “but not for treason;—and vote at the next election we *will*, but not for traitors.”<sup>61</sup>

Most pleas from nonslaveholding white laborers received little more than lip service from law makers. In South Carolina, for example, white mechanics won little more than the right to “form associations” by the end of the antebellum period. Kyle Planitzer found that in 1858, the state’s Mechanics’ Association requested a tax on their free black competitors. Gaining little traction for their plan, they humbly admitted that they would accept “some other remedy” as long as it would “at least place us in such a position...to compete with [blacks], if they are to be on an equality with us.” Of course, the slaveholding lawmakers balked at the Association’s request, doing nothing to help the cause of white laborers. In neighboring Georgia, U.B. Phillips reported a similar scenario, as “The white laboring men wanted to keep the slaves out of the skilled trades as far as possible, and to that end opposed their being hired out under any circumstances for artisan’s work.” But the animosity between laborers was not based solely on race. The requests of white mechanics against black mechanics were no different from their protests against

---

<sup>61</sup> “For the Macon Telegraph,” *Macon Telegraph* (GA), May 14, 1827, p. 3.

competition with unpaid white prison labor. One group of mechanics based in Jackson wrote to the Mississippi legislature in the 1850s, imploring them to “amend the law regulating the affairs of the State Penitentiary as to prevent their manufacturing mechanical and agricultural implements, machines of which come in competition with the mechanics working at their trades.” Regardless of the race of their competitors, white mechanics did not want to contend with unfree, unpaid labor of any sort – that practice could only hurt their chances of gaining employment and earning a living wage.<sup>62</sup>

Still, the vast majority of white mechanics’ concerns were a direct result of slavery. Michele Gillespie’s study of highly skilled mechanics offers insight into the struggle over labor competition in Savannah. Gillespie found that while “northern mechanics challenged their employers and the political system with strikes, unions, and workingmen’s parties in the 1820s and 1830s, the master mechanics of Georgia worked to preserve their status as master craftsmen...to secure social respect.” When they did protest their working conditions, the city’s “generally apolitical” skilled artisans were actually trying to “disassociate themselves from a growing group of free laborers with little or no attachment to the traditional values of this slaveholding republic.” Yet Gillespie did uncover several instances in which white mechanics’ class standing was seemingly their central concern. In Newton County, Georgia, in 1840, for example, a group of mechanics met to pledge their allegiance to the Whigs, declaring that “We...may be regarded by the aristocracy of the country, as too humble or lowly for our voices to be uttered in discontent, yet we *proclaim ourselves freemen*.” Therefore, the men held, they

---

<sup>62</sup> Michael P. Johnson, *Toward a Patriarchal Republic: The Secession of Georgia* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana, 1977), 96; Walter Kyle Planitzer, “A Dangerous Class of Men, Without Direct Interest in Slavery: A Proslavery Concern about Southern Nonslaveholders in the Late Antebellum Era,” (Ph.D. Diss., Johns Hopkins, 2007), 71; 72; Ulrich Bonnell Phillips, “The Slave Labor Problem in the Charleston District,” *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 22, no. 3 (Sept. 1907): 423; “Petition of Mechanics,” Folder “Mechanic,” Petitions, 1817-1908, Mississippi Legislature, MDAH.

had a right to be involved in state and local politics. Declaring their rights as “equal to the most pampered aristocrat,” the mechanics slyly cautioned that by “having such rights,” they “will dare assert them.” By letting local planters know that they would take matters into their own hands if the slaveholders failed to address some of their grievances, southern mechanics asserted a modicum of political power. At the same time, they also alerted slaveholders to the growing discontent among the poor classes of white southerners, a discontent that they would continue to face throughout the entirety of the Civil War.<sup>63</sup>

Yet this 1840 meeting was only one protest out of many. In 1851, Gillespie reported, the Georgia Mechanics’ Convention was held near Atlanta. Around 400 delegates and 2,000 more supporters traveled to the city to hear speeches and enjoy some camaraderie with their fellow laborers. In one particularly fiery speech, a white mechanic attempted to protect the trade from competition with free blacks and slaves, proclaiming that “A few urban negro mechanics can do more practical injury to the institution of slavery...than all the ultra abolitionists of the country.” As these types of veiled warnings became more frequent throughout the 1850s, slaveholders had no choice but to pay attention. In fact, in response to the Atlanta meeting, one Georgia paper called upon the southern aristocracy to “look to their rights, as this action was taken to mean an attack upon them, for if [slaves were] driven from one field, they will drive them from all.” Clearly agitated by the audacity of these white workers, the paper concluded by denouncing the meeting “as part of a general system of attack upon Southern institutions and rights.” According to Gillespie, because of the mounting criticism by powerful planters, by 1853 “mechanics found themselves working to preserve their place in this slaveholding society rather than voicing their grievances.”<sup>64</sup>

---

<sup>63</sup> Gillespie, *Free Labor*, 142; 154; quoted on 158.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, quoted on 148; quoted on 159; 160-1.

Gillespie's interpretation, however, does not necessarily hold true throughout the Deep South at large. In the 1840s and 50s white labor unions were active – and vocal – across the region. Robert Starobin revealed that mechanics' associations fought to prevent slave self-hire, and "board-money," which was a payment that allowed a slave to live apart from their workplace. Occasionally these groups even resorted to violence. Their growing militancy, however, only encouraged planters to further protect their cherished institution. As Starobin concluded, "The net effect of most protests by white artisans was thus not to weaken slavery but to entrench it more firmly in southern society." Henry Wright, who had been a slave near Atlanta as a young adult, remembered that his master trained slaves in masonry and carpentry so that he could sell them for higher prices if he ever needed quick money. "The slaves who were allowed to work with these white mechanics, from whom they eventually learned the trade, were eager because they would be permitted to hire themselves out," Wright stated. He also commented on a lesser-known benefit for the better-skilled white mechanics, explaining that the average white mechanic "had no particular objection to the slaves being there to help him, even though they were learning the trade, because he was able to place all the hard work on the slave which made his job easier." Although this fact was certainly true for the period of time in which a mechanic taught a slave, as soon as the instruction period was over, the white worker had to sell his labor in competition with his enslaved former student, a predicament that naturally produced spite and a sense of injustice. Moreover, as Wright correctly observed, slave mechanics were occasionally allowed to keep a portion of the money they earned for their masters by working overtime. This money, Wright concluded, "could be used to help buy their freedom," a fact that should have caused planters to rethink slavery's transformation. Some slaveholders did begin discussing this point, recognizing that skilled or semi-skilled slave hirelings would eventually lead to a growing

free black population. While this prospect gave some of the more rational thinkers pause, most planters chose to focus instead on short-term profits, not long-term problems. Slave labor had already rendered full-time white agricultural labor obsolete. When unpaid, enslaved blacks began competing for jobs in other sectors of the economy, struggling white workers finally began to organize collectively, threatening the entrenched southern hierarchy – socially and politically.<sup>65</sup>

As Chapter Five will demonstrate, poorer white laborers, mostly led by skilled and semi-skilled mechanics, continued to press for protection from competition with slave labor. They even attempted to end the practice of slave hiring altogether. Eventually, their protests, frequently peppered with threats to withdrawing their support for slavery if the planters and politicians did not readily respond, caused slaveholders to truly begin fighting a two front war, protecting slavery from forces both within and without the South. Some slaveholders proposed moving poor whites exclusively into new industrial and mechanical jobs, confining all African Americans to agricultural labor. Other pro-slavery men even attempted to reopen the African slave trade, because importing more slaves would make more white men slaveholders. Although ill-conceived, reactionary measures, both ideas confirm that on the eve of the Civil War, slaveowners were scrambling to come up with a way to dominate and placate the southern masses, both black and white.<sup>66</sup>

As far back as the mid-1840s, slaveholders were publically struggling with how to properly handle the southern labor problem. In 1847, for example, U.S. Representative Thomas H. Bayly of Virginia opined that “The negroes in the south... exclude whites from employment... The next step will be to employ slave-labor in the factories, where again they will exclude the indigent whites.” Recognizing that competition between the races in these new

---

<sup>65</sup> Starobin, *Industrial Slavery*, 211-2; 213; Henry Wright, *American Slave*, Vol. 13 (GA), Part 4, 196.

<sup>66</sup> Rockman, *Scraping By*, 7.

industries would cause problems, Bayly advocated the use of slaves but continued to point out how this labor preference would harm the white working poor. “In many respects manufactories hold out stronger inducements for the employment of slave labor than any other pursuit,” he continued. Indeed, Bayly orated, “One of the great drawbacks on the employment of slaves in agriculture, is the fact that they are scattered about in their employment and the expense of supervision is proportionably great. In factories they are huddled together, and are always under the eye of the superintendent.” After lauding his home state’s successful use of slaves in tobacco factories, the Representative also admitted that the plan rendered white laborers practically worthless. “[T]he indigent whites will be excluded from most of the handicraft and mechanical employments,” Bayly concluded. “It will be the indigent white men who will be injured more than the large slaveholder.”<sup>67</sup>

Following an 1851 mechanics’ meeting in Atlanta, the editors of Georgia’s *Albany Patriot* condemned the laborers as abolitionists. In a follow-up letter to the editors from “a Mechanic,” the writer explicitly defended white workers from the traitorous label. He stated that “Every mechanic engaged permanently in this movement, is Southern born, and citizens of Georgia—they are Whigs and Democrats—Constitutional Union Party men and Southern Rights Party men.” After affirming their allegiance to the South, however, the Mechanic proceeded to allude to slave rebellion to make the association’s larger point clear. Georgia’s white mechanics, he claimed, “all believe that negro mechanics are dangerous persons in our section—they all believe with Gen. Hammond, who is perhaps the largest slaveholder in the South...that ‘THE FIRST STEP in the progress of emancipation, is the elevation of negroes to the rank of mechanics.’ They believe with Col. R.W. Flournoy, of Washington County, that the proper place for negroes is in the corn field.” Not yet content with his argument, the Mechanic decided to

---

<sup>67</sup> “Untitled,” *Southern Recorder* (GA), March 9, 1847, p. 2

close his letter by grabbing slaveholders' attention. "Have you noticed," the white laborer concluded, "that every fugitive slave is a negro mechanic?"<sup>68</sup>

Protests similar in nature to the one held in Atlanta erupted in other Deep South cities as well. Slaveholders throughout the region began discussing their options. One school of thought advocated confining blacks to plantation work, freeing up other, non-farm work for whites. As Judge H.F. Hopkins of Mobile, Alabama, explained, "many white mechanics have had good cause for complaining of the antagonism of labor growing out of the competition of so unpleasant companionship with negro mechanics. He must work as cheap as the slave, and associate in unnatural competition, which is degrading, and entirely at variance with our vaunted notion of the superiority of the race." He continued by linking nonslaveholders' support for slavery to job opportunities for poorer whites. "If we wish to foster Southern manufactories, in which the white men of the South are to seek employment," Hopkins wrote, "we must encourage white mechanics by removing the rivalry which now confronts them in our servile population. Confine negro labor to the cultivation of the soil, where it properly belongs, and we will strengthen the 'institution' ten fold, by the encouragement it will give to the non-slaveholding young of the South, who are not able to become planters, to become possessors of the mechanic arts." But it was not only the most affluent southerners calling for change. A group of printers also advised planters "to reflect upon the policy of continuing a system which may prejudice any class of white laborers at the South against its peculiar institution. . . . Such a policy, in our opinion, seems to elevate the negro at the expense of the white man; and makes the poor mechanic at the South the enemy of the negro and of the institution of slavery." Attempting to empathize with poor white laborers, the printers proclaimed that "if the rich man's negro was placed in

---

<sup>68</sup> "Mechanic's Mass Meeting---Abolition," *Albany Patriot* (GA), Apr. 25, 1851, p. 3 (capitalization and italics in original).

competition with us at the printer's case, and by lowering our wages, take the bread from the mouths of our wife and children, a well of bitterness would spring up in our breasts against the negro and his master, that would render us the everlasting and uncompromising enemy of both." Considering themselves fortunate because the "laws of the State protect printers against this humiliation and degradation," the men then vowed that "what the laws fail to do in this respect for other mechanics, a wholesome public opinion should effect for them."<sup>69</sup>

To further complicate the Deep South's labor problems, overzealous slaveholders began promoting the reopening of the African slave trade. John Hope Franklin discovered that "As early as 1834, there were various unaffiliated groups, commonly known as the Southern Rights Clubs, that advocated the reopening of the slave trade and the extension of slavery into new territories. They had signs of recognition, met regularly, evolved a program for the development of the South, and even equipped and manned some slavers." By the 1850s, a small group of enterprising South Carolinians had begun the fight to import more slaves from Africa in earnest. They were led by Leonidas W. Spratt of Charleston, the editor of the *Standard* and one of the most influential members of the South Carolina House of Representatives. In 1853, Spratt, along with Governor James Adams and the wealthy slaveholding politician Robert Barnwell Rhett, began pushing to reopen the trade. Part of their reasoning was articulated by Spratt in 1856: "So many whites have come in since slaves have been restricted that this class of our population is greatly in excess. Many have taken to the walks of manual labor. They struggle for subsistence in competition with the slave, and already, even in this state, where there is still an excess of slaves, the proposition had been made and pressed to relieve the whites from the

---

<sup>69</sup> "Negro Mechanics," *Southern Federal Union* (GA), July 23, 1861, p. 1; "Negro Mechanics," *Federal Union* (GA), July 6, 1858, p. 1-2.

severities of such a combat.” Indeed, the growing numbers of nonslaveholding whites concerned the shrinking class of slaveholders. They realized they needed to act preemptively.<sup>70</sup>

With class tensions continuing to rise throughout the cotton boom of the 1850s, planters knew that they needed to create jobs for poor whites while appeasing the nonslaveholding yeomen class. Reopening the African trade would immediately lower slave prices, allowing many more landholding yeomen to enter the ranks of slaveowners. Although cutting the price of slaves would negatively impact planter wealth, proslavery men had to make some concessions to preserve the institution as a whole. By making slaveholders out of the respectable yeomen, and beginning to employ poor whites in industrial pursuits, the slave trade promoters believed they had come up with a plausible solution. As early as the mid-1840s, southern writers had begun to discuss a racialized division of labor, and with the rise of the southern textile mills, talk of confining poor whites to industry became popular. The famous pro-slavery advocate George Fitzhugh promoted this idea, claiming that poor whites “as independent freemen should be employed [in industrial pursuits], and let negroes be strictly tied down to such callings as are unbecoming to white men, and peace would be established between blacks and whites.” However, if complete segregation by job type failed, reopening the slave trade could actually cause more trouble for the South’s ruling class. Indeed, the flip side to reopening the trade, as some leaders pointed out, would be *more* competition for poor whites over jobs, wages, and even social status. As South Carolina legislator J.J. Pettigrew put it, the “new supply of cheap African labor would compete with the nonslaveholders and make it impossible for him to amass sufficient capital to purchase slaves. Reopening might even create a class antagonism where none had previously existed.” The concern over the reactions of lower-middling and lower class

---

<sup>70</sup> John Hope Franklin, *The Militant South, 1800-1861* (1956; reprint, Boston: Beacon, 1970), 124; Harvey Wish, “The Revival of the African Slave Trade in the United States, 1856-1860,” *The Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, Vol. 27, No. 4 (Mar. 1941): 570; 571-2.

whites to the reopening was a large part of the reason why the measure ultimately failed. As late as 1859, the *Weekly Georgia Telegraph* spoke out against the slaveholders' plan, admitting that the large number of poor white workers would not stand for such indignation: "It is quite likely then that the white laborers who constitute a majority of the district would support the advocate of a system which would bring down their labor and wages to the *starving point*." In the end, apprehension over the reception of nonslaveholding laborers helped to prevent the idea of reopening the slave trade from gaining widespread support among planters and more prosperous yeomen.<sup>71</sup>

Thus, the financial crash of 1837 had much greater impact on the Old South than previously assumed. The destruction of wealth, especially among the lower-middling and lower classes, combined with the consolidation of land and slaves among the most affluent planters, had created a class crisis by the eve of the Civil War. The cotton boom of the 1850s added to the growing, extreme wealth of grand planters, further concentrating wealth in the Deep South. Poor whites became poorer. Opportunities for poorer whites to rise above the economic class they were born into became more elusive. While already wealthy southerners became richer, the masses of the erstwhile-struggling poor and lower-middling classes lost more ground – economically, socially, and politically.

When asked about the relationship between work ethic and economic class on the eve of secession, many Civil War veterans spoke of a noticeable divide, regardless of whether they ultimately fought for the North or the South. Former Union soldier David Moss came from a family that owned thirteen slaves. The Cherokee, Tennessee native said that honest toil was respected "by some...but [by] the big slaveholders it was not." His statement is interesting: the

---

<sup>71</sup> Starobin, *Industrial Slavery*, 209; Barton J. Bernstein, "Southern Politics and Attempts to Reopen the African Slave Trade," *The Journal of Negro History*, Vol. 51, No. 1 (Jan. 1966): 23-4; "For the Georgia Telegraph," *Weekly Georgia Telegraph*, June 21, 1859, p. 2.

son of a relatively wealthy slaveholder distinguished his family from the “big slaveholders” who “would not let a poor white man eat at their table.” Perhaps Moss’s experience differed from the experiences of those in the Deep South given the fact that he resided in Appalachia, an area with a very low percentage of slaves and fewer class-based tensions between whites. Confederate veteran Henry R. Lee of Adams County, Mississippi, revealed quite a different attitude towards labor from the Deep South. The son of a planter with thirty slaves, Lee admitted that whether or not work was honorable or respectable was “[n]ot thought about much,” since “[n]o whites worked in our neighborhood.” When questioned about relationships between whites from different economic classes, Lee simply stated that there was no association between the groups, as “Slaveholders considered themselves on a higher level than non-slaveholders.” Poor white Henry Durham from Franklin, Alabama, concurred, responding that planters “was not sociable as they should have been. They would hardly speak to a laboring man.”<sup>72</sup>

One poor white East Tennessean, William Landon Babb, defected from the Confederacy and joined the Union army as soon as he got the chance. Part of the reason he fought for the North, it seemed, stemmed from his anger over the deep inequalities embedded in the slave system. But he was not solely focused on the differences in income and wealth. Babb also commented on the social imbalance that pervaded the South, condemning planters for leading “the idle life. The slaveholders was always elevated above the common laboring men...they always moved in a circle to themselves thinking themselves on a plain higher than the laboring man. The laborer was looked [on] by the slaveholder as being down on a level with the slave or not quite as good as the slave.” Still another nonslaveholding veteran, a Confederate from middle Tennessee, confirmed that “There were a few cases of rich who did not mingle with the poor. The line between the two classes was more strictly drawn then than now.” He conceded

---

<sup>72</sup> Elliot, *Tennessee*, Vol. 1, 97; Vol. 4, 1342-3; Vol. 2, 744.

that while “Some of the small county offices, constable, clerks, etc., were held by the poor whites...most of the poor rented and worked on rich men’s farms. Many of them were mechanics, blacksmiths, wagon makers, brick and stone masons, carpenters, and plasterers. Poor men did nearly all this kind of work.” And while the former soldier recalled “several” instances in which poor men became “wealthy land owners,” these situations arose “after the war, when the rich farmers who had been slaveholders did not know what to do.”<sup>73</sup>

Poor white southerners, therefore, not only noticed the inequalities inherent in the slave-based economic system, but they were also bothered by the social stratification and degrading treatment they experienced at the hands of more affluent whites. As Robert Russel found, poorer “whites had come to look upon such service as menial and degrading, and employers preferred the Negroes because they were more obsequious.” The fact that they were considered inferior for having to toil alongside slaves (or in jobs that slaves usually occupied) was too much for some poor white men to handle. Whatever sense of honor they had drove them in one of two directions: they either became more ambitious and worked extremely hard to improve their economic station in life, or—far more commonly—they dropped out of the work force altogether, eking out a meager existence on the fringes of society. While there is no way to accurately assess just how many poor whites dropped out of the labor pool in the late antebellum period, their refusal of certain job offers was a frequent complaint from observers both within and without the region. Manual, unskilled, and agricultural labor *was* considered “slave work” by slaveholders and the men who aspired to join their ranks. These types of labor were deemed so shameful that some white men chose the uncertainty of unemployment over the offer of a work. Certainly, the arduous nature of the work, the dangers involved in the job, and the fairness of wages influenced a poor white’s decision to turn down a job, but according to contemporaries,

---

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol. 1, 8; Vol. 4, 1605.

the degradation of labor itself contributed significantly to the widespread under- and unemployment of thousands of poor whites.<sup>74</sup>

William Carson of Carroll Parish, Louisiana, was the son of a grand planter who owned more than two hundred slaves. Carson wrote frankly about the privileges associated with wealth in the antebellum era, stating that “money and education went far towards making an aristocracy.” However, he went on, “the fact that a man could do no better than make his living by manual labor was assumed to prove that he lacked brains, education, or money.” White laborers, Carson admitted, received “no social recognition.” One British observer further noted, “That class which Slavery has created by dishonouring labour and abolishing wages,” are “generally employed in doing nothing, and thereat are eminently successful.” Historians from the first half of the twentieth century also noticed this demoralization of the white labor force. As Paul Buck wrote in 1925, “labor was considered disreputable because it was performed by slaves.” Over a dozen years later Mildred Mell raised the same themes, claiming that slavery’s existence caused the “attitude that any labor which is customarily performed by the slave thereby becomes beneath the dignity of the white man.” Unfortunately, after the work of Frank Owsley in the 1940s spurred the refocusing of antebellum studies on the landowning yeomen, this very important labor theory has been largely absent from recent histories on the region. Although poor whites had very few chances in life to earn a living wage, and had even fewer chances of maintaining such a job for more than a few months, they sometimes turned down offers of work if they considered the pay too low, the job too dangerous, or simply because they still had enough food and whiskey to get by another couple of weeks. As the court records in Chapter Three confirm, it was not uncommon for poor whites to balk at certain types of labor or certain

---

<sup>74</sup> Robert R. Russel, “The Effects of Slavery upon Nonslaveholders in the Ante Bellum South.” *Agricultural History* 15, No. 2 (April 1941): 124.

rates of pay. In May 1857, the *Southern Norfolk Argus* attempted to explain why this lack of work ethic arose in the slave states:

Slave labor and free labor, black labor and white labor, do not work well together. The white laborer assumes a superiority over his sable co-laborer, puts all the most disagreeable tasks on him, and neglecting his own business, acts as the overseer rather than the laborer. In the States where all the labor is performed by white men, two white laborers will do as much work as three negroes do here in the same time. But it is not so when white laborers are employed among us. They very soon fall into the idle habits of the negroes, and graduate the amount of their labor by the customs of the country. They find themselves ranked with a degraded class, and giving up all hopes of improving their condition, are content to suffice to procure the bare necessities of life.<sup>75</sup>

Indeed, poor whites' seeming contentment with "the bare necessities" led to repeated charges of laziness. Many comments related to poor whites' apparent lack of ambition; upper and middle class observers just could not seem to comprehend why the white poor were unable to lift themselves out of poverty. "The Georgia 'cracker' ... seems to me to lack not only all that the negro does, but also even the desire for a better condition, and the vague longing for an enlargement of his liberties and his rights," wrote Whitelaw Reid, a northerner who toured the state right after the end of the Civil War. "Such filthy poverty, such foul ignorance, such idiotic imbecility, such bestial instincts, such groveling desires, such mean longings; you would question my veracity as a man if I were to paint the pictures I have seen," he concluded. Fanny Kemble, the English-bred wife of planter Pierce Butler, echoed similar sentiments, writing that the "filthy, lazy, ignorant, brutal, proud, penniless savages," otherwise known as the "pine-landers" of Georgia, comprised the most "degraded race of human beings claiming an Anglo-

---

<sup>75</sup> Elliot, *Tennessee*, Vol. 2, 464-6; M.D. Conway, *Testimonies Concerning Slavery* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1855), 122; 121; Paul H. Buck, "The Poor Whites of the Ante-Bellum South." *American Historical Review* 31, No. 1 (Oct. 1925): 48; Mell, *A Definitive Study*, 138; reprinted in "Principles of the Nebraska Bill," *Southern Recorder*, May 19, 1857, p. 2.

Saxon heritage.” These “wretched creatures,” she reasoned, refused to “labour for their own subsistence,” because “labour belongs to blacks and slaves alone here.”<sup>76</sup>

Clearly, this crisis in work ethic needs to be more closely examined by historians, especially when attempting to understand the socioeconomic disconnect between the wealthiest and the poorest southern whites. Slavery unquestionably devalued labor for poor southern whites, both financially *and* psychologically. And while many of them understood that the institution of slavery stifled their wages and prevented them from being hired in the first place, they were virtually powerless to do anything to affect change. Traveler James Redpath reported that he “met and conversed with many of the poorer class of whites in my journey. All of them were conscious of the injurious influence that slavery was exerting on their social condition. If damning the negroes would have abolished slavery, it would have disappeared a long time ago, before the indignant breath of the poor white trash.”<sup>77</sup>

Instead, it seems, a percentage of the region’s poorest whites may have simply refused to work more than they absolutely needed to in order to survive. As Fredrick Law Olmsted reported, the South’s poor white laborers were often drunk and always undependable; they simply refused to “work steadily at any employment.” In one instance a laborer had received some of his wages in advance—to buy some church clothes, he said—and absconded the next day, “right in the middle of harvest.” Olmsted also reported that if a planter requested certain types of work from poor whites, like fetching water or wood or taking care of the cattle, the laborer “would get mad and tell you he wasn’t a nigger.” Their “distinct and...rather despicable

---

<sup>76</sup> Whitelaw Reid, *After the War: A Southern Tour, May 1, 1865 to May 1, 1866* (New York: Moor, Wiltach, and Baldwin, 1866), 348; Kemble, *Journal*.

<sup>77</sup> James Redpath, *The Roving Editor, or Talks with Slaves in the Southern States*, John R. McKivigan, ed. (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania, 1996), 88.

class,” he concluded, “are worse off in almost all respects than slaves.” Slavery, Olmsted knew, was essential “in encouraging vagabond and improvident habits of life among the poor.”<sup>78</sup>

While there had always been a substantial class of poor whites in the Deep South, their ranks were growing, especially in the decade before secession. Generally removed from the modern world and not fully involved or invested in the marketplace, poor whites simply did not fit the image of the white southerner, who was supposedly elevated by slavery. America’s capitalist work ethic had been lost on them. And while many of them descended from Protestant stock, that infamous work ethic, it seems, had also evaded them. Account after account describes poor whites as people who prized leisure above all else; as long as they had corn bread and a bit of meat, and enough whiskey to forget about their troubles, they seemed contented with a life of leisure. They were supposedly not concerned with wealth accumulation or even becoming slaveowners. Poor whites simply wanted to be able to earn enough money to “get by.” Regardless of how accurate these perceptions may have been, because poor whites were unable to change their job opportunities or demand a living wage, there was little incentive for them to try and live according to a society controlled by slaveholders.

A sketch of North Carolina’s poor whites appeared in American papers in 1847. Deeming them “a hardy but slothful or idle and unthrifty people,” the writer noted that “Nothing but the pressure of some necessity—approaching starvation, or the sheriff’s officer—will compel them to labor.” The article continued, relaying the story of a poor white ostler who quit his job suddenly, proclaiming that “Blackberries are ripe, and I will work for no man when I can get food in the fields or woods for nothing.” With no income, of course, the poor white inevitably ended up indebted to someone. It was only during this time, the writer observed, “when the sheriff is in pursuit” of poor white debtors, that they would finally “do a job of work to keep out

---

<sup>78</sup> Olmsted, *Journey*, 73; 83; 84; 452.

of jail, and then relapse into their old habits.” The essayist further pondered what made southern white laborers so different from their counterparts in the North. Declaring that “Slavery concentrates labor on the plantations, and makes it at once unprofitable and disreputable for a freeman,” he concluded that given the actions of most poor whites, they had more in common with Native Americans than with other classes of white Americans. Impoverished white southerners “are as distinct a race as the Indian, in some respects they are not unlike them, they love to roam the woods, and be free there; to get together for frolic or fun; to fish and hunt; to chase wild cattle.” As the article correctly pointed out, at least the slave South afforded poor whites alternatives to surviving without necessarily engaging the wage labor system. By hunting, gathering, and growing small crops of potatoes and corn, poor whites were often able to live independently of the rapidly-modernizing world around them.<sup>79</sup>

The comparison of poor whites to Native Americans, however, was not limited to one editorial. In 1851, the South Carolinian industrialist William Gregg estimated that “the white people who ought to work, and who do not, or who are so employed as to be wholly unproductive to the State” totaled 125,000. All of the South’s “capital, enterprise, and intelligence, is employed in directing slave labor,” Gregg continued, “and the consequence is, that a large portion of our poor white people are wholly neglected, and are suffered to while away an existence in a state but one step in advance of the Indian of the forest.” Gregg had an ulterior motive for his interest in the lives of poor whites, as he planned to make a fortune by using their inexpensive labor in his textile factories. Still, it is interesting that during a time of great uncertainty over the future of black slavery, more affluent whites attempted to categorize poor whites as a separate race. To the southern gentry, poor whites may have been white in appearance, but they did not *act* white. Therefore, they did not completely qualify as members of

---

<sup>79</sup> Reprint, “The South,” *The National Era* (D.C.), Nov. 25, 1847.

the master race. Sometimes the differences between “respectable” whites and poor whites were blamed on pseudo-scientific theories of racial hierarchy, blood quantum, and the like. To other observers, though, poor whites were completely to blame for their station in life, as they appeared to consistently choose leisure over hard, grueling work. In an address to the Alabama State Agricultural Society delivered in 1842, Reverend Basil Manly made it clear that poor, un- or under-employed whites were mainly responsible for their own situation:

In our large cities, hundreds are congregated, without employment, and often without bread, while millions of acres of the most fertile land on earth remain unoccupied. If a farmer advertises for extra labor, with difficulty he obtains a reluctant offer... Pass through the streets of some of these towns – you will see groups of idlers mounted upon empty boxes, drumming with the heels of their boots, lounging about the doors of drinking establishments, whistling, and manufacturing tobacco-juice or puffing the fumes of a cigar, retelling the latest scandal, conning some new joke, discussing affairs of State, and all other subjects but what concerns them, *what suits their genius or station*, and what they might do to promote their own true welfare and that of the country...<sup>80</sup>

Of course, Reverend Manly was not alone in blaming the poor for their own poverty.

Two years after the Alabama speech, a grand jury from Meriweather, Georgia complained after a spate of vagrancy arrests that “We cannot, therefore, tolerate the practice of many who are lounging about villages and places of public resort, and who seem to have no means of support.” The average poor, underemployed white man “is ever on the lookout for something whereby he can kill time, and consequently often engages in those pursuits which ruin him and exert a bad influence upon others who would perhaps do well.” Connecting unemployment to both poverty and criminal activity, the jury concluded that “The individual who is always consuming, and never, by honest employment, contributing to the stock necessary for human sustenance, cannot be viewed in any other light than a general disturber of society, and as a common burthen upon

---

<sup>80</sup> Mell, *A Definitive Study*, 95-6; “Extract from an Address on Agriculture: Delivered before the Alabama State Agricultural Society, by the Rev. Dr. B Manly, President of the Alabama University,” *Columbus Enquirer* (GA), June 16, 1842, p. 1 (emphasis added).

the good citizens of our county.” Nevertheless, the jury’s statements seemed outright kind when compared to a letter published in the *Columbus Enquirer* in 1840. After comparing the jobless to “drone bees” and noting that worker bees kill the drones, the writer reasoned, “We cannot kill the human drones that cumber society, and tumble them headlong out of the hive of mankind; but we can treat them as to indicate our conviction of their utter worthlessness.” First he advocated the complete social ostracization of those who did not work, telling the upper and middling classes to pretend that the unemployed simply did not exist. By refusing to hear them speak and by pretending they were invisible, more affluent whites could shame the poor into fleeing their communities. “But your real idlers, your true drones, are those who to poverty add laziness,” the letter persisted, “If such a one cannot be killed, he should at least be thrown out of the hive.”<sup>81</sup>

Given all of the opprobrium heaped upon poor whites during this period, it is hardly surprising that several avowed abolitionists took to their defense. In 1845, for example, the infamous Kentuckian Cassius Clay claimed that “these tyrants,” the planters, have also “enslave[d]” poor white laborers throughout the South. Reacting to Clay’s incendiary comments, *The Georgia Telegraph and Republic* reported that Clay, “a madman... expected the non-slaveholding laborers, along with the slaves, to flock to his standard, and the war of abolition to begin in Kentucky.” The editors were terrified that Clay was “kindling flames of civil and servile war, and rallying free laborers and negro slaves under his standard.” Asserting that blacks already considered the abolitionist a “deliverer,” the writers asserted that any type of coalition between African Americans and poor whites would culminate in a grave threat, to both their fortunes and their society. Attempting to scare whites into silencing every oppositional word about the peculiar institution, the paper concluded that “The plunder of our property, the kidnapping, stealing, and abduction of our slaves, is a light evil in comparison with planting a

---

<sup>81</sup> “Georgia, Meriwether County,” *Ibid.*, September 11, 1844, p. 3; “Drones,” *Ibid.*, Nov. 25, 1840, p. 1.

seminary of their infernal doctrines in the very heart of our densest slave population.

Communities may be endangered as well as single individuals.”<sup>82</sup>

While the leaders of the slave states continued trying to scare nonslaveholders into supporting the institution, the rest of the United States, and indeed, the rest of the world, took notice of the great inequalities between classes of southern whites. In the two decades prior to secession, the South’s main labor problem – the competition between “free” white and slave labor – had become enough of an issue to make national headlines. Northern politician and future Radical Republican Thaddeus Stevens wrote in 1850 that “The poor white laborer is the scorn of the slave himself; for slavery always degrades labor.” Thus, he continued, “The white people who work with their hands are ranked with the other laborers – the slaves...Their associates, if anywhere, are with the colored population. They feel that they are degraded and despised, and their minds and conduct generally conform to their condition.” With just a few words Stevens had subtly suggested that poor whites’ lack of work ethic functioned as a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy: repeatedly told that inherent laziness caused their lack of wealth, some poor whites eventually gave up trying to lift themselves out of poverty. They simply trudged along through life, demoralized and disillusioned. Even Canadian papers commented on this southern issue, often using stronger language than their American counterparts. In an 1855 article entitled “White and Black Slavery,” the writers urged every white working man of the slave states “to feel how closely their interests, and those of the black working men were united. To feel that the mill stone they are permitting to be bound around the neck of the negro bondmen, is also twisted

---

<sup>82</sup> *Georgia Telegraph and Republic* (Macon), Sept. 9, 1845, p. 1-2.

around their own, and that they are both being dragged downward to a condition of brutish ignorance, degradation and slavish dependence.”<sup>83</sup>

It was within this atmosphere that abolitionists predicted that a strong sense of class consciousness among poor white laborers would spread, leading them to seek out better opportunities, mostly in the western free states. They also conjectured that lower class whites fully understood the ways in which slavery hurt their job prospects and kept their wages low. These facts alone, abolitionists held, would soon make anti-slavery men out of nonslaveholding laborers. As early as 1849 *The Philadelphia Republic* called attention to the plight of poor white workers, viewed as the victims of the South’s widening economic inequality:

Two-thirds of the free white people of these States have no interest in slave property, but on the contrary are directly interested against the continuance of the system. They are starving or emigrating because labor is degraded in character generally and underpaid in price in all the avocations in which slaves are employed. That all this is clearly understood, appears from the fact that the tide of emigration drifts steadily to the free western states. The poor white man who under this compulsion leaves the home of his birth, avoids the competition and taint of chattel slavery... There is nothing wanting but an effective array of the latent abolitionism of the southern States to accomplish a general emancipation.

Similarly, in a “Letter from Washington,” published in the *New York Evangelist* in the spring of 1856, the writer insisted that when poor whites saw “the nobility of the free working man of Kansas, [they] will desert the degrading service of their white masters of the Slave States.” Just a few years later, a Washington, D.C. paper also reported on the topic of western migration. Recent census data revealed that in older southern states like South Carolina, “the constant increase of a class of laborers who are compelled to work without wages deters immigrants from abroad, and compels the poor whites who were born on the soil, and who have hitherto managed

---

<sup>83</sup> “The Slavery Question,” *The National Era* (D.C.), March 7, 1850; “White and Black Slavery,” *Provincial Freeman* (Canada West), Dec. 29, 1855.

to eke out existence by occasional jobs, to abandon their native land, and seek employment in States whose institutions foster free labor.”<sup>84</sup>

Indeed, the immigration of nonslaveholders to the free states had taken place for generations, and this steady tide of settlers to the free states remained strong in the few years leading up to the Civil War. Professor B.S. Hedrick from the University of North Carolina lamented in 1856, “Many is the time I have stood by the loaded emigrant wagon and given the parting hand to those faces I was never to look upon again. They were going to seek homes in the free West, knowing, as they did, that free and slave labor could not both exist and prosper in the same community.” Most slaveowners, of course, were perfectly happy to allow the poor to leave the region. Some planters helped speed the process along by buying out, evicting, or repeatedly jailing certain poor whites. One slaveholder even bemoaned to the *Farmer and Planter* that soon “the only poor folks we will have amongst us will be those we can’t run off or buy out—who expect to live by traffic with our slaves.—This is the most dangerous element in our society.”<sup>85</sup>

The slaveholder was right about one thing: it did, indeed, take some money to pick up and move across hundreds or thousands of miles. No matter how many of the better-off poor whites, mechanics, and farmers fled the region, a large percentage of the most impoverished whites remained in the slave states, exacerbating class relations and arousing racial tensions. A pamphlet from the Democratic League, published during the Civil War, forthrightly laid out the reasons for the “partial feud that had long existed between the slaveholding and non-slaveholding population.” According to the League, “Southern white labor was continually annoyed with the appellation of ‘white trash,’ and other contemptuous epithets; but still was

---

<sup>84</sup> Editorial, *The Philadelphia Republic*, reprinted as “Anti-Slavery in the South,” *Albany Patriot* (GA), Jan. 27, 1849, p. 2; “Letter from Washington,” *New York Evangelist*, March 27, 1856; “Political Economy,” *The National Era* (D.C.), Oct. 6, 1859.

<sup>85</sup> Johnson, *Ante-Bellum North Carolina*, 66-7; quoted in Planitzer, “A Dangerous Class,” 358.

compelled to toil under the continuous insult... Too many of the accidental droppings of foolish and stupid arrogance were let fall within the hearing of white labor to make it fully reconciled to the pretended monopoly of respectability by slaveholders.” Thus, many of the laborers who were able immigrated to the free western states, but those who remained learned to live “[u]nder this corroded feeling.” The degradation of poor whites, the Democratic League proclaimed, was key in understanding the aristocratic intentions of the slaveholders. “It would require a volume to delineate the arts and hypocrisy resorted to, and the false reasoning employed,” lamented the writers, “to impose upon the masses of white labor[ers in the] South, and to make them contented with their disparaged condition.” Slaveowners had, indeed, degraded common labor enough to threaten a working man’s pride. When a poor white man’s only employment option was to work for low wages alongside slaves, taking orders from a de facto “master,” at times he simply chose not to work at all. As Roger Shugg wrote, because of slavery, “Nothing was ever done to promote agriculture, or to better the lot of farmers and laborers. [It] was, truth to tell, a slave state policed by gentlemen; and the masses, having no real voice in government, received from it no benefit.”<sup>86</sup>

The story of the antebellum South’s poor whites – both laborers and the unemployed – is, at its core, similar to the stories of millions of the world’s poor, spanning different times and different places. There *is* a point at which labor becomes so degrading and demoralizing that some people may stop working, preferring to take risks with their futures to avoid the daily drudgery of their current lives. Sometimes this apathy is due to an individual’s inability to earn a living wage in a sixty or seventy hour work week; sometimes it is because of the actual labor itself, which is typically characterized by boring, physically demanding, dirty, dangerous, or

---

<sup>86</sup> The Democratic League, “The Slaveholders’ Conspiracy against Democratic Principles,” (N.P., 1864?), MDAH, 4-5; 8; Roger W. Shugg, *Origins of Class Struggle in Louisiana: A Social History of White Farmers and Laborers during Slavery and After, 1840-1875* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana, 1939), 156.

demeaning jobs; and sometimes it stems from the fact that there is simply no other option available to certain sections of the community. This last factor, especially, creates a sense of nihilism and disgust among society's disadvantaged. Resulting from factors ranging from a completely broken or non-existent educational system, to a lack of access to health care and adequate nutrition, to a legal system that favors the rich and harshly punishes the poor, common wage laborers have always had a multitude of factors prodding them to drop out of a society that does not value them – as laborers or as people. The Deep South's slaveholders had more than disgruntled slaves to consider as they weighed the reasons to secede from the Union. They also had to figure out how to appease – or overcome – angry poor whites. Perhaps Paul Buck explained the South's labor problem most elegantly:

Towards the close of the antebellum period, however, obvious defects of an undiversified economy caused a re-examination of industrial society, and in the process the antagonisms latent in the relations of the various elements of the white population came to the surface. As a consequence there took shape a movement of discontent which promised to wrest political leadership from the hands of the gentry and overthrow the industrial monopoly of the plantation system.

Slavery was being threatened on multiple fronts, both internally and externally, by diverse interests. Slaveholders had little choice but to react.<sup>87</sup>

Mere weeks after Lincoln's election, the *Southern Banner* published an alleged "want" ad they claimed originated in Rochester, New York. Appearing in an article entitled "The Practical Workings of Abolition," the advertisement was supposedly placed by a "respectable colored family" who was looking for "a white boy, 14 or 16 years of age, to wait upon the table and make himself generally useful about the house." Thus, with one scandalous advertisement, slaveholders attempted to scare poor white laborers into supporting the peculiar institution. If they failed to do so, they could fully expect to soon be working for emancipated blacks, waiting

---

<sup>87</sup> Buck, "The Poor Whites," 41.

on them in a servile fashion. Slavery, the slave owners claimed, was much more important for poor whites than it was for the affluent, as it kept them from being the mud-sill of southern society. Poor whites, the argument ran, had much to lose if African Americans ever gained freedom. Their honor and dignity were at stake. The southern publishers of the incendiary “want ad” concluded by warning nonslaveholders about their futures in a free land – futures in which they could expect to be working for black masters. “We trust the time will never come when the children of the poor white man in Georgia shall be thus humbled or abased,” they wrote. Yet soon after emancipation, they concluded, “our slaveholding population would or might lose money...but the poor white man would lose much more, and what is all in all to him and to every man, viz: the consciousness of political and social superiority.” What the pro-slavery writers failed to understand, however, was that assurances of their ostensible superiority over slaves did not always mollify people who were already so socially, politically, and economically *inferior* to members of their own race. For people who had great difficulty finding work, keeping work, and earning a living wage, there were few scenarios in which things could get materially worse, and little reason to think abstractly about their social position relative to emancipated slaves. They were likely more worried about how to obtain next week’s food and whiskey. For poor white southerners in the late antebellum period, freedom *was* indeed just another word for nothing left to lose. For the region’s planters, this type of freedom, especially within a slave society, was potentially dangerous. As one industrialist wrote, slaveholders had a vested interest in ensuring that poor whites had jobs. Otherwise, he concluded, “*It is this great upheaving of our masses that we have to fear, so far as our institutions are concerned.*”<sup>88</sup>

---

<sup>88</sup> “The Practical Workings of Abolition,” *Southern Banner* (GA), Dec. 13, 1860, p. 2; quoted in Weston, “The Poor Whites,” 2, italics in original.

### CHAPTER THREE: CRIMINALITY AND THE FAILURE OF SEGREGATION

*They are now completely under the domination of the oligarchy, and it is madness to suppose that they will ever be able to rise to a position of true manhood, until after the slave power shall have been utterly overthrown.*

– Hinton Helper<sup>1</sup>

*A certain class of white men...ha[s] been suffered to remain in our midst too long, and [their] intercourse with the slave population is altogether too intimate. So long as their presence is tolerated it will be found a difficult matter to preserve the decorum so essential among slaves....There must be...new white laws as well as new black laws.*

– Pointe Coupee Echo<sup>2</sup>

In 1858, Jacob Waddel was convicted of vagrancy in Marion, a county in the heart of the western Georgia blackbelt. Waddel appealed his case to the Georgia Supreme Court on the ground that the verdict was “contrary to evidence.” Although he owned no real estate or personal property, Waddel was a thirty-three year old farmer with a family to support. While he had been seen plowing a potato patch and “doing some other small jobs,” the local superior court concluded that Waddel’s “fancy” seemed to have been walking along the highways, “strolling about in idleness.” In a unanimous opinion delivered by Chief Justice Joseph Henry Lumpkin, the Court acknowledged that the offense itself was “somewhat anomalous”; every other offense involved “doing something,” but Waddel’s “doing nothing” caused him to be sentenced to hard labor in the state penitentiary. Yet in the only vagrancy case to reach the appellate level in the antebellum South, the justices wanted to make Waddel an example for other southern poor

---

<sup>1</sup> Hinton Rowan Helper, *The Impending Crisis of the South: How to Meet It* (1857; reprint, New York: A.B. Burdick, 1860), 382.

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in Roger W. Shugg, *Origins of Class Struggle in Louisiana: A Social History of White Farmers and Laborers during Slavery and After, 1840-1875* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana, 1939), 95.

whites on the eve of the Civil War. “It is time, perhaps, to give them a scare,” Lumpkin wrote, “to admonish them of the old adage, that the bird that can sing, and won’t sing, must *be made* to sing.” And after his imprisonment ended, Waddel sang. The 1860 census listed him as a carpenter with \$100 worth of personal property.<sup>3</sup>

But was Jacob Waddel really arrested for being a “do-nothing”? Or was he merely a victim of circumstance, a poor white man in a slaveholder’s world? Waddel’s “crime”—vagrancy—accounted for many of the criminal cases involving the South’s poor whites. By definition, vagrants owned no property and thus had nothing to lose, and their “wandering about” made it easy for them to have contact with both blacks and other white rabble rousers. Conceivably, when committed in a slave society, vagrancy was more than just mere idleness. Instead, it was a potentially subversive act that exposed the tenuousness of the upper class’s position. Apprehension over the behaviors of poor whites was especially acute in areas with high percentages of blacks. Young, able-bodied whites with no ties to the southern hierarchy, who spent their days strolling about, could easily “wander” into trouble – by colluding with slaves to commit crimes, by forming intimate (and sometimes sexual) relationships with blacks, and by their propensity for drinking, fighting, gambling, and carousing.

Antebellum laws were geared to the preservation of slavery, and the peculiar institution permeated every legal decision made. The stain of racial slavery extended well beyond the master-slave relationship, making the maintenance of a stable, well-ordered society – in which poor whites and blacks were socially separated – imperative. Since planters were never able to achieve complete segregation between the two underclasses, the Deep South’s slave owners were compelled to police the non-slaveholding population heavily, incarcerating lower class white

---

<sup>3</sup> *Jacob Waddel vs. The State of Georgia*, 27 Ga. 262 (1859 Ga. Lexis 50); U.S. Bureau of the Census. Population Schedules. Seventh Census of the United States, 1850: Marion County, Georgia; *Waddel vs. Georgia*, italics in original; Eighth Census of the United States, 1860: Chattahoochee County, Georgia.

people for a variety of relationships with African Americans. While one of the most common charges was vagrancy, thousands of poor whites were imprisoned (and sometimes killed) for crimes ranging from slave stealing to inciting riots and revolts. Poor whites were always involved in the lives of slaves and free blacks before the Civil War, and hard as slaveholders tried, they simply could not stop this interracial interaction. Thus, many southern laws were used to control the actions of poor whites in the antebellum period in ways similar to how they were used to control blacks in the postbellum period. Most historians purport that upper class southerners began using the threat of imprisonment to regulate the lives of African Americans during and after Reconstruction. In reality, many of the same laws had been used for decades to control poor whites.<sup>4</sup>

The fact that slaveholders felt the need to oversee the actions of poor whites is hardly surprising. Certainly by the later antebellum period, the rise of the underground economy, coupled with white laborers' growing unrest, gave planters good reason to be suspicious of poor whites' loyalty. As Ronald Takaki found, by the early 1850s upper class southerners had identified three main threats to slavery: "the external threat of the federal government, the internal threat of the Southern nonslaveholders, and the moral threat of the sentiment of the nineteenth century world." That second threat – the internal dissent of nonslaveholding whites – mattered much more than most historians have realized. The divide between the classes was deep, and the move towards disunion had much to do with extreme inequalities in wealth and income. "We do not believe that in any country in the civilized world such a wide, deep chasm

---

<sup>4</sup> For information on postbellum southern vagrancy, see Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877* (New York: Harper Collins, 1988), 55, 62, 200-1, 206, 208-9, 363, 372, 519, 593; Lawrence M. Friedman, *Crime and Punishment in American History* (New York: Basic Books, 1993), 94, 100, 102-4, 201, 385-6; Alex Lichtenstein, *Twice the Work of Free Labor: The Political Economy of Convict Labor in the New South* (New York: Verso, 1996); David M. Oshinsky, *Worse than Slavery: Parchman Farm and the Ordeal of Jim Crow Justice* (New York: Free Press, 1996), and Douglas A. Blackmon, *Slavery by Another Name: The Re-Enslavement of Black Americans from the Civil War to World War II* (New York: Anchor, 2008).

divides between class and class as that which separates the [slaveholders and non-slaveholders] occupying this plantation district in the Southern States,” a journalist based out of Washington, D.C., wrote a couple of years prior to secession. The two groups “are united by no common bond of sympathy or interest. On the contrary, a sour, sullen suspicion on the one side, and a proud and haughty bearing on the other, are likely to widen the gulf between them.” To fully understand how this “gulf” continued to grow throughout the 1840s and 50s, the functioning of the Deep South’s state and local governments, as well as its system of suffrage, need to be understood.<sup>5</sup>

Scholars still remain relatively ignorant about the voting process in the antebellum South. Questions over how many poor whites actually voted, and how many were *permitted* to vote in the first place, remain unanswered. Some of poor whites’ disinterest in political matters likely stemmed from their own desires to remain detached from wider society, but widespread illiteracy and the South’s stringent censorship laws also prevented the involvement of the lower classes. “How little the ‘poor white trash,’ the great majority of the Southern people, know of the real condition of the country is, indeed, sadly astonishing,” Hinton Helper lamented. “The truth is, they know nothing of public measures, and little of private affairs, except what their imperious masters, the slave-drivers, condescend to tell, and that is but precious little...” William Henry Brisbane of South Carolina, a former slaveholder turned abolitionist, published a pamphlet in 1849 under the pseudonym “Brutus.” In it he condemned the slaveholders’ complete control over southern politics and law, claiming that “The great mass of the people are virtually disenfranchised, their interests utterly disregarded, and their voice not heard in the Councils of the State.” Southern constitutions were intentionally crafted to tie the interests of the government

---

<sup>5</sup> Ronald Takaki, “The Movement to Reopen the African Slave Trade in South Carolina,” *The South Carolina Historical Magazine*, Vol. 66, No. 1 (Jan. 1965): 39; “The Farming and Plantation System in the Southern States,” *The National Era* (D.C.), Sept. 30. 1858

to the elite, Brutus continued, and the resulting “inequality” quashed the “interests of the free laborer[s].” Poor whites simply could not compete – for jobs, wages, or even civil rights – without some sort of access to the political system. “A cunningly devised mockery of freedom is guaranteed to them, and that is all,” Helper bemoaned. “To all intents and purposes they are disfranchised, and outlawed, and the only privilege extended to them, is a shallow and circumscribed participation in the political movements that usher slaveholders into office.”<sup>6</sup>

Although each state had slightly different laws, in the Deep South, both state and local governments were dominated by a small but powerful group of wealthy slaveholders. Slave- and land-owning yeomen certainly participated in politics, and even some of the “respectable,” more well-to-do poor whites became involved on a minor level. But for a majority of the landless, political power, whether in the form of suffrage or civil rights, was never within reach, and it became more elusive in the late antebellum period. While affluent planters occasionally paid lip service to democracy in the years following Andrew Jackson’s presidency, by the 1850s many of the region’s leaders were openly touting the benefits of oligarchy and aristocracy, while condemning the free states for rule by “mobocracy.” Within slave societies, these dens of “oligarchal despotism,” as Hinton Helper referred to them, the entire system was set up to serve slaveholders. Not surprisingly, by primarily serving the richest and most powerful, the government did little to help the hundreds of thousands of white poor, many of whom remained cut off from the entire political system. As Charles Bolton pointed out, the Jacksonian era’s purported democratic reforms did “little to challenge elite control of political power or to encourage popular control of the political process. By tightly controlling the selection of political nominees and limiting terms of political debate to issues largely defined by economic elites, the

---

<sup>6</sup> Helper, *The Impending Crisis*, 43; quoted in Walter Kyle Planitzer, “A Dangerous Class of Men, Without Direct Interest in Slavery: A Proslavery Concern about Southern Nonslaveholders in the Late Antebellum Era,” (Ph.D. Diss., Johns Hopkins, 2007), 49; Helper, *The Impending Crisis*, 42.

wealthy men who controlled both parties eliminated the potential threat to their power posed by an expanded electorate.”<sup>7</sup>

Deep South states, of course, were politically dominated by affluent slaveholders. While over half of the region’s legislators were farmers and planters, an additional fourth were lawyers. Almost all of them owned property and a decided majority owned slaves. The precise statistics ranged from state to state, but as Ralph Wooster described, southern politicians were overwhelmingly “middle-aged planters, farmers, or lawyers, holders of property, including slaves, who were born in the slaveholding states and usually in the lower South.” In South Carolina, for example, four out of five state legislators owned slaves. Furthermore, throughout the region, the numbers of slaveowners involved in government continued to grow in the decade before the Civil War. District and county governments, too, were decidedly controlled by the upper classes. The majority of popularly elected local officials throughout the Deep South were slaveholders, and in most localities, well over 90 percent of them owned land. For those whites who owned neither land nor slaves, any vestige of political power was slipping farther and farther away. Affluent politicians could pass laws to protect their wealth and slaves, as well as laws to monitor and control the poorer classes. Slaveholders also held the power to decide which white men were eligible to vote, and held great sway over every aspect of the election process. White men who had been previously convicted of a crime, or who did not have a long period of continuous residence in a certain state and locality, or could not afford to pay a poll tax of close to a day’s wages, were liable to become disenfranchised. Poor white men’s lack of education and literacy further hindered their chances of casting a ballot. For most lower class white men, having a say in the South’s political matters was an unrealistic dream. As one historian

---

<sup>7</sup> Helper, *The Impending Crisis*, 153; Charles C. Bolton, *Poor Whites in the Antebellum South: Tenants and Laborers in Central North Carolina and Northeast Mississippi* (Durham: Duke, 1994), 116.

concluded, “Suffrage or representation, and sometimes both, were arranged to exclude a majority of the people, white or black, from effective control of their government. They were ruled by a minority made up of planters, merchants, and lawyers.”<sup>8</sup>

Although Louisiana had a different type of social hierarchy than did the rest of the Deep South, the state’s voting restrictions were similar to those of the other cotton states. Louisiana’s original Constitution barred about two-thirds of all white men from the polls. Roger Shugg found that “The right to vote and to stand for office depended on the possession of property.” Adopting a new Constitution in 1845, the state abolished all property requirements for both voting and holding elective office. But the 1845 document also extended the residency requirement to vote from one to two years, which effectively disenfranchised transient laborers and many immigrants. Furthermore, the Constitution began allocating seats for the House of Representatives on the basis of total parish population, including slaves. Louisiana was not the only southern state to base representation on total population – Georgia and Florida did so as well. This practice obviously stacked legislative representation in favor of the slaveholders, conferring “political power on one-third of the people, and put[ting] the planters firmly in the saddle.” With slaveholders wielding so much power within Louisiana’s government, nonslaveholders had little chance of becoming politically relevant. And even though poor whites technically had the franchise, Shugg concluded that most of them “were either unable or unwilling to vote.” There were a multitude of possible causes for their seeming political apathy:

In the country, ‘mechanics, artisans and overseers’ frequently failed to qualify for the franchise, even by a year of residence, because they moved from place to place in search of employment. Hunters, fishermen, and a multitude of poor farmers in the backwoods either lived too far from the polls or were too indifferent to attend them. In New Orleans hardly 7 per cent of the white people were registered voters, and one-third of this fragmentary electorate was

---

<sup>8</sup> Ralph A. Wooster, *The People in Power: Courthouse and Statehouse in the Lower South, 1850-60* (Knoxville: Tennessee, 1969), 33; 27; 117; 92; 102; 98; Shugg, *Origins of Class Struggle*, 121.

sometimes kept from voting by violence and intimidation – generally directed against those who were immigrants.

Indeed, Louisiana's poor whites were so removed from the voting process that Shugg considered the state an oligarchy. "In spite of white manhood suffrage," he wrote, "Louisiana was not a democracy because an active slaveholding minority outvoted the majority of free people."<sup>9</sup>

Like Louisiana, Tennessee's state and local governments were dominated by slaveholders, despite the state having a much lower percentage of them. As Fred Arthur Bailey determined, by the late antebellum period *all* of Tennessee's state officials and judges, with one sole exception, were slaveholders. Neighboring North Carolina had less egalitarian laws, with wealth requirements for most state offices. And even though there was a movement in the early nineteenth century against property qualifications for voting and for holding office, up until 1857 white men were required to own a minimum of fifty acres to be eligible to vote for state senators. This single restriction disenfranchised about half of North Carolina's voters. Furthermore, it was not until North Carolina's 1835 Constitutional Convention that the office of governor became elective. Guion Griffis Johnson recognized "a constant effort on the part of the yeomanry to take from the upper classes the control of public offices. They constantly demanded the popular election of justices of the peace, constables, and of other petty office-holders, but these reforms did not come until after the ante-bellum period." Middling classes, too, noticed the severe inequalities embedded within the system, but their efforts to change things were always rebuffed. If the landed yeomanry could not engage the planter class politically, poor whites were surely out of luck.<sup>10</sup>

---

<sup>9</sup> Shugg, *Origins of Class Struggle*, 122; 125; 128; 139; Wooster, *People in Power*, 15; Shugg, *Origins of Class Struggle*, 130-1.

<sup>10</sup> Fred Arthur Bailey, *Class and Tennessee's Confederate Generation* (Chapel Hill: North Carolina, 1987), 75; Bolton, *Poor Whites*, 114; Guion Griffis Johnson, *Ante-Bellum North Carolina: A Social History* (Chapel Hill: North Carolina, 1937), 77.

Ostensibly, at least, Texas and Mississippi were the most democratic of the antebellum slave states. Neither had property qualifications for voting, and in both, all offices were elective, and legislative apportionment was reasonably equitable. In Mississippi, however, these factors still did not render the system fair. Mississippi's requirements for voting were relatively standard for the Deep South. The white male voter had to have been a resident of the state for one year and a resident of the county/city/town for four months. Indeed, these types of residency requirements, common in every southern state, probably served as the easiest way to disenfranchise poor whites who officials did not want voting. Since so many poor white men had to travel around in search of work, meeting strict residency requirements would have been difficult, if not impossible. According to Mississippi's 1857 statute, the prospective voter could also be disenfranchised if he had ever been "convicted of bribery, perjury, forgery, or any other crime or misdemeanor for which the loss of the right of suffrage shall or may be imposed as a part of the penalty by any law of this State." This clause undoubtedly rendered a decent percentage of the poor white population ineligible to vote. Seemingly, Mississippi should have been a relatively democratic state, given its frontier-like status. But it was far from egalitarian. David Williams found that during the 1850s, the percentage of southerners who owned slaves fell, yet "their numbers in state legislatures were on the rise." In Mississippi, their numbers skyrocketed from around 60 percent to more than 80 percent. Christopher Olsen, a prominent scholar of antebellum politics, argued that a combination of honor and family influence "allowed planters to extend their power and prestige to the next generation." The Deep South was such a highly stratified society that it "accepted, even celebrated, inequality." Local politics, Olsen penned, "was much less democratic or ideological than is often assumed." This divide was clearly evident in one complaint to Jefferson Davis from an appalled Mississippi legislator in

1849. With great distaste, James B. Smith wrote that other candidates debased themselves by campaigning among poor whites, a “perfectly disgusting” display “with bowing & shaking hands as intimate as if they considered themselves among their equals, when in fact they think very differently.”<sup>11</sup>

Like its sister state Mississippi, Alabama did not have property requirements for men to hold office. However, both Alabama and Georgia used poll taxes to disenfranchise poor voters, up through the time of the Civil War. It was well understood that these taxes prevented many of the poorest citizens from exercising the franchise. For example, in Columbia County, Georgia in 1851, nearly a fourth of all taxpayers owned no taxable property, and were thus only required to pay a poll tax. But as Peter Wallenstein put it, “Small as the poll tax on whites might appear, it represented a heavy burden on people with little or no cash income or property.” When poor men could not come up with the tax money, and they had no property for the sheriff to seize, the counties listed them as insolvents, and they lost the right to vote in the elections for that year.<sup>12</sup>

Beginning as early as the mid-1820s, Georgia’s legislators introduced bills to reduce or abolish the poll tax for all whites. In the thirties these bills began appearing annually, but they were never passed by the majority-slaveholding government. The few state politicians who were anti-poll tax continued to raise the topic throughout the next few decades. When their efforts to abolish the poll tax failed year after year, they even tried to put some restrictions on the tax – on who was required to pay, or how the funds would be used. By 1845, state legislators made it illegal for poll taxes to exceed one dollar for whites. The taxes usually fluctuated between 25 to

---

<sup>11</sup> Wooster, *People in Power*, 107; William Lewis Sharkey, *The Revised Code of the Statute Laws of the State of Mississippi* (Jackson, Mississippi, 1857). *The Making of Modern Law: Primary Sources*, 23. Web. 15 August 2013; David Williams, *Bitterly Divided: The South’s Inner Civil War* (New York: New, 2008), 20; Christopher J. Olsen, *Political Culture and Secession in Mississippi: Masculinity, Honor, and the Antiparty Tradition, 1830-60* (New York: Oxford, 2000), 14-5; quoted on 122.

<sup>12</sup> Wooster, *People in Power*, 21; Peter Wallenstein, *From Slave South to New South: Public Policy in Nineteenth-Century Georgia* (Chapel Hill: North Carolina, 1987), 14-5; 45.

39 cents in the mid-1800s, close to a day's wages for many poor white laborers. Still, the anti-poll tax politicians pushed on, proposing several innovative strategies to make the tax more equitable. In 1851, for example, one bill proposed to add the poll tax to the poor school fund. Among other calls for complete abolition of the tax, Representative Kimbrough of Stewart County sought to exempt whites who owned no personal property in 1858. That same year a House member from Marion County tried to end the practice by pointing out how difficult the tax was for poor men to pay. Not only did he believe that the poll tax failed to bring in revenue to the state, the Representative argued that it "is felt by the bone and sinew of the country. While the rich man does not feel a tax of 25 cents, yet the poor man does. Men cannot vote because they are not able to pay poll tax—it is oppressive and wrong." As the idea of secession became more likely, other legislators introduced bills exempting whites above 45 years old from paying. None of these bills ever picked up any traction, however; not a single one of them ever became law. "The poor white man is also degraded because, in some of the states, he is deprived of a vote unless he possesses a certain amount of property," a paper out of Washington, D.C. opined in 1856. All the while, "his neighbor, the wealthy planter, often controls an entire county by voting on his slaves." Indeed, up through the Civil War, the poll tax remained a legitimate way to disenfranchise poor white men.<sup>13</sup>

This type of disfranchisement probably worked quite well. Slaveholding planters dominated Georgia's state and local governments. Peter Wallenstein found that in 1849-50, "four-fifths of all senators and representatives were slaveholders, and a majority held a

---

<sup>13</sup> For example, see: "Monday, Nov. 14 (House)," *Georgia Journal*, Nov. 22, 1825, p. 2; "Bills Rejected," *Southern Recorder*, Nov. 14, 1829, p. 3; "Bills Reported," *Georgia Journal*, Nov. 19, 1832, p. 2; "Mr. Hazzard's Speech," *Southern Recorder*, Dec. 19, 1837, p. 2; Wallenstein, *From Slave South*, 45; "Friday, December 26," *Southern Recorder*, Dec. 30, 1851, p. 3; Bills Introduced (House)," *Ibid.*, Dec. 7, 1858, p. 2; "House," *Daily Federal Union* (GA), Nov. 18, 1858 p. 2; "In Senate, Monday, November 5," *Southern Recorder*, Nov. 15, 1859, p. 2-3; quoted in "Anti-slavery Address in Washington," *The National Era* (D.C.), April 3, 1856.

substantial number of slaves.” Ten years later, “among justices of inferior courts in the one-quarter of Georgia’s counties most densely black, at least 40 percent held a minimum of twenty slaves.” As bad as Georgia was for poor men, though, South Carolina was worse. As Ralph Wooster wrote, the Palmetto State “was the most aristocratic state in the lower South, if indeed not in the entire nation. The democratic changes which swept across the country in the early nineteenth century” were never adopted there. All of South Carolina’s legislators were required to own a great deal of property. As Michael Hindus put it, in a region that already had “exceedingly deferential” politics, “elaborate measures were taken to stifle all popular input.” Governor James Henry Hammond bragged that the right to vote had been exercised “very negligently...from time immemorial.” Manisha Sinha, questioning whether South Carolina could even be considered democratic, described local politics as such:

An all-powerful, planter-dominated state legislature lay at the heart of a highly centralized system of governance with weak local political organization. Carolina slaveholders monopolized not only state but also local offices....State representatives were required to have 500 acres and 10 slaves or real estate valued at 150 pounds sterling clear of debt, while state senators had to have a minimum of estate valued at 300 pounds sterling, also clear of debt. An estate of 15,000 pounds sterling clear of debt qualified.

Thus, the lawmakers and law enforcers of South Carolina truly represented the interests of one class. And this ruling class knew, in no uncertain terms, that democracy could eventually lead to abolition.<sup>14</sup>

Indeed, many proslavery men openly endorsed the tenets of aristocracy and oligarchy, especially on the eve of secession. One planter proudly wrote that “The power in the South is where it ought to be always, in the hands of the men of property and education.” Another

---

<sup>14</sup> Wallenstein, *From Slave South*, 21; Wooster, *People in Power*, 4-5; 9; Michael S. Hindus, *Prison and Plantation: Crime, Justice, and Authority in Massachusetts and South Carolina, 1767-1878* (Chapel Hill: North Carolina, 1980), 244; 249; quoted on 244; Manisha Sinha, *The Counterrevolution of Slavery: Politics and Ideology in Antebellum South Carolina* (Chapel Hill: North Carolina, 2000), 34; 13; 221.

slaveholder unashamedly advocated the restriction of suffrage while condemning the principle of “equality.” And Leonidas Spratt, the vocal champion of reopening the African slave trade, claimed that throughout history, the most successful societies depended on “the greatest political inequalities.” Instead of black slavery uniting whites across class lines, Sinha concluded, Spratt’s “belief in racial inequality bolstered his belief in inequality in general.” By the 1850s, a growing group of incredibly wealthy men, usually born into slaveholding families of great privilege, were brazenly identifying themselves as aristocrats or oligarchs – they simply did not believe in the benefits of “pure democracy.” The famous writer George Fitzhugh actually argued for hereditary aristocracy, entail, and primogeniture, hoping these measures would help curb the scourge of democracy. South Carolina planter David Gavin “bitterly resented the fact that lower-class whites had the right to vote,” calling universal white male suffrage “the most pernicious humbug of this humbug age.” Even female planters like Keziah Brevard, who did not have the right to vote herself, prayed that “some thing be done to check this mobocracy...Democracy has brought the South *I fear* into a *sad, sad* state.” Indeed, the fire-eaters of the slave South envisioned something more than just a slave-ridden country modeled on the principles of the United States; they wanted a return to hereditary privilege, caste systems, and rule by the wealthy few. James De Bow obstinately declared that property alone was “the basis of sound representation,” arguing that propertyless men’s right to vote “degenerates into licentiousness.”<sup>15</sup>

As seemingly tasteless as De Bow’s description was, it may not have been terribly far from reality. Voting Day in the Deep South was a raucous, drunken, hedonistic affair, at least on its surface. Behind the scenes, of course, powerful slaveholders were in complete control of the day’s events. George M. Weston noted that nonslaveholders “have no real political weight or

---

<sup>15</sup> Sinha, *The Counterrevolution of Slavery*, quoted on 225-6; quoted on 224; quoted on 227; 141; 225; quoted on 225; quoted on 225 (italics in original).

consideration in the country, and little opportunity to speak for themselves.” The actual process of voting did vary slightly among the states, but most elections had several aspects in common. White male electors were required to be twenty-one years old, with certain residency requirements for each state and county. Generally these periods ranged from three months to one year. After a voter’s “qualifications as an elector” were approved by a panel of inspectors, the voter placed his paper ballot into the ballot box as the clerks took down his name. The entire process was public, which greatly influenced the votes of poor men. A lower class man who owed money to one of the county’s affluent men, or was in his employ, or lived as a tenant or renter on his land, surely felt compelled to support the rich man’s political causes. Whether this influence was subtle or overt or even coercive, poor white men’s voting habits were carefully monitored. In some states like Alabama, a man’s right to vote could be challenged not only by the election inspectors, but also by “any qualified elector.” According to an 1852 statute, inspectors were explicitly charged with the duty to “challenge any person offering to vote, whom he knows, or suspects, not to be qualified as an elector.” The number of men who could possibly be disqualified was high; a suspected criminal history, a failure to pay poll tax, or even “disorderly” action at the polling place could immediately disenfranchise a potential voter.<sup>16</sup>

While there have been few comprehensive studies on antebellum southern voting practices, Christopher Olsen’s recent work on Mississippi provided insight into the process, as well as the voting behaviors of the population. Olsen found that only the “wealthiest, most prominent men in each precinct” served as election inspectors, overseeing every aspect of suffrage in their counties. Even though the very wealthiest men tended to stay out of state or national politics, they were still able to control elections, and thereby, politics. Inspectors

---

<sup>16</sup> Quoted in Helper, *The Impending Crisis*, 164; for example, see Sharkey, *The Revised Code of the Statute Laws of the State of Mississippi*, 22, and John J. Ormond, *The Code of Alabama* (Montgomery, 1852), 270; 96-7. *The Making of Modern Law: Primary Sources*. Web. 15 August 2013.

wielded remarkable power. Not only did they have the power to decide who was and was not allowed to vote, they were also able to “commit unruly voters to jail or fine them up to \$500.” It is difficult for modern Americans to understand how intimidating it must have been for nonslaveholders to cast ballots right under the noses of three of the most powerful men in the county. These inspectors controlled the local economy. They oversaw many of the area’s employment opportunities. And they had great influence over the criminal justice system. “Especially in small rural neighborhoods,” Olsen wrote, “planter-inspectors potentially held vast power. Not everyone voted alike, but most did – some out of genuine class bonding or a shared masculine perspective but others because they felt pressured by elites.” Indeed, lower-middling and poor whites faced many factors that left their voting experiences far from the Jacksonian ideal of a white male democracy. As Olsen concluded, “The distribution of election-day duties especially suggests Mississippians’ faith in an organic, deferential society and reveals the gentry’s influence in a supposedly democratic, free process.”<sup>17</sup>

Whether poorer Mississippians really had faith in a deferential society or whether they were coerced into voting a certain way based on slaveholder influence may never be known. It seems, however, that on election day planter behavior could go one of two ways: they could actively court the votes of poor whites, offering liquor and a barbeque in return, or they could intimidate nonslaveholders into voting a certain way. Planters, of course, had the power to disenfranchise large numbers of poor whites with a handful of effective strategies that were likely utilized with relative frequency. Moreover, slaveholders probably used their positions as men of means and power to heavy-handedly influence nonslaveholders’ votes. Much of this political pressure centered on employment opportunities or the ability for a poor white to maintain an existing job. In 1832 a white laborer from Charleston claimed that being a mechanic

---

<sup>17</sup> Olsen, *Political Culture*, 125; 127; 125; 129; 130; 125.

was “only better than the slave because he is entitled to vote and must give that sometimes for promise of a job.” David S. Reed, a gubernatorial candidate for North Carolina in the late 1840s, reminded the state’s elite that “The landlord will always exercise a sufficient influence over his tenants without having an additional vote,” since “those who do not own land can never...remain here long, unless the land holder permits him to do so.” Slaveholders controlled so much of southern society that some poor white workers had no choice but to conform. “Tenants, the most disadvantaged voters of all, probably faced the most direct pressure from their landlords; and, as landless workers also moved more often than other voters, they were frequently ineligible to vote and so relegated to the fringes of electoral politics,” wrote Olsen. Thus, “the record implies numerous limitations on freedom of choice and demonstrates that deference and intimidation survived the movement to printed ballots and mass democracy.”<sup>18</sup>

Probably much more commonly than direct intimidation, however, planters courted the poor, plying them with whiskey and cigars and providing transportation to and from the polls. Historian Robert Russel believed that slaveowners “took little interest in and felt little responsibility for their poor-white neighbors, except, perhaps, at election time.” One poor white from Bedford, Tennessee, remembered, “First vote I ever cast a slaveholder came and carried me to the polls.” Alcohol clearly played a prevalent role in all antebellum elections, and slaveholders easily manipulated the drunken masses. “At our public elections the disgusting spectacle is frequently presented,” opined a Mississippi petition, “of a free citizen tottering to the polls, so drunk that he is utterly incapable of appreciating the important duty he is about to perform.” Charles Bolton noted that this “social aspect of election day helped insure large turnouts, even if some voters became so intoxicated that they required assistance in exercising their suffrage

---

<sup>18</sup> Quoted in Richard M. Morris, “White Bondage in Ante-bellum South Carolina,” *The South Carolina Historical and Genealogical Magazine* 49, No. 4 (Oct. 1948): 206; quoted in Bolton, *Poor Whites*, 126; Olsen, *Political Culture*, 130.

rights.” Furthermore, the outright purchase of votes (with cash) did very occasionally occur in the antebellum period. Most votes, though, seemed to have been “bought” with liquor, barbeque, and a hedonistic atmosphere. Indeed, the practice of “penning” was a common enough practice to be called the “peculiar institution of Muscogee County,” Georgia. As historian David Williams explained, the day before elections “campaign workers would round up men off the streets, lodge them in local hotels, get them drunk, and then march them to the polls next morning. The party with the largest ‘pen’ usually won the election.” By beneficently distributing copious amounts of liquor, passing around cigars and meat, and transporting people to and from the polls, slaveowners usually achieved the political results they wanted. Despite the fact that some poor whites voted, the Deep South was, therefore, much more oligarchic than it was democratic.<sup>19</sup>

The few times poor whites were given a platform to discuss antebellum government, they had negative things to say about the planter-dominated political process. Federal soldier James T. Wolverton grew up the son of nonslaveholders in Tippah County, Mississippi. His father, a carpenter and mechanic, was opposed to slavery but could do little about the situation, as planters controlled the government. “It was considered slaveholders was allowed a vote for each slave owned,” Wolverton remembered. Another son of poor whites from Tippah noted that “Non-slaveholders voted for their own class,” once again confirming the fact that lower-middling and lower class whites realized that their own economic and political interests were at odds with the owners of chattle slaves. Poor white S.P. Larkins from Dickson, Tennessee

---

<sup>19</sup> Robert R. Russel, “The Effects of Slavery upon Nonslaveholders in the Ante Bellum South.” *Agricultural History* 15, No. 2 (April 1941): 123; Colleen M. Elliot and Louise A. Moxley, eds. *The Tennessee Civil War Veterans Questionnaires*, Vols. 1-5. (Easley, SC: Southern Historical Press, Inc., 1985), Vol. 2, 723; “Petition for Prohibiting the Sale of Liquor,” Folder “Temperance,” Petitions, 1817-1908, Mississippi Legislature, MDAH; Bolton, *Poor Whites*, 123; 124; Williams, *Bitterly Divided*, 20.

confirmed the sentiments of the Mississippians. “The slaveholders thought they was better than the poor people and would not have anything to do with the poor class,” Larkins alleged. Instead, “the poorer class of people was look[ed] upon about like slaves was...My father would not vote for a man that owned slaves nor would he have anything to do with them.”<sup>20</sup>

Part of the reason these nonslaveholding men refused to politically align themselves with slaveholders was likely due to frustration over extreme disparities in the southern legal system. Vagrancy offers an instructive example of affluent slaveholders using the criminal justice system to their advantage, jailing poor whites at will. Again, vagrancy is a peculiar crime: while every other offense involves the perpetrator doing *something*, the vagrant was arrested for doing *nothing*. Initially, early modern Europeans used vagrancy to control the labor of the lower classes, especially during the transition out of feudalism. Vagrancy laws essentially reinstated many aspects of serfdom; they restricted the peasant class from moving freely throughout the country and assured the employers an abundance of cheap labor. Originally, European civil law “expelled all sturdy vagrants from the city.” Michel Foucault found that in the seventeenth and eighteenth century, paupers were often confined in asylums alongside both criminals and the mentally insane. Originally, English statutes recognized three categories of vagrants: “idle and disorderly persons, rogues and vagabonds, and incorrigible rogues;--all these are offenders against the good order, and blemishes in the government of any kingdom.” Punishments ranged from one month's imprisonment to “whipping and imprisonment.” Incorrigible rogues fell into the category of felons, and therefore could be jailed for up to seven years.<sup>21</sup>

---

<sup>20</sup> Elliot, *Tennessee*, Vol. 1, 143-4; Vol. 3, 1001; Vol. 4, 1132.

<sup>21</sup> Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*, trans. by Richard Howard (1965; reprint, New York: Pantheon, 1988), see Chapter 2, “The Great Confinement”; Howell Cobb, *A Compilation of the Penal Code of the State of Georgia: with Forms and Bills of Indictment Necessary in Prosecutions under It, and the Rules of Practice* (Macon, GA: Joseph M. Boardman, 1850), 38, underlining in the original.

England's first vagrancy law was passed in 1349 in response to the end of feudalism and the onset of the Black Death, which killed 50 percent of the population and thus decimated the country's labor force. These early statutes were created for one reason: to guarantee landholders an adequate supply of low-wage labor. Some historians even dubbed the laws a "substitute for serfdom." Margaret Rosenheim wrote that these statutes ensured "labor *immobility* and concomitant wage fixing," while A.L. Beier proposed that vagrancy was originally a "crime of status" that caused people to be arrested "not because of their actions, but because of their position in society." Essentially, vagrants rebelled against social and cultural norms, becoming "masterless men" who could not be controlled by the local hierarchy.<sup>22</sup>

Thus, in early modern England most vagrants did not belong to the criminal underworld – they were simply economically dislocated. Vagrancy was a problem in both rural and urban areas, but prosecutions slowed as relief funds for the poor increased. Near the beginning of the fourteenth century, though, English statutes began focusing on eliminating criminal activities; someone who could not give a "reckoning of how he lawfully gets his living" was assumed to be involved in illegal behaviors. Communities used vagrancy statutes to protect themselves against strangers, William Chambliss wrote, whether "for fear of their predatory habits, their apparent differences in modes of conduct, and the possibility of their becoming public charges." During this time period it also became common to punish vagrants corporally: the first offence usually warranted two days of whipping, while the second offence meant the loss of an ear. A 1547 statute required that the convicted be branded "in the breast with the letter V." He also had to

---

<sup>22</sup> Margaret K. Rosenheim, "Vagrancy Concepts in Welfare Law," *California Law Review* 54, No. 2 (May 1966): 523; A.L. Beier, *Masterless Men: The Vagrancy Problem in England, 1560-1640* (London: Methuen, 1986), xxii.

become the “slave” of the person who charged him with the offense for two years. Upon running away the vagrant would be “declared a slave forever.”<sup>23</sup>

According to Forrest Lacey, after the Enlightenment, England passed a law that “placed almost exclusive emphasis on *conduct* and did not purport to attach criminality to *status* alone.” But the new English law was not the one adopted by American colonies; almost all of them implemented versions of the common law offense, which simply stated that itinerants without a visible means of employment could be arrested. But antebellum American laws also varied widely from state to state. For example, Virginia law classified nine types of vagrants, while Florida identified twenty groups. Many states, both North and South, considered a wide variety of people vagrants, including prostitutes, able-bodied beggars, gamblers and bootleggers, common drunkards, fornicators, associates of “known thieves,” men who abandon or fail to support their families, and those who simply refuse to work: the “idlers.” Two states even condemned jugglers and “common pipers and fiddlers.”<sup>24</sup>

As America adopted versions of British statutes, a subtle but definite division between northern and southern vagrancy statutes became apparent. Northern vagrancy laws depended mainly on the need for labor—rapid industrialization caused an ever-increasing demand for workers. Northern states enacted longer, more detailed vagrancy statutes, but for all of their wordiness, they identified fewer categories of vagrants than did the much more terse southern laws, and they tended to focus on maintaining a productive population. The slave-based South, on the other hand, always had a surplus of labor; it was unnecessary to force any non-slave to

---

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, xxii; William J. Chambliss, “A Sociological Analysis of the Law of Vagrancy,” *Social Problems* 12, No. 1 (Summer 1964): 68-9; 70; Robin Yeaman, “Constitutional Attacks on Vagrancy Laws,” *Stanford Law Review* 20, No. 4 (April 1968): 782; Chambliss, “Sociological Analysis,” 70; 71; 72-3.

<sup>24</sup> Forrest W. Lacey, “Vagrancy and Other Crimes of Personal Condition,” *Harvard Law Review* 66, No. 7 (May 1953): 1206; Arthur H. Sherry, “Vagrants, Rogues and Vagabonds—Old Concepts in Need of Revision,” *California Law Review* 48, No. 4 (Oct. 1960): 559; 564, italics in original; Lacey, “Vagrancy,” 1207-9; Sherry, “Vagrants, Rogues,” 559; 560.

work. And because the South's gentry had so much power over the region's laboring population, southern vagrancy statutes focused more on the prevention of undesirable activities – especially social interaction between poor whites and blacks that could undermine their control of their slaves.<sup>25</sup>

James Schmidt, the only historian to closely examine vagrancy in antebellum America, determined that southern vagrancy laws served as “instruments of class hegemony” while northern laws sought to “reform” the poor. According to Schmidt, the wave of humanitarianism that swept over “enlightened” northerners during the Jacksonian period caused changes in poor law, policy, and ideology. This emerging bourgeois class reconceptualized the value of work itself; incentives to work, as well as less severe sentences (“paternalist correction”), made northern vagrancy statutes fundamentally different than southern laws. Indeed, Schmidt held that the South's statutes “remained harsher in letter and spirit” than those of the North, but the central reason behind most American vagrancy laws “was [the] reformation of behavior.” This last premise, however, does not hold up when the South's enforcement policies are examined.<sup>26</sup>

Since southern lawmakers crafted their vagrancy statutes in extremely vague ways, these non-descript definitions of the crime allowed slaveholders to justify the lengthy jailing of suspicious people—whether because of their habits, their occupations, their beliefs, or their resistance to the established hierarchy. Forrest Lacey found that in modern vagrancy trials it is commonly necessary to prove “evidence of prior acts, in most cases a series of such acts, to show

---

<sup>25</sup> For a more in-depth examination of antebellum vagrancy in Georgia, see Keri Leigh Merritt, “‘A vile, immoral, and profligate course of life’: Poor Whites and the Enforcement of Vagrancy Law in Antebellum Georgia,” M.A. Thesis, University of Georgia, 2007; Beier, *Masterless Men*, xxii.

<sup>26</sup> James P. Schmidt, *Free to Work: Labor Law, Emancipation, and Reconstruction, 1815-1880* (Athens: Georgia, 1998). For a complete explanation of Schmidt's views on antebellum vagrancy, see Chapter 2, “The Duty to Work”; Joseph P. Reidy, “Review of James P. Schmidt's *Free to Work: Labor Law, Emancipation, and Reconstruction*,” *Journal of the Early Republic* 19, No. 3 (Fall 1999), 568-72; Christopher Waldrep, “Review of James P. Schmidt's *Free to Work: Labor Law, Emancipation, and Reconstruction*,” *Journal of Southern History* 66, No.3 (Aug. 2000), 616-8; Schmidt, *Free to Work*, 53; 61; 85; 66.

that the accused has the personal condition he is charged with having,” and this tenet seemed to hold true in the antebellum South. The typical poor white vagrant, therefore, was arrested not for a specific action, but rather for having “a certain personal condition” or being “a person of a specified character.” According to Justice Hugo Black, vagrancy had always been defined in “terms of *being* rather than in terms of *acting*.” Considered a crime of status, arrests were based largely upon the accused’s economic class. In fact, class functioned as the only universal among southern vagrants. Most statutes stipulated that the offender be without means of subsistence, and many declared that property ownership negated the crime.<sup>27</sup>

One of Georgia’s first statutes to explicitly describe vagrancy came in 1816, condemning “[a]ny person wandering or strolling about, able to work or otherwise to support himself or herself in a reputable way, or leading an idle, immoral, or profligate course of life.” Furthermore, the statute allowed the courts to determine entirely the penalties for offenders. The law remained untouched until 1847, when legislators added two important clauses. First, the new statute specified that the accused “has not property to support himself or herself.” Second, punishment guidelines were set between two and four years hard labor in the state penitentiary. This prison sentence was extreme in relation to the offense. Manslaughter convictions generally warranted the same sentences, and prison terms for assault were usually much shorter. Clearly vagrancy frightened the region’s lawmakers. They made sure that convicts would be locked up for several years.<sup>28</sup>

---

<sup>27</sup> Quoted in Lacey, “Vagrancy,” 1214; 1224; 1203-1204; italics in original. Other crimes of personal condition included “being a common drunkard, common prostitute, common thief, tramp, or disorderly person.” Also see: Chambliss, “A Sociological Analysis.”

<sup>28</sup> Cobb, *Penal Code*, 38-9. *Acts of the General Assembly of the State of Georgia*. 1816, pp. 181-6; 1835, pp. 332-4; 1847, pp. 199-200; 1855-56, pp. 344; 1857, pp. 314; 1859, pp. 69-70; 1860, pp. 44-5; 1866, pp. 234; 1868, pp. 122. All Acts can be found online at <http://docsouth.unc.edu/imls/gagenas/georgia.html>.

Paradoxically, if the offender could post bond “for his or her good behavior and future industry for one year,” he or she would be released. Since most laws stipulated that vagrants could not own any property, the bond clause was seemingly absurd. Statutorily the bond had to be under \$400, but even if it averaged between five and ten dollars, very few impoverished whites could afford to pay it. Thus, such bonds as were posted, came largely from benefactors, which clearly resembled the ways in which well-respected whites “vouched” for the behaviors of free blacks in local courtrooms. This practice obviously served to strengthen the culture of southern paternalism, and under this application, planters controlled more than blacks and women—they dominated other white men as well.<sup>29</sup>

It is difficult to understand why vagrancy threatened the existing southern order, though, without knowing more about the vagrants themselves. Superior Court Minute books for 14 Georgia counties indicate that over 230 poor whites were formally charged with vagrancy in the forty years prior to the Civil War. Vagrancy cases appear frequently in local court documents in South Carolina and Mississippi as well. These numbers suggest that thousands of poor whites were charged with this offense throughout the antebellum South. Perhaps more importantly, extant jail records show that many poor whites were arrested and incarcerated without ever being formally charged with a crime. Yet because of the dearth of antebellum jail records, it is impossible to know just how many people were deprived of liberty without due process. Some of the most complete Deep South jail records come from Savannah, and they verify that many vagrants spent time in and out of the city jail before ever being arraigned. Indeed, it appears that the vast majority of vagrancy arrests led only to confinement; often there was no demonstrable intention of bringing these cases to court. Historian Richard Morris found that in New Orleans, “the recorder’s courts sentenced thousands of vagrants to the workhouse without proof, trial, or

---

<sup>29</sup> Cobb, *Penal Code*, 38.

in most cases, opportunity of appeal.” One grand jury even protested “against this failure to grant due process” to the accused. Several short statements in the Deep South’s county minute books confirm Morris’s research: people arrested for vagrancy frequently sat in jail for weeks and months awaiting indictment hearings.<sup>30</sup>

William Bishop, a poor white arrested for vagrancy in Bibb County in 1847, was finally released after being “confined to jail for more than a year and no person appearing to prosecute.” The grand jury ordered him “discharged without payment of costs he having taken the oath of insolvency.” And Benjamin Farrell, a farm laborer in his thirties, served an undisclosed amount of time in Camden County’s guardhouse in 1820. When he finally was arraigned, the Solicitor General failed to appear in court, so the jury ordered Farrell discharged. In yet another example, Chatham County’s officials twice charged George Horlbeck with vagrancy. After his first arrest, the judge described Horlbeck as “a prisoner in the county jail for some months,” and ordered him “discharged for want of bond to prosecute.”<sup>31</sup>

These stories, along with Savannah’s jail records, suggest that southern planters frequently used vagrancy as an excuse to imprison poor whites without the intention of ever formally charging them. While some vagrants were only held for a week to ten days, many offenders were held without trial for several months, and some were even detained for a full year. Furthermore, many of these poor whites were jailed over and over again—some were imprisoned again just a day or two after being released. Slave owners could use vagrancy laws to lock away anyone who posed a threat to the southern system, even if no crime had been

---

<sup>30</sup> Merritt, “Poor Whites,” Chapter 2; Lacey, “Vagrancy,” 1214; 1224; Richard M. Morris, “The Measure of Bondage in the Slave States,” *The Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 41, No. 2 (Sept. 1954): 224.

<sup>31</sup> William Bishop: Bibb County, Superior Court Minutes, 1846-52, GDAH. Benjamin Farrell: Camden County, Superior Court Minutes, 1820-42, GDAH; Sixth Census of the United States, 1840: Decatur County, Georgia. George Horlbeck: Chatham County, Superior Court Minutes, 1826-36, GDAH; Fifth Census of the United States, 1830: Charleston County, South Carolina.

committed. This type of subjective incarceration clearly supports Hinton Helper's argument: depriving poor whites of personal freedom and bodily liberty *was* a second degree of slavery, and class—not race—dictated who became enslaved.

Some southern officials targeted entire families as vagrants, arresting different relatives repeatedly over a period of ten or twenty years. In more rural areas planters commonly cycled two or three extended families through the criminal justice system over and over again. In South Carolina's Anderson District, for example, the Chastain family served as some of the community's social pariahs. Federal census records show that several households of Chastains lived near each other, and all of the adults were listed as illiterate. Females headed several of the homes, and the predominant male occupation was farm laborer. Poor whites in every sense of the word, the Chastain family became victims of Anderson's overzealous judicial system. In 1846 the district court found James Chastain guilty of vagrancy. Sent to jail on the charge, Chastain apparently did "not get his support honestly," although precisely *how* he managed to survive was unclear. Many men in this rural community repeated this vague testimony, but still, no one claimed that James Chastain was doing anything overtly criminal. The most damning thing reported about Chastain was simply that he owed a small amount of money to J.T. Broyles, who offered to let him work off the debt. When Chastain refused to work for Broyles, whether because the wages were too low, or the work was too dangerous, or simply because he did not want to, he was arrested and imprisoned. James's case, however, was only one of the first in a string of late-antebellum arrests for vagrancy in the Chastain family. In 1849 and 1854, Cooper Chastain was charged with the crime; in 1851, Sarah, Harriett, and Louisa Chastain were all arrested; in 1854 Martha was incarcerated; and in 1856 warrants were issued for the arrests of Emeline, Benjamin, and Mary Chastain. While some of these family members were likely

involved in criminal activity, the frequency of these vagrancy arrests demonstrate that by targeting an overwhelmingly poor extended family, southern planters used poverty as a predictor of deviancy.<sup>32</sup>

While stories like the Chastain's were relatively common in more rural plantation areas, the arrests of relatives en masse did not generally occur in Deep South cities. Indeed, as antebellum Americans became more geographically mobile, the idea of the intimate, face-to-face southern community was challenged, wreaking havoc on a social system long defined by personal honor. Parts of the region that housed larger towns, cities, or even new railroad stops increasingly became overrun with "strangers." Transient poor whites had no local kinfolk, no ties to the area's churches, and no real allegiance to the institution of slavery. Slaveholders, therefore, had no knowledge of which poor whites needed extra supervision – of who would help their slaves steal and drink, who would give birth to free mulatto children, who would demoralize their work force, and who may try to lead their slaves into a bloody rebellion.

Predictably, it seems that the majority of vagrancy arrests occurred in large cities, where poor white anonymity was widespread. It was also impossible to keep the races separate in urban areas, as poor whites regularly came into contact with both slaves and free blacks in cities. Whites arrested for vagrancy tended to be in their late teens to early thirties, and they usually had some type of contact with blacks. Whether drinking, gambling, coupling, or trading with slaves in the underground economy, poor white men easily undermined planters' complete control over African Americans. But poor white women also posed a significant threat to the established racial hierarchy.

---

<sup>32</sup> Anderson District, Court of Magistrates and Freeholders, Vagrancy trials, 1829-1860, SCDAH; Seventh Census of the United States, 1850: Anderson District, South Carolina.

Slaveholders had a long history of incarcerating prostitutes and promiscuous poor white women on charges of vagrancy. They had good reason to control this section of the white population: interracial infants took on the legal status of their mothers, meaning that poor white women had the ability to produce an entire “race” of free blacks—a terrifying prospect for the southern gentry. During his travels through Georgia, Frederick Law Olmsted took notice of poor white “harlots,” noting that “very slight value is placed on female virtue among this class.” There must always be enough women, he reasoned, poor enough so that “their favors can be purchased by the slaves.” What was much worse, though, was that the biracial offspring of these poor white women “must be constitutionally entitled to freedom.” Poor white women who acted in a sexually provocative manner, or had the economic need to sell their bodies for money, had the reproductive power to greatly disrupt America’s racial hierarchy. Slaveholders had every reason to monitor the sexual behavior of white women, especially the poor ones. Prostitutes and “immoral” women could be charged with vagrancy without being caught in the act. Instead of having to produce proof of prostitution, fornication, adultery, or lewd behavior, planters simply jailed poor white women for vagrancy.<sup>33</sup>

This sexual nature of many arrests is evident in the few pieces of trial testimony that still exist. Mary Starns was accused of vagrancy in rural South Carolina in 1846. During her trial a witness purported that Starns, a recent transplant from Franklin County, Georgia, had fled her native state after being charged with robbery and “house burning.” The bigger scandal, however, had to do with Starns’s living arrangements in her new residence. Accused of keeping a “disorderly house” (a house of prostitution), Mary Starns was apparently also living “in adultery with another woman’s husband.” James Burriss, the man in question, had been financially

---

<sup>33</sup> Frederick Law Olmsted, *A Journey in the Seaboard Slave States: With Remarks on Their Economy* (New York: Dix and Edwards, 1856), 507-9, Web.

supporting Starns, and District's planters refused to turn a blind eye to the situation. By charging Starns with vagrancy, the State had very little to prove. Hearsay about Starns's character and sexual affairs left her helpless in the face of southern vagrancy laws.<sup>34</sup>

Yet Starns's story is just one of many. In 1839, Catherine Rhinehart and her daughter, Sabrina Dobson, were also arrested for the offense. As with Starns, Rhinehart and Dobson's court date began with classifying them as transient immigrants with criminal pasts. Jeremiah Satterfield testified that Sabrina "acknowledged to me that [there was] evidence against her mother in North Carolina for murdering her one child." He claimed that Catherine was sentenced to be hanged until she was saved by a Governor's pardon. These accusations, based completely on hearsay, were never supported by actual evidence. But no evidence was needed. The die had been cast.

The impoverished mother-daughter duo, portrayed as lewd, sexually promiscuous women who loved to drink, fight, and generally raise hell, were said to have had a "Continual row all night long, almost every night firing guns, cursing, swearing, and hollowing." But the real bombshell – the one that surely gripped the attention of the entire courtroom – was that the two women were possibly selling their bodies to black men. One witness claimed that he noticed "several negroes around the house," salaciously adding that he believed the black men "are familiar with the women." Elijah McColister testified that he talked to "a negro boy of Blasingame's" near the women's residence one evening. The black man he referred to apparently "had a bottle of spirits," and "said he was after Sabrina and not the old woman." McColister obviously concluded that "the negroes was familiar with the women and that the women was trading with them also." Perhaps the final blow in the women's case came from a relative of Elijah's, Andrew McColister. He claimed that one "Saturday evening 3 or 4 weeks ago between

---

<sup>34</sup> Anderson District, Court of Magistrates and Freeholders, Vagrancy trials, 1829-1860, SCDAH.

sundown and dark I saw 3 negro fellows at Miss Rhinehart's. Their business I did not learn others were hanging around and about there she went out shortly after I got there and did not return while I staid." Sabrina Dobson and Catherine Rhinehart were thus charged with vagrancy for a very specific reason – a reason that had absolutely nothing to do with the law's stated purpose. The Deep South's slaveholders wrote the laws, interpreted the laws, and enforced the laws. Vagrancy charges served the slave owners by keeping poor whites and blacks separated, especially sexually.<sup>35</sup>

When Sarah Wynn, also known as Sarah Clem, was formally charged with vagrancy in Columbus, Georgia in 1860, she had already spent several years in and out of the local jail for public drunkenness. Wynn was in her late thirties and had a rather difficult past. Census records reveal that she was living with her parents and brother, the Clems, in 1850 when she was in her late twenties. Although Wynn herself was destitute, her parents were better off, qualifying as small farmers with \$1100 worth of personal property and real estate. Because of her last name, it is apparent that Wynn had been married and was either widowed, divorced, or abandoned.<sup>36</sup>

William Brown, the first man to testify against Wynn, was a sixty year old planter from New York. An extremely wealthy widower with at least twenty slaves, Brown reported that he saw Wynn "frequently drunk in the streets," he had never known her to work, and that she often used "immoral obscene and profane language." Next, a county marshal admitted that he had not seen much of the defendant in the past few months. Prior to that, however, he had "hauled [Wynn] in a cart to the guardhouse" several times for being drunk, and had also witnessed her use profane language. Another marshal added scandalously that Wynn frequently appeared drunk in public places "with her clothes nearly torn off of her." Finally, Davenport P. Ellis, a well-off

---

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, Sixth Census of the United States, 1840: Greenville County, South Carolina.

<sup>36</sup> Muscogee County, Superior Court Minutes, 1859-63, GDAH; Seventh and Eighth Censuses of the United States, 1850 and 1860: Muscogee County, Georgia.

merchant in his mid-forties, was called as the State's last witness. Ellis brought up new information about the defendant: in recent months he had seen Wynn at Colonel Osborn's house, "drunk and noisy and threatening persons." Osborn, a "man of weak intellect and very imbecile," had a legal guardian to care for him and his rather large estate. Apparently Osborn, despite being listed in census records as "insane," was extremely wealthy. In addition to land and property, he also owned 32 slaves. According to Ellis, after Sarah Wynn accused Osborn of "staying with other women," Osborn ordered her off the premises. Osborn said that she "annoyed him greatly...and that he could not get rid of her."<sup>37</sup>

The two witnesses for the defense, however, told a very different story. Wynn's mother, Jane Clem, took the stand first. By the time of the trial, Clem was a sixty-five year old widow whose circumstances had degenerated considerably, as the 1860 census showed her living with several other jobless "paupers." She admitted that while her daughter used to be "very bad," she had "reformed within the past eight months." Wynn was now employed by Colonel Osborn: she stayed "there night and day waiting on and sewing for" him, and she earned \$10 a month. Several times, according to Clem, Osborn even sent his "Rockaway [carriage] and boy" to pick up Wynn. The final witness, a fiftyish woman who resided with Jane Clem, corroborated the story completely. Wynn "was behaving herself very well while at Osborn's." Census records from 1860 confirm the women's testimonies. Wynn, then thirty-eight, lived with William Osborn, a sixty-five year old farmer with \$2,500 worth of real estate and \$10,000 worth of personal property. Although it is not quite clear from the evidence what kind of relationship Wynn and Osborn maintained, a poor white woman living with a wealthy, mentally deficient widower must have raised some moral concern within the community. Furthermore, Wynn's wild and erratic behavior, coupled with her alcohol problems, probably caused many planters

---

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*; U.S. Bureau of the Census. Slave Schedules, Eighth Census, 1860: Muscogee County, Georgia.

alarm. The suggestive comment about Wynn's clothing is noteworthy, for Sarah Wynn's wanton sexuality and her proximity to Osborn's slaves was a combination with the potential to disrupt the local hierarchy. Because Wynn had acted outside of socially acceptable gender and class roles, she was sentenced to three years in the state penitentiary. She served all but three months of her term. Unfortunately, Sarah Wynn never seemed to improve her lot in life. In 1870 she was living in Muscogee's poor asylum.<sup>38</sup>

Although white women made up a decent percentage of southern vagrants, poor, able-bodied young men comprised the largest group by far. While some of these men had wives and children, many of them at least appeared to be single in census records. With the transience of the poor white population, however, it is possible that many of these men simply lived apart from their families for the majority of the year, working short-term jobs or searching for work. A prime example of poor white men leading a nomadic existence was Edward Isham, who moved every year or two, leaving behind a string of "wives," lovers, and illegitimate children. Victoria Bynum wrote that the women in Isham's life often kept him from self-destruction, but they also enabled him to live outside both state and moral law. With completely absent fathers like Edward Isham, it is not surprising that many of the poor white vagrants found in census records seemingly grew up in female-headed households. Radford White, an eighteen year old charged in Bibb County in 1855, resided with his jobless mother. William Holt, a twenty year old laborer from Macon, also grew up without a father figure. And Ezekiel Ward, charged with vagrancy in

---

<sup>38</sup> Jane Clem and Mrs. Maugham: Eighth Census of the United States, 1860: Muscogee County, Georgia. Both women were listed as paupers with no occupation. William Osborn: *Ibid.*; Eighth Census of the United States, 1860, Slave Schedule: Muscogee County, Georgia. Sarah Wynn: State of Georgia Board of Corrections, Inmate Administration Division: Central Registration of Convicts, 1817-85, GDAH; Ninth Census of the United States, 1870: Muscogee County, Georgia.

Morgan County in 1858, seemed to have been raised by a destitute mother and was supported financially by older brothers who worked as laborers.<sup>39</sup>

The fractured family lives of poor whites often caused these wandering men to be viewed with suspicion. As Lawrence Friedman wrote, nineteenth century America was a “society based on mobility and immigration,” but it “was also a society suspicious of immigrants and strangers, especially those who were detached and alone, without community or social circle or family, without fixed setting.” Several documents from the aforementioned trials mentioned the defendant’s recent move to the area as a reason for suspicion; rumors abounded about these men’s reasons for leaving home. Even if a poor white was from the next town over, that alone was enough to cause some distrust. In 1845 William Avery was charged with vagrancy in South Carolina’s Anderson District, essentially for stealing foodstuffs – mainly in the form of corn – from seven or eight of his neighbors. Described as “a drunken, dishonest man,” Avery supposedly had been run out of Greenville for stealing corn as well. This damning trial “evidence” was once again hearsay; trusted members of the community were allowed to present rumors as facts inside the courtroom.<sup>40</sup>

Still, southern-born poor whites were not held to the same exacting standards reserved for northerners and Europeans residing within the region. As Edward Ayers found, the foreign-born population was less than 3 percent of whites in the 1850s South. Yet they comprised between 8 and 37 percent of the region’s prisoners. People who emigrated into the slave states from free areas arrived with their own beliefs, ideas, and political agendas. In a slave society, this

---

<sup>39</sup> Charles C. Bolton and Scott P. Culclasure, eds., *The Confessions of Edward Isham: A Poor White Life of the Old South* (Athens: Georgia, 1998), 1-18; also see Chapter 6. Radford White: Bibb County, Superior Court Minutes, 1852-56, GDAH. William Holt: *Ibid.*; Seventh Census of the United States, 1850: Bibb County, Georgia. Ezekiel Ward: Morgan County, Superior Court Minutes, 1820-65, GDAH; Seventh Census of the United States, 1850: Morgan County, Georgia.

<sup>40</sup> Friedman, *Crime and Punishment*, 102; 103; Anderson District, Court of Magistrates and Freeholders, Vagrancy trials, 1829-1860, SCDH.

knowledge of the outside world worried planters greatly. They certainly did not want their slaves to hear talk of abolition or to know that blacks were free in other parts of the world, and to accomplish this task they needed to keep other poor whites ignorant of those facts as well. While all European immigrants endured additional scrutiny, Irish immigrants were clearly some of southern judicial system's primary targets. It was no coincidence that the Irish Famine began in 1845, and by the next year southern papers were complaining of "frequent conflagrations" in Charleston and Savannah. "The number of vagrants and vagabonds hurrying from village to village and from city to city," the editor opined, was never "so numerous in the Southern States as at the present moment."<sup>41</sup>

To put this fear of immigrants into perspective, about two-thirds of the people sent to Georgia's prison for vagrancy were born outside of the state or country, and at least two out of the nine women were from Ireland. A list of people charged with vagrancy in Kershaw District, South Carolina, reveals that Irish immigrants (and one German) were still being arrested at significantly higher rates than southern-born poor whites, well into the mid-1850s. Patrick Haffie, James Dawson, James Sullivan, Daniel McBright, John Bowen, Joseph E. McCauney, John Kennedy, Condy McHughs, and Edward Fraal were all deemed "persons of suspicious character." The Irish appear time and time again in arrest records, especially in port cities like Savannah, where John Harper was arrested twice for vagrancy in 1845. A twenty-five year old illiterate laborer from Ireland, Harper was finally discharged after swearing to his inability to pay jail fees. Likewise, John Casey, an Irishman in his twenties, was jailed twice for the crime in 1856 and 1857. But Irish *men* were not the only immigrants who cycled in and out of the Deep South's jails. In fact, Irish women were frequently detained and convicted of the crime at higher rates than men. One of Savannah's most notorious vagrants, Betty C. McLiam, had spent years

---

<sup>41</sup> "Fires in Savannah and Charleston," *Columbus Enquirer* (GA), March 18, 1846, p. 2.

in and out of the city jail before her conviction in 1861. At thirty years old, McLiam, a prostitute from Kilkenny, Ireland, was sentenced to three years hard labor in Milledgeville, serving all but three months of her sentence. Additionally, Catherine Ryan, a twenty-two year old wife of an Irish painter, Anna Clark, a thirty-four year old illiterate domestic worker, and Mary Powers, a seventeen year old prostitute, all spent time in the Savannah jail for vagrancy in the few years right before the Civil War.<sup>42</sup>

Irish immigrants helped swell the already growing poor white population in the Deep South, adding thousands of young, single, impoverished people to an already dispossessed population. As the numbers of able-bodied, fighting-age men increased, planters obviously had cause for some concern. With memories of the Vicksburg Gamblers, Nat Turner, Denmark Vesey, and many other smaller revolts, slaveholders felt they had good reason to be apprehensive. Essentially “masterless men,” poor whites had no one to answer to, no family name to uphold, and thus possessed a unique form of personal freedom. To planters it seemed that these men had no responsibilities; that they traded the duties of men for the pleasures of boys, whether drinking to great excess, gambling, fighting, or cavorting with loose women and prostitutes. One Georgia vagrant was jailed after reports and complaints of his being a “turbulent individual.” This “turbulence,” the propensity for violence, and the disaffection and anger that often accompany poverty, formed a potentially explosive combination. When a human being is poor enough to feel as though he has nothing to lose, and has no real hope for tomorrow, he is often not disposed to think beyond fulfilling immediate, short-term survival needs. Perhaps this

---

<sup>42</sup> State of Georgia, Central Registration of Convicts, GDAH; Kershaw District, Court of Magistrates and Freeholders, Trial papers, 1802-1861, SCDH. John Harper: Chatham County, Superior Court Minutes, 1841-45, GDAH; Seventh Census of the United States, 1850: Chatham County, Georgia. John Casey: Chatham County, Superior Court Minutes, 1841-45, GDAH; Eighth Census of the United States, 1860: Chatham County, Georgia. Betty C. McLiam: *Ibid.*, State of Georgia Board of Corrections, Inmate Administration Division: Central Registration of Convicts, 1817-85, GDAH. Catherine Ryan: Chatham County, Superior Court Minutes, 1859-65, GDAH; Ninth Census of the United States, 1870: Bibb County, Georgia. Anna Clark: Savannah Jail Records, 1855-63, GDAH; Eighth Census of the United States, 1860: Chatham County, Georgia. Mary Powers: *Ibid.*

focus on the present is part of the reason that poor whites never really organized and DID anything about their larger plight – even though they surely understood *why* they were in that economic position in the first place. But this focus on immediate desires also encouraged an individual to exist outside of the law; to break social and moral codes without truly considering the stark reality of the eventual consequences. Slaveholders quickly realized the potentially subversive consequences of the freedom inherent in poor whites simply not giving a damn. And in many cases planters seemed to view the poverty-to-crime path as a slippery slope: petty theft could lead to trading with slaves, which could then lead to personal relationships between the two groups, which may then lead to revolts or rebellions. All in all, slaveholders believed they had a legitimate reason to worry.<sup>43</sup>

Worry was, of course, the consequence of maintaining such a large poor population. This worry would become further intensified as hunger and abject poverty became widespread problems in the later antebellum period. After his arrest for vagrancy in 1841, James Browning was accused by several of his upcountry South Carolina neighbors of stealing corn. His children apparently often pilfered and even broke into a neighbor's house, ostensibly searching for food. Browning's wife was overheard saying that "it was hard to live on bread and sometimes [there was] not enough of that." In a final statement that completely eviscerated his masculinity, Mrs. Browning asserted that she "could do better with[out] him than with him." The extent of the Browning's poverty meant that a poor white man like James could not even function as a master

---

<sup>43</sup> "Untitled," *Columbus Enquirer* (GA), May 13, 1846, p. 3; For information on the connection between violence, crime, and poverty, see Herbert J. Gans, *The War against the Poor: The Underclass and Antipoverty Policy* (New York: Basic Books, 1995) and Elijah Anderson, *Streetwise: Race, Class, and Change in an Urban Community* (Chicago: Chicago, 1990); Anderson District, Court of Magistrates and Freeholders, Vagrancy trials, 1829-1860, SCDAH; As portrayed in Augustus Baldwin Longstreet's "The Fight," affluent southerners, at times, envied poor whites' "I don't give a damn" attitude. (*Georgia Scenes*. New York: Harper & Bros., 1897, online).

of his own home. Frequently physically absent and otherwise unable to financially provide for their families, many poor whites must have felt like failures as southern men.<sup>44</sup>

Thus, even in the Appalachian foothills and mountainous regions, poor whites were arrested for vagrancy with relative frequency. Although the juries in these areas were generally composed of more yeomen than large slaveholders, the fact remains that local officials made a point of jailing their county's poor whites for vagrancy. Several other cases out of Anderson, South Carolina, prove that these arrests depended upon the accused's character, associates, and propensity to commit other crimes. In 1845 William Avery was charged with vagrancy, and his trial echoed many of the concerns that southern citizens had about James Browning. Accused of pilfering a grindstone from a neighbor, corn and geese from another, and various food items from at least four or five others, Avery's guilt seemed pretty evident. But instead of multiple counts of larceny, local officials charged him with vagrancy, likely due to the burden of proof being so low. These few cases from the upcountry reveal that while vagrancy arrests in lower-slave areas occurred with less frequency, the people charged were often on trial for similar reasons as poor whites in the plantation belt.<sup>45</sup>

Edmond Thacker, an illiterate farm laborer who had been recently widowed, led a hard, miserable life. Owning no property or real estate, Thacker had four young children to support by himself in rural South Carolina. Charged with vagrancy in March 1852, Thacker's relatively detailed court records provide insight into the lives of dispossessed whites. Like other southern vagrants, Thacker was basically on trial for his shortcomings as a financial provider, coupled with his propensity for hard drinking. However, Thacker's case differs from most other vagrants in one important way: his original accuser, Early Waters, owned neither land nor slaves. Despite

---

<sup>44</sup> "James Browning - Vagrancy," *Ibid.*

<sup>45</sup> "William Avery - Vagrancy," Anderson District, Vagrancy trials, (SCDAH).

also being listed as a propertyless farmer in 1850 census records, Waters was considered “a person of reputable character” by the court, probably due to his kinship with several local slaveholders. Given that Waters had money and property after the Civil War, he may have been on the cusp of land ownership at the time of Thacker’s arrest. Although his true motives for going after Thacker will never be known, Waters claimed that Thacker “has no land of his own” and was “doing nothing for support,” leading a public attack on the man’s honor and masculinity. One neighbor interestingly blamed the entire incident on “jealousy and spite, which was occasioned by Thacker’s outgeneraled [Waters] in courting.” Early Waters may have lost a woman to Thacker, but he used the charge of vagrancy to extract a quick revenge.<sup>46</sup>

The prosecution built their case around the fact that Edmund Thacker had been offered several short-term job opportunities but turned them all down. Whenever Thacker deemed work too dangerous, or wages too low, he refrained from accepting the employment. Thacker’s inability to economically support his family led to his children begging for food and help from neighbors. The poor, motherless children “were generally by themselves,” reported neighbor John Hembree, and “they generally complained of having nothing to eat – they often asked [me] for to giving them something to eat, sometimes [I] gave them some.” The most distressing part of this story, Hembree asserted, was that Thacker *could* have provided for his family “if he had not spent his money on liquor.” Thacker had apparently been drinking frequently, especially “since his wife died.” Hembree further claimed that the accused “had not worked much at any one place, but from place to place, not long at any one place.” While most poor white men were in the same employment predicament, Hembree piled on more injurious testimony, claiming he had

---

<sup>46</sup> “Edmond Thacker – Vagrancy,” *Ibid.* (note: his name is spelled “Edmond” on the document title but “Edmund” within the trial papers); Seventh Census of the United States, 1850: Anderson District, South Carolina; Eighth Census of the United States, 1860: Anderson District, South Carolina; “Edmond Thacker – Vagrancy,” Anderson District, Court of Magistrates and Freeholders, Vagrancy trials, 1829-1860, SCDAH.

“once tried” to get Thacker to work for him and earn “provisions,” as “his children were badly clothed just enough to hide their nakedness.” Yet even with hungry, ill-clad children, Edmund Thacker refused to work.<sup>47</sup>

The second witness, John Hise, had a slightly more sympathetic view of Thacker, commenting that “his children was clothed as well as poor children generally are.” Hise even saw the accused “plowing in wheat for Cassa Gentry last fall.” But he had the same problem with Thacker that John Hembree did: Hise offered Thacker a job, but he refused to take it. While seemingly a lazy, obstinant move by Thacker, the reality of the situation was more complicated. Hise had offered Thacker 37.5 cents per day—plus board—to work. Real wages in the South had begun to fall in the late 1840s, and they continued their plummet downward throughout the 1850s. Robert Fogel famously characterized this period as a “hidden depression” for free labor. But Thacker was used to earning more for his labor and held out for a better price. Trying to negotiate with his potential employer, Thacker attempted to convince Hise that his labor was worth more than the offered amount. He had worked for Henry Jury for 40 cents a day, he pleaded, and did not need board anyway. Yet when Hise refused to budge at all on the wage issue, Thacker refused the work. Unfortunately for Edmund Thacker, slavery had rendered his bargaining power obsolete. He had to take wage offered or give up the chance to earn anything. Men who chose the latter option were always liable to be charged with vagrancy.<sup>48</sup>

The testimony of John W.B. Skelton exposed Edmund Thacker’s third refusal to work. Once again, a neighbor had offered Thacker a job, and once again he refused it. Of course Thacker claimed to have another legitimate reason for rejecting the opportunity: Skelton wanted

---

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*; Robert A. Margo, ed., *Wages and Labor Markets in the United States, 1820-1860* (Chicago: Chicago, 2000), 144 ; “Edmund Thacker – Vagrancy,” Anderson District, Court of Magistrates and Freeholders, Vagrancy trials, 1829-1860, SCDAH.

him to ditch, a job deemed too risky for valuable slave labor. Thacker “did not do it, alleging his health was not good and ditching injured him.” Thacker, therefore, turned down work three times, while his children simultaneously “complained that they had nothing to eat.” For each abandoned opportunity, Thacker had a different reason for forgoing the job. If southern vagrancy arrests had really been about labor, Thacker would have been convicted. Yet the final few witnesses in his trial likely saved him from years in jail, massive debt, and perhaps corporeal punishment. As a recent widower, they claimed, Thacker had to spend most of his time at or near his home, tending to his very young children. And despite his rejection of employment offers, Thacker apparently still had enough money to purchase food for his family during the most dire times. Witnesses testified that when they gave Thacker corn or meat, he paid for it. Time and time again people commented that it was “difficult to get provisions.” Although Thacker “is in a bad fix,” one man opined, he “has never been accounted a lazy man.” Thacker’s saving grace was the fact that vagrancy law had little to do with labor. Even though he drank to excess, his other behaviors seemed relatively tame – he was not frequenting whore houses, gambling and fighting, or cavorting with slaves. Furthermore, it was much easier for the local government to acquit Thacker so that his children remained in his care. South Carolina did not need the burden of four more young orphans.<sup>49</sup>

Thus, while there were certainly times the accused’s poverty was the only reason for a vagrancy charge, in general records show that poor white male vagrants were ascribed a combination of stereotypical traits: they were considered idle and lazy; they loved to drink to great excess; they had personal contact with slaves and free blacks; they fought, they gambled, and they slept with loose women and prostitutes. Jacob Waddel’s case is a good example, as he was convicted of vagrancy based on his drunken and immoral behavior. The court based its

---

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*

decision on the everyday actions of Waddel—not on one particular event or “act” of vagrancy. Waddel’s case was not substantively different from those of other vagrants, yet somehow he had the resources to petition the county court’s ruling, offering interesting insight into the life of a poor white vagrant. The first witness for the prosecution, Joseph Caswell, claimed that Waddel had “worked on a house” for him two years prior to the arrest, and had “heard that defendant built a room last year for William Walker.” Still, he swore that he did not know what Waddel did for a living; he only knew that the defendant had four or five children and that he had not seen him in the past year. During cross-examination, Waddel’s lawyer asserted that Waddel worked as a carpenter, and thus had “to go about frequently to get work.”<sup>50</sup>

Next John Kemp, a wealthy farmer in his forties, took the stand. Kemp lived about two miles from Waddel and did not know whether or not the defendant worked. Waddel had “come to him once for corn and meat,” but he “did not beg it.” Kemp could not recall seeing Waddel work in the past five years, although he frequently saw him drunk. He also claimed that Waddel owned no horses, cattle, or hogs, and had very little furniture; everything Waddel owned “would not sell for more than ten or fifteen dollars.” James Wadsworth, the third man questioned, lived half a mile from Waddel, and “saw him oftener in the road than elsewhere.” He knew that Waddel had planted some potatoes that year, but saw no other “signs of cultivation” or “crop about the house.” Wadsworth described Waddel’s home as a “log cabin,” and reported that Waddel had also come to him looking for meat, although he offered to pay for it. Agreeing with John Kemp, Wadsworth stated that several times he had seen Waddel drunk at Doolittle’s Grocery, although not within the past two years. During cross-examination, Waddel’s lawyer

---

<sup>50</sup> *Waddel vs. Georgia; Jacob Waddel vs. The State*, Brief of Evidence, filing 9/16/1858, judgment 2/4/1859. Case A-2666, GDAH.

once again stressed that the defendant worked as a mechanic, and “mechanics work about.” Wadsworth replied that he did not know whether Waddel worked or “idle[d] his time.”

Although Waddel lost his appeal, he does not show up in the penitentiary records. He may have simply served his time in the Marion County jail. Clearly, though, Waddel improved his financial situation in the years following his conviction, although some of his prosperity was doubtless attributable to the complete economic upheaval of the Civil War. By 1870, Waddel owned \$150 worth of real estate and \$300 worth of personal property—significantly more than the \$10 worth of furniture he owned in 1858. His case nicely illustrates several points about the lives of poor whites. First, it highlights the exclusion of poor whites from the southern labor system. Waddel’s lawyer clearly expected the court to realize that, as a mechanic, Waddel frequently had to be away from home to search for whatever scattered work he could find. Furthermore, like many other poor whites, Jacob Waddel obviously had a serious drinking problem. Finally, Waddel’s inability to find work near his home, combined with his frequent drunkenness, ultimately led to a very fractured, unstable, poverty-ridden life for his wife and children.<sup>51</sup>

William Melvin McDaniel was charged with vagrancy in the late 1850s. McDaniel, a seventeen year old from Muscogee County, undoubtedly led an “immoral” life. His trial made it clear that he was being condemned for his general lifestyle, not any one specific action. McDaniel, like almost all white vagrants, came from a poorer background. The 1850 census showed that his father, an illiterate laborer from South Carolina, owned no land and only \$200 worth of personal property, and had six children to feed. Like many young men who felt

---

<sup>51</sup> John Kemp and James Wadsworth: Eighth Census of the United States, 1860: Marion County, Georgia. Jacob Waddel: *Ibid.*: Chattahoochee County, Georgia. Waddel was listed as a forty-five year old farmer who lived with his wife and three children.

completely disengaged from society, McDaniel began acting in a self-destructive, often lawless manner.<sup>52</sup>

The first witness at McDaniel's trial, Marshal James Hughes, reported knowing the defendant for five or six years, in which time he had "seen him do nothing for a livelihood." Instead, McDaniel was "a young man of bad character" who spent time at whorehouses in "a bad part of town." He was also known to drink "whenever he can get liquor." Hughes recalled that McDaniel had been locked in the guardhouse several times during the present year – he even broke jail once. The next witness, another county marshal, stated that he had known McDaniel for four years, and that he had seldom seen him sober. Thus, McDaniel began drinking to excess at the tender age of twelve or thirteen. The marshal confirmed that McDaniel frequented houses of ill-repute and that he had "no visible means of support." A final witness further corroborated that McDaniel, who "frolicked around whorehouses and drank liquor," had been locked in the guardhouse for the past month.<sup>53</sup>

Henry Johnson, an illiterate poor man, was the first witness for the defense. Johnson told the jury that McDaniel had "worked sometime" on a river dam "opposite Columbus." Upon cross-examination, however, Johnson admitted to seeing McDaniel "pretty drunk...some two or three times about Christmas," and he also knew of at least two fights in which the defendant had participated. Witnesses Garland B. Terry and John Allen had both previously employed McDaniel. A master carpenter in his fifties, Terry hired McDaniel to work on a bridge for five days, and then to work on a race track in LaGrange for five or six weeks. Although Terry admitted that the defendant had a "reputation of being a rowdy," he had never seen him drunk. Allen, also a carpenter in his fifties, had a slightly different experience. He hired McDaniel to cut

---

<sup>52</sup> Muscogee County, Superior Court Minutes, 1858-9, GDAH; Seventh Census of the United States, 1850: Gwinnett County, Georgia. McDaniel was eight years old. He does not appear in the 1860 census.

<sup>53</sup> Muscogee County, Superior Court Minutes, 1858-9, GDAH.

wood, but after a few days the defendant quit. Allen “could not prevail upon him to continue work”—instead, McDaniel “strolled about town drinking.”<sup>54</sup>

The jury obviously took all of the testimonies about McDaniel’s wayward “character” seriously. They condemned McDaniel to two years in the state penitentiary, where he served the majority of his sentence working as a carpenter. Whether because of prison, or personal maturity, or the War, by 1870 McDaniel had reformed his untamed ways. He was listed in the census as a twenty-seven year old farm laborer with a wife and young son. Perhaps the most interesting testimony in McDaniel’s case provided insight into what many poor white men were probably feeling. In the final part of Henry Johnson’s questioning, he told the court that McDaniel had once professed “that he had as soon be in the penitentiary [as] anywhere else, and didn’t care a damn.” McDaniel’s depression-fueled apathy about his future deserves closer analysis. In *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, Eugene Genovese reinterpreted what was considered fatalism among slaves, demonstrating that many forms of slave resistance actually resulted from submerged anger and resentment. Slaves feigned illness, broke tools, and ran away; poor whites got too drunk to work, broke tools, and bought goods stolen from planters. Shirking, drinking, whoring, stealing, and fighting were all ways that southern poor whites could simultaneously escape and buck a system in which they had no stake. The harsh realities of the daily lives of poor whites – like McDaniel, or Thacker, or Waddell – make it easy to understand *why* these people might have felt isolated within the southern society. By throttling the opportunities of free laborers, slavery and slaveholding interests stripped poor white males of their jobs, drove down their wages, and

---

<sup>54</sup> Henry Johnson: Eighth Census of the United States, 1860: Muscogee County, Georgia. Johnson had \$100 of personal property and no real estate. Garland B. Terry: *Ibid.*: Quitman County, Georgia. John Allen: *Ibid.*: Muscogee County, Georgia.

crushed their sense of self-worth, their honor, and even their most sacred trait: their “whiteness.”<sup>55</sup>

And while it seems logical that planters would be more concerned about sexual relationships between white women and black men, several vagrancy cases involving poor white men and black women seem to indicate otherwise. Since all children born to slave women increased the wealth and workforce of the South’s slaveholders, planters probably did not worry much about white male/enslaved female affairs. But perhaps it was poor white men’s commingling with free black women that bothered planters, as the offspring of these relationships would also add to the free black population.

Census records help to corroborate this theory. For example, Washington Allen, arrested for vagrancy in 1844, was in his twenties and employed in manufacturing. He lived with one older white woman who was most likely his mother, as she was between sixty and seventy years old. However, Allen also resided with two “free colored” females – one between 10 and 24 years, and one under 10 years. It is very probable that these free blacks were Allen’s lover and daughter. Allen was convicted the year after his arrest, although it is unclear what his sentence entailed.<sup>56</sup>

Likewise, John Mitchell, a sixty-two year old seaman from Virginia, was arrested in Chatham County, Georgia. Mitchell lived in Savannah with two free black men, three free black women, and three female slaves. It seems very plausible that he was involved in a sexual relationship with an African American woman. Sentenced to two years in Milledgeville, Mitchell

---

<sup>55</sup> William McDaniel: Muscogee County, Superior Court Minutes, 1858-9, GDAH; Ninth Census of the United States, 1870: Harris County, Georgia; State of Georgia Board of Corrections, Inmate Administration Division: Central Registration of Convicts, 1817-85, GDAH; Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (1972; reprint, New York: Vintage, 1976).

<sup>56</sup> Morgan County, Superior Court Minutes, 1840-51, GDAH; Sixth Census of the United States, 1840: Gwinnett County, Georgia.

died a year and a half into his sentence. Charged with vagrancy in 1820, Lewis Gregory was in his sixties and employed in manufacturing. He lived with one white female between ten and sixteen years old, and two free black females. One black woman was between twenty-six and forty-five years old, and one was over forty-five. In all likelihood, these three women were Gregory's lover and daughters—perhaps one daughter was white enough to “pass,” or maybe both he and his partner had children from previous relationships. Gregory's bond was set at an exorbitant \$500 and could be “voided...[on] the condition that the said defendant was industrious and orderly for the space of one year.” The convictions of these three men probably served as warnings to other poor white men who fraternized with black women. As Edward Isham's story illustrated, getting “too intimate with a free girl” seemed to have been a relatively common occurrence among the poor white men of the state; perhaps planters decided to use vagrancy law to help combat these types of interracial relationships.<sup>57</sup>

Indeed, as Timothy Lockley claimed, during the 1840s and 50s the Deep South's slaveholders “became increasingly concerned” about the interactions between poor whites and slaves. One Georgia planter condemned “vagrants, traveling as organ-grinders and show-masters, having frequently clandestine intercourse with our slaves, and infusing dangerous notions, telling them, among other things, that they ought to be free.” In 1855 Henry Tie was arrested for vagrancy in Kershaw, South Carolina, likely because of his interactions with blacks and other “low associates.” One witness claimed to have seen Tie “with a jug of whiskey conducting negroes out of town.” While admitting that he had “conducted illicit traffic with slaves 18 years ago,” Tie swore that he had been a law abiding citizen since that time. Officials

---

<sup>57</sup> John Mitchell: State of Georgia Board of Corrections, Inmate Administration Division: Central Registration of Convicts, 1817-85, GDAH; Sixth Census of the United States, 1840: Baldwin County, Georgia. Lewis H. Gregory: Richmond County, Superior Court Minutes, 1820-1900, GDAH; Fourth Census of the United States, 1820: Richmond County, Georgia; Fifth Census of the United States, 1830: Bibb County, Georgia; Bolton and Culclasure, eds., *Edward Isham*, 9.

in Columbus Georgia, arrested Ann Willis for vagrancy after she supplied a slave with a half pint of liquor, “without the knowledge and consent of the owner, overseer, or employer.” The sharing of intoxicating spirits between a blacks and whites could certainly preface a range of interactions, from those of a sexual nature to those of a criminal nature. Liquor always functioned as a social conduit between the races.<sup>58</sup>

Planters, of course, worried about any kind of conviviality between African Americans and poor whites. And from rebellion to miscegenation to the underground economy, alcohol was central to much of the mayhem created by the South’s poor. But they also had other reasons to oppose the widespread use of liquor. Drunkenness and alcoholism were very serious problems in antebellum America; few people today can fully grasp the culture of abuse, death, and destruction created by the misuse of the drug. Indeed, alcohol was central to the vast majority of southern fights and affrays, just as it was to poor whites’ other vices of gambling, prostitution, and petty criminal activity. Drinking to excess became such a problem in antebellum America that temperance societies began forming in the 1820s and 30s. Leaders of this movement were quick to point out the connection between poverty and intemperance. “People in the antebellum United States consumed extraordinary amounts of alcohol,” Jeff Forrett explained. “Generally speaking, men outdrank women, lower classes outconsumed upper classes, and unskilled laborers imbibed more than skilled employees. By these criteria, poor white men must have consumed more alcohol than any other group of whites.” J.R. Gillmore, writing for *Harper’s Magazine* in June of 1864, estimated that “half a million” southern poor whites were especially predisposed to becoming addicts, as they were especially “given to whisky-drinking, snuff-dipping, clay-eating, and all manner of social vices.” While historians may never know exactly

---

<sup>58</sup> Timothy James Lockley, *Lines in the Sand: Race and Class in Lowcountry Georgia, 1750-1860* (Athens: Georgia, 2001), 129; Kershaw District, Court of Magistrates and Freeholders, Vagrancy trials, 1821-1855, SCDAH; Muscogee County, Superior Court Records, 1858-9, GDAH.

how prevalent alcoholism and drunkenness actually were, sources ranging from coroner's reports to newspapers to criminal trials indicate that a large percentage of poor white men, and a significant number of poor white women, frequently engaged in heavy drinking benders. Furthermore, hundreds of southerners died from alcoholism or alcohol poisoning each year.<sup>59</sup>

Both the affluent and the upper-middling classes drank at licensed taverns. These were "respectable" places, usually serving food and sometimes boarding patrons. Taverns, of course, were not the target of temperance activists. They primarily concerned themselves with controlling the actions of poor whites, who typically purchased their liquor from illegal dram shops or groggeries. Sometimes grocery stores would sell liquor on the side, but other grog shops operated out of individual homes or make-shift roadside stands. One Macon, Georgia, paper estimated that by 1835, Bibb County had "not less than fifty licensed dram shops, and some eight or ten not licensed." The article continued:

We are well convinced they are the fruitful source of nearly all the criminal prosecutions with which our courts are annoyed; and the bills of cost paid by the county for such prosecutions, independent of the jail fees, Coroner's fees, and charges on the county for pauperism (most of which may be traced directly or indirectly to dram shops) amounts to a great deal more than the sums received for license. We therefore earnestly recommend to the community and city authorities to exert all their powers in diminishing the number of dram shops; and we hope that every good citizen will feel bound to unite his example and influence in exterminating one of the greatest curses that now exists upon the morals and intellect of the community.

But planters did not have much success in stopping the proliferation of groggeries. By the late 1840s, another article guessed there were 500 grog shops throughout the state.<sup>60</sup>

While the Temperance Movement had first gained popularity in the North in the 1820s and 30s, Deep South reformers and politicians initially seemed unconcerned with alcoholism as a

---

<sup>59</sup> Ely, "Few Subjects," 851; Forret, *Race Relations*, 52-3; J.R. Gillmore, "The Poor Whites of the South," *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, Vol. 21, No. 48 (June 1864): 115, accessed in the Alfred H. Stone Collection, MDAH

<sup>60</sup> "Presentments," *Georgia Telegraph* (Macon), Jan. 29, 1835, 3; "Usury Laws & c.," *Ibid.*, Nov. 2, 1847, 3.

social problem. By the 1850s, however, slaveowners finally started to join the temperance campaign, just as many of them began considering poor whites as potential threats to the southern hierarchy. This crack-down on alcohol use in the 1850s resulted in a drastic restriction of rights for poor whites. Like many of its counterparts, one temperance convention in Georgia specifically linked alcoholism to the lower classes, reporting to the state legislature that excessive drinking caused “pauperism of every form,” requiring tax money to subsidize “drunkenness, indolence, and waste” among “a large portion of the population.” The region’s gentry certainly did not want to have to support the families of these alcoholics, and thus had a strong economic incentive to curtail liquor use among the poor. Some localities even went as far as making purchasing alcohol in small amounts illegal, meaning that the poorest whites were blocked out of the market because they could not afford to purchase in bulk. In 1857 the Panola, Mississippi “memorialists” – sixty-four signers, or “at least nine-tenths of the inhabitants who are voters” – requested a local law to prohibit the sale of any amount of liquor under twenty gallons. Twenty gallons of distilled liquor is an extraordinary amount, but the wealthiest yeomen and planters would still be able to purchase it. The law was aimed at one thing only: preventing lower-middling and poor whites from having access to alcohol.<sup>61</sup>

Part of this effort to restrict consumption stemmed from the fact that liquor undoubtedly disrupted the labor market, rendering the drunkard unsuitable for work, or rendered him unproductive or even dangerous. Olmsted reported that the poor white laborers were often drunk and always undependable. In one instance a laborer had received some of his wages in advance—to buy some church clothes, he said—and absconded the next day, “right in the middle of harvest.” Vagrancy trials often focused on how frequently the accused chose to drink and

---

<sup>61</sup> Quoted in J. William Harris, *Plain Folk and Gentry in a Slave Society: White Liberty and Black Slavery in Augusta’s Hinterland* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana, 1985), 69; “An act to prevent the sale of vinious or spirituous liquors in the county of Panola,” Folder “Temperance 1857,” MDAH.

carouse instead of search for work. It is no accident that employers generally paid wages on Saturday nights; they knew that many workers would be too drunk or hungover to perform their jobs the next day. Perhaps this culture of alcoholism helped produce the so-called “Blue Laws” in the Deep South that banned the sale of alcohol on Sundays, as slaveholders would have seen the benefit of prohibiting the liquor trade during the only day that slaves and other laborers had time off of work. Furthermore, if sales were limited on Sunday nights, planters and employers would have more productive work forces Monday morning. The most addicted drunks often worked infrequently and generally only enough to buy a little food and a lot more alcohol. County court records reveal that one or two month benders were not uncommon; after the drunkard “dried out” for a few days he would work a few small jobs to earn enough money for the next bender. Novelist Constance Fenimore Woolson described this work cycle with a poor white character who traveled to the city once or twice a week, “making the journey a pretext for forgetting troubles according to the ancient way.” Arriving with a load of wood, he generally returned “with a load of another sort, namely a mixture of whiskey and repentance.” Drinking undoubtedly “increased a man’s sense of autonomy.” Poor white men chose to work when they wanted to work, eschewing the control of a master-like boss. Getting drunk added to this sense of defiance and individualism: by essentially becoming masterless men, they desperately tried to confirm their own whiteness.<sup>62</sup>

As W.J. Rorabaugh wrote in *Alcoholic Republic*, antebellum America was, in fact, a nation of heavy drinkers. During the first third of the nineteenth century, consumption of distilled liquors continued to increase until it exceeded five gallons per person per year, “a rate nearly triple that of today’s consumption.” Throughout the antebellum period, alcohol was a central part

---

<sup>62</sup> Olmsted, *A Journey*, 83-4; Mildred Rutherford Mell, *A Definitive Study of the Poor Whites of the South*. (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of North Carolina, 1938), 27.

of many people's lives. Many young boys were taught to drink small amounts of diluted alcohol as toddlers. But women were no strangers to the drink, either. They consumed between one-eighth and one-quarter of the nation's liquor. Even slaves partook in this national pastime, Rorabaugh noted, as masters generally used watered-down alcohol as a work incentive during harvest time, "and many allowed their bondsmen a three-day spree at Christmas." By the Jacksonian period, the custom of drinking small amounts of liquor all day long was declining, but binge drinking was on the rise. While this shift surely resulted from several factors, it is likely that as settlers pushed westward and people lived in more rural, desolate places, they used alcohol to relieve feelings of loneliness and anxiety. "When he was sober, his inability to realize his aspirations engendered an acute sense of frustration that increased during long periods of abstinence," Rorabaugh wrote. "A drunken spree enabled him to turn his thoughts away from the failure of his own life, to perpetuate his illusory hopes, to deny the contradictions between his ideals and reality." For many poor whites, who lived hard, haggard lives with no real hope for a better future, getting drunk was a conscious choice, he concluded, "an act of self-will by which a man altered his feelings, escaped his burdens, and sought perfection in his surroundings. Because drinking was a matter of choice, it increased a man's sense of autonomy. To be drunk was to be free."<sup>63</sup>

This "freedom," though, had consequences. Newspapers were peppered with reports of assaults, murders, and affrays committed by drunken poor whites. One article in Macon, Georgia, reported the escape of John and Daniel Jackson, a father and son duo "guilty of corrupt and willful perjury, and...assault with intent to murder. Both...are hardened scoundrels, fond of the dram shop, prone to broils, ready to contract debts without intending to pay, and a burthen

---

<sup>63</sup> W.J. Rorabaugh, *The Alcoholic Republic: An American Tradition* (New York: Oxford, 1979), 8; 14; 12; 13; 169; 161; 151.

and pest to any neighborhood in which they reside.” Suspecting the Jacksons had absconded to Pike County, Alabama, the paper offered a \$25 reward for their apprehension. Another Georgia paper, the *Federal Union*, described two different drunken affrays over one weekend. Both involved multiple stab wounds, and at least one resulted in death: “Both of these affrays were instigated by whiskey. One if not both quarrels originated in a groggery—those pestiferious sinks of inequity that breed pauperism, vagabondism, and crime by the wholesale.” Grog shops, the paper purported, “are filling the land with mourning, and our prison houses with victims.” When drinking to great excess, poor whites often lost their self-control, and this loss of restraint could lead to proving one’s self-worth through violent means. “Fatal affrays” were common occurrences; and intoxication contributed to the deaths of many poor white southerners.<sup>64</sup>

Alcohol, therefore, did much more damage than just encouraging criminal activity among the white lower class. Poor House Records, Coroner’s Reports, and newspaper obituaries reveal just how deadly alcohol was in the antebellum period. Some fatalities were suicides, some were accidents, and some resulted from years and years of abusing the substance. “Delirium tremens,” more commonly known as the “DTs,” or the “shakes,” was caused by withdrawal from alcohol. It produced intense irritation and anxiety, culminating in muscle spasms that could cause the entire body to tremble. Delirium tremens was often listed as the cause of death for alcoholics. In 1857, a painter from Macon, Georgia “committed suicide by jumping down a well...He had been drinking freely, and was doubtless laboring under delirium tremens. A Coroner’s Inquest was held over his body, and rendered a verdict to that effect.” Another old man apparently died after the “day he was in town, and very much intoxicated. A coroner’s inquest...rendered a verdict that deceased came to his death from intoxication and exposure.” It seems that many of the

---

<sup>64</sup> “Petition for Prohibiting the Sale of Liquor,” Folder “Temperance,” Petitions, 1817-1908, Mississippi Legislature, MDAH; “Look out for the Villians!!,” *Macon Telegraph* (GA), May 7, 1831, 4; “Serious Affrays,” *Federal Union* (GA), Jan. 18, 1853, 2.

accidental deaths involving alcohol resulted from exposure. The drunken individual would pass out, usually outdoors on a roadside, and would die by overexposure to heat or cold. A few became unconscious too near to fires or simply fell trying to cross over rivers and creeks. Poor House Records from Adams County, Mississippi, depicted what life was like for a poor white alcoholic named Biggs: in early September he was admitted with diarrhea and fits. Discharged after several weeks, the following spring Biggs was readmitted with same symptoms. A few months later he was back with “diarrhea – which has been kept up by two years of exceptional drink.” Likely fed up with failed attempts at rehabilitating Biggs, the Commissioner finally discharged him in July “for disobedience to orders,” a likely allusion to his continual drinking. Another man applying to the Poor House at the same time as Biggs did not fare as well. Four days after being admitted, James Burns died, “Burnt out with hard drink.”<sup>65</sup>

While drink-fuelled suicides often involved other instruments of death, like pistols or rope, sometimes the deceased drank himself to death from alcohol poisoning. These deaths were overwhelmingly accidents, but there were a few cases with intent. In Walton County, Georgia, a “tailor by trade and a drunkard in habit” reportedly “deliberately committed suicide, by swallowing three or four half pints of raw whiskey, one after another! A few minutes previous to his death, he was heard making use of the most horrid imprecations, hurraing for the d----- and saying he was bound for h---!” While not all drunks extinguished their lives with such dramatic flair, tens of thousands of southern deaths could share the verdict of his coroner’s inquest: “premeditated death by whiskey.”<sup>66</sup>

---

<sup>65</sup> Rorabaugh, *Alcoholic Republic*, 169; “Untitled,” *Southern Recorder* (GA), July 14, 1857, 3 ; “Found Dead,” *Atlanta Weekly Intelligencer* (GA), Jan. 13, 1859, 2; Adams County Poor House Records, 1821-3, MDAH, Reel 5438.

<sup>66</sup> “A Drunkard’s End!,” *Macon Telegraph* (GA), Jan. 28, 1828, 2.

Out of the accidental cases, the wretched life of James P. Young, who died in 1841, revealed the toll alcohol could take on one man. As a poor laborer Young had boarded in a room with other men. One of his roommates testified that “he heard him often in the night groaning but that was customary with him when he was drinking, and that he had been drinking on yesterday.” He did not even notice Young had died until a “negro man told him.” Samuel Gilmer, Young’s employer, said that the deceased had “commenced drinking” about *seven* weeks prior to his death, “and does not think that he has been sober more than four days since.” Gilmer realized that Young “was trembling on Saturday morning and requested for me to send for some whiskey to cool off on.” Gilmer complied with Young’s wishes, but the poor addict “took one drink and in a very short time threw it up; he said that lately it served him that way when he took it in the morning.” Still, somehow, Young “went on and did a pretty good days work...after a spell of drinking last year he had something of a fit.”<sup>67</sup>

Variations of Young’s story appear in every single southern county’s coroner’s reports or death records. For instance, Benjamin Cockroft’s body was found “lying on his back dead with jug by him.” He was not known to have “been sober long at a time for the last two or three months.” And John Prince’s corpse was found in Greenville, South Carolina in 1856. Eli Castle, listed in the 1850 census as an illiterate laborer with six young children, testified about Prince’s death. Castle apparently sold whiskey for \$1 a gallon, and Prince desperately wanted to get drunk the day of his death. “At Barberrys,” Castle recalled, Prince had pawned his coat for half a gallon of whiskey. The last Castle heard from Prince, he was going into town to “sober up and earn money to get his coat back.” But Prince never made it back into town. The coroner listed his cause of death as “excessive use of spirituous liquors and lying in the hot sun.” In yet another instance, around dusk one night near a piazza in Edgefield, South Carolina, R. Mackgrath was

---

<sup>67</sup> “August 22, 1841,” Abbeville County, Coroner's inquisition books, 1840-1849, SCDAH.

talking with a group of five or six people. Witness W.L. Parmela overheard “some person offer to bet five dollars that Mackgrath could not drink a pint of gin at one drink.” But Mackgrath, confident in his abilities, quickly drank down the pint. Throwing the flask to the ground, Mackgrath continued to converse with his friends. Then he “made off towards Mr. Glovers, but fell in a few minutes after getting in the piazza.” Mackgrath died soon afterwards. These poor white men needed to relax and unwind, and had a number of legitimate reasons to want to escape their current realities. They could not, with any sense of self-awareness, waste time dreaming of the future; they needed something more immediate, something that lightened their present. Simply stated, poor whites needed to psychologically escape from the drudgery of their daily lives.<sup>68</sup>

Aside from the death of the drinker, alcohol was also partially responsible for the loss of thousands of other lives. Whether liquor helped cause a fight, or intensified domestic violence, it played a part in many antebellum disturbances. James Martin stabbed Daniel Dougherty to death in “the vicinity of the drinking saloon adjoining the Holland House” in Atlanta. In Augusta, Samuel Wilson, a painter, “was shot down and instantly killed in the streets on Saturday night” by a drunkard “who was currently lodged in the county jail.” Another nearby man was killed “by a blow on the head from a brick.” Both these homicides, the local newspaper lamented, were “Rum’s Doings.” And in February of 1860, a thirty year old farm laborer named John Saunders lost his life after drunkenly insulting Addison Attaway in Hancock County, Georgia. The two men had both been drinking at A. Quill’s grocery, and by all accounts appeared friendly at first. After the men became inebriated, however, a fight quickly ensued. Saunders called Attaway a

---

<sup>68</sup> “March 18, 1847,” Edgefield County, Coroner's inquisition books, 1844-1902, SCDAH; “John H. Prince,” Greenville County, Court of General Sessions, Coroner’s Inquisitions, 1849-1941, SCDAH; Seventh Census of the United States, 1850: Greenville County, South Carolina; “R. Mackgrath,” Edgefield County, Coroner's inquisition books, 1844-1902, SCDAH.

“God damn shit ass.” Attaway called him a liar, and Saunders immediately attacked him. Attaway retaliated by grabbing the nearest whiskey decanter and whacking Saunders across the skull, prematurely ending his life over a trifling, drunken insult.<sup>69</sup>

Slave owners had many reasons to keep poor whites away from alcohol, but the maintenance of the slave system was obviously of great importance. Regardless of the law, wealthy southerners could buy alcohol whenever they wanted – only poor whites were charged with crimes involving drunkenness or the liquor trade. As these frequent arrests prove, much of the poor population, whether black or white, had easy and continual access to alcohol in the underground economy. With liquor averaging forty cents a gallon, a pint only cost a nickel throughout much of the antebellum South. Even the poorest whites and slaves could afford to purchase this inexpensive commodity. More commonly, though, the South’s two underclasses used liquor itself as currency. Planters knew that runaways could usually spend a night or two with a poor white in exchange for alcohol. Indeed, spirituous liquor seemed to be the driving force behind many of the region’s crimes, especially larceny. One African American woman recalled the relationship between slaves and poor whites on the eve of the Civil War: her masters “didn’t never allow us niggers to mix with what they called the po’ white trash; they always said they would learn us how to steal and drink; it was the truth, too.”<sup>70</sup>

Historian Avery Craven summarized the importance of alcohol in black-poor white interactions: “Sometimes the Negro slipped away to labor at night in the fields of a less energetic white in return for his liquor; sometimes a system of theft was perfected by which plantation equipment and supplies passed in payments; sometimes the black economized his own rations

---

<sup>69</sup> “Homicide,” *Atlanta Weekly Intelligencer*, April 19, 1855, p. 2; “Two Men Killed in Two Days,” *Atlanta Weekly Intelligencer*, Dec. 30, 1857, p. 2; “John H. Saunders,” Hancock County, Superior Court, Proceedings of Coroners Inquests, GDAH; Eighth Census of the United States, 1860: Hancock County, Georgia.

<sup>70</sup> Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, 641-2. “Now Supported by Children She Raised,” *American Slave*, Vol. 18 (Fisk), 215.

that he might secretly exchange his surplus for the means of a spree.” Traveler Daniel Hundley also noticed the effect of alcohol on black/poor white interactions. He proposed that abolitionists focus their attention on the South’s white groggery-shop keepers, as “they can tell you who are the most reckless, daring, villainous, and discontented of negro men.” He wondered why abolitionists did not “initiate” these liquor-dealing lower class whites into their “secret plots for fostering negro insurrections, for poisoning, maiming, and murdering the white families of the South.”<sup>71</sup>

Furthermore, because both cities and rural areas housed brothels and “disorderly houses,” liquor was often assumed to play a part in black men’s “improper association” with white women, especially prostitutes. Alcohol clearly enabled—and even encouraged—personal relationships between the races, and for that reason alone slaveholders needed to tightly regulate the liquor trade. The Grand Jury of Marion County, Georgia, linked the two practices together in 1858:

We sincerely deplore the alarming prevalence of crime and immoral practices in the community, and...we cannot resist the conclusion that they are to be ascribed in almost every instance to the use and sale of intoxicating liquors...To this cause we ascribe the number of cases proffered by this Jury against divers[e] persons for vagrancy, murder, and other violations of the law...That trading with and furnishing ardent spirits to our negroes prevail to a considerable extent in our midst is very generally believed...We hope all good citizens will use more than ordinary diligence to ascertain who these violators of the law are, and prosecute them to the fullest extent of it, then we may expect that vagrancy and bartering with negroes will cease to some extent.

Likewise, in Mississippi, a “Petition for Prohibiting the Sale of Liquor” from the 1850s called for the end of the alcohol trade, as “illegal and clandestine traffic is continually kept up by corrupt men with our slaves, by which they are rendered disobedient and tempted to dishonesty.”

Michael Hindus found that in South Carolina, the prohibition against selling liquor to slaves

---

<sup>71</sup> Avery O. Craven, “Poor Whites and Negroes in the Antebellum South.” *Journal of Negro History* 15, No.1 (Jan. 1930): 18-20; Daniel R. Hundley, *Social Relations in Our Southern States* (New York: Henry B. Price, 1860), 231.

suddenly became widely enforced in the late 1850s, reflecting slaveholders' unease about the underground economy. While selling alcohol to slaves made up only 7 out of 1,249 indictments between 1800 and 1842, in the two years from 1857 to 1859 the offense accounted for 1 of 16 criminal trials in the state.<sup>72</sup>

Planters had long suspected white men involved in the liquor trade of being abolitionists. According to their logic, anyone who served slaves liquor knew that he was putting the safety of the white population in jeopardy. Most American slave revolts involved spirituous liquors, and this fact continued to haunt the Deep South's slaveholders, who genuinely feared the emboldening qualities of the drug. As Daniel Hundley noted, "Whenever two criminals have the same terrible secret to keep, there is sure to spring up a sympathy betwixt them; hence, there is a real sympathy between the slaves and the grogery keepers, and this is why the latter are sometimes abolitionists." Thus, simply because poor whites and slaves were illegally trading together, they were united against a common foe: the slaveowner. In 1860, Judge I.L. Harris warned the people in his Georgia county about the trouble that accompanied alcohol sales in the underground economy. "Selling liquor to slaves is very common in our midst," he lamented, and "The law is violated by the hour...Much of this liquor is doubtlessly purchased through the instrumentality of trifling white boys and vagrant white men." Because of the interaction between these two groups, slaveholders had real reasons to worry. Judge Harris admonished his peers, brashly stating, "You may talk of abolition incendiaries, exciting our slaves to insurrection, while he, who supplies them with liquor, is doing them more damage..." Planters clearly recognized the precariousness of the situation, and in the few years before secession they used every resource available to end the liquor trade between poor whites and blacks. Regardless

---

<sup>72</sup> Bolton, *Poor Whites*, 50; "Georgia, Marion County, General Presentments of the Grand Jury, Panel No. 1, March Term 1858," *Columbus Enquirer* (GA), March 16, 1858, p.3; "Petition for Prohibiting the Sale of Liquor," MDAH; Hindus, *Prison and Plantation*, 76-7.

of the stringency of their efforts, though, they largely failed. For people who had little prospect for a better future, and every reason in the world to escape the present, the threat of jail time had little bearing in their decision to imbibe. Whether black or poor white, liquor offered unfree and nominally free people a chance to experience freedom, if for but a brief moment.<sup>73</sup>

Aside from the alcohol trade, however, the bartering of foodstuffs and “provisions” made up a sizable percentage of transactions in the underground economy. Ex-slaves often recounted times of stealing from their masters for their own consumption. But they also frequently added that poor whites had some influence over their pilfering. Octavia George believed that “poor white folk are to blame for the Negroes stealing because they would get the Negroes to steal their master’s corn, hogs, chickens and many other things and sell it to them for practically nothing.” Another woman similarly recalled that “other niggers off other places would steal from the masters and sell to po’ white folks, and they would give them things for it. That’s how they did on my place.” The underground economy had become so disruptive in the Deep South that, by the 1840s, county officials began cracking down on peddling licenses in an effort to curb illegal trading. Ex-slave Charles Crawley was possibly referring to these licenses when he told his interviewer that poor whites had to get “passes” from slaveholders. “Did you know poor whites like slaves had to get a pass? I mean, a remit like us slaves, to sell anything and to go places, or do anything. Just as we colored people, they had to go to some big white man.” His former master was apparently rather fickle in his decisions to write “passes” for poor whites, causing Crawley to proclaim that “Old Master was more hard on them poor white folks then he was on us niggers.”<sup>74</sup>

---

<sup>73</sup> Quoted in Ayers, *Vengeance and Justice*, 130-1; “Judge Harris’ Charge to the Grand Jury,” *Southern Recorder* (GA), March 6, 1860, 3.

<sup>74</sup> Octavia George, *American Slave*, Vol. 13 (OK), 111-2; “When It’s Right to Steal From Your Master,” *Ibid.*, Vol. 18 (Fisk), 36; Charles Crawley, *Ibid.*, Vol. 17 (VA), 9-10.

Thus, the interracial trading network clearly concerned the planter class, who realized that the interaction of free blacks, slaves, and poor whites meant a majority of southerners were already colluding in open defiance of the slaveholders. J.J. Rainwater, a poor white from Mississippi, skipped town to avoid arrest for “unlawfully receiving a side of bacon from a slave.” Also accused of accepting stolen cash from the same slave, Rainwater had been smart to abscond, as the local justice of the peace determined a “palpable...case of guilt.” Rainwater’s indiscretions ultimately earned him “the condemnation of the public as a *dangerous man in a slave community*.” Indeed, frequent contact between the underclasses supposedly laid the groundwork for revolt and rebellion. Planters knew they had to intensify their efforts at segregation, heavily policing the poorer segment of the white population. Both slave patrols and vigilance committees took on this task, monitoring, as Sally Hadden noted, “not only slaves, but the shadowy underworld inhabited by poor whites who traded forbidden liquor and stolen farm goods with them.” Many areas in the Deep South called for stricter regulations by the patrols as the antebellum period wore on. One local Farmers’ Club even implored the patrol to take action against poor whites, encouraging their arrest and punishment: “There is a class of white men about here that a patrol would do good in [c]atching those Hunting Fishing & Ste[a]lling rascals...they could take them up & prosecute them & this should be done.” The increasing frequency of bi-racial interaction, especially in the underground economy, had slaveholders trying to eliminate traffickers’ privileges of white citizenship in the 1850s. Attempting to restrict the Constitutional rights of poor whites, slaveowning lawmakers called for the “imposition of civil disabilities,” essentially the denial of legal rights and privileges to people who had been convicted of crimes. These civil disabilities, of course, would permanently disenfranchise the convict. Simultaneously, planters proposed the admission of slave testimony to help convict poor

whites of criminal activity. None of these measures were particularly surprising. As Hadden concluded, because poor whites “sometimes ran illicit meeting houses where insurrections were discussed, [they] posed too great a threat to the white social order” for the southern planters to ignore.<sup>75</sup>

Slave stealing was yet another reason for planters to worry about the activities of poor whites. Most cases generally fell into one of two categories. The first scenario was literal – a poor white would simply kidnap a slave and flee the area, either keeping the slave for himself or selling the slave at another location. Also known as “blackbirding,” the practice was common enough to cause concern, as a stolen slave could mean a thousand dollar-plus hit for the slave owner. Andrew Simms, enslaved in northern Florida, recalled that “other whitefolks... caused troubles.” They would “Sneak around where there was lots of the black children on the plantation and steal them. Take them poor children off and sell them.” The second type of slave stealing was done at the slave’s behest; sometimes a poor white would receive money for helping slaves out of the county and nearer to freedom, and sometimes they would simply carry away a lover or child or friend.<sup>76</sup>

Personal relationships between whites and blacks could possibly have been the predominant reason for slave stealing. In many instances, single, unattached men “kidnapped” young black women, as in the case of Bedford Head, charged with the offense in 1859 for stealing sixteen year old Harriet and fifty year old Millie. While Head’s crime was unremarkable for the time, slaveholders throughout the South sought both federal and local solutions to derail this aspect of the underground railroad. Charles Bolton underscored the seriousness of the

---

<sup>75</sup> Mississippi Legislature, Petitions, 1817-1908, “Petition,” Folder “Various Requests 1857,” MDAH, italics added; Sally Hadden, *Slave Patrols: Law and Violence in Virginia and the Carolinas* (Cambridge: Harvard, 2001), 104; quoted in J Harris, *Plain Folk and Gentry*, 68; Planitzer, “A Dangerous Class,” 42; Hadden, *Slave Patrols*, 104.

<sup>76</sup> Andrew Simms, *American Slave*, Vol. 7 (OK), 296.

activity, finding that in 1856, almost 10 percent of Mississippi's state prisoners "were incarcerated for 'negro stealing.' Many...had been guilty only of helping slaves escape bondage." The actual number of men incarcerated throughout the Deep South for slave stealing will always be underestimated. Since county-level minute books and other legal documents lacked a system of standardization, different counties listed crimes under disparate headings. There are many instances in which charges for larceny – even "simple larceny" – were actually cases of slave stealing. Without any trial transcripts or notes, it is impossible to know how many southerners were prosecuted for the offense.<sup>77</sup>

A case out of Muscogee County, Georgia, gives one scenario for how these "slave stealings" materialized. In November of 1859, just two years before secession, Simeon Perry, Ephraim Knowles, and Matthew Axam were tried for "taking" three slaves with "intent to steal." Several other poor white men were arrested and tried for more minor offenses in this case. The three slaves were owned by three different slaveholders. Sarah, twenty-five years old, Amey, a "copper colored" thirty year old, and Buck, forty, were valued by the court to be worth about \$1000 each. The star witness happened to be at Simeon Perry's house when the men hatched the plans to steal the slaves. He claimed that Ephraim Knowles asked Simeon Perry to "come to Columbus to move a family that has just come on boat from Eufala." When Perry responded that "he did not have enough to support his family while he was gone, Mr. Knowles replied that he would give him fifty dollars for the trip," the witness continued. To sweeten the deal, Knowles then reached into his pocket and pulled out thirteen dollars "in papers," extending his offering to Perry. Simeon Perry, who had three children to feed, ultimately decided to accept the cash, immediately handing the banknotes over to his wife. Several days later, Perry was arrested by the local law enforcement for hiding the three contraband slaves in a wagon. Although only

---

<sup>77</sup> Muscogee County, Superior Court Minutes, 1859-63, GDAH; Bolton, *Poor Whites*, 108-9.

disparate pieces of the story were recounted in the testimony, all of the accused were found guilty. Perry, Axam, and one other man were all sentenced to ten years hard labor in the penitentiary. Ephraim Knowles, who orchestrated the entire heist, was given six years. The severity of their punishments revealed that slaveholders took their crime very seriously.<sup>78</sup>

Just over a year later, on the actual day of South Carolina's secession, several men were tried for the murder of a reputed underground railroader in Edgefield County. James Reynolds, the eighteen year old son of a poor landless laborer, was ruthlessly killed by the heirs of a slaveholder for being "an abolitionist." The murderers, Joseph, Wade, and Musco Samuel, were the teenage sons of Musco Samuel, Sr., a farmer who owned twelve slaves in addition to \$3500 worth of real estate and personal property. Eye-witnesses described the brothers berating Reynolds, incredulously asking "how he dared to insult" them, accusing Reynolds of telling "damned" lies. Joseph Musco, the eldest, "abused the deceased very much," labeling Reynolds an abolitionist who "had run negroes to free states and freed them." Further accusing the poor man of taking money to the escaping slaves, the Musco brothers beat Reynolds mercilessly. Joseph even attempted to shoot the victim before being stopped by more level-headed bystanders. All the while James Reynolds reacted in a calm manner, saying very little "except that he never denied anything that he did." He made "no show of fighting whatever and used no insulting language," yet he lost his life after a particularly powerful blow to the head. Joseph Musco had traded his gun for a stick, and literally beat the underground railroader to death.

---

<sup>78</sup> Muscogee County, Superior Court Minutes, 1859-63, GDAH; Simeon Perry: Eighth Census of the United States, 1860: Muscogee County, Georgia. In 1860 he was listed as a forty-five year old with three teenage children and a wife. No occupation is listed; instead it says "penitentiary – stealing." His family owned \$100 of personal property but no land. Matthew Axam: *Ibid.*: Baldwin County, Georgia: Listed as an illiterate, common laborer, he was in the state penitentiary for "simple larceny."

James Reynolds – a poor, white, nonslaveholding young man – ultimately sacrificed his life for his involvement in disrupting the slave system.<sup>79</sup>

Not all slave stealers, of course, were abolitionists. In fact, the most well-known kidnapper, John A. Murrell, was an infamous southern “land pirate” who tried to ignite a massive slave uprising in 1835. Murrell, the original American outlaw, traveled all over the Deep South, plundering slaveholders, stealing and reselling slaves, and generally raising hell. Amassing a band of scores (some accounts claimed hundreds) of men, Murrell and his bandits were considered “idle, lazy, drunken vagabonds, that spend all their time in gaming and horse racing, and never do a stroke of work for an honest living.” Much of Murrell’s turbulent life was exposed when a former follower-turned-informant published a book detailing his life and crimes, including an extremely detailed plan to lead a massive slave uprising. Apparently slated to take place in southwest Mississippi on Christmas Day 1835, the Murrellites’ “plan” was uncovered in the early summer. In the days leading up to the festivities of July 4<sup>th</sup>, tensions ran high throughout the region. Several southern cities arrested lower-status whites and slaves who were supposedly involved in plotting the uprising. Vigilance committees throughout the Deep South tried and even executed suspects, both white and black. The Mississippi city of Vicksburg resolved to purge all potentially-troublesome white gamblers from its midst. During this eradication, a mob of citizens stormed the house of notorious gamblers, leading to a shootout in which a local doctor was killed. The “Vicksburg Gamblers,” as the men inside the house came to be known, were led by Joshua Cotton and William Saunders, laborers who worked on Mississippi River steamboats. The gamblers, who precariously existed “on the fringes of white

---

<sup>79</sup> Edgefield County, Coroner's Inquisition Books, 1844-1902, SCDAH; James Reynolds: Eighth Census of the United States, 1860: Edgefield District, South Carolina. His father was a 52 year old laborer with no land and \$50 of personal property. Musco Samuel, *Ibid.*, Eighth Census of the United States, 1860, Slave Schedule: Edgefield District, South Carolina. Samuel was a farmer who lived with 13 “adult” or teenaged children. Sons were listed as “J.G.” (Joseph) 21, “W.C.” (Wade) 19, and “M” (Musco Jr.) 17.

society,” were quickly given extra-legal trials by a committee of thirteen “respectable” citizens, who “discovered that the evidence of a conspiracy was conclusive.” Joshua Cotton, under the duress of torture, confessed his guilt and admitted to being an “accomplice of the celebrated Murrell.” On July 6<sup>th</sup> 1835, five white men were hanged in the slave state of Mississippi. Seven others were flogged and banished.<sup>80</sup>

Joshua Rothman, the leading scholar of the affair, proposed that Vicksburg’s citizens “were not just hanging gamblers. They were all inventing a respectable place for themselves in Jacksonian America.” As the southwest was an unpredictable, untamed place, the region’s slaveholders—as well as slaveowning aspirants—sought to create order from the chaos. They hoped to establish a stable place for their plantations, slaves, and other investments. Rothman identified eight out of the ten men complicit in hanging the gamblers as middling class men who were attempting to rise into the upper class. Because these young professionals were socially ascendant, they had much more to prove to the established planters of the region. They had to affirm their allegiance to slavery, and demonstrate that they were wholly unlike the drinking, fighting, gambling, unemployed poor white trash. To prove their worth as men of honor, wrote Rothman, they, “not unlike their northern counterparts, sought mantles of moral and cultural authority in their cities and towns.” Yet unlike their compatriots outside of slave country, they employed vigilante violence against other whites to substantiate their claims of legitimacy and respectability.<sup>81</sup>

---

<sup>80</sup> James L. Penick, *The Great Western Land Pirate: John A. Murrell in Legend and History* (Columbia: Missouri, 1982); Augustus Q. Walton (AKA Virgil Stewart), *A History of the Detection, Conviction, Life and Designs of John A. Murrell, The Great Western Land Pirate*, (Cincinnati: s.n., 1835), MDAH; Joshua D. Rothman, “The Hazards of the Flush Times: Gambling, Mob Violence, and the Anxieties of America’s Market Revolution,” *Journal of American History* 95, No. 3 (Dec. 2008): 674; “A Thrilling Sketch,” *Southern Recorder* (GA), March 1, 1842, p. 1; also see Thomas Ruys Smith, “Independence Day, 1835: The John A. Murrell Conspiracy and the Lynching of the Vicksburg Gamblers in Literature,” *Mississippi Quarterly* 59: pp. 129-160.

<sup>81</sup> Rothman, “The Hazards of the Flush Times,” 661; 665; also see Joshua D. Rothman, *Flush Times and Fever Dreams: A Story of Capitalism and Slavery in the Age of Jackson* (Athens: Georgia, 2012).

As events like Murrell's plot and the Vicksburg Gamblers' alleged uprising showed, planters' worst fears about poor whites had become exacerbated following the "equalizing" Jacksonian era. As lower class white men were issued more political powers, upper class leaders and middling class "strainers" were forced to make sure their worlds and their fortunes remained safe and untouched. The possibility of real revolt, whether class-based or bi-racial, always concerned slave owning southerners; their actions clearly attest to this fact. As the antebellum period wore into the 1840s and 50s, slaveholders' fears peaked. Indeed, aside from the well-known rebellions and "unhatched plots," several recent historians have discovered evidence of smaller, generally inchoate, planned revolts. While more research is needed on the topic, there were multiple conspiracies between slaves and poor whites to overthrow the prevailing hierarchy in the late antebellum period. Charles Bolton uncovered a plan from 1845 for insurrection in North Carolina. A letter, written by a slave, tells of at least two poor whites who were supposed to help with the revolt. William Taylor, a landless white farmer, and Eli Penry, a poor dram-shop keeper, were to serve as "captains." After freeing both blacks and poor whites from the county jail, the men planned to "tie all the whites" and shoot "every man that [won't] go with them." Eli Penry even offered all "his powder and shot for half the money." Penry's job made him an obvious leader; he could "make all the men drunk and...[thus] make them do anything."<sup>82</sup>

And while most scholars have held that slaveholders had little to worry about in reality, the very *possibility* of an uprising was enough to help solidify the growing culture of poor white "policing" and incarceration. Three years before secession, a Chatham County, Georgia jury tried William McGuire for "attempting to excite an insurrection and revolt of the slaves." John Pool, a poor white from Hancock County, Georgia, heard about John Brown's Harper's Ferry raid and mindlessly told an overseer that he would "black himself" and join "the strong side"

---

<sup>82</sup> Bolton, *Poor Whites*, 109.

when war broke out. He was tried for “uttering abolitionist sentiments,” but after being labeled a “poor, simple native,” Pool was finally discharged with a stern lecture. Jeff Forret discovered another small rebellion that erupted in Alabama in 1860, instigated by “the low-down, or poor, whites of the country,” who apparently banded with slaves to demand a redistribution of “land, mules, and money.”<sup>83</sup>

All of these cases, all of these stories, show that the lives of poor whites were inextricably tied to the institution of slavery, and often the lives of the slaves themselves. As one son of a slaveholder stated, “Some non-slaveholders were always meddling in slaveholders’ business. Such men were not thought of much by slaveholders – they were always trying to get slaves to do something wrong.” With so little to lose, poor whites obviously gave slaveholders cause to worry, and these fears reached a fever pitch during the 1850s. Planters’ most serious anxieties about poor whites concerned the prospect of bi-racial revolt, and it became more and more imperative to separate poor whites and blacks. Eugene Genovese believed that in the late antebellum period, slaveholders’ panic “at the slightest hint of slave insurrection revealed what lay beneath their endless self-congratulations over the supposed docility, contentment, and loyalty of their slaves.” Slaveowners *did* have something to fear. In the decades leading up to the Civil War, poor white nonslaveholders were disrupting the hierarchical order of the South. Whether interacting with slaves and free blacks on very personal levels or subverting the notions of “decent” behavior, lower class whites had the power to dismantle the structural order of society. Indeed, when the Savannah City Council met in 1859, their primary focus was on white people – poor, non-slaveholding whites whose “alleged unsoundness in reference to our system of slavery” threatened the southern system in a way no northern abolitionist could. Because

---

<sup>83</sup> Lockley, *Lines in the Sand*, 128; Harris, *Plain Folk and Gentry*, 64-5; Forret, *Race Relations*, 153.

slaveholders never achieved sufficient segregation between the two underclasses, they were forced to come up with other ways to control the potentially explosive population.<sup>84</sup>

---

<sup>84</sup> Elliot, *Tennessee*, Vol. 6, 1842-3; Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, 595; Lockley, *Lines in the Sand*, 129.

## CHAPTER FOUR: POVERTY AND PUNISHMENT

*Slavery is a monstrous evil, when considered in all its bearings; it makes us poor; poverty makes us ignorant; ignorance makes us wretched; wretchedness makes us wicked, and wickedness leads to the devil!*

– Hinton Helper<sup>1</sup>

*Soon there comes a time in the history of a people that continue to enslave men, a time when there are in reality but two classes, masters and slaves. There may be a class that retain[s] the shadow of freedom, but their liberty is only nominal. They are used to further the interests of the masters, or driven from the country.*

– Provincial Freeman<sup>2</sup>

On a clear spring day in 1846, a poor young man named Roderick was lead slowly up the courthouse steps in Kershaw, South Carolina. With his head down he ascended, one foot before the other, until he finally reached the top. Ordered to turn toward the crowd, Roderick followed orders – perhaps defiantly, filled with rage, or perhaps with a sense of despair, choking down feelings of utter humiliation. As the local sheriff began the proceedings to auction off Roderick to the highest bidder, the gravity of the situation unfolded. It was nearly impossible for any human being to be publicly degraded and “sold” without an immense loss of honor and self-worth. Indeed, as the sheriff started the bidding Roderick likely experienced one of the darkest moments of his life. He was no longer independent. He was no longer free.<sup>3</sup>

Five years later and a few counties over in Laurens, South Carolina, another man portentously climbed that district’s courthouse steps. James, who had stolen a horse, turned towards the crowd awaiting a different fate than Roderick’s. James was about to receive twenty-

---

<sup>1</sup> Hinton Rowan Helper, *The Impending Crisis of the South: How to Meet It* (1857; reprint, New York: A.B. Burdick, 1860), 82.

<sup>2</sup> “White and Black Slavery,” *Provincial Freeman* (Canada West), Dec. 29, 1855.

<sup>3</sup> Kershaw District, Court of Common Pleas, Capias ad Satisfaciendum executions, 1800-1859 (SCDAH).

five lashes – just one-fourth of his total punishment. Over the course of the next three Saturdays James endured a public whipping three more times, until his back bore the scars of one hundred lashes. He would spend the next four months incarcerated, hoping that his open wounds would heal despite languishing inside a hot, squalid cell. He likely suffered through periods of intense anxiety and deep depression, feelings that would probably continue to haunt him for the rest of his life.<sup>4</sup>

These types of accounts were unfortunately quite commonplace among African American slaves. But the two men from these stories were not slaves. They were not even black. Roderick McLeod and James Grigg were white men, United States citizens who were entitled to constitutional rights, and theoretically entitled to the privileges of whiteness in a racist society. While most scholars assert that the whipping and “selling” of white men and women ended during the Jacksonian period, these customs did, in fact, continue in the Deep South until the Civil War. Although the practice was not widespread, local judges occasionally ordered these methods as part of a person’s punishment, generally for non-violent property crimes, like Grigg’s theft of a horse. Other times, these sentences were penance for unpaid court fees and small amounts of debt. Roderick McLeod, for example, fathered a child out of wedlock with a woman named Harriet Waters. Charged with bastardy in April 1846, he was ordered to pay \$25 a year for twelve years to support his daughter through her adolescence. That amount of money, by itself, would have been possible (though rather difficult) for a poor laborer to pay. Nevertheless, McLeod also needed to enter a recognizance of \$300, which meant he would have to show up to court and swear to make the scheduled payments. But it appears from district records that he never did so. “In the default thereof,” the court warned, “on the sale day in May next,” the sheriff was supposed to “hire the said Roderick McLeod out to service for any time not exceeding four

---

<sup>4</sup> Laurens District, Court of General Sessions, Capias ad Satisfaciendum executions, 1826-1870 (SCDAH).

years, and the proceeds of his labour shall be applied to” financially supporting his daughter. On the surface this punishment makes logical sense, as the primary goal of the legal system should have been the material support and welfare of the little girl. The actual outcome of McLeod’s sale, however, did not accomplish that objective. A simple, single sentence told of McLeod’s fate: “Sold according to the within order to Angus McSween for \$1.” McSween, a sixty-five year old farmer from Scotland, lived with his wife within the district. He owned \$5000 of real estate, as well as ten slaves. McLeod’s “sales price” strongly suggests that the recorded sum was paid on a weekly or monthly basis, rather than serving as payments for long-term arrangements. Essentially serving as indentured servants, therefore, poor white debtors and criminals were at times auctioned off for their services, with all the symbolism that conveyed. The punishment of other white convicts in such public, spectacle-like settings further sent a clear message to nonslaveholders. Planters must have felt the need to periodically remind poor whites that their freedom was conditional.<sup>5</sup>

As we saw earlier, upper class attitudes about the poor changed over the course of modernity. In pre-modern Europe, impoverished people were generally viewed with pity, and often received charitable alms. Believing that the poor shared in the poverty of Jesus, affluent Europeans equated caring for the unfortunate to caring for the Savior. Yet by the seventeenth century, Humanists proposed alternate theories about how to deal with this often-troublesome portion of the population. The two most prominent ideas centered on sending the poor back to their place of origin, or simply incarcerating them. Over the next two centuries, European state and urban policymakers began establishing prisons and codifying criminal laws. While this movement originally began before the Reformation, the unraveling of Catholic charities helped

---

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*; Kershaw, *Capias ad Satisfaciendum* executions; Seventh Census of the United States, 1850: Kershaw District, South Carolina; Seventh Census of the United States, 1850, Slave Schedule: Kershaw District, South Carolina.

accelerate a reliance on government-run alternatives – penitentiaries, poor houses, and asylums. These “institutions of confinement” or “total institutions,” Norbert Finzsch and Robert Jütte proposed, served as catch-alls for social deviants as Europe moved from a feudal to a modern society.<sup>6</sup>

Across the ocean in America, a similar divide was emerging. The upper classes, who wrote and interpreted the laws, devised a set of poor laws and stringent criminal codes to help them deal with propertyless, potentially troublesome whites. Taking a cue from the old European model, James W. Ely found that several states “specifically authorized a justice of the peace to order the removal of any poor person who entered the county and was ‘likely to become chargeable’ to his place of settlement.” While the poor were treated with disdain all throughout America, from the time of the early Republic slave states stipulated harsher punishments, even for non-violent offenders. For example, since the eighteenth century Massachusetts had only one capital crime, while South Carolina had *twenty*, including relatively benign property crimes like horse stealing, burglary, grand larceny, and forgery. Even with a strict set of punitive laws, southern policymakers also used other methods to deal with transient poor whites. By the 1840s, most counties had established poor houses or farms, institutions where the impoverished could find shelter, food, and at least a few days of respite. The justices in one North Carolina county noted that the poor “can be kept much cheaper there than in the county jail.” Michel Foucault argued that institutionalized governmental projects – the prison, the poor house, and the hospital – all operated with the same end goal. Their main objective was the creation of a society governed through surveillance; therefore, discipline was paramount. And in the slave South, probably more so than anywhere else in the country, impoverished people endured official

---

<sup>6</sup> See Pieter Spierenburg, *The Prison Experience: Disciplinary Institutions and their Inmates in Early Modern Europe* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam, 1991); Norbert Finzsch and Robert Jütte, eds. *Institutions of Confinement: Hospitals, Asylums, and Prisons in Western Europe and North America, 1500–1950* (New York: Cambridge, 1996).

scrutiny at all times and in all places. With guards, constables, and sheriffs firmly established as fixtures in every community, with the growing numbers of uniformed police officers, and with the nightly rides of the slave patrols, poor southerners—both white and black—lived under the constant watchful eyes of the slaveholders.<sup>7</sup>

The heaviest periods of incarceration in the pre-war South came in the 1840s and 50s, just as the region began to industrialize. By this time many poor white laborers were paid with wages, and property crimes dominated the local level criminal court dockets. Slaveholders were preoccupied with protecting their property rights; modern European laws were considerably less punitive. After all, much of Europeans' wealth came from landholdings, tangible assets that cannot be easily "stolen." Planters, on the other hand, held the majority of their wealth in slaves. And slaves could run away, be "inveigled," maimed, killed, or rendered economically worthless. Slave property demanded far more protection than any other possession. Slaveholders' aggressive protectiveness of their property and wealth clearly added to the growing criminalization of poor white southerners, who always posed a risk to planter property. Poor white men, especially, began to be considered "dangerous" and violent individuals who were always looking for trouble. As Edward Ayers wrote, affluent southerners likely feared poor white men more than they did slaves. The note of one physician contained sentiments that seemed to "have been widely shared." When travelling alone, the doctor admitted, "the sudden

---

<sup>7</sup> James W. Ely, Jr., "'There are Few Subjects in Political Economy of Greater Difficulty': The Poor Laws of the Antebellum South," *American Bar Foundation Research Journal* 10, No. 4 (Autumn, 1985): 858-9; Michael S. Hindus, *Prison and Plantation: Crime, Justice, and Authority in Massachusetts and South Carolina, 1767-1878* (Chapel Hill: North Carolina, 1980), 93; Ely, "'There are Few Subjects,'" 856-7; see Timothy James Lockley, *Welfare and Charity in the Antebellum South* (Gainesville: Florida, 2007); Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Trans. by Alan Sheridan (1975; reprint, New York: Random House, 1995).

appearance of a white man generally excited some apprehension with regard to personal safety, but the sight of a black man was always cheering, and made him feel safe.”<sup>8</sup>

These “white victims of slavery,” as Hinton Helper called them, lived in a constant state of *qualified* freedom: one legal misstep, one wrong acquaintance, one unpaid debt – could lead to an indefinite loss of liberty. As historian Richard Morris hypothesized in the late 1940s, the relatively frequent imprisonment of poor white southerners, combined with other methods of compelling them to work at extremely low wages, set the precedent for the treatment of African Americans following the Thirteenth Amendment. White “bondage,” according to Morris “provided the necessary experience in the control of ‘free’ labor which served as the design for the emerging pattern of quasi-freedom cut to fit the emancipated Negro in the era of Reconstruction.” While few modern scholars have realized the accuracy of Morris’s convincing ideas about class and power in the slaveholding states, they have confirmed key pieces of his theory. Jack Kenny Williams, for example, contended that class largely dictated a criminal’s sentence. There were “punishments awarded ‘persons of quality,’” he wrote, “which were fines almost invariably,” but “‘citizens of little respectability’ . . . received public lashings and served the jail terms.” Much of this disparity was written off as a by-product of the accused’s supposed intentions. If an affluent slaveholder committed a misdemeanor, local judges classified the criminal acts as “innocent amusement or understandable self-defense.” But when poor whites made similar mistakes, their actions “were designated as crimes against the State.”<sup>9</sup>

These grave disparities in both arrests and punishments confirm the importance of class among the Deep South’s whites. Williams’s seminal study of crime in South Carolina, *Vogues in*

---

<sup>8</sup> Edward L. Ayers, *Vengeance and Justice: Crime and Punishment in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century American South* (New York: Oxford, 1984), 132.

<sup>9</sup> Helper, *The Impending Crisis*, 44; Richard M. Morris, “White Bondage in Ante-bellum South Carolina,” *The South Carolina Historical and Genealogical Magazine* 49, No. 4 (Oct. 1948): 207; Jack Kenny Williams, *Vogues in Villany: Crime and Retribution in Ante-bellum South Carolina* (Columbia: South Carolina, 1959), 134.

*Villany*, blamed the “consistent severity of the penal codes” on the “low estate of the criminal group.” Upper class slaveholders realized that many of the accused would spend years funneled in and out of the justice system, often due to alcohol addiction or extreme poverty. Lancaster’s *Ledger* reported in 1853 that four-fifths of all criminal charges were related to alcohol. Moreover, Williams found, the “bulk” of indicted criminals were not able to read or write. But illiteracy was not the accused’s only hurdle in the courtroom: verbatim testimony was “blunt suggestive that some criminals were hardly able to speak the English language in an understandable fashion.” The prosecuted were seemingly so uneducated, and so cut off from the wider, capitalist society, that they demonstrated many traits of pre-modern agricultural peoples. Kenny further noted that many sessions court minutes contained the phrase, “The def[endant]s are poor,” indicating the strong correlation between poverty and crime. This link had become so obvious by the late-antebellum period that William Gregg, the champion of southern industrialism, claimed in 1845 that “thousands” of poor whites were starving and thus turning to stealing as a result. Grand planter James Henry Hammond estimated that at least fifty thousand whites were unemployed in South Carolina in 1850. These paupers were forced, he reasoned, “either to beg or steal in order to live.” The chances for poor whites to rise out of poverty, it seemed, were dwindling in the lead up to secession. As poverty worsened, crime rates rose, mostly for crimes involving the property of the respectable upper-middling and upper classes. When poor whites were involved in disputes and bloody affrays with other poor whites, though, there was rarely intervention from the criminal justice system. As Williams concluded, more affluent southerners likely “thanked God and took heart when one poor-white killed another.”<sup>10</sup>

While the make-up of antebellum southern juries has not been closely examined yet, it seems highly likely that jurors were chosen from among the wealthiest, most respectable citizens

---

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 23; 7; 24; 25; 23.

of each county. Why would slaveholding lawmakers allow otherwise? To assure the safety of their assets, planters needed like-minded individuals deciding who posed a serious threat to southern institutions. As one slaveowner declared, men on southern grand juries were generally chosen for their “superior intelligence, wealth, and purity of character.” From a cursory study of a few juries in two Georgia counties, Edward Ayers determined that grand juries – who decided the accused’s guilt or freedom – were filled with affluent slaveholders. Out of the twenty-four (two twelve-men panels) grand jurors in Greene County, Georgia’s 1853 term, all but one man could be found in tax rolls or census records. Only one of twenty-three was landless, and only seven were nonslaveholders. They averaged fifteen slaves each, and owned an additional \$9,000 of non-slave property. The county’s median wealth was less than \$4,000, indicating that these grand jurors were much, much wealthier than the bulk of the people who were being tried.

Whitfield County’s numbers were similar; its jurors averaged around \$4700 of wealth versus a county mean of \$2,900. It is also important to note that in most places in the Old South, juries were drawn from tax registers, so many poor whites were not even on the rolls to be called for duty in the first place. Furthermore, given the often transient lives of poor white men, and the fact that most of them did not have the luxury of stopping work for several days or weeks at the court’s behest, they were probably precluded from becoming jurors by multiple factors. Poor men, though, could never expect to have a jury of their peers deciding their guilt or innocence.<sup>11</sup>

Ayers also found evidence that unlike the powerful grand jurors, a different class of men served on petit juries. Petit jurors decided whether or not there was enough evidence for the accused to stand trial. Based upon two small samples, Ayers determined that petit jurors generally owned property slightly below county average rates, and many of the men were absent from tax lists and census records, indicating that they may have owned little, if any, property.

---

<sup>11</sup> Ayers, *Vengeance and Justice*, 113.

Southerners, he wrote, routinely “Complained that sheriffs and court clerks merely rounded up anyone they could get their hands on when it came time for court, and hardworking farmers did not want to squander hours or days in a jury box.” A few scattered pieces of evidence confirm that some localities did have great trouble recruiting “respectable” men to hear cases. In 1858 one newspaper even tried to persuade Georgia’s legislature to abolish the penitentiary, replacing it with whipping, branding, and hanging. But there was one caveat: that each county “provided honest and intelligent men sit upon criminal cases, and not vagabonds, as is too often the case now.” A Kentuckian further pointed out that some lower-class men sat on juries to make money for liquor, returning no bills and acquittals even in cases with overwhelming proof of guilt. It is, of course, possible that some poor white men served on petit juries. Just as at the ballot box, the most impoverished men were the likeliest to be “bought” or won over by the local elite, who controlled their employment and credit options. Outside of large towns and cities southern juries were surely influenced by local connections and family ties. “Disinterested jurors were also hard to find in rural counties,” Ayers noted. “Kin ties, no doubt, bound a good number of these families together.” These connections, however, were not just limited to juries; family relationships, friendships, and the all-powerful dollar pervaded every branch of the justice system. Jack Kenny Williams reported that a man charged with grand larceny in Spartanburg, South Carolina, received executive mercy due to “his family connections.” And in Mississippi, a paper reported in 1854 that “even the bloodiest murderer has no fears of the Penitentiary, *provided* he has either money or friends.”<sup>12</sup>

While class privilege was prevalent throughout all of the United States, the Deep South seemed to house a particularly extreme strain. Michael Hindus’ *Prison and Plantation* examined the penal systems of both nineteenth century Massachusetts and South Carolina, comparing

---

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 113; 112; 112; Williams, *Vogues in Villany*, 24; quotes from Ayers, *Vengeance and Justice*, 112.

crime and conviction rates, sentences, and the overall judicial system. He proposed that assaults comprised about three-fifths of South Carolina's cases, while Massachusetts officials focused on property crime (about one-third of all offenses) and crimes of morality, like liquor-related offenses. According to Hindus, southern grand jury presentments, which generally listed a community's grievances, most often cited assaults, dueling, and carrying concealed weapons as items of major concern. However, his assault figures do not seem to hold true for the late antebellum period in South Carolina, or throughout the rest of the Deep South, where property crimes and morality offenses comprised significant portions of both arrests and formal charges. This is likely attributable to the fact that by the 1840s and 50s, even the rural South was transforming into a fully capitalist society, where property rights reigned supreme. Jack Kenny Williams' study of the Palmetto State supports this theory. He found that while the market-driven lowcountry's prisoners were incarcerated on charges of murder and different forms of larceny, the upcountry was dominated by assault and battery charges and 65 percent of the state's bastardy cases. Williams also recognized a change over time, demonstrating that from 1810 until 1850, the state's crime rate nearly doubled. In 1800, for example, indictments in sessions courts were 1 to 600 people. By 1850, indictments numbered 1 in 350. Hindus' figures confirm this growth. Rates of criminal prosecutions (per 100,000 per year) ranged from 277 in Massachusetts to 322 in South Carolina during the 1840s. In the fifties, Massachusetts' prosecutions dropped to 265, while South Carolina's rose to 333. Not only were South Carolina's rates higher than rates in the North, they were also rising over a period of time when northern rates were falling.<sup>13</sup>

Hindus attributed this disparity between the states to the fact that in South Carolina, the "act of initiating a prosecution in many cases seemed far more important than seeing it to completion." Indeed, petit juries had a high rate of returning a verdict of "no bill," essentially

---

<sup>13</sup> Hindus, *Prison and Plantation*, 63; 78; Williams, *Vogues in Villany*, 6; 1; Hindus, *Prison and Plantation*, 77.

dropping the charges because of a lack of evidence to proceed to trial. In Hindus' study, while only 16.5 percent of Massachusetts's cases ended in no bills, a large proportion of South Carolina's did, strongly indicating "that grand juries were using the no bill as a preliminary acquittal." About 20 percent of the state's assault cases were dropped after the defendant paid his arrest and jail costs. Out of the cases that made it to a grand jury, two-thirds ended in a no bill, and charges were dropped. Indeed, South Carolina's high arrest rate affirmed "a high level of frivolous prosecutions" throughout the region. Here, Hindus' findings match those of Jack Kenny Williams, who determined that the state's antebellum grand juries returned true bills in 63 percent of indictments, leaving about 37 percent of cases with no bills.<sup>14</sup>

Williams' study also explored incarceration in South Carolina. Although he found that most jail sentences were less than three months, those longer than three years were rare. Yet these figures only focus on sentences – scholars are still unsure of how long most accused criminals were deprived of their freedom while awaiting trial. For the imprisoned, whether awaiting formal charges or serving out a sentence, their plight often centered on survival. Most of the incarcerated complained of hunger, Williams wrote, because standard fare throughout most of South Carolina "was a loaf of bad bread, weighing about nine ounces, and a pint of thin, repulsive soup...served in a dirty-looking tin pail, without even a spoon." Even given the horrible conditions of confinement, crime rates rose in the 1840s and 50s as localities began experiencing serious problems with burglary. Hogs were the most commonly stolen animal, and any theft of livestock was treated harshly by the South Carolina courts. It makes sense, therefore, that the criminal most "consistently punished to the extreme letter of the law" was the slave stealer. According to Williams, a white person who dared to kidnap a slave was immediately branded "the anarchist of Southern serfdom," and could be sentenced to death. Carrying away an

---

<sup>14</sup> Hindus, *Prison and Plantation*, 86; 92; 97; Williams, *Vogues in Villany*, 80.

African American laborer thus elicited a much more serious punishment than did assault and even manslaughter and murder. This difference in penalties, wrote Williams, likely stemmed from the fact that few antebellum southerners had “a high moral regard for human life nor a healthy respect for the laws concerning it.” In many places far more than half the murders were committed with weapons other than firearms, suggesting “that among the common folk, at least, pistols and rifles were not widely owned.”<sup>15</sup>

To deal with the growing ranks of criminals, by the late antebellum period almost every Deep South county had some sort of jail or makeshift guardhouse, although very few records from these institutions have survived. The majority of these “Jail” or “Sheriff’s” registers contain little more than a balancing of books and listings of financial transactions. Despite this fact, historians have been able to identify several important factors common to most of these institutions and the ways that they operated. In most jails and guardhouses, prisoners were housed together, regardless of race or sex. Savannah’s jail, for instance, incarcerated whites, slaves, and free blacks of both sexes; generally a third to a half of the prisoners were African American. The only trait that most of the inmates shared was class: whether black or white, man or woman, the people arrested were nearly always poor. In 1835 the Savannah jail committee reported that it usually housed “sailors and indolent people who are often intoxicated... These people are generally paupers.” In some sections of the South, like the central piedmont of North Carolina, fighting or assault and battery made up about half of the prosecuted crimes. Yet most other areas, especially those with high percentages of slaves, property crimes like theft were considered, as Timothy Lockley argued, “the greatest threat to society.” Thieves served much more punitive sentences than other criminals. In Georgia’s lowcountry, assault crimes averaged three to three and a half years, while manslaughter sentences lasted only six months longer. But

---

<sup>15</sup> Williams, *Vogues in Villany*, 114; 117; 41; 42; 43; 35; 36.

thieves and burglars—non-violent offenders—served roughly four and a half years for crimes involving property. Killing a human being warranted less of a sentence than larceny. Planters had codified their own system of values and ethics in the legal codes of the Deep South, revealing how severely their roles as slave lords circumscribed their capacity for humanity: protecting property and wealth accumulation took precedence over protecting their fellow citizens from physical harm or even death.<sup>16</sup>

This preoccupation with materialism and affluence came to permeate the southern criminal justice system, from the governmental chambers to the courtroom. Ayers pointed out that lawyers “made up a large portion of state legislators and won great wealth and respect.” The interconnectedness between the legal system and extremely affluent individuals was self-evident. Criminals who owned property posted bond, bailed themselves out, and paid off their fines while rarely having to go to jail. For those without property, the situation was completely different. As discussed in Chapter One, economic inequality continued to grow throughout the 1850s, with the cotton boom making the rich richer, leaving the poor to fend for themselves, especially after the financial panic of 1857. For whites who were already financially struggling, the subsequent years did not herald much of a financial recovery. Not surprisingly, this period coincided with a dramatic increase in “criminals” in the Deep South. Chatham County, Georgia, for example, prosecuted more people for property crimes in 1858 and 1860 than in any other years of the decade. As Jeff Forret wrote, using the justice system to preserve this highly stratified society,

---

<sup>16</sup> Savannah Jail Records, 1855-63, GDAH; Timothy James Lockley, *Lines in the Sand: Race and Class in Lowcountry Georgia, 1750-1860* (Athens: Georgia, 2001), 127; 126; Charles C. Bolton, *Poor Whites in the Antebellum South: Tenants and Laborers in Central North Carolina and Northeast Mississippi* (Durham: Duke, 1994), 59; Lockley, *Lines in the Sand*, 98.

the region's planters "maintained social boundaries by punishing wayward poor whites (and equally subversive free blacks) whose activities with slaves threatened the social structure."<sup>17</sup>

Like poor whites, free blacks were arrested frequently, for a variety of offenses. Most slaves, on the other hand, spent time in jails only after running away and getting caught, or if they had committed an extremely violent crime. In the fall of 1859, for instance, in Kershaw, South Carolina, twenty-five individuals were incarcerated in the local jail. Out of the twenty-five prisoners, there were eleven black men: two free men of color had been arrested for burglary, two slaves for assault and battery, and seven slaves who had attempted to escape to freedom. In the case of runaway slaves, the local jail would house them until the owner made arrangements to pick them up. For all other slaves, it made no economic sense to jail the ones who stole or misbehaved; slaveholders needed their labor and thus relied on whipping as the primary form of punishment. Planters could – and did – force slaves to work mere days or even hours after they received savage beatings. But slaveholders also had to restrain themselves in meting out these punishments; if they went overboard they could deprive themselves of capable, energetic labor. Severe castigation of poor whites, by contrast, cost planters nothing.<sup>18</sup>

Most slaves, therefore, considered jails "white" institutions. Freedmen and women recalled time and time again that jails were built primarily to incarcerate whites. Ruben Fox declared "There weren't no such things as jails for colored folks. There were jails all right enough, but only white folks were put in them." Elisha Doc Garey concurred, saying that "White folks used to get locked up in them but I never did see no Niggers in one of them little jailhouses." Annie Price, Squire Irvin, Prince Johnson, and Frances Willingham made similar statements. One freedman from Georgia even juxtaposed the plight of black and white

---

<sup>17</sup> Ayers, *Vengeance and Justice*, 31; 55; 97; 91; Jeff Forret, *Race Relations at the Margins: Slaves and Poor Whites in the Antebellum Southern Countryside* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana, 2006), 225.

<sup>18</sup> Kershaw District, Court of General Sessions, Sheriff's returns of prisoners in jail, 1803-1888, SCDAH.

troublemakers: slaves who reacted negatively to cruel punishments were “quickly gotten rid of. Many were sent to Mississippi or Texas. White offenders were sent to chain gangs, but there were no gangs for slaves.” Still another man claimed that the infamous “nigger dogs” were sent after “white folks too.” The region’s legal system, it seemed, *was* primarily structured around incarcerating poor whites. The guardhouses and jails scattered throughout every county seat, town, and city, were built with one main purpose: to deprive troublesome or suspicious poor whites of their liberty. Enslaved as a child in Mississippi, Dempsey Pitts confirmed this class element of the legal system: “There weren’t no jails, except for the poor whites,” he recalled. “I remember one day, Mr. Sandfort, one of the neighbors came by. I ask him if he going to town, to attend court. He say, ‘No, nobody don’t attend court, but poor white trash.’” Although many of those attendees were merely gawkers – people who spent the day being entertained by court proceedings – some of them were indeed the family and friends of the criminally accused.<sup>19</sup>

As poor whites continued filling jail cells across the Deep South, many of the largest cities began establishing professional, uniformed police forces. As Edward Ayers found, by the mid-1840s New Orleans, Savannah, and Charleston used the police to impose “uniformity by creating ‘crime’ out of the much more ambiguous materials of ‘disorder’ and ‘nuisance.’” This slippery slope towards criminalizing the most inconsequential actions was stated eloquently by a retired Georgia lawyer in 1839. Concerning lynch law, he observed,

For awhile it was deemed by our chivalry, appropriate only to drunken husbands, who maltreated their wives. Then, it was held justly applicable to some gross indecencies of life, which shocked the moral feelings of society, but were not effectually grasped by the laws. Next, it was employed against receivers of stolen

---

<sup>19</sup> Ruben Fox, in George P. Rawick, ed., *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography* (Westport, CT.: Greenwood, 1972-79), Vol. 6 (MS), Supplement, Series 1, Part 2, 776; Elisha Doc Garey, *Ibid.*, Vol. 12 (GA), Part 2, 4; Annie Price, *Ibid.*, Vol. 13 (GA), Part 3, 183; Squire Irvin, *Ibid.*, Vol. 6 (MS), Supplement, Series 1, Part 3, 1082; Prince Johnson, *Ibid.*, Vol. 6 (MS), Supplement, Series 1, Part 3, 1170; Frances Willingham, *Ibid.*, Vol. 13 (GA), Part 4, 156; Milton Hammond, *Ibid.*, Vol. 12 (GA), Part 2, 94; Abe Kelley, *Ibid.*, Vol. 6 (MS), Supplement, Series 1, Part 3, 1270; Dempsey Pitts, *Ibid.*, Vol. 9 (MS), Supplement, Series 1, Part 4, 1712-3.

goods, and petty thieves, whose rogueries, it was said, could not be proved, though every body knew them—they were notorious... One worthy citizen thought strolling gamblers ought to be thus dealt with; another, suspicious vagabonds of all sorts; another, horse thieves; a fourth, all thieves; a fifth, drunkards who had wives; a sixth, common drunkards, whether they had wives or not; a seventh, inhuman masters; an eighth, persons who traded clandestinely with servants, encouraging them to steal.

Indeed, the rise of professional law enforcement changed the entire system of criminal justice. Private citizens, “free” white men, were now under regular surveillance. No longer content with punishing people who had committed particularly heinous crimes, police locked up gamblers, vagrants, and drunkards, sometimes long before they actually did anything of a criminal nature. As Timothy Lockley wrote, the cyclical nature of jailing people for insignificant reasons often became self-perpetuating, as the “poverty of inmates seemingly encouraged recidivism to obtain free food and shelter.”<sup>20</sup>

Not all poor whites found enough incentive in food and shelter to return to imprisonment; incarcerated individuals escaped from local jails with relative frequency. In 1858, South Carolina’s Governor R.F.W. Allston admitted that “Escapes have been more frequent the past year than I am willing to enumerate.” Indeed, throughout the antebellum period, guardhouses and jail buildings were generally not structurally sound enough to prevent enterprising, able-bodied prisoners from figuring a way out. Not surprisingly, in several cases these escapes included the collaboration of poor whites and blacks. In South Carolina’s Kershaw District, two white prisoners absconded in the spring of 1856. Herman Holleyman, a debtor, and Jackson Bradley, a murderer sentenced to be hanged, banded together with a runaway slave who was sick and therefore not confined to a cell. The three men tied pieces of blankets together and bored a hole into the wall near a window, slipping out into the night and towards freedom. In Talbotton,

---

<sup>20</sup> Ayers, *Vengeance and Justice*, 82-3; 90; “Recollections of a Retired Lawyer,” *Southern Recorder*, April 9, 1839, p. 1; Lockley, *Lines in the Sand*, 128.

Georgia, Bartley M. Murdock attempted to escape from the local jail. Murdock “was confined in the lower story, in company with a negro,” when the guard retired to a room above the cell. Hearing a noise, the guard looked around, spotting a black man just outside the jail. “Supposing him to be a negro who had come to converse with the one in jail,” the guard ordered him away. As the man scurried off the guard noticed a white man exit from inside the jail and join the black man, whereupon the pair ran together towards the woods. Immediately hightailing it downstairs, the guard realized that the prisoners had escaped through a hole they cut in the wall. Dogs were sent after the escapees, and the authorities soon apprehended the African American man. They found Murdock several hours later that evening, in a swamp near the courthouse. At first he refused to tell the officials who aided his escape, but after being threatened with lynch law, he changed his mind, confessing that he received the tools from a “negro, whom he had promised to carry to a free state.” Officials immediately hauled Murdock off to the Harris County jail, where he was ordered to “be strictly guarded.”<sup>21</sup>

Attempted escapes from prison were much rarer than jail escapes. Generally, convicts had to work together to ensure that the prison-break had a chance at success. In 1843, a group of men tried to escape the penitentiary at Milledgeville. The *Georgia Journal* reported that their “conspiracy” originally included seventy convicts who promised to flee the prison together. When the men heard “a given signal, a rush was made to the gate, by a large number concerned, but only eleven succeeded in getting out.” One of the men, named Nichols, “was badly wounded, though not captured” after being shot by a guard. All but one of the convicts initially succeeded in their escape, but five of them were re-captured in the following days, and one man even died. The deceased, known as Crowder, perished at the hands of two of William Sanford’s slaves, who

---

<sup>21</sup> Quoted in Williams, *Vogues in Villany*, 120; Kershaw, Sheriff's returns of prisoners in jail; “Escape and Recapture of Murdock,” *Macon Georgia Telegraph*, June 1, 1841, p. 2.

were attempting to arrest him. A Coroner's Inquest concluded that the deceased "came to his death, by a blow or blows inflicted on the left side of his head" during the altercation. Prison escapes were clearly much more dangerous and prone to failure than jail breaks.<sup>22</sup>

Escape, however, was not the only way that white prisoners expressed their disgust with the judicial system – they also destroyed the structures that were built to imprison them. One of the main reasons few antebellum jail records exist today is the historic prevalence of fires. While these fires were sometimes set by poor whites who were attempting to escape, others were started by recently freed prisoners or even sympathetic friends and family members. For instance, in less than four months during the mid-1850s, the *Atlanta Weekly Intelligencer* reported at least three intentional jail fires. In Blairsville, a small town in northern Georgia, a prisoner named Jason Cladden started a fire "in order to make his escape." Unfortunately for Cladden, who was only "serving out a few months imprisonment," the blaze consumed him before he could free himself. A few months later, just after the citizens of another Georgia county spent \$3500 constructing a new jail, the building was burned to the ground one Sunday morning. The paper reported that "it was beyond all doubt set a fire by some incendiary." And in Tuskegee, Alabama, one Saturday in late November of 1854, a mob stormed the jail to free a certain prisoner. The incarcerated, known as Walker, was "liberated by violence by a mob of his friends, and escorted thence in triumph. It is rumored that a barbecue was given, guns fired, and the laws set at defiance." In neighboring South Carolina, local papers lamented the fiery destruction of both the Camden jail by an inmate, and the Sumter courthouse by "a person

---

<sup>22</sup> "Escape of Convicts from the Penitentiary," *Georgia Journal*, June 6, 1843, p. 3.

unknown.” White southerners, therefore, were becoming quite bold in their opposition to the perceived injustices of the criminal system.<sup>23</sup>

Edward Isham, the infamous poor white who murdered a former employer a few years before the Civil War, bragged that during the heyday of his criminal activities, “Everybody was afraid of me and no officer would attempt to take me.” His statement is telling. Isham’s pride in his own little reign of terror doubtless reflected a newfound, albeit primitive, sense of masculine honor. He may not have been smart enough or industrious enough to improve his economic station in life, but for a time he was tough enough to instill fear in slaveholders and powerful local officials. In a world where physical dominance and brutality allowed masters to remain masters, slaveless poor whites received daily lessons in the efficacy of violence. Slaveholders frequently used cruelty and brutality to their own advantage; it made logical sense for the lower classes to expect similar results. Lacking wealth and privilege, poor white men attempted to prove their self-worth through violent and destructive means. If the people in power refused to recognize lower class men’s honor and autonomy, poor whites could create their own hierarchy of honor by acting out against the establishment – by being the meanest, most impulsive, most lawless man in the locality. Lacking the resources to have a voice in society, these men demanded to be heard the only way they knew how. To be taken seriously by the southern gentry, poor whites began relying on the most primal type of honor, one that depends on strength, physical prowess, and a type of existential freedom based on living in the moment. Throughout the late antebellum period, therefore, planters tried to control lower class whites in myriad ways. Poor whites responded to their attempts to secure hegemony by bucking the system, fighting authority, and damaging or stealing the property of the wealthy and powerful. In

---

<sup>23</sup> “Jail Burnt,” *Atlanta Weekly Intelligencer*, Dec. 16, 1854, p. 2; “Untitled,” *Ibid.*, March 8, 1855, p. 1; “Riot in Macon County,” *Ibid.*, Dec. 2, 1854, p. 2; Williams, *Vogues in Villany*, 45.

whatever small way they could, poor white men expressed their anger over their position in society by becoming as “free” as possible. As white men, they likely balked at the prospect of other white men ordering them around, manipulating both their lives and their livelihoods. Whether drinking to excess, dropping out of society, or committing more serious crimes, poor white southerners attempted to assuage the pain of powerlessness. Becoming either destructive and/or self-destructive, these “criminals” were seeking some semblance of control over their own destinies. Yet with the rise of the penitentiary and the carceral state, the quest for autonomy was typically fleeting.<sup>24</sup>

In America, the rise of the penitentiary certainly seemed to fit Foucault’s model. First appearing in the United States in the 1790 with Philadelphia’s Walnut House, prisons were built rapidly in the 1820s and early 1830s. Originally, Philadelphia’s institution sought to combine solitary confinement with hard labor completed in solitude. The Pennsylvania system attempted to both “reform” and “deter” criminals, and it functioned as a model for all subsequent American penitentiaries. These early prison systems relied on a combination of solitude, hard labor, discipline, and regimentation. In the slave South, intense debates over whether or not to build penitentiaries arose in most states. Interestingly, despite white southerners’ familiar disdain for tax-funded governmental projects, their states built the same types of prisons, at the same rate, as the industrializing North. Georgia originally constructed a penitentiary in 1817, and Tennessee finished building in 1831. By 1837 Louisiana had established a prison; in 1840 Mississippi followed suit, as did Alabama in 1850. Only sparsely-populated Florida and the stubborn Carolinas remained without penitentiaries before the Civil War. While North Carolinians, especially, continued debating the benefits and drawbacks of a penal institution, South

---

<sup>24</sup> Charles C. Bolton and Scott P. Culclasure, eds., *The Confessions of Edward Isham: A Poor White Life of the Old South* (Athens: Georgia, 1998), 3.

Carolinian legislators were dead set against the idea from the beginning. As Edward Ayers wrote, after the Nullification Crisis, South Carolina began to “define themselves in conscious opposition to the values of ‘progress.’” With “an extremely conservative legislature appointed the governor,” there was simply no two-party system to debate things like penal reform. As Lawrence Friedman quipped, “more ‘primitive’ punishments” thrived in “this more primitive section of the country,” where humiliation, shame, and corporeal punishment remained “downright indispensable.”<sup>25</sup>

Before the penitentiary formally existed in America, criminal sentences consisted of confinement in local jails, generally coupled with expensive fines. Punishments also included branding, whipping, cropping, and death. Once a state built a prison, however, much of the violence used to punish the convict disappeared from public sight. In general, whippings were no longer administered on the steps of the local courthouse; instead, lashings became private affairs, taking place behind prison walls. Likely influenced by the social mores of the Jacksonian era, violent retribution against criminals became increasingly unpopular. By the late antebellum period, public displays of violence against criminals had all but ceased in many areas of the country, especially the urbanized North, where a combination of humanism and religious awakening had rendered the practices barbaric. According to Friedman, public punishments of “stigma and shame” naturally fell out of favor in “an age of rapid growth, impersonal cities, and rootless populations.” Occasional hangings still took place for the most heinous criminals, but non-slave state and local governments stopped using the more cruel forms of torturous body mutilation. In the Deep South, however, where the system of slavery was predicated on

---

<sup>25</sup> Ayers, *Vengeance and Justice*, 34; Lawrence M. Friedman, *Crime and Punishment in American History* (New York: Basic Books, 1993), 78; 79; 81; Peter Wallenstein, *From Slave South to New South: Public Policy in Nineteenth-Century Georgia* (Chapel Hill: North Carolina, 1987), 81; Ayers, *Vengeance and Justice*, 35; Bolton, *Poor Whites*, 110; Ayers, *Vengeance and Justice*, 58; Friedman, *Crime and Punishment*, 81; 82.

viciousness, public violence against individuals – both black *and* white – continued to play an important role in the maintenance of society. According to Ayers, the region’s legislators “who initiated penitentiaries numbered themselves among ‘the best people’ from their counties. They were wealthier than most of their constituents, of course, and owned a greater stake in the social order.” These affluent planters still resorted to public spectacles of violence when they deemed it necessary, but they also privatized most of the violence against white convicts. From the start, Alabama’s prison, for example, wielded punishments such as straightjackets, solitary confinement, a diet of bread and water, a form of water torture where the head is gradually immersed in ice cold water, and whipping. As whipping was historically associated with controlling and punishing slave behavior, white prisoners found this particular form of punishment incredibly humiliating. The penitentiary’s inspectors concluded their report by endorsing the efficacy of this cruelty: “Immaterial how degraded a convict may be...being placed under the lash is the most degrading of all imaginable positions.”<sup>26</sup>

In the Deep South, these degraded convicts were almost all poor white men. After 1818, Louisiana was the only southern state to consistently admit slaves into the penitentiary, as an alternative to hanging. Although free people of color made up a large percentage of the Upper South’s prisoners, the Deep South’s institutions of corrections rarely housed any. Comprising one out of every three of Virginia’s prisoners and one of every two of Maryland’s convicts, free blacks made up less than 1 percent of Alabama and Mississippi’s populations in the 1850s, while there were no free blacks in Georgia’s prison. The Deep South’s penitentiaries, therefore, almost exclusively housed whites. Out of these convicted whites, high proportions of them were immigrants (especially the “Famine Irish”) and city dwellers. Most were impoverished, and many were non-violent offenders. The majority of inmates were not incarcerated for murder,

---

<sup>26</sup> Friedman, *Crime and Punishment*, 77; Ayers, *Vengeance and Justice*, 42; 53; 70.

rape, or even assault; instead, about half of them spent years laboring under the lash for insignificant property crimes like petit larceny and burglary.<sup>27</sup>

Mississippi's penitentiary was constructed in 1840 in Jackson. According to Charles Bolton, state politicians sold the idea to the public by claiming that a prison would "provide for the humane treatment of criminals and to free them from such 'barbarous punishments' as whipping and branding...physical forms of discipline [that] were generally associated with slavery." There were likely two main reasons for this privatization of violence. First, the timing coincided with a rise in poor white discontent following the Panic of 1837. Perhaps planters were attempting to assuage some of nonslaveholders' ill will following the great consolidation of wealth and landholdings. Second, and much more significantly, beating a white person in front of a slave could destroy the "established boundary" between slavery and freedom. But as southern states turned to imprisonment, the only change in white corporal punishment was that it now happened overwhelmingly in private, within the prison bounds, instead of in public, where slaves and nonslaveholding whites could witness it. Mississippi's prisoners, "almost exclusively" poor whites, were primarily incarcerated for property crimes, with two-thirds of them serving time for theft.<sup>28</sup>

Throughout the later antebellum years, the Deep South's prisoners produced a wide array of goods, from wagons to slave shoes to pails to bricks. But many of these projects came to a halt when working men all across the region began complaining about competition with prison labor. Mississippi's prison, like those of the other southern states, was supposed to eventually become a self-sustaining enterprise; the gentry certainly did not want to have to support it with tax dollars. Originally, the superintendent worked prisoners in various trades, turning a profit as early as

---

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 61; 75.

<sup>28</sup> Bolton, *Poor Whites*, 110; 111.

1843. To achieve this result, however, the prison wardens needed to command complete control and obedience from the incarcerated – not just as prisoners, but also as laborers. C.M. Hart, the superintendent of Mississippi’s prison in the 1840s, started his job with only \$500 in funding from the state. Using their money, as well as forced convict labor, he erected a blacksmith’s shop, a coal house, and a stable, reporting that “articles manufactured by the convicts” were being “sold for cash.” His plans for the future including using convict labor to manufacture bricks for the growing city of Jackson. Hart even asked the state to furnish him with five slaves to cut and haul wood for the kilns, and to tend to the kilns at night, “when convicts cannot be employed.” Access to these two types of unfree labor made Hart so sure of the brick factory’s success that he predicted “a revenue to the state” within three years of operation. Over the next few years, however, the state’s artisans and mechanics began protesting that they could not compete with unpaid prison labor. Deciding to head off any further problems from non-slaveholding working men, Mississippi’s politicians turned the prison into a cotton factory in 1849 and it stayed that way for over a decade, producing profits of about \$20,000 a year. When the Civil War began, the state converted the penitentiary into a munitions factory.<sup>29</sup>

Cruel and barbarous treatment of these laborers could be detected from the earliest days of the institution, but actual accounts of the violence demonstrate just how commonly these mostly non-violent criminals were violently abused. The superintendent’s report from 1840 began by listing each convict as a number, without a name, a method that slaveholders and census takers sometimes used to enumerate slaves. Beside each number Superintendent Hart recorded a brief description, and many of them related to work ethic and labor: Number 20 “works indifferently,” and Number 28 “works badly, is very deceptive, and required very close

---

<sup>29</sup> Ayers, *Vengeance and Justice*, 75; “Mississippi Penitentiary Superintendent’s Report,” Folder 1840, MDAH; Ayers, *Vengeance and Justice*, 66-7; Bolton, *Poor Whites*, 111.

watching.” While “Nothing but fear” made convict Number 23 work, Number 12 held the title of the “laziest and most stubborn of all the convicts. All moderate punishments have no effect upon him. Nothing but stripes will make him work, and observe the rules of the prison.” Prisoner Number 2, however, suffered the cruelest fate. Apparently stubborn, disobedient, and refusing to work, he was put on bread and water and isolated from the other convicts. When those punishments seemed to have little effect on Number 2’s behavior, the superintendent whipped him with a leather strap, claiming to have given him less than eight stripes. Following the savage whipping, Number 2 kept complaining that he felt sick. Yet since he had “feigned sickness before,” the superintendent refused to believe him and continued making him work. A week later prisoner Number 2 died. Hart was, of course, never held liable for the convict’s brutal death. Instead, it seemed as if the superintendent became even more confident and bold in his methods. Although he never hesitated to use violence to make the convicts labor, Hart also took great care to ensure that the corporeal punishments he issued would not affect the prison’s profit margin by keeping a convict from working. Sounding very much like a slaveholder, the Superintendent rather proudly concluded that the “strap, or paddle, which while it produces instantaneous pain, has the desired effect, does not wound or mutilate, or cut the body, and admits of little or no interruption in the labor of the day.”<sup>30</sup>

Perhaps not surprisingly, prisoner Number 2 was not the only white man to perish under the prison lash. The following year, in 1841, the state set up a joint select committee to examine the penitentiary and issue a report to Mississippi’s Speaker of the House. The committee found “many breaches of the rules for...discipline,” and reported that Superintendent Hart “has been guilty of several acts of severe harshness and cruelty towards the convicts, and appears from the concurrent testimony of nearly all the witnesses examined to be a man whose strong prejudices

---

<sup>30</sup> “Mississippi Penitentiary Superintendent’s Report.”

and haste and ungovernable temper very much unfit for the performance of the delicate, important, and responsible trust confided to him.” The committee further stated that prisoner John King’s death “was unquestionably hastened if not actually induced by the severity of the labor imposed upon and exacted of him and by the frequency and rigor of the corporal punishment inflicted upon him when in a low and enfeebled state of health.” Being whipped and beaten and then literally worked to death was an ending not uncommon in the slave community. A white man who suffered this fate could be used as an example to all the other convicts: work hard and behave in a uniformly deferential way at all times, or you might pay with your life. In some cases, the way the penitentiary actually functioned did not simply resemble slavery – it *was*, in effect, short-term slavery. Antebellum convicts were forced to work long hours at high levels of intensity in backbreaking jobs, forced to live under constant surveillance, forced to follow every single order or take a beating, forced to live every moment of their lives according to someone else’s will.<sup>31</sup>

Two guards and the penitentiary’s shoemaker testified about the murder of John King. E.S. Pettit, the institution’s shoemaker, “saw Major Hart on several occasions much excited by anger. Saw him knock down and kick John King a few days before his death saying at the same time that he should work or die in the stocks.” The first guard interviewed confirmed that King was forced to “perform severely laborious tasks under a burning sun,” even though he looked “extremely unwell,” appearing emaciated and “languid.” Yet even after performing his work, King was “severely,” mercilessly beaten by Superintendent Hart, enduring “stripes and blows with various instruments, to wit a cow hide leather strap and saw blade.” The guard defiantly added that Hart fed his horses off of the penitentiary’s corn and fodder, and then raised the topic

---

<sup>31</sup> “To be inserted on Journal of January 19, 1841,” Penitentiary Records, Series 1575, Box 7704, Folder 1840, MDAH.

of another horribly abused convict. “Reported” for simply talking, prisoner Number 32 was flogged and put on a diet of bread and water, all at the behest of the superintendent. Sometime thereafter, Number 32 committed suicide, unable to deal with his miserable life any longer.<sup>32</sup>

James Spann, another guard, corroborated his co-worker’s testimony. He had witnessed Superintendent Hart “strike one of the convicts with a stick and on another occasion saw him choke No. 32. At both times Major Hart appeared to be much excited by anger.” Spann further claimed “that Major Hart is a man of exceedingly irascible temper, though in general his treatment of the convicts is kind and humane.” Spann’s caveat at the end of his statement, defending a man who murdered prisoners (albeit a man who was also his employer), was indicative of the broader culture that tolerated—and even tacitly encouraged—the abuse of prisoners to produce a profit for the state. Certainly the committee’s report to the Speaker reflected this acceptance; instead of firing Superintendent Hart, they merely called for him to be censured. They laid much of the blame on the penitentiary’s Board of Inspectors for not examining reported incidents like they should. Recommending the prohibition of whipping altogether, the report called for convicts be sent to solitary confinement for “mischievous” behaviors. The abolition of whipping inmates, of course, never happened, but Hart was allowed to continue in his position as superintendent. In fact, the committee even concluded its report by praising Hart for his ability to produce revenue, noting that the “keeper has certainly discharged his duty” concerning the “profitable employment of the convicts and meets a degree of praise in that respect.”<sup>33</sup>

Georgia’s penitentiary was, in many ways, similar to Mississippi’s. Originally erected in 1817 in Milledgeville, the antebellum capital of the state, Georgians immediately expected it to

---

<sup>32</sup> “Statement of Petit, Long, and Gibbons,” *Ibid.*; “Statement of Hughton, Carter, and Spann,” *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*; “To be inserted on Journal of January 19, 1841,” *Ibid.*

become self-supporting, although in the early years that never happened. After the prison was destroyed by a fire in 1831, the legislature considered abolishing the institution altogether, returning to the pre-penitentiary system of corporeal punishment. Yet more progressive forces prevailed and the following year the prison was rebuilt. Since the prison did not produce a profit over the next few years, in 1843 the state senate passed a bill to hire out convicts, but the House postponed the bill indefinitely, effectively killing it. Instead, as the *Columbus Enquirer* reported, “All articles manufactured” at the penitentiary would “be sold (at low cash prices) in six or twelve months’ time.” The main reason Georgia’s convicts worked so hard and so quickly was revealed by a journalist from Athens a year later; the warden, Charles H. Nelson, apparently embodied “an inhumanity and cruelty that would have disgraced a brute.” Despite Nelson’s critics, he continued working the convicts like slaves. By the 1850s Georgia’s prisoners had built 371 cars for the Western and Atlantic Railroad, finally paying off the penitentiary’s construction debt in the process. Like Mississippi’s superintendent, Georgia’s warden knew how to effectively use violence to optimize labor output. Indeed, these two men had learned from slaveholders how to successfully exploit unfree laborers. Southern prisons proved that whites – like blacks – could be deprived of their liberty and forced to work at the command of the lash. Perhaps most importantly, the antebellum prison experience proved that, properly coerced, unfree white labor could successfully produce a profit.<sup>34</sup>

Profits, however, were not the only financial concern of the Deep South’s judicial system. As mentioned in Chapter Three, antebellum courts functioned on a fee system. From a sheriff’s fee for the actual arrest itself, to accrued daily jail fees, to the payment of the solicitor general, the courts depended on the accused for reimbursement of their own legal costs. These fees,

---

<sup>34</sup> Wallenstein, *From Slave South*, 81; 82; “Penitentiary, Georgia,” *Columbus Enquirer*, Oct. 4, 1843, p. 3; Ayers, *Vengeance and Justice*, 52; 66.

especially when combined with the fines imposed for most criminal convictions, could vary widely, from five or ten dollars to hundreds of dollars for more serious offenses. And while every state laid out statutory guidelines on what each step of the judicial process should cost, local courts were able to tack on additional charges at will, knowing the defendants had no recourse to challenge these costs. Aside from civil cases, it is relatively rare to find explicit monetary details on fines and fees in antebellum southern minute books, but when numbers do appear, they vary greatly. In most states, completely indigent people had the option of taking an oath of insolvency, and then local taxes would be used to compensate the court. In practice, however, it is unclear how often this actually happened.

In Savannah, for example, each night accused criminals were arrested and lodged in jail. The next morning they generally received a cursory hearing in the Mayor's Court. While some of the accused were fined and released, others were returned to jail - either to await the next session of the Superior Court, or simply because they could not pay their fines. And because court sessions were only held twice a year, some people were lodged in jail for six months before even having the chance to be fully arraigned. Regardless of the amount of fines and fees, though, most poor whites would have had trouble trying to pay them. With rare access to actual cash, poor white suspects faced two realities: remaining imprisoned for lengthy periods of time, or getting a benefactor to pay the fees or post bond. Whenever this scenario did arise, it undoubtedly strengthened the culture of paternalism. Having a well-known, affluent member of the community vouch for the future behaviors of a poor white could be likened to having a patron taking responsibility for the actions of a free black.<sup>35</sup>

Yet for the vast majority of poor whites, there was no paternalist benefactor to post their bonds. In fact, the debt some poor whites accrued in jail and court fees actually caused them to

---

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 74.

be incarcerated even longer. Most historians purport that the widespread jailing of debtors ended in the Jacksonian period. But this was not the case in the Deep South, where the practice thrived in many localities throughout the late antebellum period. Originally, Old English law separated debtors into two separate classes: the rich and “respectable” middle classes had one set of laws, and the poor had another. Bankruptcy law, as John Fabian Witt wrote, had always been as much about the “interests of creditors as it had been about providing fresh starts to debtors.” As part of the legal code reserved for the (formerly) affluent, bankruptcy was, especially in the nineteenth century, a “commitment to social provision for middle-class risks...[while] the American law of torts and American poor laws developed comparatively harsh rules for the occupational risks faced by the working classes.” The states had little incentive to help lift poor whites out of poverty; thus the poor never enjoyed the forgiveness of debts or the clean slate of bankruptcy. Instead, poor whites were left to sink deeper and deeper into debt, racking up excessive court and jail fees as they attempted to navigate the legal system. Poor law and criminal law were deeply historically intertwined. The fact that poor white southern debtors were still deprived of liberty in the 1840s and 1850s is hardly surprising.<sup>36</sup>

According to Lawrence Friedman, colonial American jails “housed debtors” but did not usually confine them to cells. Generally allowed to work within the prison bounds during the days, the debtors would return to the jail to sleep at nights. There were also workhouses and “houses of correction,” institutions that boarded vagrants, idlers, and paupers, functioning somewhere “between a poorhouse and a jail.” By the 1820s, wrote Peter Coleman, “only the larger debtors, or those suspected of fraud, commonly spent more than a month in jail. Even then, in most eastern states about seven out of eight prisoners qualified for the privilege of prison

---

<sup>36</sup> John Fabian Witt, “Review Essay: Narrating Bankruptcy/Narrating Risk,” *Northwestern University Law Review*, Vol. 98, No. 1 (2003): 327; 305.

bounds.” In general, most American legal scholars have held that imprisonment for debt ended by the mid-1830s. Although true for much of America, recently historians have uncovered a different reality in the Deep South. While many Upper South states had changed their laws by the later antebellum period, states with larger percentages of slaves lagged behind. North Carolina, for example, had an Insolvent Debtors Law which “provided for the release of any debtors imprisoned for more than twenty days once they took an oath that they did not have property worth more than \$10 other than property exempt from execution.” The law was not like bankruptcy – the impoverished debtor was still responsible for his debt. Still, North Carolina’s laws were much more humane than its southern counterpart, where imprisonment for debt was not abolished until Reconstruction. As John Fabian Witt confirmed, “Imprisonment for debt persisted into the 1830s and 1840s; in some Southern states it was not formally abolished until the early 1870s.”<sup>37</sup>

Originally, debt imprisonment in the antebellum South was largely the result of the adoption of an early English law, *capias ad satisfaciendum*, popularly referred to as “ca. sa.” As “the creditor’s ultimate weapon,” Peter Coleman stated, *ca. sa.* “was the right to imprison his defaulting debtor until the obligation had been paid.” The local sheriff, by writ of execution, would arrest and jail the debtor until the court date, unless, of course, the debtor had enough money to purchase his own release. The creditor then had the option of proceeding “in one of two ways. By the first method he filed suit to recover the overdue debt. If the trial court upheld the demand it issued a final judgment providing for the assignment and sale of the debtor’s assets, personal property first, then real property.” Thus, for the accused who still owned wealth,

---

<sup>37</sup> Friedman, *Crime and Punishment*, 49; Peter J. Coleman, *Debtors and Creditors in America: Insolvency, Imprisonment for Debt, and Bankruptcy, 1607-1900* (Washington, D.C.: Beard Books, 1999), 254; 257; Bolton, *Poor Whites*, 26; see Morris, “White Bondage,” 202, Footnote 55: In South Carolina, “Imprisonment for debt was not abolished until 1868.”; Witt, “Review Essay,” 308.

the sole punishment was the repossession of enough property to pay off the original debt. But the truly indigent people who could not satisfy the loan were forced to remain in jail, paradoxically, until they *could* repay the loan. This method, also known as the mesne process, “was simple, cheap, and swift.” The plaintiff merely had to appear before a court official and swear to the fact that a “debt was overdue or that the debtor intended to hide, run away, or conceal property.” By that point, the debtor’s fate was sealed: the inability to make a payment on a loan meant the end of freedom.<sup>38</sup>

One of Georgia’s original statutes concerning insolvent debtors, adopted in 1801, changed very little over the next sixty-plus years, at least for the truly impoverished. Perhaps one of the most concerning aspects of the law required the jailing of all debtors who “shall not be able to satisfy and pay his ordinary person fees, [when] such fees shall be paid by the person at whose insistence such insolvent person may be confined.” The creditor, therefore, was all-powerful in deciding whether or not the debtor would become incarcerated. As long as the creditor agreed to pay jail fees, the county would imprison the debtor, regardless of how insignificant of a sum he owed, and regardless of time. But for those “debtors” who somehow had enough wealth to post bond, an 1820 act permitted them “the privilege of the jail yard,” a ten acre circumference around the jail that would be expanded to a hundred acres in 1840. Not until 1850 did state legislators amend the wording of the law to include “the privilege of prison bounds” to all debtors, regardless of their inability to post bond. For the most part, however, the state’s *capias ad satisfaciendum* laws remained unchanged from the very beginning of the nineteenth century. In 1845, for example, one Georgia legislator introduced a bill “to prevent the issue of a ‘*capius ad satisfaciendum*’ [sic] against defendants, until the plaintiff swears that he believes the defendant has property or money fraudulently concealed.” But slaveholding

---

<sup>38</sup> Coleman, *Debtors and Creditors*, 3-5.

lawmakers, who comprised 70 percent of the state’s legislature, immediately rejected this reasonable amendment, suggesting that the primary goal of the law *was* to jail debtors, not to recover overdue debts. These laws were clearly regularly enforced, as the 1859 statute book included “An act to authorize the Justices of the Inferior Court of this State, to discharge Insolvent Debtors confined by process.” According to the act, local jails were overcrowded with both debtors and criminals, necessitating the intervention of lower court judges to continually release some of the incarcerated. It is unclear what became of the debts of the freed prisoners; in all likelihood, they were listed as insolvent, with the state absorbing their public debts. Perhaps this excess of prisoners helped push Georgia to outlaw the practice of jailing females for *ca. sa* in 1847, with Alabama following suit in 1852. Other Deep South states, though, made no distinction as to the sex of the debtor – any individual who owed even a small sum of money was at risk of losing their liberty.<sup>39</sup>

And for those unlucky individuals who did lose their liberty over debts, the waiting time before formal charges or trials varied widely. It seems likely that many of the debtors in the later antebellum period experienced lengthy periods of incarceration, sometimes in between the initial arrest and actual trial, and sometimes while awaiting formal charges. Georgia’s 1859 code advocated the release of debtors who had been languishing in jails with no semblance of Due Process, explaining that “It often happens that prisoners, debtors and criminals, are committed

---

<sup>39</sup> Howell Cobb, *Analysis of the Statutes of Georgia, in General Use, with the Forms and Precedents Necessary to Their Practical Operation, and an Appendix, Containing the Declaration of Independence; the Articles of Confederation; the Constitution of the United States; the Constitution of the State of Georgia; General Washington’s Farewell Address, and the Naturalization Laws Passed by Congress*. New-York, 1846. *The Making of Modern Law: Primary Sources*. Web. 15 August 2013, p. 631; Coleman, *Debtors and Creditors*, 235; “Georgia Legislature,” *Albany Patriot*, Dec. 3, 1845, p. 2; Ralph A. Wooster, *The People in Power: Courthouse and Statehouse in the Lower South, 1850-60* (Knoxville: Tennessee, 1969), 41; Howell Cobb, *A Compilation of the General and Public Statutes of the State of Georgia; with the Forms and Precedents Necessary to Their Practical Use. and an Appendix. Containing the Naturalization Laws; the Constitutions of the United States and of Georgia, and the Rules of Practice*. New York, 1859. *The Making of Modern Law: Primary Sources*. Web. 15 August 2013, p. 335; 334; Coleman, *Debtors and Creditors*, 235; John J. Ormond, *The Code of Alabama*. Montgomery, 1852. *The Making of Modern Law: Primary Sources*. Web. 15 August 2013, p. 448.

and sent to jails in other counties than those to which they belong...to the great injury of the county to which they are so committed; as the criminals, in particular, are frequently left there without prosecution.” Alternately, in Hinds County, Mississippi, sheriffs were often commanded to arrest small-time debtors, even in cases where the prisoners would have to wait until the next court term for a hearing, which could sometimes take as long as six months. Furthermore, these arrests were still prevalent in the years leading up to the Civil War, as evidenced by the number of southern newspapers advertising various forms related to *capias ad satisfaciendum*. In 1855, the *Albany Patriot* advertised, “For Sale at the Patriot Office: For Justices’ Court: Ca. Sa. Bails; For Superior and Inferior Court: Ca. Sa. Bonds.” Indeed, as late as 1857 Mississippi’s legislature ordered \$1.50 to be paid to sheriffs for “Serving ca. sa. on each defendant.” Two years later Georgia declared that jailers should get sixty cents for receiving any “prisoner or debtor,” while a justice of the peace was entitled to thirty-five cents for each *capias ad satisfaciendum* execution.<sup>40</sup>

Due mainly to overcrowding, by the later antebellum period most Deep South states allowed debtors the privileges of “prison bounds,” a specified area surrounding the jail. Convicts would ostensibly try to find work within the prison bounds during the day, and return to jail at night to sleep. Even in the punitive state of South Carolina, by the early 1830s many debtors who were sentenced to both a fine and imprisonment were given the privilege of “prison bounds” during the day so that they could try and earn money to pay their fines. Regardless of how the convicted served their time, arrests for debt remained frequent throughout the 1840s and 50s. In Fairfield District, for instance, the “prison bounds bonds” records literally contain several

---

<sup>40</sup> Cobb, *A Compilation*, 334; Hinds County, Circuit Court Minutes, 1859-62, MDAH; “List of Blanks,” *Albany Patriot* (GA), May 4, 1855, p. 4; William Lewis Sharkey, *The Revised Code of the Statute Laws of the State of Mississippi*. Jackson, Mississippi, 1857. *The Making of Modern Law: Primary Sources*. Web. 15 August 2013, p. 145; also see 535-537; Howell Cobb, *A Compilation*, 435.

hundred standardized, (blank) fill-in-the-blank forms for people charged with ca.sa. Furthermore, a few cases from South Carolina's Anderson District provide examples of how *capias ad satisfaciendum* was used in practice. In 1847 the sheriff lodged James H. Taylor in jail "for \$159.50 and costs," while in 1855 William Browning was imprisoned for a mere \$17.00. Four years later the sheriff searched for Norman Bronson, who apparently owed William Way and Company \$223.89. But Bronson absconded before he could be arrested. The sheriff noted, "I have made search and have not been able to find this defendant in my district," a statement that likely functioned as a refrain throughout the southern states. Imprisonment for debt was yet another incentive for less affluent whites to stay constantly on the move.<sup>41</sup>

Perhaps one of the most striking practices of local southern courts was the "auctioning off" of paupers, debtors, and criminals. Poor white children had been "bound out" as cheap laborers for decades, but "selling" adults for their labor meant that some white Americans were essentially working as indentured servants throughout the late antebellum period. Whether to save money on Poor Houses or incarceration costs, poor white debtors and criminals were auctioned off for their services, with all the allegory that entailed. The bidders were agreeing to take the prisoners and paupers off of the county's hands in order to have their labor to exploit. The entire practice likely originated with the auctioning off of paupers, usually as a group. In these types of cases, rather than putting their own money down, bidders were actually competing to show how little assistance they would require from the county for the paupers' upkeep. As the courts began ordering convicts to be auctioned off, however, the transactional part of the process changed. It seems that when convicts were "sold," they were auctioned off to the highest bidder, and the proceeds from the sale would be applied to the criminal's court fines

---

<sup>41</sup> Williams, *Vogues in Villany*, 118; Fairfield District, Court of Common Pleas, Prison bounds bonds, 1829-1861, SCDAH; Anderson District, Court of Common Pleas, *Capias ad satisfaciendum* executions, 1828-1859, SCDAH.

and fees. Both of these methods saved county governments money while further privatizing the responsibilities of localities. In either scenario, the winning bidders, of course, were grateful for the chance to purchase such cheap labor, and the minimal amount of care they were required to provide for the poor only added to their profits. Historian James Ely confirmed that the “successful bidder could put his charges to work during the term of the contracts.” Timothy Lockley concurred, noting that in Georgia, “Many counties operated a policy of putting paupers up for ‘auction’...Paupers who were in effect hired out in this manner might well have been expected to work if they were physically able.”<sup>42</sup>

As for the Deep South’s criminals, those “auctioned off” were usually men who had been convicted of vagrancy, livestock theft, or bastardy. For instance, in South Carolina vagrants were publicly sold for terms of six months to a year and a day. If no one was willing to purchase the vagrant’s labor, “the sessions court ordered that he be whipped anywhere from five to thirty-nine lashes.” George Brown remembered seeing white men for “sale” in Tennessee as a boy. The low costs described in accounts of such transactions further suggest that these rates were generally daily or weekly rates. “The men who idled were arrested under the Vagabond Act and made to work. I knew one man, John Henderson, who was bid off at 6 ½ c. and put to work by the buyer; afterwards he bought his freedom, later bought a farm for \$15,000. He would often laugh about being sold for 6 ½ c.” This single statement is deeply telling. Not only did John Henderson suffer the humiliation of being sold and the degradation of being forced to work for a master, but he also “bought his freedom,” an act that further blurred the lines of slavery.<sup>43</sup>

Historian Richard Morris purported that South Carolina’s laws authorizing the “sale” of vagrants and “putative fathers...stemmed from the archaic debt laws still in existence” on the eve

---

<sup>42</sup> Ely, “Few Subjects,” 858; Lockley, *Welfare and Charity*, 22.

<sup>43</sup> Morris, “White Bondage,” 199; Colleen M. Elliot and Louise A. Moxley, eds. *The Tennessee Civil War Veterans Questionnaires* (Easley, SC: Southern Historical Press, Inc., 1985), Vol. 1, 388-9.

of secession. As for the crime of bastardy, Chapter One explained that many upper and middling class southerners were concerned about the non-traditional sexual relationships among poor whites, who often eschewed the institution of marriage. Grand juries all across the region complained about the poor living in “open adultery.” The practice had become so common, one jury reported, “as to render social order insecure, to dispense with the ancient and honorable institutions of Matrimony, and load our Country with indigent orphans and prostitutes.” Up until 1847, men convicted of bastardy in South Carolina could be sold into servitude for four years. However, according to Jack Kenny Williams, the restrictions under this statute were “repeatedly ignored,” as some men served much longer sentences. Morris’s findings confirm this fact. If the putative father defaulted on payments of \$25 a year until the illegitimate child turned twelve, he was liable to be sold for his labor to the highest bidder. The proceeds of this sale “were applied to the child’s upkeep.” Occasionally southern courts sold these alleged fathers for shorter periods of time, but sometimes their time in bondage far exceeded what the law allowed, as in 1843 when the Barnwell sessions court “sentenced Bryant Weathersbee to be sold for *ten years*.”<sup>44</sup>

This type of forced labor obviously blurred the lines between slaves and free white citizens. But so did the public corporeal punishment of poor whites – generally by means of whipping – which occurred in almost every Deep South state. While scholars who have worked extensively with local southern legal records know that these lashings occurred, the larger narrative of American history often obscures this important fact. Indeed, one of the most revered scholars of American crime and punishment, Lawrence Friedman, held that most corporeal punishment, including whipping, had ended by the close of the Jacksonian period. In the colonial period, he wrote, jails were used “to hold people for trial who could not make bail, and for

---

<sup>44</sup> Morris, “White Bondage,” 202; Williams, *Vogues in Villany*, 57; 55; Footnote 82 on page 55 explains that after the 1847 law, the putative father was jailed, leaving the district to pay his expenses; Morris, “White Bondage,” 200; also see 224-5.

debtors who could not pay debts...All this changed in the republican period.” Citing the prison as “the centerpiece of correctional theory,” he declared that “whipping...fell into disrepute. In an age of rapid growth, impersonal cities, and rootless populations, public punishments (punishments of stigma and shame) seemed to lose their power. These tools worked best in small, closed communities.” While Friedman’s theory was certainly true for the rapidly industrializing North, his description of “small, closed communities” still applied to areas of the late antebellum Deep South. The public, violent punishment of black Americans was a common sight in these regions. For white Americans, state-sanctioned corporeal punishments were much rarer, but they did, in fact, occur. Poor white debtors and criminals were publicly beaten and whipped throughout the late antebellum and Civil War eras. While some of the lashings were committed by vigilantes, it seems that most were sanctioned by local officials. Growing up in Lauderdale, Alabama, Benjamin Derby remembered “a few loafers in the country that would steal and we had the whip law and run them out...They had to work and did work and made a good living or they had to leave the country. I saw my father and other men whip one man and make him leave.”<sup>45</sup>

Ex-slaves also confirmed that white men were still being whipped in the years leading to secession. Betty Chessier recalled, “The only person I ever seen whipped at that whipping post was a white man.” Charles Crawley confirmed her statement, saying, “Yes the poor white man had some dark and tough days, like us poor niggers; I mean [they] were lashed and treated, some of them just as pitiful and unmerciful.” Of course, the institution of slavery only added to the justification of the use of brute force. Attempting to maintain a society that was predicated upon violence and terror, slaveholders naturally extended their violent grip over poor whites who had no stake in the peculiar institution. As Pieter Spierenburg found in Europe, public executions and

---

<sup>45</sup> Friedman, *Crime and Punishment*, 49; Ayers, *Vengeance and Justice*, 102; Elliot, *Tennessee*, Vol. 2, 632-3.

other forms of corporeal punishment tended to decline as the “mentalities” of the people changed. As modern nation-states began forming, a fundamental shift in attitudes concerning human suffering occurred. As the upper class became more confident in its ruling powers, there was little need to reinforce its power through violent means. By the early nineteenth century, European countries had ended all forms of public punishment, including mutilation and torture. Considered unnecessary and even distasteful, there was simply no room for barbaric methods in an age of enlightenment and modernity.<sup>46</sup>

In the slave South, however, violence was not only an accepted part of daily life, it was also a fundamental necessity. So even with the rise of the penitentiary and the privatization of most corporeal punishment, slaveholders still employed public spectacle whenever they needed to reassert their power over slaves, free blacks, and even poor whites. Planters made sure to preserve their legal right to whip and publicly humiliate other white men, codifying bodily harm as a just punishment for several seemingly benign crimes. Poor whites convicted of trading with slaves were liable to be whipped in most southern states, and larceny charges from livestock stealing to petty theft warranted similar treatment. Georgia, the only Deep South state to officially abolish whipping and torture, still entertained notions of reintroducing corporeal punishment throughout the 1840s and 1850s. As Charles Bolton found in North Carolina, a state that “mandated corporal punishment for a variety of crimes ranging from theft to fighting...poor whites convicted of theft usually involved a fine for women but a public whipping for men.” And South Carolinian officials, according to Jeff Forret, “inflicted as many as thirty-nine stripes on whites—men only—caught gambling with slaves or free blacks, in addition to fines and imprisonment that both men and women faced.” The Palmetto State’s legal code also allowed

---

<sup>46</sup> Betty Foreman Chessier, *American Slave*, Vol. 13 (OK), 31; Charles Crawley, *Ibid.*, XVII (VA), 9-10; Pieter Spierenburg, *The Spectacle of Suffering: Executions and the Evolution of Repression: From a Pre-Industrial Metropolis to the European Experience* (New York: Cambridge, 1984).

whipping for petit larceny, receiving stolen goods, and perjury, and the offense of horse stealing warranted between fifty and two hundred lashes. And even though the practice began engendering some public backlash in the 1850s, South Carolina's legislature did not seem too affected by the sentiment. As late as 1857 they passed a law requiring whipping as part of the punishment for white males who had been convicted of trading with slaves more than once.<sup>47</sup>

Both Alabama and Mississippi required every county to build a "jail or county prison, well secured with iron bars, bolts and locks; and also, one pillory, whipping-post, and stocks; and every jail so to be erected, shall consist of three apartments at least; one of which shall be appropriated to the reception of debtors." These laws were still in effect at the time of the Civil War, and from all indications, they were still used, if sparingly. One Georgia newspaper described "Life in Mississippi" in 1836: "there has lately been some lynching of some shopkeepers...for selling whiskey to and harboring negroes. Each of the lynched received about one hundred lashes." Alabama's criminals fared no better. Stealing was generally punishable by "fine and imprisonment, or whipping, as the court shall think to inflict." Even vagrancy warranted very harsh penalties for repeat offenders in Alabama, whether male or female. If a second arrest occurred less than twenty days after a vagrant was released from jail for a first offense, the accused was incarcerated for one month, "with all costs accruing thereon; which if he or she neglect or refuse to pay, he or she may be continued in prison until the next county court." If the defendant was then found guilty, the "court may proceed to hire the offender for any term not exceeding six months, to make satisfaction for all costs." However, the law

---

<sup>47</sup> See Spierenburg, *The Prison Experience*. Spierenburg holds that the scaffold and the prison coexisted throughout the early modern period; the rise of the prison did not immediately spell demise for older forms of torture and public humiliation. Walter Kyle Planitzer, "A Dangerous Class of Men, Without Direct Interest in Slavery: A Proslavery Concern about Southern Nonslaveholders in the Late Antebellum Era," (Ph.D. Diss., Johns Hopkins, 2007), 40; Wallenstein, *From Slave South*, 83; Bolton, *Poor Whites*, 60; Forret, *Race Relations*, 60; *The Statutes At Large Of South Carolina*, Columbia, 1841. 10 vols. *The Making of Modern Law: Primary Sources*. Web. 15 August 2013, p. 297; 286; Forret, *Race Relations*, 106.

stipulated an important caveat: if the vagrant “be of noted ill fame” and thus no one will hire them, thirty-nine lashes on “his or her bare back” would suffice as justifiable punishment. South Carolina also recommended selling off the “services” of the vagrant for one full year “at auction.” Just as in Alabama, if “no purchaser” was found, the offender would be whipped and then given three days to leave the district.<sup>48</sup>

Aside from vagrancy, there were a number of other crimes that warranted the lash in the antebellum South. From the perspective of corporeal punishment against whites, South Carolina had the most punitive legal code in the region, probably due to several factors. Aside from the obvious problem of not having a state penitentiary, the Palmetto State’s leaders seemed less concerned than other Deep South states over poor white discontent. Much of their apathy likely stemmed from the fact that South Carolina had higher rates of slaveholders than did its neighboring states, making its poor white population proportionally less significant. States with a more economically stratified white population showed a little more restraint in the meting out of punishments for white convicts. Unfortunately, the vast majority of legal records from this period lack any sentencing information, so it is difficult to ascertain how frequently white people were publicly whipped in the late antebellum period. Still, public whippings of white people *did* take place, and the spectacle of it all further blurred the lines between slavery and freedom, black and white.<sup>49</sup>

Certainly by the early 1800s, the pillory had become nearly obsolete in most of the South. Whipping, on the other hand, continued, especially in states like South Carolina. Since the

---

<sup>48</sup> Sharkey, *The Revised Code*, 703; Clement Comer Clay, *Digest of the Laws of Alabama: Containing all the Statutes of a Public and General Nature, in Force at the Close of the Session of The General Assembly, in February, 1843. To Which are Prefixed, the Declaration of Independence; the Constitution of the United States; the Act to Enable the People of Alabama to Form a Constitution and State Government, &c.; and the Constitution of the State of Alabama*. Tuscaloosa, 1843. *The Making of Modern Law: Primary Sources*. Web. 15 August 2013, p. 162; “Life in Mississippi,” *Southern Recorder* (GA), Aug. 16, 1836, p. 2; Clay, *Digest of the Laws*, 592.

<sup>49</sup> *The Statutes At Large Of South Carolina*, 1841, p. 582.

Palmetto State never invested in a penitentiary, judges were limited in their sentencing of criminals. Even for petty crimes, repeat offenders were often ordered to leave the region immediately. Alternatively, staying in the area would earn them a public lashing and perhaps a jail term. Although it is impossible to know how many accused criminals suffered under the crack of the whip, Jack Kenny Williams attempted to break down the antebellum punishments of South Carolina's convicts. Local judges sentenced about 10 percent of the state's felons to death, and out of the 90 percent remaining, 50 percent were fined, 20 percent were jailed, and an astonishing 30 percent were sentenced to whipping, the pillory, or branding. Oftentimes these punishments were paired with fines or jail time; the most common combination included a fine and a lashing. According to Williams, "the view of a pickpocket or a hog-stealer receiving his 'dorsal application' was a common one. Most whipping posts were simply a pair of poles connected by a cross beam to which a criminal's arms were tied. A single pole or a tree might adequately serve the same purpose." Actual lashings were usually administered by the sheriff, and sometimes by jailors or deputies. Occasionally judges specified whether the lashings should be "moderately laid on" or "well laid on." Probably the most commonly ordered sentence was thirty-nine lashes, a number derived from the Biblical code of Moses, which stipulated penalties at "forty stripes save one." In reality sentences ranged from as little as one, two, or three lashes up to 119 lashes. Two horse thieves, convicted in Columbia in 1852, were sentenced to 119 lashes, to be doled out in monthly installments of 39-20-20-20-20. The men were jailed in between whippings. Horse stealers received the most severe sentences; it was rare for them to receive less than fifty stripes. Yet no matter the number of lashes, a primary objective of whipping white people was to completely and utterly embarrass them, degrading them to the level of slaves. Governor John Means confirmed this point in 1852, stating that "when a white

man once had” a public whipping, “he disappeared and never returned again.” The shame and stigma associated with being punished like a slave was simply too much for most men to bear.<sup>50</sup>

At least in the case of South Carolina, the administration of public whippings changed over time. For one thing, in the early antebellum years, considerable numbers of white women were ordered to receive the brutal punishment. While most of these women were lashed less than eleven times, public sentiment began changing by the mid-antebellum period, causing the practice to become rare. When one woman was sentenced to a whipping in 1853, public anger became so intense that the governor pardoned her before the lashing. This timing coincided with the fact that the South Carolina legislature considered a number of bills in the early 1850s to end the whipping of white people. During these years two of the state’s governors tried to substitute hard labor for the practice; one even attempted to outlaw the public whipping of whites altogether. Although none of these bills or proposals ever became laws, the punitive sentence became much rarer in the years leading to secession. Much of the public’s outrage, it seemed, stemmed from the fact that growing numbers of African Americans were watching the spectacles, leading both slaves and free blacks to question the racial divide by considering poor white criminals their social equals. In 1846 a grand jury out of Charleston complained about the “self-congratulation” among blacks over “the degradation of the white by the same punishment.” Despite mounting criticism of the practice, the system did not change, and poor white men were publicly whipped in South Carolina up until the Civil War.<sup>51</sup>

Silas Bond, a severely impoverished laborer in Martin County, North Carolina, was whipped for stealing food in 1828. Born to poor parents, his three siblings were bound out as apprentices. But Bond himself “was weak and ill grown,” and thus “could not find a master

---

<sup>50</sup> Williams, *Vogues in Villany*, 107; 106; 106; 108; 109; 108; 109.

<sup>51</sup> Williams, *Vogues in Villany*, 109; 110; Hindus, *Prison and Plantation*, 101; Williams, *Vogues in Villany*, 110; Hindus, *Prison and Plantation*, 101; 102.

willing to clothe and feed him for his services.” Wandering from place to place with his mother, begging for food and shelter, he survived childhood living on the “verge of starvation.” When at last Bond turned nineteen, his mother was finally able to hire him out. After several days of working and without having eaten a meal, Silas Bond pilfered “one joint of meat” from his employer. As Guion Griffis Johnson described it, Bond’s “master, vengeful,” had the young man arrested for petit larceny. Upon Silas Bond’s conviction, the local judge “passed sentence that he receive ten lashes lightly laid on. This conviction deprived him of the rights of citizenship.” But Bond would not be the last North Carolinian whipped. In fact, by 1856 in Guilford County, North Carolina, the punishment for property crimes had gotten more punitive. When John Rogers pled guilty to burglary charges, the court sentenced him to thirty-nine lashes, “with a promise of thirty-nine more if he would appear here at the next Term of the Court.” And Willis Hurley, convicted of stealing a horse in Randolph County in 1855, also received a two part sentence: thirty-nine lashes, and thirty more in four months’ time. “Presumably,” Charles Bolton wrote, “few people stayed around to receive the delayed portion of such sentences.”<sup>52</sup>

In Laurens, South Carolina, several men charged with *capias ad satisfaciendum* for fines and court fees were also sentenced to public whippings. In 1844, William Hazel was “sentenced to receive twenty lashes on the bare back on the first Monday of April next.” Originally charged for the relatively benign crime of petit larceny, Hazel apparently still owed the court \$22.08. Listed in the 1850 census as a thirty year old illiterate landless, propertyless farmer, Hazel was obviously too destitute to pay that sum to the court. Because of his poverty, he was punished like a slave – with the crack of a whip. John Snow endured the same ordeal in 1851. Owing the court \$31.80 for jail and trial fees stemming from a grand larceny conviction, Snow was further

---

<sup>52</sup> Guion Griffis Johnson, *Ante-Bellum North Carolina: A Social History* (Chapel Hill: North Carolina, 1937), 71, Web.; Bolton, *Poor Whites*, 64-5.

“sentenced to whipping and imprisonment.” At the time of his public flagellation, Snow was twenty-three years old and illiterate. Like William Hazel, the prior year’s census listed John Snow as a landless, propertyless farmer. He resided with a female head of household and her six children, perhaps as a live-in farm laborer. While it is unclear what Snow was charged with stealing, local officials seized the opportunity to make an example out of his behavior. Again in 1859, the Laurens court sentenced another man convicted of larceny to ten lashes for owing less than twenty-five dollars to the court. Indeed, by the late antebellum period in most southern states, a rich man had the privilege of declaring bankruptcy and moving on with his life. A poor man, on the other hand, was liable to be whipped like a slave in front of the entire community for the failure to pay his own jail and court fees.<sup>53</sup>

A few districts over in Kershaw, South Carolina, poor white men were being publicly whipped for similar crimes. In November 1848, the local court sentenced Harvey Smith to a year in jail for larceny. He was also ordered “to receive on [the] first Monday in January 15 stripes and on [the] first Monday in May 15 stripes.” Less than a year later Norman Gillis, a landless farm laborer in his mid-forties, was convicted of stealing a sheep. The local court used Gillis to teach poor whites a lesson: respect the sanctity of their property (ALL of their property), or suffer through an incredibly vicious punishment. According to the sheriff’s records, Norman Gillis’s penance was extremely harsh:

On the first Monday in July 1849 my deputy inflicted ten stripes upon the bare back of the defendant he having failed to comply with the sentence of the court. Which was repeated by him on the first Monday in August following on the first Monday in September following I inflicted upon the bare back of the defendant ten stripes. And on the first Monday in October following nine stripes...

---

<sup>53</sup> Laurens, Capias ad satisfaciendum executions; Seventh Census of the United States, 1850: Laurens District, South Carolina; Laurens, Capias ad satisfaciendum executions; Seventh Census of the United States, 1850: Laurens District, South Carolina.

Jeff Forret found further evidence of whip law in Greenville, South Carolina. In 1840, Murrell Massey, along with several other poor white men, had been gambling with a slave when a disagreement broke out. Massey apparently beat and stabbed the slave “with a dirk in the back.” The slave, Jacob, ultimately lived, but Massey was sentenced to “a \$20 fine, two weeks in jail, and twenty lashes.”<sup>54</sup>

Whippings were also meted out as just punishment for non-slaveholding whites who uttered sentiments in opposition to secession or slavery. Sometimes the local courts ordered these lashings, but as secession loomed, extralegal, vigilante groups began taking matters into their own hands. Steven Channing uncovered a case from Columbia, South Carolina in 1859, in which an Irish stonecutter named James Powers apparently used “seditious language” about slavery while talking to a group of white men. As Powers fled the city vigilantes caught up to him, hauled him to the city square, and ordered two black “operators” to give him thirty-nine lashes and a coat of tar and feathers. The vigilance committee then loaded him aboard a ship heading to New York. Thus, even if the public whippings of poor whites did not occur with great frequency, they *did*, in fact, happen. And every time a white person was publicly whipped, poor whites and other non-slaveholders were reminded in a very meaningful way that they had better support the established social order. As Jeff Forret wrote, “For at least a brief moment, flogging degraded the white man, reducing him to the level of slaves and temporarily suspending his membership in white society.” Anyone who dared to disrupt the southern hierarchy was in jeopardy of being publicly humiliated and savagely beaten, subsequently robbed of almost every last vestige of white privilege.<sup>55</sup>

---

<sup>54</sup> Kershaw, *Capias ad satisfaciendum* executions; Seventh Census of the United States, 1850, Kershaw District, South Carolina; Forret, *Race Relations*, 170-1.

<sup>55</sup> Steven A. Channing, *Crisis of Fear: Secession in South Carolina* (New York: Norton, 1974), 30; Forret, *Race Relations*, 105.

For decades scholars have wondered why a biracial coalition of the South's lower classes never emerged. Poor whites and blacks certainly realized that their respective oppressors were the same people. Whether trading together in the underground economy, drinking, gambling, or sleeping together, or helping each other escape imprisonment or slavery, the two races collectively undermined planters' control in myriad ways. In its more direct forms, their animosity manifested itself in the destruction of affluent whites' property, the prevalence of violence, and the occasional plotted or attempted revolt. As Eugene Genovese found, "the slaves had some sense of being an exploited class, not merely an oppressed race." Poor whites experienced a variation of Genovese's theory. They recognized themselves as a distinct class because they were excluded from many of the privileges of whiteness. They had few tangible reasons to consider themselves as part of the ruling race.<sup>56</sup>

Precisely because of this sentiment, the threat of rebellion ominously engulfed the region, gaining traction in the late antebellum period. Southern poor whites lived in a society that boasted of white supremacy and racial solidarity. In reality, however, slaveholders made clear distinctions, based upon class, about who shared in the spoils of whiteness. In the slaveholding Deep South, white privilege was dependent on wealth and fidelity to the region's chattel-owning aristocracy. Slaveholders could – and often did – use any activity, any utterance, and any association a poor white had to question his loyalty to the maintenance of the peculiar institution. If planters felt they had reason to be suspicious of a certain individual, they had the legal means to have the person incarcerated at will. If they failed to prove their full and unwavering support for slavery, poor whites could expect to face dire consequences. The southern legal system made sure of that. As Karen Davis observed about lower class whites in the slaveholding Caribbean,

---

<sup>56</sup> Eugene Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Vintage, 1974), 597-660; 305.

“If West Indian poor whites were never owned in perpetuity, they had been the object of strict legal codes, demeaning epithets, suspicious fear, and cruel treatment.” In the United States of America, poor southern whites suffered similar fates.<sup>57</sup>

Certainly poor whites had few chances to challenge the established southern hierarchy. Wealthy slaveholders assured the region remained veiled in ignorance. Non-slaveholders were indebted to and financially dependent upon them. The planter aristocracy had created a legal system that allowed them to imprison anyone who challenged the slave-based hierarchy. They constantly reminded poor whites and other non-slaveholders of their power – and that people who tried to disrupt their carefully crafted society were just one step away from slavery. Rising levels of incarceration, the “selling” of convicts and debtors, and the spectacle of public corporeal punishment forced poor white men to reflect upon the status of their rights as white citizens within the slaveholding South, and the results of this reflection did not bode well for their future. As a Washington, D.C. paper reported in 1850, “Slavery suppresses the liberty of the poor white man of the South, as it does the black man, if not in the same degree, yet in the same manner and for the same purpose. It tolerates no independence of thought or discussion.” Just a couple of years later *True Delta*, a newspaper based in Louisiana, echoed the same sentiments. But the vitriol against the slaveholders was growing. Discussing the fate of poor whites, the southern paper reported, “There never was a people so enslaved by stupid laws, so degraded by class legislation. Everything...tended to one end, the aggrandizement of a small, narrow minded, selfish, ignorant and domineering class.” By the middle of the 1850s, the cracks that had always been present within the façade of white racial solidarity finally turned into deep fissures. When

---

<sup>57</sup> Karen F. Davis, “The Position of Poor Whites in a Color-Class Hierarchy: A Diachronic Study of Ethnic Boundaries in Barbados,” (Ph.D. Diss., Wayne State University, 1978), 69.

the Panic of 1857 hit and wealth inequality continued to widen, slaveholders realized that they had to be proactive in the defense of their property and power.<sup>58</sup>

After the Civil War, however, white men were no longer the southern gentry's main legal targets. As soon as the slaves became free, the social structure of southern society changed dramatically. Emancipation actually heralded the end of the imprisonment of thousands of poor southern whites who had defied the slaveholders' social hierarchy. Slaveholders no longer needed to protect slave property. Instead, they began using the criminal justice system to target freedmen and freedwomen, returning them to a state of quasi-slavery. This sudden transformation in the race of the southern "criminal"—overwhelmingly white during slavery, overwhelmingly black after the Thirteenth Amendment—confirms that the maintenance of slavery greatly exacerbated class tensions between whites in the antebellum period. Slaveholders used a variety of different means to keep poor whites and blacks separate, and the incarceration of "dangerous whites" and "masterless men" helped planters reach this end goal. As slavery's existence continued to economically cripple many white southerners, it caused many of them to completely disengage from society. Almost a hundred years after slavery's end, Martin Luther King, Jr. explained this alienation – an alienation that has plagued the impoverished underclasses of every civilization: "There is nothing more dangerous than to build a society, with a large segment of people in that society, who feel that they have no stake in it; who feel that they have nothing to lose. People who have a stake in their society, protect that society, but when they don't have it, they unconsciously want to destroy it."<sup>59</sup>

---

<sup>58</sup> "Settling the Slave Question," *The National Era* (D.C.), March 28, 1850; quoted in Roger W. Shugg, *Origins of Class Struggle in Louisiana: A Social History of White Farmers and Laborers during Slavery and After, 1840-1875* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana, 1939), 121.

<sup>59</sup> See Ayers, *Vengeance and Justice*, Part 2; Martin Luther King Jr., interview in Henry Hampton, *Eyes on the Prize* (PBS/Blackside Inc., 1987).

## CHAPTER FIVE: CLASS CRISIS AND THE CIVIL WAR

*They are now completely under the domination of the oligarchy, and it is madness to suppose that they will ever be able to rise to a position of true manhood, until after the slave power shall have been utterly overthrown.*

– Hinton Helper<sup>1</sup>

*They will have an Abolition party in the South, of Southern men. The contest for slavery will no longer be one between the North and the South. It will be in the South, between the people of the South.*

–The Charleston Mercury<sup>2</sup>

In 1838, Ohio abolitionist Charles Olcott assailed the relationship between free white labor and black slave labor, charging that “a multitude of poor whites...are...by the monopoly of slave labour...kept in the greatest poverty, want and ignorance. It is disgraceful in them to labour with slaves,” he continued, “and if it were not the slaveholders will not hire them...the poor whites in those states live, in a state of dependence bordering on pauperism.” Because of the South’s decided economic inequality between classes of white men, Olcott concluded that “All of the evils of slavery are great evils; but one of the greatest is, *that it injures the free as well as the enslaved.*”<sup>3</sup>

Labor problems arising from competition between the Deep South’s poor whites and enslaved blacks became acute in the 1830s, as abolitionist ideas trickled South and the slave labor system flourished. Slavery had allowed the region’s planters to overwork the land for years, eroding and depleting the soil of nutrients and causing farmers to move frequently in

---

<sup>1</sup> Hinton Rowan Helper, *The Impending Crisis of the South: How to Meet It* (1857; reprint, New York: A.B. Burdick, 1860), 382.

<sup>2</sup> *The Charleston Mercury*, Oct. 11, 1860, quoted in Michael P. Johnson, *Towards a Patriarchal Republic: The Secession of Georgia* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana, 1977), 44.

<sup>3</sup> Charles Olcott, *Two Lectures on the Subject of Slavery and Abolition* (Massillon, OH: “Printed for the Author,” 1838), Vol. 11, No. 16, 54-5, MDAH.

search of better, more fertile land. Slavery also helped to reduce the wages of southern white laborers to well below those of their northern counterparts, since southern whites had to sell their labor in direct competition with slaves, who were also valuable capital assets to their owners. Indeed, the peculiar institution had rapidly decreased the demand for white farmers, tenants, day laborers, and even mechanics, creating a large underclass of impoverished white people who often suffered from unemployment or underemployment. The “evils” of slavery, as Charles Olcott so eloquently stated, had in fact produced a society in which poor whites had no stake. Slavery stripped poor whites of their jobs, drove down their wages, and destroyed their sense of self-worth and honor. Thus, slavery was not only massively injurious for black Americans – it was also detrimental to the welfare of a large percentage of southern whites. While poor white southerners were certainly never subjected to the absolute horrors, daily violence, and humiliations of chattel slavery, they did suffer very tangible socio-economic consequences because of the institution.<sup>4</sup>

In the two decades before the Civil War, poor whites became increasingly upset about their exclusion from the labor market. Already excluded from most agricultural labor, many poor whites wanted to keep slaves out of industrial and construction jobs, sectors of the economy that showed signs of beginning to rely on slave labor. By the 1840s, non-slaveholding laborers began holding small conventions in all parts of the Deep South. These meetings generally served one purpose: white men were forming nascent Unions to elevate their wages, primarily by eliminating competition from slaves. Generally led by the upper-economic tier of lower class

---

<sup>4</sup> Gavin Wright, *Old South, New South: Revolutions in the Southern Economy Since the Civil War* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana, 1986), Chapter 2. On the labor issue, see Charles C. Bolton, *Poor Whites in the Antebellum South: Tenants and Laborers in Central North Carolina and Northeast Mississippi* (Durham: Duke, 1994), 17; Jeff Forret, *Race Relations at the Margins: Slaves and Poor Whites in the Antebellum Southern Countryside* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana, 2006), 11; Max Grivno, “‘Chased Out on the Slippery Ice’: Rural Wage Laborers in Baltimore’s Hinterlands, 1815-1860,” in Delfino, Susanna, et. al., eds., *Southern Society and Its Transformations, 1790-1860* (Columbia, MO: Missouri, 2011), 132; and Seth Rockman, *Scraping By: Wage Labor, Slavery, and Survival in Early Baltimore* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 2009); Olcott, *Two Lectures*, 54-5.

whites – skilled or semi-skilled “mechanics” – these laborers started to agitate for better opportunities, and demand protections against competition with slaves. The new “associations” demanded higher wages, and at times members even threatened to withdraw their support for slavery. Therefore, non-slaveholding laborers in the Deep South *did* recognize a “common identity.” Poor whites considered themselves an underprivileged class with few chances at upward mobility. And despite the fact that most of these people were uneducated or illiterate, they showed a fairly sophisticated understanding of the ways in which slavery oppressed them. As traveler James Redpath reported, all the poor whites he met “were conscious of the injurious influence that slavery was exerting on their social condition.”<sup>5</sup>

The second consequence of competition with slave labor was that the most impoverished sector of poor whites found themselves trapped in a perennial cycle of unemployment and underemployment. As poor white Isaac Grimes remembered, consistent employment “was awful scarce. Couldn’t hardly get work [and ] wages [were] so low – I have worked that time for \$5.00 a month and board. Worked with oxens, all [I] could get for work.” This inability to earn a living wage increasingly led to poor whites dropping out of the labor force entirely, constantly moving and squatting, living off the land and outside of society. Not surprisingly, these southerners completely understood *why* they were having such a hard time finding decent-paying employment. One Georgian laborer complained that in the few years before the Civil War, “the

---

<sup>5</sup> See Michele Gillespie, *Free Labor in an Unfree World: White Artisans in Slaveholding Georgia, 1789-1860* (Athens: Georgia, 2000), for a discussion of skilled white laborers. Gillespie found that the hegemony of Savannah’s slaveholders prevented white artisans from organizing politically or forming a sustained class consciousness. While this chapter focuses on all unskilled and some semi-skilled white laborers, “mechanics” comprise most of the examples given. I use the term “mechanic” in the same way it was used by southerners in the antebellum period: it encompasses almost any type of non-agricultural labor, and generally involved the use of tools. Mechanics could range in skill level from unskilled, common day laborers to skilled, artisanal “Master Mechanics.” And although the leaders of these associations may not have qualified as poor whites in the strictest sense of the term (some of them likely owned a little bit of land and some personal property), I believe that they were still articulating the concerns of the South’s white poor. As workers who were in constant competition with slaves, mechanics from all economic circumstances shared common labor goals. James Redpath, *The Roving Editor, or Talks with Slaves in the Southern States*, John R. McKivigan, ed. (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania, 1996), 88.

slaveholders could get the slave for almost nothing and the poor young men like myself, could not get a job.” Poor white laborer A.J. Ferrell concurred: “If they had not owned slaves a man working as I was could have secured better wages.” These men, therefore, posed a threat to upper class whites precisely because they had no stake in the southern economic system. Completely excluded from the benefits of slavery, poor whites were essentially “masterless men” in a rigidly hierarchical world, and this fact deeply troubled the region’s planters and politicians. This crisis, caused in large part by the “demoralization” of a white laborers who were unable to earn a living wage, threatened the stability, and thus the safety, of southern slaveowners, adding fuel to the secession flame.<sup>6</sup>

In 1847, Congressman Thomas Bayly of Virginia gave an apt summary of the South’s labor problem: “As soon as the supply of slave labor exceeds the demands of agriculture,” he opined, they “are put in the trades. Blacksmiths, shoemakers, joiners, bricklayers, & c., are made of them. They are thus brought into competition with the white mechanics of the country, and they exclude whites from employment...The next step will be to employ slave-labor in the factories, where again they will exclude the indigent whites.” The representative’s comments were historically accurate. As Robert Starobin has shown, slave labor began to dominate some industrial pursuits in the decades leading up to the Civil War. Slaves provided a cheaper, supposedly more docile workforce than poor whites, as the Deep South’s growing number of antebellum industrialists were well aware.<sup>7</sup>

This rise of industry in the 1840s and 50s coincided with three other important changes in the region. Following the Second Great Awakening, the rise of abolitionism in the 1830s, and the

---

<sup>6</sup> Colleen M. Elliot and Louise A. Moxley, eds. *The Tennessee Civil War Veterans Questionnaires*, Vols. 1-5. (Easley, SC: Southern Historical Press, Inc., 1985), Vol. 3, p. 966; p. 1057; Vol. 2, 806-7.

<sup>7</sup> “Untitled,” *Southern Recorder* (GA), March 9, 1847, p. 2; Robert S. Starobin, *Industrial Slavery in the Old South* (1970; reprint, New York: Oxford, 1975).

financial Panic of 1837, slaveholders from the Upper South began disentangling themselves from the peculiar institution, causing an influx of additional slave labor into the Deep South. As Fogel and Engerman showed, between 1790 and 1860, about 835,000 slaves were imported from the Upper South into the Lower South, with the “traffic during the last half of the seventy-year period...three times as large as the first half.” Furthermore, by the middle of the 1840s immigrants from Germany and Ireland had settled in the Lower South. The large majority of these immigrants, particularly the “Famine” Irish, joined the ranks of poor whites, overflowing the labor pool, undercutting wages, and increasing competition for employment opportunities, especially in southern cities and towns. Finally, by the 1850s the British textile boom was in full swing. Cotton production became increasingly profitable throughout the Deep South, and fed by a dramatic increase in slave prices, wealth was becoming even more concentrated.<sup>8</sup>

Several Confederate veterans spoke about this transformation in the two decades leading up to the war. Lee Billingsley, the son of a large slaveholder, admitted that “For ten or fifteen years just before the war the larger land and slave-owners did not regard manual labor as respectable for a gentleman.” J.P. Dillehay, whose yeoman father owned only one slave, recalled a similar change: “When I was a boy [slaveholders] did not think themselves better than one who did not have slaves, but just as the war broke out, they seemed to think themselves better than the ones who did not own any...some of them would not speak to the men who did not own slaves.” Thus, as the 1840s and 50s rolled on, the socio-economic plight of poor whites in the Deep South seemed to worsen continually. In the few years leading up to secession, wealthy planters realized that they desperately needed to address this impending class crisis between whites – a predicament that was, ironically, a by-product of slavery. Instead of unifying all white men,

---

<sup>8</sup> Robert W. Fogel and Stanley L. Engerman. *Time on the Cross: The Economics of American Negro Slavery* (Boston: Little, Brown, & Co., 1974), 47; 103-6.

black slavery had opened deep fissures in any semblance of racial solidarity among white southerners.<sup>9</sup>

In 1858, Governor James Adams of South Carolina observed “that free labor and slave labor w[ere] *necessarily* antagonistic to each other. The policy of teaching negroes the various trades, instead of putting them on the plantations, where they belong, tends to make the rich richer, and the poor poorer.” Indeed, he continued, by bringing “slave labor into competition with white labor, and thus arraying capital against labor, (for the negro is capital)...this will produce a spirit of antagonism between the rich and the poor.” But Governor Adams was not acting out of progressive labor principles. Instead, he was reacting to the growing number of “associations” and the growing chorus of protests by white laborers demanding reform. Poor and lower-middling class whites held gatherings all across the Deep South, insisting on job segregation and wage protection.<sup>10</sup>

The same year that Governor Adams gave his speech on the perils of pitting white workers against slaves, 163 white laborers met in Charleston to pass resolutions against the “baneful evil” of slave hiring. This practice, they declared, hurt their own economic interests, and would eventually harm “the owner of the slave” as well. Two years later, Charleston’s mechanics continued to petition the state of South Carolina for legal protections against black competition. All other trades benefitted from racial exclusion, their argument ran, so white mechanics deserved the same advantage. And though the legislature ultimately tabled a bill on restricting slaves from mechanical trades, the final sentence of the 1860 petition was portentous: “Is it wise to tax the loyalty of the working poor man, by such discriminations, to the institution which he is educated to defend, and in defense of which he is always the foremost?” In the six

---

<sup>9</sup> Elliot, *Tennessee*, Vol. 1, 317; Vol. 2, 691.

<sup>10</sup> “Negro Mechanics,” *Federal Union* (GA), July 6, 1858, p. 1-2; see Johnson, *Towards a Patriarchal Republic*, 46-52.

years before the Civil War, South Carolinian Mechanics Associations sent more than ten petitions and memorials to the state legislature, asking for non-competition laws for slaves and free blacks. The legislators, of course, did nothing. Two states away, poor white workers in Jackson, Mississippi also called for “a permanent Mechanical Association and the suppression of the abuses committed by the owners of negro mechanics in ‘permitting their slaves to go at large, trade as free men, [and] hire themselves out’ ...to the...direct injury of the mechanical classes in open violation of *social right*.” R.H. Purdom, a master mechanic who addressed the Jackson meeting, issued a blatant warning to slaveholders and slave hirers: an “early, decided course for the speedy suppression of the intolerable abuses” suffered by poor white laborers was necessary for the “permanent welfare of the institution of slavery itself.” It seemed as if poor whites were finally at their tipping point. They were willing – at least in theory – to threaten the institution of slavery in the interests of their own economic class.<sup>11</sup>

Even some of the Deep South’s most highly skilled laborers threw their support behind the demands of these new associations. The editors of a Milledgeville, Georgia paper eloquently defended poor white laborers, writing that “if the rich man’s negro was placed in competition with us at the printer’s case, and by lowering our wages, take the bread from the mouths of our wife and children, a well of bitterness would spring up in our breasts against the negro and his master, that would render is the everlasting and uncompromising enemy of both.” The editors then pointed out that men in their profession enjoyed legal protection against competition with

---

<sup>11</sup> A few months after presenting the first version of this paper in Mississippi, a colleague told me about a recent dissertation, Walter Kyle Planitzer, “A Dangerous Class of Men, Without Direct Interest in Slavery: Proslavery Concern about Southern Nonslaveholders in the Late Antebellum Era,” (Ph.D. Diss., Johns Hopkins University, 2007). Planitzer’s work dovetails nicely with the arguments presented in the first part of this article (specifically concerning mechanics). I also agree with his main point, that “proslavery secessionists propelled their states out of the Union, in large part, to preserve the hegemony of the slave owning class.” Quoted in Planitzer, “A Dangerous Class of Men,” 74 and 72; Ronald Takaki, “The Movement to Reopen the African Slave Trade in South Carolina,” *The South Carolina Historical Magazine*, Vol. 66, No. 1 (Jan. 1965): 43; “Mechanical Association,” *Mississippian State Gazette*, Dec. 29, 1858, p. 3.

slave labor. Poor whites were owed the same protections, they argued – all whites at least deserved a chance to earn a living wage: “Fortunately, however, the laws of the State protect printers against this humiliation and degradation. And what the laws fail to do in this respect for other mechanics, a wholesome public opinion should effect for them.” Urging lawmakers to do something about poor whites’ competition with slave labor, the editors concluded that current conditions made “the poor mechanic of the South the enemy of the negro and of the institution of slavery.” A writer to the *Mobile Mercury* in Alabama echoed these sentiments. If slaveowners stayed “deaf to the just claims of white laboring men,” then the poor should “act in the manner and take measures for their own protection.” The integration of the southern labor force had destroyed the “rights and dignity of white men.” What southerner would “be willing to see his son working at the same bench with a set of buck negroes, and on equality with them?”<sup>12</sup>

Planters and politicians responded quickly to the emerging labor crisis by proposing several ill-formed plans. In the decade before the Civil War, this issue had politicians scrambling to come up with a new labor plan for the plantation South. As one of the earliest responses to the labor crisis, in 1853 South Carolina’s Leonidas Spratt advocated reopening the African slave trade. Seeking a wider base of support for slavery, and largely as a response to the spike in slave prices in the decade before the war, the leaders of the movement wanted to allow more landed yeoman farmers to become slaveowners. If they could increase the supply of slaves by importing African and Caribbean people, the price of slaves would plummet, thus allowing a lower class of whites to become slaveowners. Reopening the African slave trade was historically important, as the radicalism it engendered helped to mold young fire eaters into effective secessionist politicians. Manisha Sinha wrote, “Even those historians who have studied this movement have

---

<sup>12</sup> “Negro Mechanics,” *Federal Union* (GA), July 6, 1858, p. 1-2. “Employment of Slaves,” *Mobile Mercury* (AL), quoted in Planitzer, “A Dangerous Class of Men,” 80.

not fully grasped its significance for the politics of slavery and separatism in the 1850s.” This controversial crusade gained enough support to make it “the central topic of heated debates” in the Southern commercial conventions of 1858 and 1859. According to several historians, the leaders of this movement felt the need to protect slavery from three main threats: the federal government, the moral “revolution” and humanistic enlightenment that swept across much of the nineteenth century western world, and an internal challenge from nonslaveholders.<sup>13</sup>

This last threat was serious enough that Spratt warned slaveholders that unless the price of slaves could be lowered, the masses of white laborers would eventually become frustrated enough to vote for abolition. “They will question the right of masters to employ their slaves in any work that they may wish for,” Spratt cautioned, “they will invoke the aid of legislation...and thus this town of Charleston, as the very heart of slavery, may become a fortress of democratic power against it.” Even the plan’s detractors used economic class issues to argue their own side, correctly pointing out that importing more slaves would further drive down the wages of the region’s white laborers. As evidenced by the few public responses of nonslaveholders on reopening the trade, they, too, realized the dire consequences that would befall them. One letter from a “poor, very poor” white laborer attempted to dissuade South Carolina’s lawmakers from importing more slaves by appealing to their humanity: “If we are to have negro labor in abundance, where will my support come from...how can I live?” Reopening the trade, of course, would have reduced the overall wealth of slaveowners by lowering the cost of slaves. But that was an economic loss that some planters were willing to take. They needed to preserve slavery, and they wanted to continue on with their efforts to expand the institution’s geographic reach.

---

<sup>13</sup> Takaki, “The Movement,” 38-9; Manisha Sinha, *The Counterrevolution of Slavery: Politics and Ideology in Antebellum South Carolina* (Chapel Hill: North Carolina, 2000), 125. Also see Harvey Wish, “The Revival of the African Slave Trade in the United States, 1856-1860,” *The Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, Vol. 27, No. 4 (March, 1941), p. 569-588.

Thus, while planters and politicians never succeeded in reestablishing the African slave trade, debates over the issue revealed new fissures between classes of southern whites.<sup>14</sup>

As late as 1860, Robert S. Hudson was urging planters to sell one tenth of their slaves to nonslaveholding yeomen, to “make interest supply the deficiency of patriotism.” Until they became slaveholders, white men in the Deep South had very few reasons to feel a sense of nationalism with more affluent slaveholders. As Ronald Takaki found, the desire to reopen the trade had ultimately been driven by “an internal crisis of the Old South—a crisis based chiefly on the distressing awareness that slaveholding social mobility was tightening, and on the disturbing recognition that white Southerners themselves doubted the rightness of slavery.” Indeed, by the end of the 1850s, the issue of reopening the African slave trade had openly divided the southern upper classes on policy and exposed the tenuousness of nonslaveholders’ fidelity to the social hierarchy. Sinha concluded that the incendiary debate “had not only initiated a major rethinking on this issue in the Lower South but had also become an important part of southern nationalists’ platform of disunion and slavery expansion.”<sup>15</sup>

Reopening the slave trade was only one of the many ways that slaveholding interests attempted to deal with class problems related to slavery. Indeed, as far back as 1850 slaveholders recognized the labor problem, and they often connected it to the specter of rebellion:

So long as these poor but industrious people, could see no mode of living, except by a degrading operation of work with the negro upon the plantation, they were content to endure life in its most discouraging forms, satisfied that they were *above* the slave, though faring worse than he...the great mass of our poor white population, begin to understand that they have rights, and that they, too, are entitled to some of the sympathy which falls upon the suffering...*It is this great upbearing of our masses that we are to fear, so far as our institutions are concerned.*

---

<sup>14</sup> Takaki. “The Movement,” 38-9; 48-9.

<sup>15</sup> Quoted in Paul D. Escott, *After Secession: Jefferson Davis and the Failure of Confederate Nationalism* (1978; reprint; Baton Rouge: Louisiana, 1992), 29; Ronald Takaki, *A Pro-Slavery Crusade: The Agitation to Reopen the African Slave Trade* (New York: The Free Press, 1971), x; Sinha, *The Counterrevolution of Slavery*, 126.

The threat of an angry, jobless mob caused some southern lawmakers to propose ensuring poor whites' fidelity to slavery by restricting slave labor to agriculture. Indeed, non-slaveholding workers were already pushing for some sort of division of labor. Their "associations" seemingly demanded nothing short of privileging white labor by excluding slaves and free blacks from certain types of work. One proposed solution seemed to gain favor incrementally as more states seceded from the Union. Judge H.F. Hopkins, of Mobile, Alabama, carefully explained the benefits of this plan. In an effort to preserve slavery, he wrote, "slaveholders should... thorough legislative action... confine the negro to the soil, thus to elevate and open up the mechanic trades to the non-slaveholding people around them." The Judge concluded, "By confining the negro to the soil, the mechanic would be at once converted from an... enemy of negro slavery into its finest advocate and supporter, because he would feel himself then lifted up in the solid scale of social responsibility, and maintained in that position by the subordinated negro, confined exclusively to menial services." As Paul Escott wrote, this discussion over limiting slaves to agriculture revealed just how deep planter fears ran. "This nagging anxiety over the loyalty of the nonslaveholder was widespread and did not abate," he concluded, "for the planters' fears proved to be justified."<sup>16</sup>

But mechanical jobs were not the only employment problem arising from issues associated with slave labor competition. Industrialists also used this opportunity to try to position the factory as the simple solution in segregating the labor force. With new factories, boosters argued, jobs could be arranged in a hierarchical manner: blacks would work in the fields, in the "lowliest" of jobs with the hardest physical toil, while poor whites would work in industry. J.M.

---

<sup>16</sup> Richard W. Griffin, "Poor White Laborers in Southern Cotton Factories, 1789-1865," *The South Carolina Historical Magazine* 61, No. 1 (Jan. 1960), 33; "Negro Mechanics," *Southern Federal Union* (GA), July 23, 1861, p. 1; Escott, *After Secession*, 29.

Wesson, a Mississippi industrialist, even proposed creating an economic stake in slavery for poor whites by employing them to manufacture clothes and shoes for slaves. Regardless of how segregation was pitched, the Deep South's slaveholders proposed similar plans in every state. In their pleas for implementing a racial division of labor, they often cited protecting the institution of slavery as their main purpose. An 1860 editorial from South Carolina reminded planters that it was "impolitic to force slavery into any channel where it materially injures that class [i.e. nonslaveholders], who are not only the most numerous, but who are best adapted to protect the interests of the institution when assailed in a physical manner."<sup>17</sup>

Thus, the willingness of slaveholders to entertain notions of reforming or restricting slavery revealed their growing unease about the increasingly angry, sizable white underclass. The South's planters knew that poor whites had no stake in slavery, and that they were becoming more and more upset about their inability to earn a living wage. Slaveowners needed to placate the white masses if they wanted to continue holding blacks in slavery. Faced with an over-supply of labor and a growing pool of impoverished, unemployed whites, planters tried their best to keep the races separate. As Chapter Three demonstrated, slaveholders used vagrancy laws and other legal means to keep the two underclasses apart. While there were myriad reasons for this segregation, one important motivation concerned the "demoralization" of labor. As one planter explained, "the intercourse of *these people* with the negroes was not favorable to good discipline." Poor whites, he thought, could not command slaves' respect, and thus would weaken the prevailing racial hierarchy. This idea of "demoralization" is important, because in the minds of upper class whites, at least, if slaves recognized the absolute differences—both economically and socially—between poor whites and

---

<sup>17</sup> William L. Barney, *The Secessionist Impulse: Alabama and Mississippi in 1860* (Princeton: Princeton, 1974), 42; "Negro Mechanics," *Camden Journal* (SC), Jan. 18, 1860, quoted in Planitzer, "A Dangerous Class of Men," 81.

all other whites, they would likely begin questioning the supposed twin ideologies of privilege and whiteness. Poor whites undoubtedly undermined slavery by serving as a constant reminder that white skin did not constitute any type of “scientific” superiority.<sup>18</sup>

The region’s most impoverished poor whites, often deemed “po’ white trash” by planter and slave alike, cobbled together a meager existence with very occasional employment, often supplemented by hunting and fishing and occasional forays into the underground economy. Writing during the Civil War, one scholar estimated that there were at least five million poor whites in the South who “eke out a wretched subsistence by hunting, fishing, and hiring themselves out for occasional jobs, and by plunder...these people make up a class at once degraded and dangerous; and constantly reinforced, as they are, by all that is idle, worthless and lawless...[they] preserve an inexhaustible preserve of ruffianism.” Furthermore, in a culture where honor was everything, poor white men often had to live with the dishonor of their failure to provide a stable home for their families. Traveler James Stirling attributed the “vagrancy of the ‘poor whites’ of the Slave States” to “that institution, which shuts out and prevents the copious employment of free labor.”<sup>19</sup>

Stirling was right. Slavery caused many poor white men to travel frequently in search of short-term industrial work and seasonal agricultural jobs. While some poor white families moved together every few years, many poor white men were gone for parts, if not most, of the year searching for work, especially around planting and harvesting seasons. Poor whites’ transience truly caused slaveholders worry; they arrested and jailed these “masterless men” with relative frequency for non-violent, non-property crimes such as vagrancy, drinking, gambling. Moreover,

---

<sup>18</sup> Frederick Law Olmsted, *A Journey in the Seaboard Slave States: With Remarks on Their Economy* (New York: Dix and Edwards, 1856), 674.

<sup>19</sup> J.R. Gillmore, “The Poor Whites of the South,” *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine*, June 1864 (in Alfred H. Stone Collection, MDAH, Vol. 21, No. 48, p. 115; James Stirling, *Letters from the Slave States* (1857: Ann Arbor: Michigan, reprint 2005), 266.

the absence of poor white men meant a sizable number of poor white families were headed by females for at least parts of the year. This family structure served to further weaken poor white men's already fragile notions of masculinity. Given these mounting inequities, it comes as no surprise that one slaveholding veteran noted, "There was a class of nonslaveholders who hated the slaveowners...there was a class of 'poor whites' (they are there yet) who hated those who owned any kind of property." Alas, slavery actually intensified otherwise ordinary feelings of class resentment.<sup>20</sup>

Poor whites undoubtedly composed a completely distinct class from slaveholding yeomen and even from self-sufficient land-owning farmers. Historians Lacy Ford and Stephanie McCurry both argued that South Carolina had a democratic political culture that included the widespread participation of yeomen, who, they maintained, far outnumbered the more affluent planters. While Ford classified yeomen as owning up to five slaves, and McCurry expanded the definition to include up to nine slaves, *any* slaveholder had much more in common with planters than with poor whites. Of course planters encouraged the political participation of men who shared their economic interests. According to a recent article by Stephen West, McCurry at least stressed "the exclusive and hierarchical character of proslavery republicanism and of South Carolina's political culture, in contrast to Ford's more egalitarian depiction," and acknowledged the prevalence of vigilante and para-military violence in the quest for secession. Still, however, these facts did not detract from her conclusion that "yeomen farmers not only supported the cause of secession and disunion, they made it their own." Poor whites, conversely, were not engaged in an egalitarian, democratic society. Instead, in the few years before disunion they co-existed with an increasingly hostile slaveholding class who sought to police and control their

---

<sup>20</sup> Elliot, *Tennessee*, Vol. 5, 1787. For further reading on southern honor, see Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *Honor and Violence in the Old South* (New York: Oxford, 1986) and Stephen W Berry, *All That Makes a Man: Love and Ambition in the Civil War South* (New York: Oxford, 2003).

actions, as well as their beliefs. *The National Era*, a newspaper out of Washington, D.C., ran an article in the fall of 1858 asserting that no other “country in the civilized world” had “such a wide, deep chasm” dividing “class and class as that which separates the [slaveholders and nonslaveholders] occupying this plantation district in the Southern States.” Indeed, the writer continued, the two groups “are united by no common bond of sympathy or interest. On the contrary, a sour, sullen suspicion on the one side, and a proud and haughty bearing on the other, are likely to widen the gulf between them.”<sup>21</sup>

Despite professing to live by Jeffersonian agrarian ideals, by the late antebellum period few large planters engaged in manual labor. In fact, the quintessential mark of economic and social status for white southerners was the ability to avoid labor of any sort. For the most part, the southern slaveocracy never labored with their hands. As one poor white remembered, “It was the slaveholders who led the idle life.” And yet the slaveholder treated the laborer as “being down on a level with the slave or not quite as good as the slave.” This “demoralization” of labor, however, was multi-faceted: at the same time that poor whites supposedly undermined the work ethic of slaves, and upper class whites denigrated manual labor, slavery both financially devalued and psychologically stigmatized work to many poor whites. Slavery produced long term costs in self-esteem and labor discipline, and not only among blacks. Indeed, laziness was the “chief characteristic” of poor whites, according Daniel Hundley. Southern writer Walter Hines Page saw poor whites as “the pathetic by-products of slavery.” Under a slave system “a white man who worked with his hands showed thereby that he was a poor man, doing a slave’s

---

<sup>21</sup> Lacy K. Ford, *Origins of Southern Radicalism: The South Carolina Upcountry, 1800-1860* (New York: Oxford, 1988), and Stephanie McCurry, *Masters of Small Worlds: Yeoman Households, Gender Relations, and the Political Culture of the Antebellum South Carolina Low Country* (New York: Oxford, 1995); Stephen A. West, “Minute Men, Yeomen, and the Mobilization for Secession in the South Carolina Upcountry,” *Journal of Southern History* 71, No.1 (Feb. 2005): 77; McCurry, *Masters of Small Worlds*, 278; “The Farming and Plantation System in the Southern States,” *The National Era* (D.C.), Sept. 30. 1858.

work. In this way the white man ceased to love work. Slavery killed his working habits.” One Virginia paper opined that

In the States where all the labor is performed by white men, two white laborers will do as much work as three negroes do here in the same time. But it is not so when white laborers are employed among us. They very soon fall into the idle habits of the negroes, and graduate the amount of their labor by the customs of the country. They find themselves ranked with a degraded class, and giving up all hopes of improving their condition, are content to suffice to procure the bare necessaries of life.

Furthermore, planters often spoke of poor whites as drunken and undependable, frequently refusing to “work steadily at any employment.” Thus, as poor whites became increasingly angry and disillusioned about their exclusion from the southern economic system, planters and politicians realized the urgent necessity of finally addressing the class problems borne by slavery. Faced with surplus labor and a growing pool of impoverished, unemployed whites, the slaveowners needed to figure out how to appease people – white people – whose lives suffered because of the presence of slavery. And when planters found themselves having to defend slavery from both internal and external forces, they resorted to using fear and propaganda to engender racial hatred among the nonslaveholders.<sup>22</sup>

By the eve of war, southern slaveholders began trying to scare poor whites into supporting secession by warning of the dire consequences of black emancipation. First, they predicted that poor whites’ wages would fall quickly and drastically – to the point of literal starvation. Second, they said that poor whites would suddenly be the social equals of the newly freedmen. Finally, planters warned in most incendiary fashions that a bloody racial war between the two impoverished classes would undoubtedly follow freedom, and that poor whites would be slaughtered by the thousands. This type of fear mongering should be recognized by historians as

---

<sup>22</sup> Elliot, *Tennessee*, Vol. 1, p. 8; Daniel R. Hundley, *Social Relations in our Southern States* (Henry B. Price: New York, 1860), 262; Walter Hines Page, *The Southerner* (New York: Doubleday, 1909), 29; “Principles of the Nebraska Bill,” *Southern Recorder* (GA), May 19, 1857, p. 2.

part of the lead-up to the fanatical violence of the Jim Crow era. In the few years before secession, southern slaveholders literally laid the foundation for the irrational, extremist, racist fear that would come to dominate the decades following the war.

In 1860 Georgia Governor Joseph Brown warned the region's poor whites that abolishing slavery meant that blacks would become their "equals, legally and socially." Since "the negro has only been accustomed to receive his victuals and clothes for his labor. Few of them, if free, would expect anything more." Brown continued:

The poor white man would then go to the wealthy land-owner and say, I wish employment. Hire me to work. I have a wife and children who must have bread. The land-owner would offer probably twenty cents per day. The laborer would say, I cannot support my family on that sum. The landlord replies, That is not my business, I am sorry for you, but I must look to my own interest. The black man who lives on my land has as strong an arm, and as heavy muscles as you have, and can do as much labor. He works for me at that rate, you must work for the same price, or I cannot employ you...the poor, honest laborers of Georgia, can never consent to see slavery abolished, and submit to all the taxation, vassalage, low wages and downright degradation, which must follow. They will never take the negro's place; God forbid.

A year later the Governor continued on the same theme, claiming that "The negro would, when free, be placed nearer a state of equality with the white laborer, and...would come into direct competition with the poor white laborer, and would soon under-bid him, and reduce the price of labor to as low a rate as would sustain life." Thus, nearly five months after the start of the Civil War, the leader of one of the largest slaveholding states was still trying to convince lower class whites that slavery served their interests, too. Black emancipation, Brown warned, "would bring ruin on the poor white man, and degrade his family far below the present condition...In other words," the Governor further

propagandized, “the rich and poor are alike interested in sustaining slavery and in sustaining the price of labor.”<sup>23</sup>

Alfred Iverson, another Georgia politician, joined in the campaign to scare poor white laborers into supporting the peculiar institution. Slavery, Iverson believed, “elevates the character and condition of the poor white man...he well understands that if slavery be abolished the value of his own labor will be diminished, his political and social condition lowered, and his personal safety itself greatly jeopardized. Set the negroes free, and the rich man...can escape them by relocating to a Free State or some other safe and quiet place.” However, Iverson warned, the poor white would not be able to afford the same luxury. Without the financial means to flee the South, “The poor man must remain upon the soil, to encounter the ravages of the ‘black plague’...[it] would sooner or later lead to a war between the races...[and] The brunt of that war would necessarily be borne by the poorer classes of the white population—the effects would fall mainly upon them, and they would reap a rich harvest of all those tortuous evils which follow.” By predicting that poor whites would be massacred by the “black plague,” planters tried to scare white laborers into supporting the institution of slavery – regardless of what it did to their jobs or wages.<sup>24</sup>

But Iverson was not finished with his fear mongering. If the slaves won freedom, then the poor white, Iverson continued, “would become ‘the hewer of wood and drawer of water’ for the rich and powerful. Yes, sirs, the poor people of this country are more interested in the maintenance of slavery...and would take up arms, if necessary, and fight to the death to prevent the infection of so great a calamity.” Iverson’s reference to hewing wood and drawing water

---

<sup>23</sup> “Letter from Gov. Brown, Milledgeville, Dec. 5, 1860,” *Federal Union* (GA), Dec. 11, 1860, p. 3; “Governor’s Message,” *Southern Recorder* (GA), Nov. 12, 1861, p. 3.

<sup>24</sup> “Speech of Hon. Alfred Iverson, Delivered at Griffin, July 14, 1859,” *Weekly Georgia Telegraph*, July 26, 1859, p. 1.

harkens back to the idea of the demoralization of white labor. Illustrating this point further, one southern paper opined that if the slaves were set free,

The occupation of the hundreds of thousands of white laborers in the south would be gone, from the fact that they could not compete with the negro in the lowness of wages...poor white men would be driven to the necessity of competing with the negro, for places of boot-blacks, ostlers, carriage-drivers and waiting men to their wealthy neighbors...the poor [white] man...is no longer an equal of his employer—has no seat around his table—no place at his fireside, and no position but that of a *servant in his society*.<sup>25</sup>

Subsequently, as historian William Barney thought, “The importance of the racial issue cannot be overemphasized. Secessionists employed it in the press and on the stump; nearly every resistance meeting cited the threat of racial equality as a leading justification for secession.” Alabama Supreme Court Justice John D. Phelan remarked that if slavery were destroyed, the “poor and middling classes” would feel the toll most heavily, since “negro...domination” and “amalgamation” would necessarily follow black freedom. The rhetoric became so inflamed that by 1860, Andrew Henry, the Irish-born editor of the *West Alabamian*, warned that southerners should soon expect to “Submit to have our wives and daughters chose [sic] between death and gratifying the hellish lust of the negro!! Submit to have our children murdered, our dwellings burnt and our country desolated!!” When describing the consequences of abolition, slavery’s vociferous defenders always envisioned a bloody, violent future for the South, where African Americans lorded over whites. “So awful was this prophecy, so extreme the language, that a modern observer is compelled to question the depth of fear that lay beneath it,” wrote Stephen Channing. “[T]here is little doubt that from the first,” he concluded, “abolition was regarded as

---

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*; “Southern Rights Meeting in Monroe,” *Georgia Telegraph* (Macon), Nov. 12, 1850, p. 2.

an unthinkable horror, attendant with boundless physical, economic, social, and political disasters.”<sup>26</sup>

Poor whites had no personal or economic interest in the peculiar institution, but slaveholders desperately tried to convince them otherwise. The southern gentry had plenty to think about as they entered election season in 1860. Clearly, the loyalty and devotion of the region’s poor whites was high on their minds. J. Henly Smith, the non-slaveholding political protégé of Alexander Stephens, expressed these concerns several times right before the 1860 presidential election. If Republicans won, he wrote, they will “have adherents and supporters all over the South—in every state... The nonslaveholders will very generally adhere to the new party, and slavery will be crushed out forever.” Indeed, the inevitable rise of a southern Republican Party was one of the most compelling arguments secessionists had for immediate action. The specter of Black Republicanism was omnipresent; secessionists tried their best to paint the party of Lincoln as “a foreign menace which should be treated as if it were an infectious disease.” In rural Louisiana, “a few men were thrust into jail because ‘they hurraed for Lincoln’ or revealed ‘the darkest Abolitionist proclivities.’” All over the Deep South slaveholders scrambled to come up with a plan to preserve slavery, and to do that, they had to blunt or redirect the anxiety of the white masses. The white working class was under-worked, under-paid, and increasingly fed up with the peculiar intuition. As one poor white laborer succinctly put it, “if it came to a war over slavery, he was going to fight against it... perhaps he could get better wages.”<sup>27</sup>

---

<sup>26</sup> Barney, *The Secessionist Impulse*, 229; quoted on 228-9; quoted on 228; Steven A. Channing, *Crisis of Fear: Secession in South Carolina* (New York: Norton, 1974), 58.

<sup>27</sup> J. William Harris, *Plain Folk and Gentry in a Slave Society: White Liberty and Black Slavery in Augusta’s Hinterland* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana, 1985), 91; Johnson, *Towards a Patriarchal Republic*, 30; Roger W. Shugg, *Origins of Class Struggle in Louisiana: A Social History of White Farmers and Laborers during Slavery and After, 1840-1875* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana, 1939), 145-6; David Williams, *Bitterly Divided: The South’s Inner Civil War* (New York: The New Press, 2008), 31.

Planters, therefore, fully realized that they were quickly losing the support of nonslaveholding whites. Formerly apathetic nonslaveholders were growing more militant, and the underground economy flourished as slaves and poor whites interacted on a daily basis. Slaveholders began using police tactics and forming quasi-military organizations in an effort to force the population into acquiescence. Vigilance committees, existing in the Deep South as early as the mid-1830s, began rapidly springing up throughout the region in the 1850s. These committees were essentially bands of slaveholders who monitored and policed both the behaviors and beliefs of other white southerners. Charles Bolton described the targeted whites as those “whose poverty or indolence made them undesirable.” Undoubtedly, vigilance committees were to poor whites what slave patrols were to African Americans. Slaveless whites increasingly found themselves inhabiting a world in which they had to censor every utterance and defend every action. Though vigilance committees were extralegal, they were still a cut above mob law, as the groups tended to be both more respected and more restrained. Jack Kenney Williams found that by 1854, all of South Carolina’s larger communities had formally organized vigilance committees, who often advertised their meetings in newspapers. Even the rank and file of these groups were at least part of the middling classes. Of course, only the most powerful planters dominated the leadership roles. Defenders of the groups proudly claimed that the committees were filled with affluent gentlemen, “to the manor born.” Even the lowliest members, they bragged, were at least slaveowners.<sup>28</sup>

But everything changed on October 16, 1859, when the abolitionist John Brown, along with five black and fifteen white men, attacked the arsenal at Harpers Ferry, Virginia, hoping to incite a massive slave rebellion. Slaveholders’ worst fears were instantly realized. Slave rebellion

---

<sup>28</sup> Channing, *Crisis of Fear*, 25; 27; Bolton, *Poor Whites*, 165; Jack Kenny Williams, *Vogues in Villany: Crime and Retribution in Ante-bellum South Carolina* (Columbia: South Carolina, 1959), 122; Channing, *Crisis of Fear*, 37.

was imminent, they believed, and nonslaveholding whites were joining the revolt. Steven Channing studied the dramatic impact of John Brown's raid on South Carolina politics and the push toward secession. Soon after the attack, there was a "dreadful and portentous sense of apprehension that now filled the pages of newspapers and private correspondence." Slaveholding Carolinians sincerely believed "that abolitionism was boldly thrusting itself into the slaveholding community, indeed, into the very home and family of every white man, woman and child." In the wake of Harpers Ferry, therefore, vigilance committees became even more singularly focused on controlling the speeches and actions of other white Americans, whether northern abolitionists or southern sympathizers. Slaveholders became so suspicious of other whites that some citizens even proposed lifting the ban on slave testimony in the courtroom in hopes of convicting troublemaking white incendiaries. As Channing concluded, John Brown's raid had a significant impact on apolitical southerners who identified as cooperationists and Unionists. The ranks of these groups "were depleted," he theorized, as "fewer and fewer Carolinians could honestly feel confidence in the firmness and integrity of Northern moderation."<sup>29</sup>

By December of 1859, articles published in Charleston's newspapers attempted to organize vigilance committees in every ward of the city. Their stated aim included questioning or examining every single man in the city, to "learn whether he is for us or against us in the conflict now waged by the North against our property and our rights... The times demand that all men South should be above suspicion." *The Daily Courier* promised to mete out "proper treatment" to both abolitionists and sympathizers. Brought to a peak in the winter of 1859, Channing wrote, this "Protracted 'reign of terror'" caused an "organized attack on free thought in the antebellum South." All of the policing, all of the censorship, and all of the ensuing violence, were "a lamentable product of African slavery." By the new year of 1860, there were daily reports of

---

<sup>29</sup> Channing, *Crisis of Fear*, 18; 57; 50; 56; 83.

slave rebellions from “everywhere and nowhere” throughout the Deep South. “John Brown had plunged a knife deep into the psyche of Southern whites,” Channing held, “and life would never be the same again.” The possibility of a bloody slave revolt preoccupied every slaveholder’s mind, and by the end of the year pro-secession men “openly alluded to the argument that the South harbored its own assassin in the person of the nonslaveholder.”<sup>30</sup>

During this same time, Minute Men volunteer groups began to organize across the entire South, largely in response to Lincoln’s election. As William Barney wrote, these men “were organized to defend the South and to promote secession.” Much like vigilance committees, Sally Hadden found, these groups served “the multiple purposes of augmenting local surveillance of suspicious whites and assisting the slave patrols with their increasingly important duties.” And, like vigilance committees, the ranks of the Minute Men were filled with upper-middling class and affluent men who were generally slaveholders. In Selma, Alabama, for example, the typical Minute Man was in his twenties or thirties and worked in the professional/business community. Two out of three of Selma’s members owned slaves. Needless to say, Minute Men commonly used violent tactics. After reports of white abolitionists “exciting” the slaves in Georgia, the local chapter tarred and feathered several suspects. These groups were necessary, claimed the *Vicksburg Weekly Citizen*, just in case the government needed to “resort to drastic measures to insure secession.” Another South Carolinian editorialist expressed his hope that these committees would “at least...rid us of many vagabonds, too lazy to work, and depraved enough to do mischief.” Even the president of the Mississippi Secession Convention, W.S. Barry, suggested that “a stiff limb and a strong rope vigorously applied” should quiet anyone who was opposed to “our work.” These committees did their best to protect slaveholders from the supposedly deviant transient poor whites, who might try to incite the slaves to rebel. By August of 1860, the northern

---

<sup>30</sup> Channing, *Crisis of Fear*, quoted on 34; 36; 35; 272; 23; 256.

press was reporting that in “the Southern States a poor white man dare not speak, write, or print his sentiments...If he does, he is mobbed, or driven from their borders. The entire South is now under a worse than martial law.”<sup>31</sup>

Several other secretive, paramilitary style groups formed in the decade before the War, including what appears to be a precursor to the Ku Klux Klan – the Knights of the Golden Circle. The Knights were described in one northern political pamphlet, entitled “The Slaveholders’ Conspiracy.” This sixteen page document, subtitled “Treason against Democratic Principles,” claimed that the purpose of secession was two-fold. First, slaveholders would establish rule by aristocracy, casting off the vestiges of democracy. The plantation gentry wanted a government “based on the privilege of class...[and] have set down the expressed apprehension as to the security of slavery as a hypocritical pretext for revolution...[the] more absorbing motive was to establish an order of nobility, either with or without monarchy.” Then, with complete control over the region, the slaveocracy would lord over both slave and white serf, growing richer and richer at the grave expense of the masses. This task proved harder than slaveowners expected, critics noted, because the loyalty of poor whites and other nonslaveholders was manifestly suspect, causing the slaveholders to employ even more violent means of coercion:

It has been repeatedly asserted that the South was a political unit on the question of attempted revolution. This declaration has been reiterated by Southern press, by travelers, and by all the influences connected with the rebellion. It is not now necessary to delineate the quasi-military organization of the Knights of the Golden Circle, or their operations in cajoling and terrorizing the Southern population into acquiescence...the very means employed to enforce acquiescence afforded also the evidence that there was a strong under-current of aversion...Flight or conformity became the condition precedent of safety, even for life. The bulk of the Southern population was as much conspired against as the Government at Washington; and force against the same population was rigorously

---

<sup>31</sup> Barney, *The Secessionist Impulse*, 207; Hadden, *Slave Patrols*, 172; Barney, *The Secessionist Impulse*, 208; quoted in Johnson, *Towards A Patriarchal Republic*, 19; quoted in Planitzer, “A Dangerous Class,” 358; quoted in Bolton, *Poor Whites*, 175; reprinted as “Lincoln Freesoilism,” *Georgia Weekly Telegraph* (Macon), August 10, 1860, p. 1.

called into requisition to consummate what fraud and political crime had concocted. This was the boasted unity of the South.

The Knights of the Golden Circle, therefore, and other paramilitary organizations like it, were essential in ensuring secession by terrorizing people into supporting the move toward a separate southern nation. Originally established as a secret organization in 1854, the Knights' main goal was to create a slaveholding empire that encompassed the American South, Mexico, and parts of central America and the Caribbean – the so-called “golden circle.” According to John Hope Franklin, the Knights planned to center their empire in Havana, creating a “gigantic slave empire.” The President of the organization claimed it had 115,000 members, and even vowed to invade Mexico by January 1, 1861. To achieve these ends, the Knights had to toss off the shackles of the U.S. Constitution, subdue the white masses, and start conquering new slaveholding territory. First, though, they had to secede from the Union – and they needed to suppress the voices and the votes of nonslaveholders to do so.<sup>32</sup>

Indeed, in the year or two before secession, the Deep South had become something akin to a police state. Any individual who did not own slaves was suspect and under constant surveillance. As Manisha Sinha wrote, “The vigilance and safety committees composed of large and prominent slaveholders, ensured political conformity by conducting random acts of vigilantism against persons suspected of having unorthodox views on slavery.” Hysteria over possible slave revolts enveloped the region, and vigilante justice was quick to rid localities of those individuals assumed of harboring abolitionist sentiments. While some of these individuals were northerners or immigrants, many of the prosecuted were southern poor whites. In 1860 in Abbeville, South Carolina, one woman reported that in a neighboring village, “five negroes are

---

<sup>32</sup> The Democratic League, “The Slaveholders’ Conspiracy against Democratic Principles,” (N.P., 1864?), 2-3; 10; 4, in the Alfred Stone Collection, MDAH. Randolph B. Campbell, “Knights of the Golden Circle,” *Handbook of Texas Online*, accessed July 11, 2013. Published by the Texas State Historical Association; John Hope Franklin, *The Militant South, 1800-1861* (1956; reprint, Boston: Beacon, 1970), 125-6.

to be hung, twenty white men implicated all *southern born*, the poor white *trash* who have associated with negroes and are jealous of the higher classes and think insurrection [sic] will place them on a footing and they get some plunder in the bargain.” Slaveholder anxieties continued to heighten, peaking during the holiday season. Clara Young, the wife of a prosperous planter, worried that “Christmas will soon be here & I suppose vigilant committees will be active and no doubt but in many instances will be too active, for both white & black.” It seemed as if nothing could calm the fears of the slaveholders. By January of 1861 a vigilance committee from Panola, Mississippi vowed to “take notice of, and punish all and every persons who may be guilty of any misdemeanor, or prove themselves untrue to the South, or Southern Rights, in any way whatever.” Wealthy white men had completely taken over southern society. Circumventing both the government and the criminal justice system, they effectively abolished due process and the right to trial. Instead, affluent slaveowners anxiously lorded over the region, meting out punishments whenever they felt compelled, and inching the nation closer and closer to Civil War. Thus, concluded Sinha, “An atmosphere of terror and vigilantism limited the scope of political dissent and helped propel the secession movement.”<sup>33</sup>

As slaveholder worries over the impending presidential election grew, William Barney wrote, “Southern doubts over their ability to maintain slavery intensified, and the need for white unity grew ever more urgent. . . . Any qualms over slavery were crushed as social conformity became a fetish.” Try as they might, the Deep South’s slaveowners simply could not conjure up enough racial fear among the lower classes to unite white men over the issue. To make matters even worse, the summer of 1860 was one of the driest, hottest seasons that southerners had experienced. Although slaveholders were able to produce a bumper crop of cotton, the severe

---

<sup>33</sup> Sinha, *The Counterrevolution of Slavery*, 79; quoted on 214; Barney, *The Secessionist Impulse*, quoted on 212; quoted on 212, footnote 42; Sinha, *The Counterrevolution of Slavery*, 214.

drought added great unease over food shortages, as “famine was a distinct possibility as early as the spring of 1860.” With poor whites and other nonslaveholders experiencing difficulty feeding themselves and their families, incidents of backlash against the well-fed upper classes were hardly surprising. Threats of armed rebellion, for example, came from Barbour County, Alabama. “The suffering is confined chiefly to the poorer classes who have not the means of providing themselves with the wants of life,” one official reported, “and we understand that if provision is not made immediately to secure those wants unto them, they will take them by force of arms from those who happen to have them.”<sup>34</sup>

The South’s grave economic inequalities, which had always functioned as a source of class tension, were now resurrected with a vengeance on the eve of Lincoln’s election. According to Barney, “Only the incessant reports of ubiquitous abolitionists plotting slave revolts, setting fires, and poisoning wells upset the South’s equilibrium more severely than the drought.” Of course, these things were all interconnected; class continued to divide white southerners as slaveholders intensified their efforts to “out” unlikable or suspicious nonslaveholders as abolitionists. Over the course of two nights in Alabama, a journeyman harness maker allegedly held “improper conversations with slaves.” He was immediately stripped down and severely whipped, while newspapers throughout the region clamored for his death. Around the same time, Hilery J. Lanier was found guilty of “slave tampering” in Georgetown, Mississippi. During a public meeting, the slaveowning mob concluded there was not enough evidence to convict Lanier in a court of law. Ordering Lanier to leave town within thirty days, the mob specified that every single day past thirty that Lanier remained in town, he would receive one hundred lashes on his bare back.<sup>35</sup>

---

<sup>34</sup> Barney, *The Secessionist Impulse*, 184; 153; 157; quoted on 158.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 163; 169-70; 175-6.

As discussed in Chapter Three, even before the 1860 Presidential election, some of the Deep South's poor white men were already disenfranchised, and slaveholders had myriad ways to prevent others from voting. As proslavery advocate Louisa McCord wrote to James Henry Hammond, "the assumed position of equality [for white men] even in the limited sense which we adopt is plainly a false one." Of course, as the issue over secession exploded in 1860 and 1861, wealthy planters began once again lauding the benefits of limited rights and suffrage – specifically for lower-class white men. George McDuffie, a staunch defender of racial and class inequality, claimed that by allowing white laborers to vote, "whatever may be their color, you do not elevate them to the character of freemen, but degrade liberty to their level." Slaveholder Laurence M. Keitt further praised the inequities inherent in the region, writing that the South, "with the principle of subordination, gradation, and harmonious inequality pervading her social system," was the best system of governance in the world. He worried that Republicans would spread "impalpable" notions of equality throughout the region, not only to free blacks and slaves, but to poor whites as well. And as John Townsend, owner of over 200 slaves on Edisto Island, argued for secession, he railed against southern unionism, arguing that every unionist was an abolitionist. Republicans, Townsend worried, were "a radical democratic party" who favored redistributive policies like the Homestead Act that benefitted lower-middling and lower class white Americans. But slaveholders, it seems, were hardly overreacting by attempting to prevent nonslaveholders from voting. As the U.S. Marshall from Charleston asked South Carolina's Congressman William Miles in February of 1860, "think you that 360,000 Slaveholders will dictate terms for 3,000,000 of nonslaveholders at the South[?] I fear not, I mistrust our own people more than I fear all of the efforts of the Abolitionists."<sup>36</sup>

---

<sup>36</sup> Sinha, *The Counterrevolution of Slavery*, quoted on 90; quoted on 35; quoted on 226; quoted on 233; Barney, *The Secessionist Impulse*, 48-9.

Scholars generally consider the election of 1860 the most important presidential election in our nation's history. In the four-way race, Republican Abraham Lincoln, who was not listed on the majority of southern ballots, garnered all of the northern and western electoral votes, and just under 40 percent of the nation's popular vote. The slaveholding South, on the other hand, split its vote between the remaining three candidates. The "northern" Democrat, Stephen Douglas, won only Missouri but still earned a sizable percentage of Dixie's popular vote. John C. Breckenridge, the pro-slavery, pro-expansionist southern Democrat, carried about 18 percent of the nation's votes, sweeping the Deep South and western cotton states. Finally, John Bell, a Tennessean from the new Constitutional Union party, mostly claimed the votes of conservative former Whigs in the Border States. Bell never took a firm stance on the issue of slavery's expansion, which widened his appeal in the Upper South.<sup>37</sup>

While the Deep South split the popular vote between the three non-Republican candidates, John C. Breckinridge clearly dominated the electoral votes of the heavily slave cotton states. Yet as Paul Escott noted, "only Texas, Mississippi, Alabama, Florida, and South Carolina gave Breckenridge strong majorities...Louisiana and Georgia...preferred the moderate, unionist programs of Bell or Douglas." Therefore, "many who cast their ballots for Breckinridge did not favor secession, it is clear that the voters did not desire secession in at least four of the nine states that he carried." While only a few studies have examined the voting habits of southerners in the 1860 election, William Barney's research on Alabama and Mississippi provide insight into Breckenridge's Deep South victory. First and foremost, it must be understood that leadership positions for all three parties were "virtually monopolized" by slaveholders. The only difference between the groups of planters was the amount of wealth, with those men owning

---

<sup>37</sup> Thomas A. Bailey et. al., *The American Pageant*, 11<sup>th</sup> Ed. (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1998), Chapter 20 and Appendix 29.

more than thirty slaves generally supporting Douglas and Breckinridge. Less-wealthy, smaller slaveholders, as well as businessmen and editors, generally supported John Bell. Douglas Democrats tended to be members of the old Whig party, and were “ideologically aligned by their common desire to find a safe middle ground.” Douglas’s campaign leaders included some of the South’s richest and most well-established planters. Northern-born transplants and immigrants, especially the Irish, also supported Douglas. Among nonslaveholding voters, both Bell and Douglas garnered the support of the town-dwelling middle class of merchants and professionals. But Douglas also appealed to older (nonslaveholding) yeomen, leading Barney to conclude that “the Douglasite leadership relied more heavily on those not directly benefitting from slavery.”<sup>38</sup>

Conversely, John Breckenridge’s campaign leaders tended to be less-wealthy slaveholding lawyers born in the Deep South. Most were under 45 years old and heavily involved in cotton production. Thus, Breckenridge supporters were generally wealthier than Bell’s, but younger and less wealthy than Douglas’s well-established older planters. Many of Breckenridge’s most ardent campaigners, it seemed, were young men on the come-up, trying to make names for themselves. They knew that slavery was the key to the region’s wealth, and they wanted assurance that they would not be prevented from making quick fortunes. As a Presidential contender, Barney wrote, Breckenridge “shunned any moderation, boldly proclaimed the need for the South to expand, demanded federal protection of slave property within the territories, and emphasized irreconcilable differences between the sections.” Exploiting the fears of nonslaveholding whites, his campaign greatly exaggerated reports of slave uprisings. In fact, the pro-Breckenridge press urged voters to rally behind the southern Democrat, “or face more abolitionist emissaries.” Furthermore, from the few identifiable vigilance committee members, Barney determined that Whigs generally avoided vigilantism;

---

<sup>38</sup> Escott, *After Secession*, 23; Barney, *The Secessionist Impulse*, 62-3; 75; 64; 129; 64; 75; 85.

instead, these extra-legal groups were led by Breckenridge-supporting slaveholders. Fear was an integral part of the southern Democrats' campaign, but that fear was not only aimed at the lower classes, it was also a fear *of* the lower classes. Attempting to frighten slaveholders with the specter of disloyal lower classes, in July of 1860, the pro-Breckenridge *Democratic Watchman* claimed that a political party was arising in the South, "composed mainly of nonslaveholders, and arrayed in opposition to that supreme control over the politics of Southern States, which the slaveholding interest has always enjoyed."<sup>39</sup>

As an ardent proslavery candidate, of course, Breckenridge could not win outside of the cotton states. But the main irreconcilable difference between Northern and Southern Democrats had not been over slavery itself. Rather, the question over the expansion of slavery separated the two branches of the party. The expansion of slavery would achieve the aims of reopening the slave trade by increasing the percentage of whites owning slaves. However, it would also avoid some of the headaches associated with reopening the trade, like issues over competition with poor whites. If slavery was allowed to spread, advocates argued, the Deep South could reduce frighteningly high concentrations of slaves in particular areas, while simultaneously keeping the demand for slaves – and slave prices – up.

Had a Democrat won the 1860 Presidential election, therefore, slaveholders would have never had to worry about their constitutionally protected right to own slaves. The proponents of slavery's expansion, therefore, created a path for the election of the United States of America's first Republican President. Immediately following the announcement of Abraham Lincoln's victory, southern proslavery men began clamoring for secession, "in large part," wrote Kyle Planitzer, "to prevent nonslaveholders from being exposed to the free-soil ideology which had gained preeminence in the North. They succeeded because a considerable segment of the

---

<sup>39</sup> Barney, *The Secessionist Impulse*, 61; 66; 73; 126; 179; 174; quoted on 123.

southern population shared their doubts about nonslaveholders' devotion to slavery.”

Slaveowners were soon proven correct in their doubts. In the few short weeks following the presidential election, a group of “working men” from Richmond, Virginia organized a meeting to oppose secession. Another mechanics' association soon followed suit, railing against the “folly and sinister selfishness of the demagogues of the South.” Some poor whites throughout the region made their political thoughts well known through other types of organizations. A band of nonslaveholders in southwest Alabama and southeast Mississippi deemed themselves “the Friends Z. Society.” Described by one historian as a “mysterious poor man's abolitionist society,” the Friends Z. Society reportedly had one hundred members. They adamantly opposed secession and even threatened “class warfare” if it “ever occurred.” So as the reality of disunion neared and the situation intensified, slaveowners began preparing for the worst. Mobilization to suppress the poor white vote began in earnest.<sup>40</sup>

Before resorting to drastic measures, though, wealthy slaveholders could use their dominant position in society to subtly shame or publically humiliate a nonslaveholder into talking, thinking, or voting a certain way. A man who supported anything less than immediate secession would summarily be branded as a traitor or a coward. As one historian pointed out, these “brands were not only humiliating to receive but they were also dangerous to carry around, for the distance between opposition to secession and betrayal of the South was small and getting smaller.” Planters also attempted to circumvent political power from the large majority of non-slaveholding voters using bribery, lies, and intimidation to make sure secession passed. Some poor whites took the slaveholders' cheapest bait, drinking themselves into intoxicating stupors before stumbling to the polls with a big crowd, too drunk to recognize the significance of their

---

<sup>40</sup> Planitzer, “A Dangerous Class,” 507; Williams, *Bitterly Divided*, 9; Barney, *The Secessionist Impulse*, 123; quoted in Bolton, *Poor Whites*, 233, note 41. Also see Stephanie McCurry, *Confederate Reckoning: Power and Politics in the Civil War South* (Cambridge: Harvard, 2010).

actions. Near Jackson, Mississippi, one candidate reported that “the ‘rag-tag and bobtail’ of creation were pulled in to vote the secession ticket. Whiskey was freely given; promises of corn and meat were made. Threats were made.” Even northerners realized that secession could possibly succeed – given the persuasive nature of spirituous liquors. As one Pennsylvania paper reported, a “jug of whiskey and the scare-crow of abolition was sufficient to identify them with secession and its bloody work.” Poor whites should be pitied “deeply,” the paper opined, “for they are of the most part the ignorant dupes of designing and desperate leaders.”<sup>41</sup>

The road to disunion, therefore, was quite rocky. Far from a democratic mandate, secession was orchestrated by the slaveholding oligarchy over the protests – or at least the against the wishes of – of hundreds of thousands of slaveless whites. In areas of the South where voters held few slaves, as in the southern-most piney woods and wiregrass regions, and in the northern foothills and mountains of Appalachia, secession was “decisively opposed.” These voting returns correspond with information on the poorest sections, where between two-thirds and three-fourths of voters wanted to remain in the Union. As Michael Johnson noted, in Georgia, as “voter turnout increased, the support of secession decreased.” The more white men voted, the less support secession received. The vast majority of southern whites did not own slaves, and were not eager to secede and possibly go to war to protect the property rights of a much more affluent minority. Not surprisingly, “the largest secessionist majority was in high slaveholding Democratic town counties, closely followed by other town counties, and by high slaveholding Democratic country counties.” Larger percentages of slaveowners typically meant strong support for secession.<sup>42</sup>

---

<sup>41</sup> Johnson, *Towards a Patriarchal Republic*, 98; Bolton, *Poor Whites*, 166; “Preaching to the Secessionists,” *The Christian Recorder* (PA), March 22, 1862; Bolton, *Poor Whites*, 164; Shugg, *Origins of Class Struggle*, 164.

<sup>42</sup> Johnson, *Towards a Patriarchal Republic*, 66; 76; 74.

Even though official returns from the Deep South showed about 40 percent of the popular vote in convention elections was *against* secession, fraud was so rampant that the number is basically meaningless. Political Scientist Seymore Lipset studied voting returns in seven southern states, determining that Breckenridge had “carried almost two thirds of the counties which were low in slaves, while almost half the counties that were high in slaves voted against him.” These statistics, however, are slightly misleading. Breckenridge did well in areas that may have had lower slave populations, but those populations were growing. And those areas with high percentages of slaves tended to be home to larger, well-established slaveholders who probably feared losing what they had. Lipset further revealed that during secession convention voting, “the relationship between slave-ownership and voting Unionist...was completely reversed.” In these referenda, counties with high percentages of slaves supported secession, and those with low percentages wanted to stay in the Union. While these results of the two elections are seemingly inconsistent, Lipset convincingly explained that in the Presidential election, men tended to vote down party lines. Thus, many poor and lower-middling class men may have voted for Breckenridge simply because he was the Democratic candidate. But when secession became a reality, party labels no longer mattered. Instead, he wrote, “the class or economic factors previously inhibited by party loyalties broke through.” Nonslaveholding white southerners had precious few reasons to support disunion. In pushing for secession, slaveowners channeled as much racial fear into their politics as possible, scaring and threatening their fellow citizens into acquiescence. According to William Barney, young, affluent lawyers led the separatist charge in Alabama and Mississippi. According to Manisha Sinha, “planters as a class led the secession movement.” Regardless of their professions, one thing was clear. Secession, the Confederacy,

and Civil War were all overwhelmingly the creations of one class of Americans, southern slaveholders.<sup>43</sup>

South Carolina, of course, blazed the trail towards secession, withdrawing from the Union just over a month after Lincoln's election. Manisha Sinha, one of the foremost scholars of the state's journey towards disunion, described the event as "The culmination of an influential political ideology of slavery and separatism." South Carolina was the first slave state to secede for several reasons. The "vanguard determination of the state's political elite, the lack of organized opposition, an apparent disunionist majority among the citizenry, tactics of intimidation and terror, and hopeless apathy of outnumbered unionists," she wrote, "made the state's secession a relentless juggernaut." The small farmers and poor whites in the mountainous part of the state had historically opposed nullification and now ardently resisted secession. According to Sinha, the unionism of the Appalachian yeomen and lower class whites "worried secessionists." As one South Carolinian warned, "when the battle comes in earnest...and we find ourselves fairly embarked in a contest which will shake the world, you will find an element of great weakness in our non-slaveholding population."<sup>44</sup>

The second state to secede was Mississippi. As in many parts of the Deep South, lawyers ultimately led Mississippi out of the Union. During their efforts, there was certainly no lack of race-baiting. For instance, the two secessionist candidates from Attala County scandalously warned that Republicans were "in favor of abolishing all distinctions in social position and in

---

<sup>43</sup> Williams, *Bitterly Divided*, 36; Seymore M. Lipset, "The Emergence of the One-Party South—The Election of 1860," *Political Man* (New York: Anchor, 1960), 377; 376 (states included Virginia, North Carolina, Tennessee, Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana); 377; 378; 383: Seymore interestingly held that "The Republican party maintained some continuity with the old southern Whigs by retaining the votes of the poor whites in the mountains who backed the Whigs in the '30s and '40s because they wanted roads. It was this group which voted Constitutional Union in 1860, for the Union in the referenda of 1860-61, fought in the Union army against the Confederacy, and remained loyal to the Republican party all during Reconstruction, and the later era of white supremacy, and the age of Roosevelt and Truman.;" Barney, *The Secessionist Impulse*, 230; 297; Sinha, *The Counterrevolution of Slavery*, 222.

<sup>44</sup> Sinha, *The Counterrevolution of Slavery*, 221-2; 135; 212; quoted on 212.

civil and political rights between negroes and white men and women.” Aside from fear tactics, Mississippi’s secessionists also used outright fraud. When a Methodist minister from the state asked for a Union ticket, he “was informed that none had been printed, and that it would be advisable to vote a secession ticket.” Furthermore, low voter turnout likely helped increase the number of secessionist representatives in the Magnolia state. While about 80 percent of Mississippi’s registered electors voted in the presidential election, the turnout for the secession convention vote was much lower. Charles Bolton found that “many unionist voters... chose to stay home on the day of the convention election, undoubtedly disappointed with the lack of alternatives.” Only slightly more than half (55 percent) of Mississippians who voted in November of 1860 actually voted for or against secession. Likewise, in Louisiana more than a quarter of the citizens who voted in November “were absent from the polls two months later.” Many poor and lower-middling class whites had long harbored an intense distrust of government, and bothered little with civic activities like voting. They spent lifetimes noticing how little political power they actually possessed, and likely believed that no matter how they voted, powerful planters would rule in accordance with their own economic interests. Any apathy that poorer whites may have had towards the secession elections was understandable.<sup>45</sup>

Alabama’s voter turnout for the convention was similar to its western neighbor’s. Although 79 percent of eligible Alabamans voted in the presidential election, Paul Escott estimated that only “three-fourths of those who had voted in November went to the polls and elected fifty-four secessionists and forty-six cooperationists.” The cooperationists would have won, claimed a local paper, “except for bad management in two counties.” As Alabama’s convention neared, one politician rated the parties as having similar number of votes. However,

---

<sup>45</sup> Barney, *The Secessionist Impulse*, 312; quoted on 260; Quoted in Williams, *Bitterly Divided*, 35; Barney, *The Secessionist Impulse*, 191; Bolton, *Poor Whites*, 164; Shugg, *Origins of Class Struggle*, 164.

by January 10, Mississippi had seceded, and the next day Florida followed, leaving Alabama with little choice. The state was nearly surrounded by the seceding states. Cooperationists, Barney wrote, “were resigned but bitter.” Even though the state ultimately seceded, the opposition to joining the Confederacy was clear. Much like South Carolina and Georgia, Alabama’s less affluent mountain and foothill whites, who were overwhelmingly nonslaveholders, adamantly opposed secession. As Barney put it, “The mountain whites, deeply resentful of the planters’ wealth and privileges, did not hate slavery so much as they did the second-class citizenship to which it relegated them.”<sup>46</sup>

Georgia seceded eight days after Alabama. While records show that secession may have actually been defeated by about a thousand votes, Governor Joseph Brown lied about the results of the election, proudly proclaiming that the state had voted itself out of the Union. Still, as Michael Johnson declared almost forty years ago, by even “consenting to the secession election, secessionists revealed that they could not escape the internal crisis of the South. Instead...they hoped to overcome it.” Indeed, in Georgia the internal crisis was particularly evident. A majority of nonslaveholding voters had supported Breckenridge but then opposed secession. They clearly had no desire to fight and die to preserve slavery. As Rome, Georgia’s *Weekly Courier* asked in 1861, “Is it right that the poor man should be taxed for the support for the war, when the war was brought about on the slave question, and the slave at home accumulating for the benefit of his master, and the poor man’s farm left uncultivated, and a chance for his wife to be a widow, and his children orphans?”<sup>47</sup>

Furthermore, as Drew Faust pointed out, most historians tend to overlook the fact that the secession conventions ushered in more than just a break with the Union. Delegates were actually

---

<sup>46</sup> Barney, *The Secessionist Impulse* 191; Escott, *After Secession*, 26; quoted on 26; Barney, *The Secessionist Impulse*, 302; 271.

<sup>47</sup> Williams, *Bitterly Divided*, 39; Johnson, *Towards a Patriarchal Republic*, 87; Escott, *After Secession*, 30; 95.

in charge of writing the new state constitutions. Their proposals demonstrate that planters were prepared to get rid of the guise of white democracy if it meant protecting their own economic interests. By creating a vision of new southern nation-states based upon the maintenance and expansion of the institution of slavery, the region's planters revealed that they desired a form of government based on property holding and wealth – a rule by slaveholders and for slaveholders, at the expense of the poor. Georgia's convention attempted to reduce the number of legislators and appoint (not elect) justices. North Carolina's judiciary committee called for property qualifications for certain governmental jobs and exempted other offices from popular elections. Virginia proposed similar measures, and also sought to restrict voting to tax payers. Alabama and Arkansas endeavored to have all judges appointed, as elections "by the people" would produce "mere instruments of popular prejudice," as the justices' robes "were placed on their shoulders by the votes of a fanatical people." At every turn, the southern slaveholders were revealing their anti-democratic desires. They ultimately created a centralized, slaveholder-dominated republic with a President who served six year terms. The oligarchic tenets embedded in the Confederate Constitution led Faust to conclude that in the Deep South, "it was not the electorate but something very close to Genovese's ruling class that led the state[s] out of the Union. Secession was the ultimate test of the hegemony of the slaveholders. Yet secession was necessary precisely because the hegemony of slaveholders was not secure." Still, slaveholders were ultimately able to turn secession into what Michael Johnson termed a "double revolution: a revolution for home rule—to eliminate the external threat; and a conservative revolution for those who ruled at home—to prevent the political realization of the internal threat."<sup>48</sup>

---

<sup>48</sup> Drew Gilpin Faust, *The Creation of Confederate Nationalism: Ideology and Identity in the Civil War South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana, 1988), 34-8; 37; Johnson, *Towards a Patriarchal Republic*, xx.

The ultimate choice of disunion, therefore, was a choice made by—and for—slaveholders. By the early 1860s the Deep South’s slaveholding interests were using every possible method to force people with no ties to slavery to support the institution. Politics became dominated, as Shugg wrote, by “a farce and fraud; the knife, the sling-shot, the brass knuckles determining . . . who shall occupy and administer the [public] offices.” Poor whites, along with many other non-slaveowners, made it completely clear that they opposed disunion. But as Stephen Ash found, the state conventions, “all of them dominated by slaveholders . . . ignored majority will and took their states out of the Union.” While proving the efficacy of manipulative violence, however, the planter oligarchy simultaneously invoked further concern from northerners. According to Ash, to many Americans in free states, “the aristocratic ‘Slave Power’ had . . . conspired to take the South out of the Union as much to subjugate poor whites as to preserve slavery.” Poor whites did not want war. They had no desire to fight and die to protect an institution that had long injured their prosperity and well-being. White supremacy, Michael Johnson concluded, for all the weight scholars have afforded it, “proved of marginal value in closing the social divisions that the secession crisis had exposed.”<sup>49</sup>

While the scholarship on poor whites during the Civil War is still in relative infancy, pioneers in the field like Charles Bolton and Timothy Lockley have offered several reasons why poor whites would decide to fight and die for the South’s slaveocracy – a class whose economic interests fundamentally clashed with their own. The current historical consensus hinges on three main points. First, poor whites had kinship ties with middling farmers and even planters, as well as other social ties to the upper classes. Second, many less affluent whites persisted in believing that through hard work and perseverance, they could move up the economic ladder and perhaps

---

<sup>49</sup> Shugg, *Origins of Class Struggle*, 147; Williams, *Bitterly Divided*, 2-3; Stephen V. Ash, “Poor Whites in the Occupied South,” *Journal of Southern History*, 57, (1991): 40; Johnson, *Towards a Patriarchal Republic*, 69.

someday become slaveholders themselves. And third, racism often tainted poor whites' decision-making skills, helping to prevent the formation of true color-blind class consciousness.<sup>50</sup>

Although the first point has considerable validity, the second and third arguments will likely lose favor in the near future. Widely employed legal means aimed to force dissenters to join the armed forces. Cases of imprisonment and even murder for desertion and avoiding conscription were prevalent throughout the South. For the most part, this underwhelming support for secession had its roots in the severe class inequalities of the late antebellum period. Simply put, at some point in the early 1860s, nonslaveholders had to reflect upon why they would fight a war meant ultimately to protect the property of the class that had long oppressed them, a “property” that constantly undercut their employment prospects. And certainly by the middle of the war, many thousands of these men decided that they would no longer put their lives – and the welfare of their families – on the line to protect the wealth and status of slaveholders. The poor whites who did not support secession were generally more anti-Confederate than they were pro-Union. Feelings and beliefs ran the gamut from apathy to hatred, but one thing was clear: a majority of poor white men had no burning desire to fight for the South from the start, and even more were unwilling to fight after a year or two. In recent years historians like Victoria Bynum and David Williams have shown that the South really did experience an “Inner Civil War” over the course of the actual one, and subsequent generations of scholars will surely uncover even more evidence of this internal disharmony.<sup>51</sup>

---

<sup>50</sup> Bolton, *Poor Whites*, and Timothy James Lockley, *Lines in the Sand: Race and Class in Lowcountry Georgia, 1750-1860* (Athens: Georgia, 2001).

<sup>51</sup> Some areas – especially where Union occupation occurred early – experienced changes in loyalties of the people. See Judkin Browning, *Shifting Loyalties: The Union Occupation of Eastern North Carolina* (Chapel Hill: North Carolina, 2011). Victoria E. Bynum, *The Long Shadow of the Civil War: Southern Dissent and its Legacies* (Chapel Hill: North Carolina, 2010), and Williams, *Bitterly Divided*.

There were many colorful names for the anti-Confederates, from deserters and mossbacks to jayhawkers and abolitionists. Certainly the most principled of the objectors, the abolitionists, came from all classes of white southerners, but the poor part of the population caused the slaveholders the most worry. Even the great Georgia statesman T.R.R. Cobb warned his fellow legislators to “Notice the anxious look when the traveling pedlar lingers too long in a conversation at the door with the servant who turns the bolt—the watchful gaze when the slave tarries long with the wandering artist who professes merely to furnish him with a picture.” Planters were becoming increasingly fearful of whites with no real stake in slavery, as evidenced by an Atlanta-area grand jury who decreed that all beggars were to “be promptly sent [to the Poor House] for support, and all transient beggars be arrested as vagrants, and sent back from whence they came, or otherwise *summarily disposed of*, as in that garb they may be the means of much mischief in these troublous times, by transmitting information to our enemies, and otherwise.” Indeed, even the slave patrols amped up their policing duties, carefully monitoring the actions and conversations of both blacks and poor whites.<sup>52</sup>

By 1860 Alabama’s slave patrols had the “authority to apprehend any white person who may be found...consorting with slaves, or loitering about negro cabins.” Furthermore, in the absence of the patrol, “any three freeholders or slaveholders” could arrest the white person who ignored the strict order of segregation, giving propertied white men the unprecedented authority to lawfully imprison other whites. Anxieties grew so intense that just a few weeks after Lincoln’s election, South Carolina’s Governor William H. Gist called upon the state’s lawmakers to punish “summarily and severely, if not with death, any person that circulates incendiary documents, avows himself an abolitionist, or...attempts to create insubordination or insurrection among the

---

<sup>52</sup> Johnson, *Towards a Patriarchal Republic*, 37; “Presentments of the Grand Jury,” *Southern Confederacy* (GA), April 24, 1861, p. 1, italics added.

slaves.” While these laws seemed harsh in letter, they were nonetheless deemed necessary to prevent a massive rebellion involving slaves and poor whites. By the summer of 1861, slave conspiracies, “all of them involving whites,” were uncovered in three Mississippi counties. In southwest Georgia a vigilance committee “uncovered plans for a slave uprising.” The revolt was supposed “to be led by several local whites.” And nonslaveholder Osborne Burson was arrested near Atlanta in March of the same year, for declaring that “negroes were as free as he was and that he would have voted for Lincoln had he a chance to do so, and if he had a chance he would assist in freeing them.” Slaveowners were in a racial frenzy. Just a few days after the secessionist ordinance passed, one politician “proposed that the governor accept the service of between fifteen and fifty men in each county and commission them as a ‘Mounted Military Police’” to patrol the activities of suspected abolitionists.<sup>53</sup>

While historians will never know how many abolitionists inhabited the Deep South at any point, the number of southern Unionists is slightly easier to quantify. More than a hundred thousand white southerners served in the Federal army and navy, although the majority of these men were from Upper South states. Unionist organizations existed all throughout the southernmost states. Adding the number of African Americans who served as Union soldiers, nearly half a million southerners fought against the slaveholding oligarchy. These Unionists, David Williams wrote, “Together with hundreds of thousands more who actively and passively resisted the Confederacy,” were ultimately just as responsible as anyone from the North for Confederate defeat. And just as slaveowners worried about abolitionists, there was certainly a class element among Unionists. As Williams found, even though most Confederates were poor to middling nonslaveholders, “white southerners who served the Union were most often poorer

---

<sup>53</sup> Planitzer, “A Dangerous Class,” 35; 408; Williams, *Bitterly Divided*, 50; Johnson, *Towards a Patriarchal Republic*, 133; 134.

still.” Many of the vigilance committees that sprang up during the secession debates helped to quiet “unionist dissent.” When a Unionist candidate attempted to run for office in North Carolina, he was threatened with lynching. Even his supporters were mobbed at the polls, and summarily intimidated with promises of death. Planters used these tactics commonly enough to create an atmosphere of fear throughout the region. One transient poor white was arrested shortly after secession for “refusing to do military duty and vagrancy.” The local sheriff offered to release the man from jail on one condition: that he enlist with the local regiment. And in northeastern Mississippi, an area with a high percentage of poor whites, coercion was common: one unionist from Chickasaw County “opposed the war all I could but when it forced itself on us I with several others volunteered in the Southern army as we thought we would be forced to join if we did not go.”<sup>54</sup>

Indeed, rather than simply choosing to support the Confederacy, most poor whites doubtless felt they had little or no choice *but* to support the war effort since they were largely at the mercy of the slave owning oligarchy. As poor white soldier John Dinsmore remembered, “When the Civil War began to come up the nonslaveholders wasn’t allowed to say anything... They was kept down as much as possible.” Because planters completely controlled the southern legal system, they rendered poor whites essentially powerless. Powerful slaveholders could coerce the poor to join the Confederate Army with the threat of jail time for vagrancy or some other trumped up charge. Other poor whites fell victim to vigilante “justice” or were simply banished from the region.<sup>55</sup>

Yet these punitive and criminal statutes were not the only laws invoking the ire of the lower classes. Almost immediately after secession, Paul Escott found, the divisions that had

---

<sup>54</sup> David C. Downing, *A South Divided: Portraits of Dissent in the Confederacy* (Nashville: Cumberland House, 2007), 11; Williams, *Bitterly Divided*, 48; 242; 151; Bolton, *Poor Whites*, 151; quoted on 158; quoted on 176.

<sup>55</sup> Elliot, *Tennessee*, Vol. 1, 45-6.

always existed between white southerners once again became tense. There was certainly no strong sense of Confederate nationalism in the early part of 1861. Even after the Montgomery Convention, when the Deep South delegates attempted to moderate their “extreme pro-slavery views” to appeal to the states in the Upper South, poor whites were not enthusiastic about fighting to protect the interests of slaveholders. Despite a “lack of identification with the Confederacy’s cause,” though, large numbers of southerners obviously did not defect into the Union Army. Instead, Escott concluded, “a quiet rebellion,” erupted, as many nonslaveholders showed minimal support for the slaveholders’ cause. Still, Jeff Forret explained, almost three-quarters of all southern white men served in the Confederate forces. Since most nonslaveholders “adamantly opposed secession from the Union...few poor white men volunteered for service during the first year of the conflict...Their poverty offered them ample and undeniable proof that the present system benefitted them little.”<sup>56</sup>

Historian Joseph Glatthaar’s recent work confirmed the strong ties between Confederate volunteers and slavery. In 1861, almost half of all the South’s enlistees “either lived with slaveholders or were slave owners themselves.” The nonslaveholding volunteers either sold crops to, worked for, or rented land from slaveowners. Therefore, Glatthaar concluded, “the vast majority of the volunteers of 1861 had a direct connection to slavery. For slaveholder and nonslaveholder alike, slavery lay at the heart of the Confederate nation.” These findings align nicely with the research of Hugh Bailey, who examined the antithesis of this slavery-induced patriotism. Studying Confederate disloyalty in Alabama half a century before Glatthaar’s book was published, Bailey contended that even in the Deep South, nonslaveholders held strong unionist sympathies well before Fort Sumter. He wrote:

---

<sup>56</sup> Escott, *After Secession*, 32; 33; 99; Forret, *Race Relations*, 223.

It has long been recognized that disloyalty to the Confederacy became widespread in a number of the 'hill counties' of Alabama by the spring of 1862 and that this region remained a cancer in the side of the Confederacy for the remainder of the war. It is not generally recognized, however, that from secession active disaffection was widely prevalent in this area of poor land and small farmers.

In fact, Unionist voters were so decisively opposed to secession, Bailey asserted, that they "organized themselves to prevent enlistment and frequently asserted that if they fought it would be for Lincoln." James B. Bell, a nonslaveholding Unionist from Winston County, Alabama, wrote to his son Henry, a Confederate sympathizer residing in Mississippi, in April of 1861. After confirming the rest of the family's devotion to Lincoln, and thus, to the Union, the elder Bell warned that "All [the slaveholders] want is to get you pumped up and go to fight for their infernal negroes." James Bell clearly understood the genesis of secession and the cause of disunion, and he was certainly not planning to give his life to protect the vast wealth of planters, who never showed any interest in well-being of nonslaveholding whites in the first place. In reality, Bell concluded, "after you do their fighting you may kiss their hind parts for all they care."<sup>57</sup>

A year later when the draft began, however, the composition of the Confederate Army changed. As Mark Weatherington found, "poor white men, who composed a significant minority of potential recruits, became the disproportional targets of conscription." The Conscription Act, passed April 16, 1862, declared that all white men from eighteen to thirty-five years old were subject to serving three years in the Confederate Army. While certain categories of laborers were exempt from the draft, "if they went on strike and lost their jobs, they could be hauled off to

---

<sup>57</sup> Joseph T. Glatthaar, *General Lee's Army: From Victory to Defeat* (New York: The Free Press, 2008), 20; Hugh C. Bailey, "Disloyalty in Early Confederate Alabama," *Journal of Southern History* 23, No. 4 (Nov. 1957): 522; 523; quoted on 524-5. Also see Georgia Lee Tatum, *Disloyalty in the Confederacy*, (Chapel Hill: North Carolina, 1934), Scott A. MacKenzie, "The Slaveholders' War: The Secession Crisis in Kanawha County, Western Virginia, 1860-1861," *West Virginia History*, New Series, vol. 4, no. 1 (Spring 2010): 33-57, and Mark A. Weitz, *A Higher Duty: Desertion among Georgia Troops during the Civil War*. (Lincoln: Nebraska, 2000).

combat.” According to David Williams, factory and business owners “found the act an effective tool to keep workers in line and wages low.” Few poor men wanted to fight in this incredibly bloody, deadly war, and the “spurt of desertions” after the Conscription Act revealed the will of the people. As E.B. Seabrook wrote in 1867, many poor whites had “murmured from the beginning of the war; and toward its close, when the length of the struggle and their increasing sufferings had abated their fires of their patriotism, large numbers deserted, a fact, it is well known, which had much to do with the ultimate failure of the cause.”<sup>58</sup>

Less than six months after the draft, the Confederate Congress quietly passed the Twenty Negro Act, exempting from service any planter with more than nineteen slaves. Unsurprisingly, this one law brought mounting class tensions closer to a head by emphatically affirming the nonslaveholders’ refrain of “a rich man’s war and a poor man’s fight.” The law’s blatant protection and privileging of the region’s richest slaveowners surely spurred more rounds of mass desertion. Ex-slave Elsie Posey of Mississippi reported that the Twenty Negro Act “accounts for Jones County’s record as the ‘Free State of Jones’ and for Covington County’s famous ‘Deserter’s End Lake.’” Shortly after the passage of the law, James Seddon, the Confederate Secretary of War, attempted to spare the southern government the ire it would surely earn from lower class whites. Realizing the severity of the shortage of manpower on nonslaveholders’ farms, he immediately recommended to Jefferson Davis that the Confederacy “should exempt soldiers on whom several helpless dependents relied for food.” The slaveholding Confederate government, though, never reacted to Seddon’s request. As historian Bell Irvin Wiley explained, this “refusal to exempt from conscription nonslaveholding adult males upon whose labor the livelihood of wives and small children was vitally dependent,” combined with

---

<sup>58</sup> Mark V. Wetherington, *Plain Folk’s Fight: The Civil War and Reconstruction in Piney Woods Georgia* (Chapel Hill: North Carolina, 2005), 126; Williams, *Bitterly Divided*, 84; E. B. Seabrook, “Poor Whites of the South,” *The Galaxy Volume*, Issue 6 (Oct. 1867): 689.

the failure to deal with monetary hoarding and speculation, comprised “two of the greatest mistakes of the Confederate government.” By targeting poorer whites such Confederate laws exacerbated already tense class relations – and would ultimately help draw the war to a close.<sup>59</sup>

Another southern law allowed rich southerners to hire substitutes to take their places in the armed forces. Hiring a substitute was extremely expensive. The “going rate was \$500 soon after the draft began,” and by the middle of the war a prospective soldier could charge thousands. In some parts of the region substitutes reportedly received as much as \$10,000. Since the average hireling charged far less than that, the practice remained widespread. In just two months of 1863, for example, the small county of Chickasaw, Mississippi, recorded thirteen substitutions. Many of the substitutes were young sons of poor white women, some of whom were “war widows,” and some of whom were abandoned. Time after time these illiterate women left their marks, attesting to the fact that their sons were somewhere close to sixteen years old. These impoverished children were then marched off to war to die in the stead of wealthy slaveholders, perpetuating the grave inequalities that had long marked this slave society. Paid substitutes, of course, had very high desertion rates, but the punishments were unusually harsh and violent. Most deserting substitutes, wrote David Downing, “were arrested and thrown into prison, limited to a diet of bread and water, or forced to wear a ball and chain. Some were whipped with thirty lashes, some branded with a D, and others had their names published in their hometown newspapers.” All in all, the ability to hire a substitute allowed at least fifty thousand of the South’s wealthiest men to avoid military service. According to Paul Escott, some credible estimates claim that over 150,000 affluent southerners hired someone to serve in their stead. But

---

<sup>59</sup> Downing, *A South Divided*, 115; 113; Elsie Posey, in George P. Rawick, ed., *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography* (Westport, CT.: Greenwood, 1972-79), Supplement, Series 1, Part 4 (MS), 1738; Escott, *After Secession*, 151; quoted on 152; Bell Irvin Wiley, *The Plain People of the Confederacy* (1943; reprint, Columbia: South Carolina, 2000), 69.

even this total falls far short of the actual number who used their personal fortunes to sidestep serving in the war. Sons of planters could easily bribe conscript officers, and Army surgeons sold medical exemptions. These means of circumventing the draft were generally much cheaper than hiring a substitute, and afforded countless rich men other ways to shift the burden of war even more disproportionately onto the shoulders of the poor and middling classes.<sup>60</sup>

While many poor white men simply joined or were drafted into the military and then deserted and returned back home, there were likely tens of thousands of men who evaded the draft purposely, or who lived away from mainstream society and were thus never drafted in the first place. By refusing to fight and die for slavery, these men had to spend the Civil War in hiding, whether in heavily wooded areas, swamplands, or small river islands. They were sometimes dubbed “mossbacks” because as they hid from Confederate troops, plant material would inevitably begin growing on their clothes. These nonslaveholders hunted and fished and survived on roots and berries. Using rockets and horns to alert each other to danger, the mossbacks would simply retreat farther back into the woods and swamps as Confederate forces approached. They became a great nuisance to southern leaders, who consistently attempted to arrest, impress, or kill them. According to Mark Wetherington, most of these attempts were futile, “largely because too many citizens sympathized with their plight.” Almost every southern paper reported the names of local deserters in the paper, urging citizens to turn in their friends, family, and neighbors for treason. One paper out of Albany, Georgia, publicized the names of over a dozen recent deserters, ordering the “good men of the country...to keep an eye on such men.”<sup>61</sup>

---

<sup>60</sup> Williams, *Bitterly Divided*, 57; Chickasaw County, Mississippi, Substitutes, 1863, MDAH; Downing, *A South Divided*, 114; Escott, *After Secession*, 118; Williams, *Bitterly Divided*, 57.

<sup>61</sup> Wetherington, *Plain Folk's Fight*, 230; “Deserters!” *Albany Patriot* (GA), Aug. 15, 1861, p. 3.

These tactics, however, failed to unite the “haves” and “have nots” of the South. In 1863 another Georgia newspaper revealed the extent of class division among white men within the Confederacy. In a letter to the editor from a mechanic, the economic inequality of the South was laid bare. After complaining of biased reporting against mechanics and “working men,” the writer immediately began lampooning the affluent slaveholders, whose “thirst for gain, in their worship of Mammon, and in their mighty efforts to appropriate every dollar on earth to their own account, have lost sight of every principle of humanity, patriotism, and virtue itself.” Indeed, the mechanic continued, the poor men fighting in the Army fully realized that “every day they remain from home, reduces them more and more in circumstances.” Watching the wealthy slaveholders grow richer while their own families struggled to keep from starving, poor and lower-middling class whites had been pushed to their breaking point. As the mechanic portentously concluded, a significant number of hard-working Confederate soldiers

are ruined now, as many of their homes and other effects are passing into the hands of speculators and extortioners...all the capital, both in money and property, in the South, is passing into the hands of class No. 1, while class No. 2 are traveling down, soon to take their station among the descendants of Ham. You can easily see who are class No. 2. The soldiery, the mechanics, and the workingmen...is it not time that our class should awake to a sense of their danger...and endeavor to escape a bondage more servile than that imposed by the aristocracy of England on their poor peasantry?<sup>62</sup>

Several freed slaves recalled stories of poor whites who refused to join the war effort or had deserted. Sallie Paul said that in North Carolina “There been plenty white folks that wouldn’t never fight against the Yankees without they couldn’t get out of it. They slip off and hide in pits they dig in the woods and the bays. Some of them say they didn’t have no slaves and they weren’t going to fight. That the way it be, if they didn’t fight, they had to run away and stay in the woods.” One freedman from Alabama explained just how extreme conscription became: in

---

<sup>62</sup> “Voting by Classes,” *Columbus Daily Sun* (GA), quoted in David Williams, *Bitterly Divided: The South’s Inner Civil War* (New York: New, 2008), 88-9.

the early part of the war the Confederacy asked for volunteers, but “then a little later when the south needed more men to fight, Jeff Davis’ officers would go through the streets, and grab up the white men and put ropes around their wrists like they was taking them off to jail. And all the while they was just taking them off to the war. They made all the white men go.” Jim Allen remembered that slaveowners “would track the runaways with dogs and sometimes a white scalawag or slacker would be caught [by] ‘dogging duty.’ I saw as many deserters as I see corn stalks over in that field. They would hide out in day time and steal at night.” Some slaves even recalled helping feed the war’s deserters. Mississippian Jeff Rayford told his interviewer that “men would hide out to keep from going to war. I cooked and carried many a pan of food to these men in the Pearl River swamp. This I did for one man regularly. All I had to do was to carry the food down after dark, and...pretty soon he would step out from behind a tree and say, ‘Here Jeff’ and then I would hand it to him and run back to the house.”<sup>63</sup>

In Georgia, the heavily forested area west of the Ocmulgee River was part of the region’s “deserter and draft evader country as early as 1862...By early 1865 the area was in open revolt.” Gum Swamp, another densely wooded area in Pulaski and Telfair counties, provided another refuge. As Mark Weatherington found, since Confederate troops could not “penetrate the flooded swamps and reach the small islands where the deserters hid out,” they stole the guns and horses of the deserters and sometimes harassed their families. Yet very few men actually surrendered, “because entire backwoods neighborhoods were now controlled by ‘rank traiters.’” In Mississippi and Louisiana, these “draft-dodgers’ were especially numerous” around the Pearl River, where “scarcely five hundred men were drafted from these piney woods.” On the actual Mississippi River, deserters took over several small islands, leading one ex-slave to recall that a

---

<sup>63</sup> Sallie Paul, *American Slave*, Vol. 3, Part 3 (SC), 233; Downing, *A South Divided*, 116; Tom McAlpin, *American Slave*, Vol. 6, Part 1 (AL), 270; Jim Allen, *Ibid.*, Vol. 6 (MS), Supplement Series 1, Pt. 1, 58; Jeff Rayford, *Ibid.*, Supplement, Series 1, Pt. 4 (MS), 1801-2.

“bandit named Coe settled on” Island No. 76. Coe apparently “gathered around him a large number of negroes. He became a terror to all the neighboring country. He and the negroes descended on the plantations and carried off everything.” But Coe’s anti-Confederate actions were not unique, as the former bondsman remembered “there were also other renegade white men with him whose names I will not mention.” These terrorist tactics flourished in conflicts between the deserters/draft dodgers and pro-Confederate factions. Indeed, many nonslaveholders joined anti-war organizations, while others formed semi-violent “tory” or “layout gangs.” These bands of men could be highly destructive to the South’s infrastructure, burning bridges, jails, and government buildings, attacking supply trains, and generally stealing from plantations whenever they got the chance. Emboldened anti-Confederates even began harassing conscript officers and other government officials. According to David Williams, by 1864 these men had “all but eliminated Confederate control” in the Deep South’s hills and piney woods.<sup>64</sup>

Violence, of course, went both ways, with Confederate troops and sympathizers raiding and torturing the layouts and their families. The wives, children, and parents of these men were commonly harassed, since they usually provided the “lay-outs” with food, clothing, and other essential provisions. As Victoria Bynum has shown, “men who deserted the Confederacy received strong civilian support... Extensive ties of kinship and neighborhood were essential, and women, children, and slaves aided their missions.” The persecution of the family and friends of these deserters not only cut off their supply lines, it also gave Confederates an effective strategy to capture these men. In some instances, local militias tortured the mothers, wives, and children of defectors in the hopes that they would turn themselves in to the authorities. One North Carolinian woman wrote to the Governor, expressing her outrage at the home guard.

---

<sup>64</sup> Wetherington, *Plain Folk’s Fight*, 223; 222; Shugg, *Origins of Class Struggle*, 178-9; Holt Collier, *American Slave*, Vol. 7, (MS), Part 2, 470; Williams, *Bitterly Divided*, 5.

Condemning the Confederates for “their physical abuse of women and children and their burning of barns, houses, and crops,” she attributed their violence and destruction to a desire “to force deserters out of the woods.” Another “civil war” raged in the Deep South, even in areas where Union forces had never set foot. All throughout the region, poor whites, nonslaveholders, and blacks kept the South’s slaveocracy fighting a two-front war.<sup>65</sup>

Anti-Confederates and Union sympathizers were numerous enough to have taken over several areas of the Deep South by the end of the war. Mark Weatherington found that in South Georgia, the backwoods areas “became contested ground” early on, with the homes of renegades “subjected to search-and-seizure sweeps...Loyalists feared an anti-Confederate uprising.” In South Carolina the hill country around Greenville, Pickens, and Spartanburg was overrun with deserters, while in the piney woods of Louisiana, jayhawkers claimed to have established an anti-Confederate “government.” Some southern counties even took the Confederacy’s stance on secession literally, arguing that if the states could secede from the Union, then counties and districts could secede from states. In northern Alabama, the “Free State of Winston” seceded from the slave South, and in southern Mississippi, the “Free State of Jones” was established. Considered the “heart of the Confederacy,” Alabama and Mississippi ironically sustained some of the most passionate and well-organized opposition to the slaveholding oligarchy. One particularly large group of seven to eight hundred men followed the infamous McLeod brothers throughout the two states. The McLeods, non-slaveholding yeomen, were avowed Unionists who “compared the slaves to the children of Israel and said they were meant to be free.” The leaders purported that their followers were ready and willing to start fighting the slaveowners. By 1864, the lower part of Mississippi had become so overrun with anti-Confederates and deserters, the tax quartermaster apologized to his superiors for not being able to perform his job properly, since

---

<sup>65</sup> Bynum, *The Long Shadow of the Civil War*, 23; 30; 48.

the men had “overrun and taken possession of the country.” Northern troops undoubtedly took note of the unionism – both latent and overt – among white non-slaveholding southerners. In 1865, Yankee sergeant Richard W. Surby and his men stopped to eat at a modest log cabin in Mississippi’s piney woods. The local women promptly welcomed them, unfurled a U.S. flag, and “wished aloud that their menfolk, hiding in the woods, might join them in their feast.”<sup>66</sup>

Indeed, as Stephen Ash claimed, many poor whites “sincerely welcomed the northern soldiers as liberators.” Multiple sources report that poor whites, like blacks, were extremely helpful in providing Yankee troops with “all the information they are in possession of.” Since planters had used the war as an opportunity to expand their fortunes by continuing to raise cotton and tobacco, poor white soldiers and their families were left to suffer from hunger and near-starvation. The hardships on the home front became so dire that by late 1863, according to some estimates, almost half of the Confederate army had deserted. On November 26, 1863, Secretary of War Seddon reported to President Davis on that the Army is “generally a little more than a half, never two-thirds, of the numbers in the ranks.” Just over a year later, Confederate J.B. Jones wrote that resentment over furloughs, combined with the exemption of wealthy planters, had created a “rapidly growing Emancipation Party.”<sup>67</sup>

Certainly by 1864, the Confederate leadership fully recognized the need to ease class tensions as much as possible. As Victoria Bynum noted, Congress began “tightening standards for class-based exemptions such as the Twenty-Negro law.” The practice of hiring a substitute was officially discontinued. Furthermore, in an unprecedented effort to appease the poor and middling classes, southern politicians even established price controls. By this time, however,

---

<sup>66</sup> Wetherington, *Plain Folk’s Fight*, 221; Williams, *Bitterly Divided*, 161; Shugg, *Origins of Class Struggle*, 180; Williams, *Bitterly Divided*, 49; Victoria Bynum, *The Free State of Jones: Mississippi’s Longest Civil War* (Chapel Hill: North Carolina, 2003); Bolton, *Poor Whites*, 178; quoted in Williams, *Bitterly Divided*, 157; quoted in Bynum, *Long Shadow*, 3-4.

<sup>67</sup> Ash, “Poor Whites,” 47; quoted in Williams, *Bitterly Divided*, 146; 3.

these tempered measures were vastly insufficient, and came much too late. Desertion levels had continued to climb following Gettysburg and Vicksburg. By the end of war only 160,000 men were present out of a total of 359,000 whose names were on the muster rolls. Recent historians have even uncovered evidence that by the final years of the war, slaves and white anti-Confederates were cooperating in an organized opposition to the southern government. The South truly was responsible for its own demise. Slaveholders had created a war to protect their own wealth and privilege. Then they expected nonslaveholders to carry the burden of the war; to give life, limb, and sanity to preserve an institution that only negatively impacted their lives. Hundreds of thousands of southern men evaded the draft or defected. As Bell Irvin Wiley wrote, this fact “was probably due...to the conviction that they were being discriminated against by the privileged class.”<sup>68</sup>

Unsurprisingly, over the final two years of the war, bread riots erupted in many cities and towns. The mobs of rioting women were universally ridiculed in the southern press for their poverty. One Alabama editor described the starving women as “prostitutes, plug uglies...and those who have always been a nuisance to the community,” while a Georgia paper complained about “loafers, vagrants, and loose women.” It is no surprise that many poor whites initially hailed the invading troops as saviors, especially because Union commanders provided direct, material relief to them, providing food and other provisions. By connecting with poor and non-slaveholding whites, Ash concluded, Yankee servicemen “endeavored to bring out [their] latent unionism...by smiting the aristocracy.” To many northerners, plans to uplift and educate

---

<sup>68</sup> Bynum, *Long Shadow*, 5; Downing, *A South Divided*, 115; Steven Hahn, *A Nation under our Feet: Black Political Struggles in the Rural South from Slavery to the Great Migration* (Cambridge: Harvard, 2003), 88; Wiley, *The Plain People*, viii.

southern poor whites were seen as the key to reuniting the country, since poor white illiteracy and ignorance had “enabled secessionist demagogues to dupe” them in the first place.<sup>69</sup>

Still, while a sizable percentage of nonslaveholders had been drafted into the Confederate Army, and another portion were forced to join against their wills, there were still many lower class white men who chose – by their own volition – to fight for slaveholders. In reality there were numerous reasons why they cast their lot with the Confederacy. The southern planters’ fear mongering surely helped convince a number of them that maintaining slavery would keep their families safe and their wages stable. By playing to their basest, most irrational anxieties, slaveowners successfully used racism to push reluctant poor whites into an unsustainable war. Moreover, many of these men, who oftentimes lived hand to mouth during slavery, actually looked forward to the prospect of making a steady wage in the Confederate military. As David Williams pointed out, even “a private’s lowly pay of \$11 a month was the best option available to many poor laborers.” Other poor whites simply concluded that allying with powerful planters was in their best interest.<sup>70</sup>

Finally, cravings for honor and respect undoubtedly led some poor white men to try to prove their own self-worth and masculinity through combat. And once the war actually began, slaveholders could shift their campaign of racial hysteria into a campaign about honor and patriotism. Once the fighting had actually commenced, the region’s politicians could stop talking about miscegenation and race wars and begin talking about heroism and virility. And poor white men, who had spent most of their lives without a sense of honor, finally found a way to feel valued by their society. By protecting their homes, families, and communities, poor white men

---

<sup>69</sup> Quoted in Escott, *After Secession*, 127; 251; Williams, *Bitterly Divided*, 106; 100; Ash, “Poor Whites,” 45-7.

<sup>70</sup> See note 13 for references on southern honor. Elliott J. Gorn, “‘Gouge and Bite, Pull Hair and Scratch’: The Social Significance of Fighting in the Southern Backcountry,” *The American Historical Review* 90, Supplement to Vol. 90 (Feb. 1985), 18-43. Williams, *Bitterly Divided*, 44.

were able to elevate their social status. The southern code of honor dictated that these men attempt to defend themselves from an invading force. Furthermore, as David Potter found, most southerners had more loyalty to the war and the troops than to the Confederacy itself, largely due to their emotional attachments to “home.” These men identified themselves primarily by locality, not nationality. For instance, an antebellum southerner would consider himself as someone from the town of Decatur, first and foremost. Next he would associate with DeKalb County, and only after that would he consider himself a Georgian, and lastly as an American or Confederate. This type of localized identification was probably even more intense for the poorest southerners, who lacked the means to learn about larger concepts like nationalism. Their worlds were limited, as was the intensity of their patriotism. As James Cobb wrote, “a great many and possibly most Confederate soldiers marched off to war in 1861 inspired less by a broadly abstract allegiance to their new nation-state than by what [David A.] Bell describes as an ‘emotional attachment to a place thought of as ‘home.’” For white southerners, Cobb concluded, the term “‘my country’ could refer not to the Confederacy or even to the South but to his own particular geographic and emotional realm of existence and experience, whether he defined that as his state or his local community, or simply ‘the loved ones who call upon me to defend their homes from pillage.’”<sup>71</sup>

George Reed, an ex-slave from Biloxi, Mississippi, told a story that revealed the importance of honor among poor white men in the Old South: “There was Jim Hudson, short ways this way from Hattiesburg. Jim wouldn’t go to war, nor [would] any of his brothers. So they joined up with the other white men in the woods that didn’t want to go to war. They had their tick-tacking signals and the Confederate troops sent to make them join the army, never could catch them for a long time.” Reed continued, “After a time, Lem Williams, he had always been Jim’s neighbor and most first friend, Lem got tired of hiding out in the woods. ‘Let’s join

---

<sup>71</sup> Potter is discussed in Cobb, *Away Down South*, 57; *Ibid*.

up with the Confederate troops,' Lem says, 'then after the war is over we *can be somebody*. This way we never can.'" But Jim refused to fight. After Lem joined up with the local regiment, he led the troops to the hiding places of defectors, including his former best friend. When the Confederates got to Jim's house Lem chased the unarmed man into the woods and shot him down in cold blood. "Them buckshots made a patch of little holes in Jim's back about [as] big as your hand," Reed remembered, "They toted Jim into the house and he lived two, three hours, talking most [of] the time that *he had never hurt no humans*; that they must see after his wife and children."<sup>72</sup>

But men like Jim Hudson were still in the minority. Even though poor whites knew that slavery kept them in a state of dependency, even though they saw how slavery drove down their wages and disrupted their family lives, even though they were thoroughly marginalized within the southern economic system, most of them ultimately supported the planters' war. The North, and indeed, the United States of America, might once have had a potentially game-changing ally in the South's poor whites. By 1861, however, all bets were off. Slaveholding secessionists had engendered just enough fear to maintain racial solidarity. When war comes, and violence begins, everything changes. Priorities undergo cataclysmic reorganization, once unimaginable alliances form, and society is ruled – if for a brief moment – by fear, not logic. One Atlanta newspaper writer attempted to explain in 1870 why so many poor whites chose to fight for the South: "Thousands of our best men...had opposed the war of secession inaugurated by Democratic politicians for the perpetuation of a party dynasty; they had denounced the Charleston Convention as a treasonable body, and held up its leaders to the execration of the public." However, as soon as "the fighting commenced, they very naturally submitted their better

---

<sup>72</sup> George Reed, *American Slave*, Supplement, Series 1, Part 4 (MS), 1810-1, italics added.

judgment to an impulse, and took up arms in defense of their native section.” These men had families to protect and honor to defend.<sup>73</sup>

The slave regime of the Old South needs to be remembered for what it was. For a large percentage of white southerners, slavery was deeply harmful. It spurred forces that drove down their wages, took their jobs, pushed them off of the land, denied them civil rights, and kept them languishing in cycles of poverty. In 1867 Union General John Pope wrote to a letter to Ulysses Grant, expressing his concerns about how the Civil War—and the causes of the Confederacy—would be remembered in history.

The rebellion was the result of a tremendous conspiracy, to destroy the nation’s life. It sought to obliterate civil liberty throughout the South – to reduce the Southern white laborer to the condition of the free negro, and the free negro to slavery; to re-open the African slave trade, and to establish over the South the despotism of an oligarchy founded alone on slavery, and the interests and ambition of those interested in slave property. How cruel and remorseless its career was—how little it respected individual rights and the common laws of humanity when they stood in the way of its remorseless schemes...<sup>74</sup>

When the war ended, however, it quickly became evident that former slaves were not the only southerners who benefitted from new-found forms of freedom. Just as Hinton Helper argued that poor whites suffered a “second degree of slavery” in the antebellum period, the post-war era “freed” poor whites in several very important ways. Most importantly, poor white workers were finally able to compete in a free-labor economy, albeit a surplus labor one, which at least provided them with a potential opportunity to improve their economic situation. “But another great element of productive power in the South is now to be brought into action,” one Georgia paper opined, “the labor of poor white men who have heretofore been completely

---

<sup>73</sup> “Speech of Hon. Foster Bledgett,” *Daily Atlanta Intelligencer*, Nov. 12, 1870, p. 2.

<sup>74</sup> “General Pope’s Letter,” *Georgia Weekly Opinion*, Sept. 3, 1867, p. 4.

idle for want of employment. They will find agricultural labor to be creditable, in the absence of negro slavery, as well as highly remunerative.”<sup>75</sup>

William Dillihay, a Confederate veteran from Tennessee, recalled how the end of slavery changed the southern labor market, providing new opportunities to hard working, enterprising poor whites. He remembered that “Slaveholders before the war seem to be the leading men of the country, causing little demand for white labor. The negro emancipation placed white people on a more equal footing causing much better opportunities for young men to buy homes.” Even northerners noticed the bounties that black freedom brought to poor whites. Although stretching the truth, *Forney’s Philadelphia Press* explained, “In a condition of slavery...white labor could not, and would not be allowed to, enter into competition with the black...The Southern laborer is at this moment much better able to stand out for high price for his labor than the Northern farm-hand. This fact should teach the white laborer that there must be an eligible field open for him, and induce him to grasp it.” The writer concluded that “The day has gone by when the white mechanic or laborer at the South was despised alike by his own color and the black, and the time has come when he can not only obtain enhanced wages, but respect. The South wants him, and his coming is a question to them of life and death.”<sup>76</sup>

The pre-war plight of the Deep South’s poor whites thus demonstrated that the tentacles of slavery extended into every aspect of southern life, and shaped even the worlds of people who had no involvement in the peculiar institution. As historian Mildred Mell wrote in 1938, “with the disintegration of the plantation-slave economy, the poor whites were no longer theoretically ‘outside.’ A free-labor economy, in theory, meant the disappearance of barriers which had kept them from sharing in the division of labor.” Even ex-slaves recognized the ways in which black

---

<sup>75</sup> “The South,” *Daily Intelligencer* (GA), Nov. 28, 1865, p. 1.

<sup>76</sup> Elliot, *Tennessee*, Vol. 2, p. 692; Quoted in “Labor for the South,” *Macon Daily Telegraph* (GA), March 31, 1869, p. 4.

emancipation benefitted poor whites. Daniel Goddard reckoned that “Lincoln was raised up for a specific purpose, to end slavery, which was a menace to both whites and blacks.” And Tom Woods, enslaved in Florence, Alabama, explained in detail how the lives of poor whites changed after the Civil War: “Lady, if the nigger hadn’t been set free this country wouldn’t ever been what it is now! Poor white folks wouldn’t never had a chance. The slaveholders had most of the money and the land and they wouldn’t let the poor white folks have a chance to own any land or anything else to speak of. These white folks wasn’t much better off than we was.” Poor whites, Woods continued, “had to work hard and they had to worry about food, clothes, and shelter and we didn’t. Lots of slaveowners wouldn’t allow them on their farms among their slaves without orders from the overseer. I don’t know why, unless he was afraid they would stir up discontent among the niggers. There was lots of ‘underground railroading’ and I reckon that was what Old Master and others was afraid of.” Therefore, Tom Woods believed, “White folks as well as niggers profited by emancipation.” Indeed, the emancipation of African Americans heralded many new socio-economic freedoms for poor white southerners. Just as black slavery kept poor whites down, black freedom offered them opportunities to rise.<sup>77</sup>

---

<sup>77</sup> Mildred Rutherford Mell, “A Definitive Study of the Poor Whites of the South,” (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of North Carolina, 1938), 2-3; Daniel Goddard, *American Slave*, Vol. 2, Pt. 2, 151; Tom W. Woods, *Ibid.*, Vol. 7, Pt. 1, 354.

## CONCLUSION: A “NOBLER” EMANCIPATION

*Rejoice in a nobler emancipation, which has stricken the fetters from millions of our own race, and given an earnest of a better destiny to a class which has suffered fatally and long.*

– E.B. Seabrook<sup>1</sup>

*The blunting effects of slavery upon the slaveholder’s moral perceptions are known and conceded the world over; and a privileged class, an aristocracy, is but a band of slaveholders under another name.*

– Mark Twain<sup>2</sup>

Immediately following the news of emancipation, joyous freedmen and women gathered in every Deep South city and town in a near-ecstatic state of celebration. For generations they had prayed, hoped, and even fought to escape bondage. Reports of freedom unleashed renewed optimism among African Americans, many of whom envisioned a black community that was independent, self-sufficient, and largely autonomous. Freedom – emancipation – had been the primary dream of every black man, woman, and child who suffered through slavery. Yet after a few short, jubilant years filled with the reuniting of families, the construction of new churches and schools, and the endowment of basic citizenship and suffrage, blacks found themselves at the bottom of free society, just one step removed from bondage. Facing a demographic catastrophe wrought by disease and homelessness, freedmen experienced a devolution of once hopeful expectations. Indeed, in no more than a decade after emancipation, many African Americans were questioning the severe limitations that the region’s white elite were continually placing upon their “freedom.” Famously describing the Reconstruction experience of the South’s blacks,

---

<sup>1</sup> E.B. Seabrook, “The Poor Whites of the South,” [The Galaxy Volume 04 Issue 6 \(Oct 1867\): 690. Web.](#)

<sup>2</sup> Mark Twain, *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court* I (Charles L. Webster & Co., 1889), Chapter XXV, Web.

W.E.B. DuBois wrote, “The slave went free; stood a brief moment in the sun; then moved back again toward slavery.”<sup>3</sup>

When judged comparatively with other nations’ emancipatory histories, America’s experience is unique. While African Americans were the only freed slaves to be granted political rights so soon after emancipation, those rights were limited for a people without land, wealth, or job prospects. Most freed slaves left their plantations with little more than the clothes on their backs. Black men were ostensibly granted the rights of citizenship, but that meant little when their families were homeless and suffering from hunger. Newly granted civil rights sometimes rang hollow to people who were left – unprotected – to suffer the violence of vigilante groups like the Ku Klux Klan. The soon-neutralized Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments could not help almost four million Americans whose first concern was finding a way to earn a living wage and gain self-sufficiency.

According to Jim Downs’s recent book, “the exigencies of war and the massive dislocation triggered by emancipation” caused tens of thousands of African Americans to perish from illness during the early years of Reconstruction. Given the utter chaos resulting from a homefront war, health conditions for ex-slaves were terrible. “Measles, fever, and diphtheria developed because of the overcrowded and unsanitary conditions” at refugee camps, Downs wrote, and in the few years following emancipation smallpox and Asiatic cholera ravaged the entire population of freemen. The United States government, however, did not attempt to deal with these epidemics in any meaningful way. Indeed, these crises in public health prematurely ended the lives of untold thousands of blacks, causing their first years of freedom to be fraught with pain, grief, and misery. African Americans’ suffering was so prolonged and widespread that

---

<sup>3</sup> W.E.B. DuBois, *Black Reconstruction in America: An Essay toward a History of the Part which Black Folk Played in the Attempt to Reconstruct Democracy in America, 1860-1880* (1935; reprint, New York: Free Press, 1992).

Downs proposed dropping the term “emancipation” altogether; instead, he claimed, the “‘process of emancipation’ would be a more apt way to their experiences.”<sup>4</sup>

By the time of the Great Depression, several interviewed ex-slaves mourned retroactively for the freedom they had been promised, but felt they had never received. Having lived through several recessions and the horrors of Jim Crow, and having survived decades of violent terrorism by vigilante groups like the Klan, these older African Americans tended to have pointed opinions about whether or not blacks were enjoying anything approximating true freedom within a few years after emancipation. Keeping in mind that these ex-slaves were being interviewed almost three generations after the fact, and that they obviously knew their white interviewers wanted them to downplay the horrors of slavery (and thus, the benefits of emancipation), their responses still warrant consideration. Many of these freedmen and women felt as if they had received absolutely no recompense for decades – indeed, generations – of slavery. Now upwards of at least seventy years old, they concluded that the conditions they had experienced throughout the postbellum period had been generally bleak and sometimes miserable, and that economically and materially, their lives had not significantly improved from the days of slavery. While they obviously appreciated certain aspects of emancipation, and fully recognized all of the benefits they had received from freedom, they also knew that nominal “legal” freedom never ended their struggles as African Americans in a white-dominated world. Walter Calloway told his interviewer that blacks had “never been what I call free...if they’re all like me they still have to work just as hard, and sometimes have less.” A Mississippi woman agreed. “We all had a hard time then and we still have a hard time,” she lamented. “There is nothing in this old world but hard time for black folks.” Minerva Wells remembered that shortly after learning of their

---

<sup>4</sup> Jim Downs, *Sick from Freedom: African-Americans Illness and Suffering during the Civil War and Reconstruction* (New York: Oxford, 2012), 7; 162-3; 96; 113; 14.

emancipation, former slaves “were told we would be free to go and to work for wages and [be] given homes and stuff and the men could vote. But the whole country was so torn up and ruined until everybody had a hard time for several years after it was all over with.”<sup>5</sup>

The horrors of a protracted, bloody war, combined with the destruction of the South’s entire social, political, and economic system, led to one of the most intense, violent eras in our nation’s history. “It seems like the white people can’t get over us being free, and they do everything to hold us down all the time,” one freedman observed. Instead of enjoying emancipation and building new lives, “we have to just keep on bowing and scraping when we are around white folks like we did when we were slaves. They had us down and kept us down.” Jefferson Franklin Henry, who spent his childhood as a slave in Georgia, purported that “Negroes was free but they weren’t allowed to act like free people.” James Southall echoed these sentiments, remembering “We lived in a sort of bondage for a long time.” And Annie Groves Scott of Lyonsville, South Carolina recalled working just as hard after emancipation as she had before the Civil War. “Wore myself out after freedom,” she reported, “and got kind of tired of hearing folks yelling about Grant and Lincoln setting us free.”<sup>6</sup>

While many freedmen questioned the actual socio-economic benefits of their emancipation, during early Reconstruction, poor whites experienced a time of mostly positive change. Before the Civil War, poor whites had functioned as social pariahs in the Deep South because they had no real place or stake in the slave system, and thus actually stood to threaten it. With emancipation, however, poor whites were finally granted at least enough of the privileges of whiteness to get them off of the bottom rung of society, which would now be occupied by

---

<sup>5</sup> Walter Calloway, in George P. Rawick, ed., *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography* (Westport, CT.: Greenwood, 1972-79), Vol. 6 (AL), Part 1, 53; Harriet Miller, *Ibid.*, Vol. 9 (MS), Supplement, Series 1, Part 4, 1505; Minerva Wells, *Ibid.*, Vol. 10 (MS), Supplement, Series 1, Part 5, 2261.

<sup>6</sup> Allen V. Manning, *Ibid.*, Vol. 7 (OK), 222; Jefferson Franklin Henry, *Ibid.*, Vol. 12 (GA), Part 2, 191; James Southall, *Ibid.*, Vol. 7 (OK), 308; Annie Groves Scott, *Ibid.*, Supplement, Series I, Vol. 12 (OK), 273.

blacks. Just as Hinton Helper claimed that poor whites suffered a “second degree of slavery” during the antebellum period, the postbellum era “freed” poor southern whites in several important ways. With the region in economic ruin, poor whites were no longer effectively barred from land ownership. A small percentage were even able to take advantage of the former slaveholders’ financial troubles, remaining in the Deep South and buying small plots of plantation land to farm. Moreover, the Homestead Act of 1862, along with the Southern Homestead Act of 1866, allowed tens of thousands of poor whites to finally join the ranks of landholders. Many poor whites migrated westward, to seek new opportunities and self-sufficiency.<sup>7</sup>

For those poor whites who remained landless, there were still tangible improvements in their daily lives following the destruction of slavery. Most importantly, poor white workers were finally able to compete in a free labor economy, which, though awash in surplus labor, at least provided them with a potential opportunity to improve their economic situation. Poor whites certainly gained more consistent employment, and thus the freedom to live in two-parent, family-centered households for the majority of the year. At the same time, black emancipation signaled the end of the virtual imprisonment of thousands of poor southern whites, whose existence outside the slave system had threatened the antebellum social hierarchy. The swift change in the race of the typical southern convict—overwhelmingly white during slavery, overwhelmingly black after emancipation—meant that poor whites were no longer the primary targets of the criminal justice system. Although some of poor whites’ newfound freedoms would be tempered or even suspended in later years, early Reconstruction served as a time of hope for many of the Deep South’s poor whites, just as it did for African Americans.

---

<sup>7</sup> Hinton Rowan Helper, *The Impending Crisis of the South: How to Meet It* (New York: Burdick Brothers, 1857), 32-3.

Indeed, the idea of “freedom for poor whites” had become so commonplace in the New South that, up until the revisionist work of Frank Owsley, historians unhesitatingly used the term “emancipation” to describe poor whites’ postbellum situation. The “dual nature of emancipation” has been discussed by more recent scholars like Stephen Ash, Robert Gilmour, and Jeff Forret, who accurately concluded that “poor white gains often came at the freedpeople’s expense.” Because the lower class was finally able to begin enjoying some of the privileges of whiteness, Forret contended, once surprisingly fluid “racial lines hardened.” Ash found that “The conquest of the South by northern armies during the Civil War began the liberation of the region’s poor whites as well as its enslaved blacks. In pursuing the extraordinary opportunities thus presented, slaves and poor whites followed remarkably parallel—but not congruent—paths, celebrated kindred victories, and stumbled over like obstacles.” Therefore, he wrote, “both encountered revolutionary possibilities beyond mere liberation, only to see those possibilities eventually thwarted by powerful countervailing forces.” Unfortunately, after a few brief years of expanded opportunities and inclusion in many of the privileges of whiteness, most poor whites became re-ensnared in poverty. Their economic ascension may have ultimately failed, but they still gained certain permanent benefits from black emancipation.<sup>8</sup>

Despite the continued concentration of southern wealth, it nonetheless became easier for poor whites to become landholders following the Thirteenth Amendment. Although the majority

---

<sup>8</sup> Stephen V. Ash, “Poor Whites in the Occupied South,” *Journal of Southern History*, 57, (1991): 39-62; Robert Arthur Gilmour, “The Other Emancipation: Studies in the Society and Economy of Alabama Whites during Reconstruction,” (Ph.D. Diss., Johns Hopkins, 1972); Jeff Forret, *Race Relations at the Margins: Slaves and Poor Whites in the Antebellum Southern Countryside* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana, 2006), 228-9; Ash, “Poor Whites,” 39-40. See William M. Brewer, “Poor Whites and Negroes in the South since the Civil War,” *Journal of Negro History* 15, No. 1 (Jan. 1930): 32; C. Vann Woodward, *Origins of the New South, 1877-1913* (1951; reprint, Baton Rouge: Louisiana, 1999), 175: Woodward was not convinced by the idea of a dual emancipation. “‘Emancipation freed the poor whites more than it did the Negro!’ This cliché was heard so often that it came to be repeated even by respected southern historians and is still a favorite generalization of modern textbooks, one of which goes so far as to compare the liberation of the poor white men by the Civil War with that of the peasants by the French Revolution. Out of this tissue of theory was spun that curious postulate ‘The Rise of the Poor Whites’ – an expression that, as one writer pointed out, ‘reduces to a paradox the problem it was coined to describe.’”

of planters' wealth was lost with the freedom of their slaves, the federal government allowed all but a very few former slaveholding Confederates to keep their land. By maintaining ownership of most of the Deep South's property, they were able to adapt to the new economic structure of the region by earning their primary income as landholders. In their transition from laborlords to landlords, as Gavin Wright wrote, "farmers now reoriented their investments and their politics toward raising land yields and land values...[they] began to push for markets, towns, railroads, and eventually factories." As landlords, these men finally felt a reason to invest in their local communities. Since Reconstruction era policy allowed ex-slaveowners to maintain ownership of the only significant source of southern wealth, the majority of the region's power remained in the hands of the old masters. But while newly freed African Americans waited patiently for their storied recompense of 40 acres and a mule, poor whites were slowly but surely entering the ranks of small landholders. For those poor whites who remained in the Deep South, opportunities for land ownership that had not existed before the Civil War suddenly sprung up. Ash found that some plantation owners, "hurt financially by the loss of their slaves...were anxious to sell off excess acreage; and therein lay opportunity" for less affluent whites. While some thrifty, hard-working poor whites were able to purchase their land the old-fashioned way, many more were the beneficiaries of the largest entitlement program in the entire history of the United States of America: the Homestead Acts.<sup>9</sup>

The original Homestead Act granted about 1.5 billion acres of western land – an area close to the land mass of both California and Texas – to individual Americans, virtually for free. As T. R. W. Shanks explained,

---

<sup>9</sup> Gavin Wright, *Old South, New South: Revolutions in the Southern Economy Since the Civil War* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana, 1986), 47; Lee Soltow, *Men and Wealth in the United States, 1850-1870* (New Haven: Yale, 1975), 141; Wright, *Old South*, 34.

The new law established a three-fold homestead acquisition process: filing an application, improving the land, and filing for deed of title. Any U.S. citizen, or intended citizen, who had never borne arms against the U.S. Government could file an application and lay claim to 160 acres of surveyed Government land. For the next 5 years, the homesteader had to live on the land and improve it by building a 12-by-14 dwelling and growing crops. After 5 years, the homesteader could file for his patent (or deed of title) by submitting proof of residency and the required improvements to a local land office.

Since it was signed into law by Lincoln in May 1862, however, few people from the Deep South initially received any benefit from it. Yet given that the Act remained in place until 1934, tens if not hundreds of thousands of southern poor whites undoubtedly became land owners following the close of the Civil War. By the end of the Act, over 1.6 million homestead applications had been processed, transferring more than 270 million acres of land to American individuals. Thus, as Trina Williams estimated, about 10 percent of all the land in the entire United States was given to homesteaders for little more than a filing fee. For many poor whites who had longed to leave the South but never had the means to emigrate, the Homestead Act offered them a chance to start fresh, often in places unstained by the legacy of slavery.<sup>10</sup>

A year after Appomattox, the Southern Homestead Act sought to accomplish the same objectives as the original act on a much smaller scale. Opening up 46 million acres of public domain land in Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Louisiana, and Mississippi, the guidelines to claiming land were similar to the original Homestead Act. Originally, the Southern Homestead Act was proposed to make self-sufficient farmers out of freedmen, but the aims of the law were never fully realized, and the federal government's failure to make a significant proportion of blacks landowners would have dire consequences for decades to come. As historian Claude

---

<sup>10</sup> Trina Williams, "The Homestead Act: A Major Asset-building Policy in American History," Paper commissioned for "Inclusion in Asset Building: Research and Policy Symposium," Center for Social Development Washington University, St. Louis, Sept. 21-23, 2000, 1; 6, Web; T. R. W. Shanks, "The Homestead Act: A Major Asset-Building Policy in American History," in M. Sherraden, Ed., *Inclusion in the American Dream: Assets, Poverty, and Public Policy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005); "Homestead Act," National Archives, <http://www.archives.gov/education/lessons/homestead-act/>; Williams, "The Homestead Act," 1.

Oubre wrote, “The tragedy of Reconstruction is the failure of the black masses to acquire land, since without the economic security provided by land ownership the freemen were soon deprived of the political and civil rights which they had won.” Owning land would have been the only realistic way for African Americans to achieve a level of self-sufficiency after generations of slavery. Yet to the great detriment of U.S. race relations, Oubre rightly concluded that “Efforts to assist the freedmen to become landowners must therefore be judged a failure.”<sup>11</sup>

While the Freedman’s Bureau had initially been in charge of land policy relating to ex-slaves, Oubre found that it “never controlled more than two-tenths of one percent of the land in the South,” and moreover, President Andrew Johnson issued an amnesty proclamation giving almost all southern land back to the former slaveholders. When it became obvious that the Bureau had been rendered powerless to effect real change, Radical Republicans in Congress began pushing for a Homestead Act specifically aimed to give land to ex-slaves. Spurred on by the efforts of Union General Oliver Otis Howard, the Southern Homestead Act passed in the summer of 1866. During the first year of the Act, land was exclusively offered to African Americans and loyal whites, but after 1867 ex-Confederates could apply. Although the law ostensibly offered a solution to the region’s land problem without removing any planters from their land, only unoccupied, often un-farmable land remained. Much of the Homestead land was either covered with swamps, was heavily wooded, or lay very far from transportation routes.<sup>12</sup>

Even with these qualifications, the passage of the Southern Homestead Act gave the region’s poor population reason for hope; land ownership could turn the dream of self-sufficiency into a reality. Ultimately, of course, the Southern Homestead Act fell far short of its

---

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*; Williams, “The Homestead Act,” 6; 1; Claude F. Oubre, *Forty Acres and A Mule: The Freedmen’s Bureau and Black Land Ownership* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana, 1978), 197.

<sup>12</sup> Oubre, *Forty Acres*, 31; Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America’s Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877* (New York: Harper Collins, 1988), 246.

objectives as far as African Americans were concerned. According to Oubre, there were several reasons for this failure. First, African Americans who

had already made year-long labor contracts with employers under the auspices of the Freedman's Bureau could not simply leave their jobs and go... They were locked into their contracts until January 1, 1867, the very date at which the Southern Homestead Act's terms ceased to provide them with any special benefit. Second, the land open for homesteading was typically available for a reason... And finally the administrative headaches... were particularly difficult for people usually without cash resources or experience in dealing with men behind desks... Sometime, a state had only one land office, and it cost more for a prospective farmer to travel there than the cost of his entire acreage under the Act.

Homesteading activity varied greatly by state, and was also sporadic from year to year. Perhaps due to the Southern Act's disorganized, haphazard administration, Congress repealed the southern version in 1876, exactly a decade from its start date (much unlike the long-lived Homestead Act of 1862). As Williams found, under the Southern Homestead Act approximately 67,600 applications were made, but at most only about 27,800 applicants "received final patent," totaling about 6 percent of the land originally offered. Using the few reports left by these bureaucratic offices, it is nearly impossible to calculate how many white individuals, as opposed to businesses, received land under the southern version of the Act. However, it is much easier to calculate the number of black beneficiaries. Williams estimated that fewer than 5,500 of the 27,800 final patents were ever awarded to African Americans. Other records indicate that fewer than 4,000 freedpeople received land. "Either way," Williams concluded, "the reality is that few homesteads were granted to Black claimants."<sup>13</sup>

Conversely, by the end of Reconstruction, tens of thousands of poor whites had already succeeded in becoming landowners, and many others would follow in their footsteps over the

---

<sup>13</sup> Katherine C. Mooney, Foreword, in Oubre, *Forty Acres*, n.p., Oubre, *Forty Acres*, 90; Williams, "The Homestead Act," 10. Eric Foner used the lower estimate: "By 1869 only 4,000 black families had even attempted to take advantage of the act, three quarters of them in sparsely populated Florida, and many of these subsequently lost their land." Foner, *Reconstruction*, 246.

next few decades. Indeed, by essentially giving away land to private individuals, the Homestead Acts were the most extensive, radical, redistributive governmental policy in American history. Williams conservatively calculated the number of original (1862) Homestead-recipient descendants living today at forty-six million people, about a quarter of the current U.S. adult population. These beneficiaries, however, were overwhelmingly white. Largely denied these entitlements, blacks were essentially left landless after years – and generations – of unpaid, coerced labor. As sociologist Thomas Shapiro pointed out, if nearly a quarter of Americans can potentially trace their “legacy of property ownership” to these entitlement programs, then modern-day issues like “upward mobility, economic stability, class status, and wealth” need to be understood as directly related “to one national policy—a policy that in practice essentially excluded African Americans.”<sup>14</sup>

Without the widespread redistribution of southern land among the freedmen, African Americans were all but doomed to recurrent indebtedness and poverty. For poor whites who remained landless, though, Charles Bolton found that while the Civil War “did not drastically alter [their] economic status...the economic system built after the war did offer them some new employment opportunities.” With slavery abolished, poor whites were finally able to sell their labor in a free market. Long shut out of many of the region’s labor opportunities, they finally had the chance to work without having to compete with slaves, for jobs or for wages. Gavin Wright thus accurately deemed emancipation “an economic revolution,” noting that “A popular metaphor among regional spokesmen during the 1870s and 1880s was the notion that slavery had enslaved whites as well as blacks by stifling economic energies in various ways.” For so many years, manual labor had been degraded within the slaveholding South, especially in areas with

---

<sup>14</sup> Gilmour, *Other Emancipation*, 121, footnote 2; Williams, “The Homestead Act,” 8; Thomas M. Shapiro. *The Hidden Cost of Being African American: How Wealth Perpetuates Inequality* (New York: Oxford, 2004), 190.

high percentages of slaves. By way of contrast, Wilbur Fisk Tillett wrote in 1887, “If the Old South had a contempt for the worker, the New South has a greater contempt for the do-nothing and the idler.” With the massive upheaval of the southern work force, however, poor whites finally, albeit briefly, perhaps, had a modicum of power with which to negotiate labor terms. This shift, in turn, forced more affluent whites to at least pay homage to the “honor” inherent in hard work. As E.B. Seabrook confirmed just two years into Reconstruction, “Already [poor whites’] services are, for the first time, in general demand, and simultaneously all over the country many of them have been taken into employment.” Now that all labor was supposed to be dignified, and all laborers could possess a sense of honor, poor whites “are recovering the place from which too long they have been driven, and...they will stretch upward from it to higher aims and better attainments.” Thus, Robert Gilmour contended, “the collapse of the slave system liberated the social and economic order” of the Old Confederacy. “White reactions to emancipation in the decade following the end of the Civil War established social and economic patterns that far outlasted Reconstruction,” he continued. Although poor whites’ options in the labor market were still very limited, at least “The plantation economy, no longer bound to an exclusive slave labor system, now provided new openings for many whites, who migrated into the plantation districts as sharecroppers, and expanded onto lands previously controlled by small farmers.”<sup>15</sup>

African Americans, however, did not fare as well. Studying post-emancipatory black history, Jay Mandle concluded that “The plantation economy was able to survive slave emancipation.” His theory undoubtedly applied to the postbellum criminal justice system as well.

---

<sup>15</sup> Charles C. Bolton, *Poor Whites in the Antebellum South: Tenants and Laborers in Central North Carolina and Northeast Mississippi* (Durham: Duke, 1994), 182; Wright, *Old South*, 18; Wilbur Fisk Tillett, “The White Man of the New South,” *Century Magazine* (March 1887): 769; Seabrook, “The Poor Whites,” 690; Gilmour, *Other Emancipation*, ii.

Just as blacks had taken over poor whites' old place at the bottom of free society in terms of land policy and labor, a similar scenario played out in state and local legal matters. Deep South legislatures passed new constitutions between 1865 and 1866. With slavery over, the updated documents were based on Black Codes restricting African Americans from almost every privilege of freedom. These repressive statutes prompted the federal Civil Rights Act of 1866, which anticipated the Fourteenth Amendment and forced the Old Confederacy to give at least an appearance of having accepted emancipation, primarily by changing the wording of laws that blatantly targeted blacks. Although the new state Constitutions did not single out ex-slaves in letter, the intent of the region's new laws was quite clear. If planters could no longer lord over enslaved African Americans, they would at least create a path whereby the most "dangerous" and "disruptive" freed people could be returned to legally sanctioned bondage. By drastically increasing the severity of criminal punishments, broadening the statutes of behavioral crimes, and effectively preventing jury service by blacks, southern whites were able to quickly reclaim a good deal of social control over their former slaves.<sup>16</sup>

Thus, following emancipation, the number of people arrested in Deep South rose significantly as the substance and enforcement of certain laws changed substantially. In stark contrast to the antebellum period, the vast majority of those now arrested were black. To keep up with the rapid pace of arrests, cities and towns that did not have police forces before the war quickly established professional, uniformed forces during Reconstruction. Atlanta, Augusta, Nashville, Memphis, and Richmond created police departments following emancipation. As

---

<sup>16</sup> Mandle, *The Roots of Black Poverty*, 15. Furthermore, just as antebellum child apprenticeship laws allowed poor white children to be taken from their homes and forced to labor for individual citizens, the postbellum version of these laws, of course, targeted African American children. Eric Foner wrote that southern apprenticeship laws allowed local judges "to bind to white employers black orphans and those whose parents were deemed unable to support them." Poor black children, whose parents and grandparents and great-grandparents had labored for years without compensation, were now also fair game. Foner, *Reconstruction*, 200; 201.

Edward Ayers found, the undeniable proportion of race-based arrests caused concern, even during the initial years of freedom. In one petition to the Georgia's Freedmen's Bureau, the blatant racism of a particular judge was called into question after he punished several African Americans for speaking "disrespectfully" to whites. Indeed, the petitioners lamented, "the condition of the freed people is worse than slavery." By the mid-1870s, Greene and Chatham Counties recorded alarming levels of racial discrepancy in convictions. While 60 percent of arrested whites would eventually be convicted, the proportion rose to 80 percent for arrested blacks. Local southern officials had become so heavily invested in policing the freedmen that by January 1875, the *Greensboro Herald* warned of a "heavy increase" in state convicts that fall, since local jails across the region were already filled to capacity. Emancipation, did, of course, provide the theoretical framework of black freedom, and laid the groundwork for a path towards citizenship. But that path would be long and hard, with many obstacles along the way. Despite idealistic promises from the federal government, overturning an entrenched system of racial slavery was a momentous task. Unless local governments were purged of Confederate sympathizers, true emancipation for southern blacks was nearly impossible. As Hahn concluded, "Vagrancy ordinances, apprenticeship laws, antienticement statutes, stiff licensing fees, heavy taxes, the eradication of common-use rights on unenclosed land, and the multiplication of designated 'crimes' against property constructed a distinct status of black subservience and a legal apparatus that denied freedpeople access to economic independence."<sup>17</sup>

In 1868, Allen Thomas was the first person sent to Georgia's penitentiary for vagrancy following the Civil War. A forty-five year old from Dooly County, Thomas differed from the state's antebellum vagrants in two extremely important ways. First, Thomas was African

---

<sup>17</sup> Edward L. Ayers, *Vengeance and Justice: Crime and Punishment in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century American South* (New York: Oxford, 1984), 168; quoted on 154; quoted on 174; 179; Steven Hahn, *A Nation under our Feet: Black Political Struggles in the Rural South from Slavery to the Great Migration* (Cambridge: Harvard, 2003), 235.

American. Second, instead of the usual one to four year sentence handed down to poor white vagrants during the antebellum period, Thomas was sentenced to “natural life.” Unfortunately, little else is known about Thomas; he died in prison, less than a year after his conviction. Yet his arrest symbolizes the refocusing of the criminal justice system following emancipation. Indeed, Georgia’s postbellum vagrancy laws criminalized people “who have not some visible and known means of a fair, honest and reputable livelihood,” meaning primarily ex-slaves who left the employ of their plantations. It also included people “without a fixed abode,” qualifying all newly freed, and usually homeless, blacks. The vagrant category also extended to anyone involved in trading or buying stolen property, presumably property carried off of plantations by freedmen. Furthermore, the statute deemed it lawful for “any person to arrest said vagrants,” effectively giving even the poorest whites legal authority over blacks. After arrest, vagrants could be fined, imprisoned, or sentenced to work on “public works or roads.” Alternately, they could “be bound out to some person” for a year, for a bond not exceeding \$300. This short-term master would agree to provide food, clothing, and medical attention, making the black vagrant’s virtual slavery complete.<sup>18</sup>

No longer masters, the former slaveholders created institutionalized ways to reassert their power. They began aggressively enforcing laws enacted to strictly control the purchasing and distribution of liquor, to regulate individuals’ private sexual lives, and to dictate how and where people could spend their leisure time. Just as poor whites had been singled out for prosecution for non-violent, behavioral crimes in the antebellum period, so were blacks in the postbellum

---

<sup>18</sup> State of Georgia Board of Corrections, Inmate Administration Division: Central Registration of Convicts, 1817-68, GDAH; *Acts of the General Assembly of the State of Georgia*, Passed in Milledgeville, at an annual session in December 1865, and January, February, and March 1866: 234. Several scholars have written about vagrancy in the post-war context. See James P. Schmidt, *Free to Work: Labor Law, Emancipation, and Reconstruction, 1815-1880* (Athens: Georgia, 1998), Mary Farmer-Kaiser, “‘Are they not in some sorts vagrants?’: Gender and the Efforts of the Freedman’s Bureau to Combat Vagrancy in the Reconstruction South.” *Georgia Historical Quarterly* 68, No. 1 (Spring 2004): 25-49, and Linda Kerber, *No Constitutional Right to be Ladies: Women and the Obligations of Citizenship* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1998).

period. After the initial few years following the war, the Deep South once again had a labor surplus. Local officials were not incarcerating people because they needed laborers. Instead, there was a distinct continuity before and after the war: southern criminal statutes' intended purpose was the maintenance of elite social control over the masses. African American emancipation, therefore, literally changed the face of the region's criminal targets. Before secession, the incarcerated were generally poor and white, but after the Thirteenth Amendment, convict populations almost immediately became overwhelmingly black. As one Union soldier stationed in Meridian, Mississippi wrote of the former slaveholders, "It is their hope, and intention, under the guise of vagrant laws, &c, to restore all of slavery but its name."<sup>19</sup>

Since the vast majority of people arrested in the post-war Deep South were black, scholars like Alex Lichtenstein and Lawrence Friedman have demonstrated that post-emancipation statutes were specifically intended to keep freedmen trapped in a type of bondage. Friedman wrote that post-war arrests "played a sinister role in the system of race oppression." The southern legislatures may not have been able to single out African Americans in letter, but law enforcement officials across the former Confederacy clearly understood the statutes' intended targets. Complicating this plan of criminal prosecution, however, was the fact that most southern prisons had fallen apart during the war. Georgia and Mississippi had turned their prisons into munitions factories during the fighting, while others had simply fallen too far into states of disrepair. Many local jails had suffered similar fates, or had been burned down or otherwise destroyed by invading soldiers or disgruntled southerners, both black and white. To deal with this lack of infrastructure, "The postbellum South saw the growth of a unique penal system, the convict lease," Lichtenstein explained. "Rather than house convicts in a penitentiary,

---

<sup>19</sup> Quoted in Amy Dru Stanley, *From Bondage to Contract: Wage Labor, Marriage, and the Market in the Age of Slave Emancipation* (New York: Cambridge, 1998), 126.

after 1865 southern states leased them to the highest bidder, who was then responsible for feeding, clothing, and restraining the convicts. In return, the lessee received the right to use the convicts' labor as he desired." Generally not abolished until the Progressive Era, convict leasing was, in Lichtenstein's words, "a fiscally conservative means of coping with a new burden: the ex-slaves who were emancipated from the dominion of the slaveholder only to be subject to the authority of the state." The racial disparity apparent in the disproportionate numbers of black convicts during early Reconstruction remained consistent throughout the remainder of the century. As late as 1908, Lichtenstein found, Georgia's African American prisoners outnumbered white convicts almost ten to one.<sup>20</sup>

Convict leasing was, in many instances, akin to a death sentence. Several journalists confirmed the brutal history of convict labor in the Deep South. In 1907, the temperance activist Clarissa Olds Keeler attempted to reveal the inhumanity and racism inherent in the system. In Alabama, she revealed,

During the seven years prior to 1874, when the number had greatly increased and the convicts were worked constructing railroads, the official reports showed that over one third...died annually. A prison official has said that if tombstones were erected over the graves of all the convicts who fell either by the bullet of the overseer or his guards during the construction of one of the railroads, it would be one continuous graveyard from one end to the other.

Indeed, the average yearly death rate for black convicts in Mississippi was around 11 percent in the years from 1880 to 1885. White death rates hovered at half that level. By 1887, the annual rates of death for African American prisoners had risen to an astonishing 16 percent. Blacks had

---

<sup>20</sup> Lawrence M. Friedman, *Crime and Punishment in American History* (New York: Basic Books, 1993), 95; Alex Lichtenstein, *Twice the Work of Free Labor: The Political Economy of Convict Labor in the New South* (New York: Verso, 1996), 3; 15.

indeed taken over poor whites' place as the intended targets of legal system, a tradition that the rest of America would adopt and perpetuate, all the way through to the present day.<sup>21</sup>

One of the most important developments of the postbellum era, therefore, was the significant change in relations between poor whites and blacks, and in their relative standing before the law. Recognizing the slaveholders as their respective oppressors, the Deep South's poor whites, free blacks, and slaves had once shared similar class concerns. As Eugene Genovese wrote in his essay on poor whites in 1977, although slaveholders "succeeded in driving a deep wedge" between the poor whites and blacks, "the hints of mutual sympathy and compassion in a world in which so much conspired to sow distrust and hatred suggest that the Reconstruction era was not fated to end as it did." Indeed, Genovese believed, "A wiser and firmer social polity directed toward building interracial unity would have encountered enormous obstacles, but it would have had more on which to build than historians have yet investigated." Poor whites began as pariahs in the antebellum era because they had no real place in the slave system and therefore actually threatened it. With the emancipation of African Americans, poor whites were finally brought into the system of white privilege, albeit at the bottom. This inclusion nonetheless placed them higher on the southern social hierarchy than freedmen, and they gained certain legal, political, and social advantages solely based upon race. Both blacks and poor whites were better off after emancipation, but both were still constrained by historical and contemporary economic and social forces that, especially when manipulated by those atop the economic and political pyramid, made their respective interests seem contradictory.

---

<sup>21</sup> Clarissa Olds Keeler, *The Crime of Crimes: Or The Convict System Unmasked* (Washington, DC: Pentecostal Era Co., 1907), 7; Woodward, *Origins*, 214.

After emancipation, African Americans became the only race in America ever to start out – as an entire people – with close to zero wealth. With no saved, inheritable wealth and assets, loans were nearly impossible to secure. Foreclosure, homelessness, and hunger were only one illness or one accident away. Without ever owning land, and thus, having nothing else upon which to build or generate wealth, the majority of freedmen had little real chance of breaking the cycles of poverty created by slavery. Without the prospect of earning a living wage, or the opportunity to secure a job in the first place, millions of African Americans struggled through generations of hunger and want. Jane Johnson had spent her childhood as a slave in South Carolina, and understood the realities of severe poverty. She even linked the experiences of impoverished whites before the Civil War to impoverished blacks after emancipation:

There was a heap of poor white folks in slavery time, and some of them lived mighty hard, worse than the slaves sometimes... They say slavery was wrong but what about hard times? That is the worst kind of slavery, I think. All this hollering round about freedom they have, shucks, all that kind of talk ain't nothing. When you have work and some money in your pocket so you can go to the store and buy some meat and bread, then you have the best freedom there is, don't tell me.

Poverty, many ex-slaves believed, was responsible for a degree of deterioration within the black community. The inability to provide for a family had to have been extremely demoralizing for African Americans, much like it was for impoverished whites in the antebellum period. Years after gaining freedom, some ex-slaves still grieved the fact that younger generations of African Americans seemed unable to extricate themselves from debt, poverty, and the criminal justice system. Dempsey Pitts of Mississippi lamented that black parents were only able to “bring up their children for three things—The County Farm, the Penitentiary, and the Gallows.” Charlie Davenport also found little substantial difference between slavery and extreme poverty. African Americans, he maintained, were “all in debt and chained down to something same as we slaves were.” Therefore, in an observation that might have resonated with many poor whites as well,

Davenport concluded, “there ain’t no such thing as freedom. We’re all tied down to something.”<sup>22</sup>

In certain tragic respects, therefore, the nineteenth century South offered some ominous foreshadowings of twenty-first century America. From an economic perspective, the extreme inequality of wealth and privilege remains striking, a direct reminder of the toll of unrestrained capitalism. During the antebellum period, few poor whites could ever hope to rise above the economic class into which they were born. Today, few Americans born into poverty will ever be able to lift themselves out of the lower classes. For African Americans, the savage consequences of history, policy, and racism have rendered prospects of economic ascension grimmer still. Scholar C.L.R. James held that “The cruelties of property and privilege are always more ferocious than the revenges of poverty and oppression. For the one aims at perpetuating resented injustice, the other is merely a momentary passion soon appeased.” His sentiments seem to hold true years later, as increasing wealth disparity continues to lead to other types of inequity, both social and political. The conversation over America’s extreme (and growing) inequality is long overdue, and, more clearly now than ever, a matter of not simply regional but truly national urgency. As James Baldwin fittingly wrote, “Anyone who has ever struggled with poverty knows how extremely expensive it is to be poor.”<sup>23</sup>

---

<sup>22</sup> Jane Johnson, *Ibid.*, Vol. 3 (SC), Part 3, 51; Dempsey Pitts, *Ibid.*, Vol. 9 (MS), Supplement, Series 1, Part 4, 1723; Charlie Davenport, *Ibid.*, Vol. 6 (MS), Supplement, Series 1, Part 2, 572.

<sup>23</sup> Quoted in Steven Hahn, *A Nation under our Feet: Black Political Struggles in the Rural South from Slavery to the Great Migration* (Cambridge: Harvard, 2003), 265; James A. Baldwin quote, online at <http://www.chronicpoverty.org/uploads>.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

### Primary Sources

#### ALABAMA DEPARTMENT OF ARCHIVES AND HISTORY, MONTGOMERY (ADAH)

##### Alabama Department of Corrections and Institutions

Record of Deceased Prisoners

State Convict Records

##### Clarke County

Sheriff's Records, Jail Registers

##### Elmore County

County Prison Records

##### Montgomery County

Sheriff's Records, Jail Registers

##### Perry County

Sheriff's Records, Jail Registers

##### Russell County

Sheriff's Records, Jail Registers

##### Wilcox County

Sheriff's Records, Jail Registers

#### ALABAMA LAWS

*Code of Alabama*. 1823, or Toulmin's Digest.

\_\_\_\_\_. 1836, or Aiken's Alabama Digest.

\_\_\_\_\_. 1843, or Clay's Alabama Digest.

\_\_\_\_\_. 1852, or Ormond, Bagby, Goldthwaite Digest.

\_\_\_\_\_. 1876, prepared by Keyes and Wood.

\_\_\_\_\_. 1886, V. 2 Criminal, by Brickell, Hamilton, and Tillman.

\_\_\_\_\_. 1896, V. 2 Criminal, by Martin.

*Revised Code of Alabama*, 1867, or Walker's Code.

Sanford, John W. A. *The Code of the City of Montgomery, Prepared in Pursuance of an Order of the City Council of Montgomery* Montgomery, Ala., 1861. *The Making of Modern Law: Primary Sources*. Web. 15 August 2013.

*The Penal Code of Alabama*, 1866, prepared by Stone and Shepherd.

#### CENSUS RECORDS

U.S. Bureau of the Census. Population Schedules. Third through Thirteenth Censuses. 1810-1910.

\_\_\_\_\_. Slave Schedules. Seventh and Eighth Censuses. 1850-1860.

\_\_\_\_\_. Social Statistics. Seventh Census. 1850.

GEORGIA DEPARTMENT OF ARCHIVES AND HISTORY, MORROW (GDAH)

Bibb County

Superior Court, Minutes

Camden County

Superior Court, Minutes

Chatham County

Prison Records

Superior Court, Minutes

Decatur County

Superior Court, Minutes

Forsyth County

Superior Court, Minutes

Georgia Reports

*Jacob Waddel vs. The State*. Brief of Evidence

Governor Convict and Fugitive Records

Pardons

Hancock County

Superior Court, Proceedings of Coroner's Inquests

Irwin County

Superior Court, Minutes

Lumpkin County

Superior Court, Minutes

Monroe County

Superior Court, Minutes

Morgan County

Superior Court, Minutes

Murray County

Superior Court, Minutes

Muscogee County

Superior Court, Minutes

Richmond County

Superior Court, Minutes

Rabun County

Superior Court, Minutes

State of Georgia Board of Corrections

Inmate Administration Division: Central Registration of Convicts

State Supreme Court Records

*Jacob Waddel vs. The State of Georgia*, 27 Ga. 262 (1859)

GEORGIA LAWS

*Acts and Resolutions of the General Assembly of the State of Georgia*. Passed at Its Session in  
July and August, 1872.

\_\_\_\_\_. Passed at the Regular January Session, 1875.

- \_\_\_\_\_. Passed at the Regular Session of January, 1876
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1886-7. Volume II.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1888-9. Volume II.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1896. Volume I.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1899. Volume I.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1900. Volume I.
- Acts of the General Assembly of the State of Georgia.* Passed at Milledgeville, at an annual session, in November and December, 1816.
- \_\_\_\_\_. Passed at Milledgeville, at an annual session, in November and December, 1835.
- \_\_\_\_\_. Passed in Milledgeville, 1845.
- \_\_\_\_\_. Passed in Milledgeville, 1847.
- \_\_\_\_\_. Passed in Milledgeville, 1849-50.
- \_\_\_\_\_. Passed in Milledgeville, at a bi-ennial session, in November, December, and January, 1851-'2.
- \_\_\_\_\_. Passed in Milledgeville, at a bi-ennial session, in November, December, January, February. 1853-4. Compiled, and notes added, by John Rutherford.
- \_\_\_\_\_. Passed in Milledgeville, at a bi-ennial session, in November, December, January, February & March, 1855-'56. Compiled, and notes added, by John W. Duncan.
- \_\_\_\_\_. Passed in Milledgeville, at a session of the same, in November and December, 1857. Compiled and annotated by Edwin N. Broyles.
- \_\_\_\_\_. Passed in Milledgeville, at a session in November and December, 1858.
- \_\_\_\_\_. Passed in Milledgeville, at an annual session in November and December, 1859.
- \_\_\_\_\_. Passed in Milledgeville, at an annual session in November and December, 1860.
- \_\_\_\_\_. Passed in Milledgeville, at an annual session in December 1865, and January, February, and March 1866.
- \_\_\_\_\_. Passed in Atlanta, Georgia, at the Called Session, Beginning July 14, and Ending October 6, 1868.
- Cobb, Howell. *Analysis of the Statutes of Georgia, in General Use, with the Forms and Precedents Necessary to Their Practical Operation, and an Appendix, Containing the Declaration of Independence; the Articles of Confederation; the Constitution of the United States; the Constitution of the State of Georgia; General Washington's Farewell Address, and the Naturalization Laws Passed by Congress.* New York, 1846. *The Making of Modern Law: Primary Sources.* Web. 15 August 2013.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *A Compilation of the Penal Code of the State of Georgia: with Forms and Bills of Indictment Necessary in Prosecutions under It, and the Rules of Practice.* Macon, GA: Joseph M. Boardman, 1850.
- Cobb, Thomas Read Rootes. *A Digest of the Statute Laws of the State of Georgia, in Force Prior to the Session of the General Assembly of 1851, with Explanatory Notes and References; and Also, with Notes, Giving the Exposition of the Statutes, by the Supreme Court of the State; Together with an Appendix, Containing the Constitution of the United States; the Constitution of the State of Georgia; the Statute of Frauds and Perjuries; the Habeas Corpus Act; the Judiciary Act of 1799; and the Local Laws Applicable to Each County.* Vol. 1. Athens, 1851. 2 vols. *The Making of Modern Law: Primary Sources.* Web. 15 August 2013.
- Clark, Richard H. *The Code of the State of Georgia.* Atlanta, 1861. *The Making of*

*Modern Law: Primary Sources*. Web. 15 August 2013 Hotchkiss, William A. *A Codification of the Statute Law of Georgia, Including the English Statutes of Force: In Four Parts. To Which is Prefixed a Collection of State Papers, of English, American, and State Origin; Together with an Appendix, and Index, and also a Collection of Legal Forms, in Use in Georgia*. Second Edition Augusta, 1848. *The Making of Modern Law: Primary Sources*. Web. 15 August 2013.

Prince, Oliver H. *A Digest of the Laws of the State of Georgia: Containing all Statutes and the Substance of all Resolutions of a General and Public Nature, and now in Force, which have been Passed in this State, Previous to the Session of the General Assembly of Dec. 1837*. Second Edition Athens, 1837. *The Making of Modern Law: Primary Sources*. Web. 15 August 2013.

#### MISSISSIPPI DEPARTMENT OF ARCHIVES AND HISTORY, JACKSON (MDAH)

Adams County

Poor House Records

Chickasaw County

Receipts for Deserters from the Army Arrested by the Sherriff  
Substitutes, 1863

Hinds County

Circuit Court, Minutes

Mississippi Legislature

Petitions

Senate Journals

Penitentiary Records

Folder 1840

#### ALFRED H. STONE COLLECTION (MDAH)

Atkinson, Edward. *Cheap Cotton by Free Labor: By a Cotton Manufacturer*. Boston: A. Williams & Co., 1861.

Barrows, Samuel J. "The Evolution of the Afric-American [sic]," *Man and the State: Studies in Applied Sociology*, No. 28 (1892): 317-45.

Child, David L. *The Despotism of Freedom; Or the Tyranny and Cruelty of American Republican Slave-Masters, Shown To Be the Worst in the World; In a Speech, Delivered at the First Anniversary of the New England Anti-Slavery Society, 1833*. Boston: Boston Young Men's Anti-Slavery Association, 1833.

*Condition of the South! An Impartial Review of Affairs in Mississippi by Two residents of that State: Letters of Ex-Senator Revels (Colored), and Attorney General Harris (N.P., 1876?)*.

Cunningham, Alexander. "The Whipping Post as It Is," *Leslie's Monthly* (1901).

DeLeon, Edwin. "The New South." *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* 2, No. 50 (Jan. 1874): 270-280.

Fleming, Walter L., ed. *The Constitution and the Ritual of the Knights of the White Camelia [sic], West Virginia University Documents Relating to Reconstruction, No. 1* (Morgantown, WV: Acme Publishing Co., 1904).

- \_\_\_\_\_, ed. *Union League Documents, West Virginia University Documents Relating to Reconstruction, No. 3*. Morgantown, WV: Acme Publishing Co., 1904.
- Hallowell, Richard P. *The Southern Question: Past and Present*. Boston: Samuel Ushr, 1890.
- Keeler, Clarissa Olds. *The Crime of Crimes: Or The Convict System Unmasked*. Washington, DC: Pentecostal Era Co., 1907.
- Olcott, Charles. *Two Lectures on the Subject of Slavery and Abolition*. Massillon, OH: "Printed for the Author," 1838.
- Proceedings of the Colored National Labor Convention of December 1869*. Washington, D.C.: New Era, 1870.
- "Peonage in the South," *Independent*, Vol. 41, No. 11 (July 9, 1903): 1616-18.
- Revels, Hiram and C.E. Harris. *Condition of the South! An Impartial Review of Affairs in Mississippi by Two Residents of that State: Letters of Ex-Senator Revels (Colored), and Attorney General Harris (N.P., 1876?)*.
- Royall, William L. *A Reply to "A Fool's Errand, by One of the Fools."* New York: E. J. Hale & Son, 2nd ed., 1881.
- The Democratic League, "The Slaveholders' Conspiracy against Democratic Principles." (N.P., 1864?).
- Tillett, Wilbur Fisk "The White Man of the New South," *Century Magazine* (March 1887): 769-76.

## MISSISSIPPI LAWS

- Howard, Volney Erskine. *The Statutes of the State of Mississippi of a Public and General Nature, with the Constitutions of the United States and of this State: And an Appendix Containing Acts of Congress Affecting Land Titles, Naturalization, &c, and a Manual for Clerks, Sheriffs and Justices of the Peace*. New Orleans, 1840. *The Making of Modern Law: Primary Sources*. Web. 15 August 2013.
- Hutchinson, Anderson. *Code of Mississippi: Being an Analytical Compilation of the Public and General Statutes of the Territory and State, with Tabular References to the Local and Private Acts, from 1798 to 1848: With the National and State Constitutions, Cessions of the Country by the Choctaw and Chickasaw Indians, and Acts of Congress for the Survey and Sale of the Lands, and Granting Donations Thereof to the State*. Jackson, Miss., 1848. *The Making of Modern Law: Primary Sources*. Web. 15 August 2013.
- Journal of the State Convention and Ordinances and Resolutions Adopted in January, 1861, with an Appendix*. Jackson, Mississippi, 1861. *The Making of Modern Law: Primary Sources*. Web. 15 August 2013.
- Sharkey, William Lewis. *The Revised Code of the Statute Laws of the State of Mississippi*. Jackson, Mississippi, 1857. *The Making of Modern Law: Primary Sources*. Web. 15 August 2013.

## SOUTH CAROLINA DEPARTMENT OF ARCHIVES AND HISTORY, COLUMBIA (SCDAH)

Abbeville District

Coroner's Inquisition Books

Anderson District

- Court of Common Pleas, Capias ad Satisfaciendum Executions
- Court of General Sessions, Annual Reports of the Commissioners of the Poor
- Court of General Sessions, Arrest Warrants
- Court of General Sessions, Capias ad Satisfaciendum Executions
- Court of General Sessions, Coroner's Inquisitions
- Court of Magistrates and Freeholders, Vagrancy Trials

Charleston District

- Court of General Sessions, Criminal Dockets
- Court of General Sessions, Criminal Journals

Clarendon District

- Court of General Sessions, Capias ad Satisfaciendum Executions

Darlington District

- Soldiers' Board of Relief, Papers

Edgefield District

- Coroner, Coroner's Inquisition Books

Fairfield District

- Court of Common Pleas, Bastardy processes
- Court of Common Pleas, Petitions and Property Schedules of Insolvent Debtors
- Court of Common Pleas, Prison Bounds Bonds
- Court of General Sessions, Coroner's Inquisitions

Greenville District

- Court of General Sessions, Coroner's Inquisitions
- Court of General Sessions, Nol. Pros. Rolls

Horry District

- Coroner's Inquisitions Books

Kershaw District

- Clerk of Court, Election Files
- Court of Common Pleas, Capias ad Satisfaciendum Executions
- Court of General Sessions, Capias ad Satisfaciendum Executions
- Court of General Sessions, Capias ad Satisfaciendum Executions against Defaulting Jurors
- Court of General Sessions, Coroner's Inquisitions
- Court of General Sessions, Criminal Journals
- Court of General Sessions, Rough Criminal Journals
- Court of General Sessions, Sheriff's Returns of Prisoners in Jail
- Court of Magistrates and Freeholders, Trial Papers
- Vagrancy Trial Papers

Laurens District

- Court of Common Pleas, Petitions and Property Schedules of Insolvent Debtors
- Court of General Sessions, Capias ad Satisfaciendum Executions
- Court of General Sessions, Coroner's Inquisitions
- Court of General Sessions, Grand Jury Presentments

Marlboro District

- Court of Common Pleas, Capias ad Satisfaciendum Executions

Court of General Sessions, Coroner's Inquisitions  
Pickens District  
Court of General Sessions, Coroner's Inquisitions  
Richland District  
Coroner's Inquisition Books  
Spartanburg District  
Court of Common Pleas, Capias ad Satisfaciendum Executions  
Court of General Sessions, Capias ad Satisfaciendum Executions  
Court of General Sessions, Coroner's Inquisitions  
Union District  
Court of General Sessions, Coroner's Inquisitions

#### SOUTH CAROLINA LAWS

McCord, David J. *The Statutes at Large of South Carolina*, Volume Sixth. Columbia: A.S. Johnston, 1839.  
*Report of the Commissioners on the Revision and Consolidation of the Statute Laws of the State*. Columbia: Republican Printing Co., 1871.  
*The Statutes At Large Of South Carolina*. Columbia, 1840. 10 vols. *The Making of Modern Law: Primary Sources*. Web. 15 August 2013.  
*The Statutes At Large Of South Carolina*. Columbia, 1841. 10 vols. *The Making of Modern Law: Primary Sources*. Web. 15 August 2013.

#### VARIOUS STATE LAWS

Brayman, M. *Revised Statutes do the State of Illinois*. Springfield: William Walters, 1845.  
Brightly, Frederick C. *A Digest of the Laws of Pennsylvania*. Ninth Edition. Philadelphia: Kay and Brother, 1862.  
Caruthers, R. L. and A.O.P. Nicholson. *A Compilation of the Statutes of Tennessee*. Nashville: James Smith, 1836.  
Denio, Hiram and William Tracy. *The Revised Statutes of the State of New York*. Volume II. Albany: Gould, Banks, and Co., 1852.  
Denny, A.F. *The General Statutes of the State of Missouri*. Jefferson: Emory S. Foster, 1866.  
Hartley, Oliver C. *A Digest of the Laws of Texas*. Philadelphia: Thomas, Cowperthwait, and Co., 1850.  
Haywood, John and Robert L. Cobbs. *The Statute Laws of the State of Tennessee*. Knoxville: F.S. Heiskell, 1831.  
Meigs, Return J. and William F. Cooper, *The Code of Tennessee*. Nashville: EG. Eastman and Co., 1858.  
Parke, Benjamin and Ovid F. Johnson. *A Digest of the Code and Acts of Pennsylvania*. Philadelphia: James Kay, Jr. and Brother, 1837.  
Parker, Amasa J., et al., *The Revised Statutes of the State of New York*. Volume II, Fifth Edition. Albany: Banks and Bros., 1859.  
Paschal, George W. *A Digest of the Laws of Texas*. Galveston: S. Nichols, 1866.

- Peirce, Levi, et al., *The Consolidation and Revision of the Statutes of Louisiana*. New Orleans: Bea Office, 1852.
- Purdon, John. *A Digest of the Laws of Pennsylvania*. Philadelphia: McCarty and Davis, 1824.
- Purple, N.H. *A Compilation of the Statutes of the State of Illinois*. Part I. Chicago: Keen and Lee, 1856.
- Revised Statutes of Missouri*. Volume I. Philadelphia: C.H. Hardin, 1856.
- Stroud, George M. *A Digest of the Laws of Pennsylvania*. Sixth Edition. Philadelphia: McCarty and Davis, 1841.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *A Digest of the Laws of Pennsylvania*. Seventh Edition. Philadelphia: James Kay, Jr. and Brother, 1852.
- Supplement to the Revised Code of the Laws of Virginia*. Richmond: Samuel Shepherd and Co., 1833.
- Tate, Joseph. *Laws of Virginia*. Second Edition. Richmond: Smith and Palmer, 1841.
- The Revised Laws of Illinois*. Vandalia: Greiner and Sherman, 1833.
- The Revised Statute Laws of the State of Louisiana*. New Orleans: Republican Office, 1870.
- The Revised Statutes of the State of Missouri*. Third Edition. St. Louis: Chambers and Knapp, 1841.
- \_\_\_\_\_. St. Louis: J.W. Dougherty, 1845.
- The Revised Statutes of the State of New York*. Volume I. Albany: Packard and Van Benthuysen, 1835.

## NEWSPAPERS

- Albany Patriot* (GA)
- Atlanta Daily Sun*
- The Christian Recorder* (PA)
- Charleston Courier* (SC)
- Columbus Enquirer* (GA)
- Federal Union* (GA)
- Georgia Journal*
- Georgia Telegraph*
- Georgia Weekly Opinion*
- Macon Telegraph* (GA)
- Mississippian State Gazette*
- New York Evangelist*
- New York Times*
- Provincial Freeman* (Canada West)
- Southern Confederacy* (GA)
- Southern Recorder* (GA)
- The National Era* (DC)
- The New York Times*
- The North Star* (NY)
- Thomasville Times* (GA)
- Union and Recorder* (GA)

*Weekly Atlanta Intelligencer*  
*Weekly Constitution (GA)*  
*Weekly New Era (GA)*  
*Weekly Sumter Republican (GA)*

#### BOOKS, ARTICLES, AND OTHER PRINTED PRIMARY SOURCES

Beccaria, Cesare. *On Crimes and Punishments and Other Writings*. ed. Aaron Thompson. 1764; reprint, Toronto: Toronto, 2008.

Conway, M.D. *Testimonies Concerning Slavery*. London: Chapman and Hall, 1855. Web.

Douglass, Frederick. *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*. Boston: De Wolfe & Fiske Co., 1892. Web.

Elliot, Colleen M. and Louise A. Moxley, eds. *The Tennessee Civil War Veterans Questionnaires*, Vols. 1-5. Easley, SC: Southern Historical Press, Inc., 1985.

Faulkner, William. *Absalom, Absalom!* 1936; reprint, New York: Vintage, 1986.

Fitzhugh, George. *Cannibals All! Or, Slaves without Masters*. ed. C. Vann Woodward. 1857; reprint, Cambridge: Harvard, 1988.

Gallay, Alan, ed. *Voices of the Old South: Eyewitness Accounts, 1528-1861*. Athens: Georgia, 1994.

Helper, Hinton Rowan. *The Impending Crisis of the South: How to Meet It*. 1857; reprint, New York: A.B. Burdick, 1860. Web.

Hundley, Daniel R. . *Social Relations in Our Southern States*. New York: Henry B. Price, 1860. Web.

Kemble, Frances Anne. *Journal of a Residence on a Georgia Plantation in 1838-1839*. New York: Harper, 1863. Web.

Kirke, Edmund. *Among the Pines, or, South in Secession Time*. New York: J.R. Gilmore, 1862. Web.

Longstreet, Augustus Baldwin. *Georgia Scenes*. New York: Harper & Bros., 1897. Web.

Olmsted, Frederick Law. *A Journey in the Seaboard Slave States: With Remarks on Their Economy*. New York: Dix and Edwards, 1856. Web.

Parsons, C.G. *An Inside View of Slavery: Or, A Tour among the Planters*. Boston: J.P. Jewett and Co., 1855. Web.

- Pepper, George W. *Personal Recollections of Sherman's Campaigns in Georgia and the Carolinas*. Zanesville, OH: Hugh Dunne, 1866. Web.
- Perdue, Jr., Charles L., Thomas E. Barden, and Robert K. Phillips, eds. *Weevils in the Wheat: Interviews with Virginia Ex-Slaves*. Charlottesville: Virginia, 1976.
- Rawick, George P. ed. *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography*. Vols. 1-19. Westport: Greenwood, 1972-79.
- Redpath, James. *The Roving Editor, or Talks with Slaves in the Southern States*. John R. McKivigan, ed. 1859; reprint, University Park: Pennsylvania, 1996.
- Reid, Whitelaw *After the War: A Southern Tour, May 1, 1865 to May 1, 1866*. New York: Moor, Wilstach, and Baldwin, 1866. Web.
- Seabrook, E.B. "Poor Whites of the South," *The Galaxy Volume*, Issue 6 (Oct. 1867): 681-691. Web.
- Twain, Mark. *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. 1884; reprint, New York: Bantam, 1981.
- Watson, Thomas E. "The Negro Question in the South," *Arena* (Boston), 1892. Web.
- Weston, George M. *The Poor Whites of the South*. Washington, D.C.: Buell & Blanchard, 1856. Web.
- Wiltshire, Betty Couch. *Marriages and Deaths from Mississippi Newspapers*. Vols. 1-4. Bowie, MD: Heritage, 1987.

## Secondary Sources

- Alexander, Michelle. *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*. New York: New Press, 2010.
- Anderson, Elijah. *Streetwise: Race, Class, and Change in an Urban Community*. Chicago: Chicago, 1990.
- Appleby, Joyce. *Capitalism and a New Social Order: The Republican Vision of the 1790s*. New York: New York, 1984.
- Ash, Stephen V. "Poor Whites in the Occupied South." *Journal of Southern History* 57, (Feb. 1991): 39-62.
- Ashworth, John. *Agrarians and Aristocrats: Party Political Ideology in the United States, 1837-1846*. New Jersey: Humanities, 1983.

- Ayers, Edward L. *The Promise of the New South: Life after Reconstruction*. New York: Oxford, 1992.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Vengeance and Justice: Crime and Punishment in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century American South*. New York: Oxford, 1984.
- Baggett, James Alex. *The Scalawags: Southern Dissenters in the Civil War and Reconstruction*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana, 2003.
- Bailey, Fred Arthur. *Class and Tennessee's Confederate Generation*. Chapel Hill: North Carolina, 1987.
- Bailey, Hugh C. "Disloyalty in Early Confederate Alabama." *Journal of Southern History* 23, No. 4 (Nov. 1957): 522-528.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Hinton Rowan Helper: Abolitionist Racist*. Montgomery: Alabama, 1965.
- Barber, E. Susan, "Depraved and Abandoned Women: Prostitution in Richmond, Virginia across the Civil War," in Susanna Delfino and Michele Gillespie, eds., *Neither Lady Nor Slave: working Women of the Old South*. Chapel Hill: North Carolina, 2002.
- Bardaglio, Peter W. *Reconstructing the Household: Families, Sex, and the Law in the Nineteenth Century South*. Chapel Hill: North Carolina, 1995.
- Barney, William L. *The Secessionist Impulse: Alabama and Mississippi in 1860*. Princeton: Princeton, 1974.
- Bateman, Fred and Thomas Weiss *A Deplorable Scarcity: The Failure of Industrialization in the Slave Economy*. Chapel Hill: North Carolina, 1981.
- Beale, Howard K. "On Rewriting Reconstruction History." *American Historical Review* 45, No. 4 (July 1940): 807-827.
- Beckles, Hilary McD. "An Economic Life of their Own: Slaves as Commodity Producers and Distributors in Barbados," in Ira Berlin and Philip D. Morgan, eds. *The Slaves' Economy: Independent Production*. Portland: Frank Cass, 1991, 31-47.
- Beier, A.L. *Masterless Men: The Vagrancy Problem in England, 1560-1640*. London: Methuen, 1986.
- Bender, Thomas, ed. *The Anti-Slavery Debate: Capitalism and Abolitionism as a Problem in Historical Interpretation*. Berkeley: California, 1992.
- Beringer, Richard E. et. al. *Why the South Lost the Civil War*. Athens: Georgia, 1986.

- Berlin, Ira. *Many Thousands Gone: The First Two Centuries of Slavery in North America*. Cambridge: Harvard, 1998.
- Berlin, Ira and Herbert G. Gutman, "Natives and Immigrants, Free Men and Slaves: Urban Workingmen in the Antebellum American South." *American Historical Review* 88, No. 5 (Dec. 1983): 1175-1200.
- Berlin, Ira and Philip D. Morgan, eds. *The Slaves' Economy: Independent Production*. Portland: Frank Cass, 1991.
- Bernstein, Barton J. "Southern Politics and Attempts to Reopen the African Slave Trade." *Journal of Negro History* 51, No. 1 (Jan. 1966): 16-35.
- Berry, Stephen W. *All That Makes a Man: Love and Ambition in the Civil War South*. New York: Oxford, 2003.
- \_\_\_\_\_. Review of *Race Relations at the Margins: Slaves and Poor Whites in the Antebellum Southern Countryside*, by Jeff Forret. *Reviews in American History* 35, No. 3 (Sept. 2007): 380-4.
- Black, Henry Campbell. *Black's Law Dictionary: Definitions of the Terms and Phrases of American and English Jurisprudence, Ancient and Modern*. 6<sup>th</sup> ed. 1890; reprint, St. Paul: West Group, 1990.
- Blackburn, Robin. *An Unfinished Revolution: Karl Marx and Abraham Lincoln*. New York: Verso, 2011.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "The Old World Background to European Colonial Slavery." *William and Mary Quarterly*, Third Series, Vol. 54, No. 1 (Jan. 1997): 65-102.
- Blackmon, Douglas A. *Slavery by Another Name: The Re-Enslavement of Black Americans from the Civil War to World War II*. New York: Anchor, 2008.
- Blaikie, Piers M. *The Political Economy of Soil Erosion in Developing Countries*. New York: Longman, 1985.
- Blassingame, John W. *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South*. New York: Oxford, 1979.
- Bode, Frederick A. and Donald E. Ginter, *Farm Tenancy and the Census in Antebellum Georgia*. Athens: Georgia, 1987.
- Boles, John B. *The South through Time: A History of an American Region, Volume I*. New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1999.

- Bolton, Charles C. *Poor Whites in the Antebellum South: Tenants and Laborers in Central North Carolina and Northeast Mississippi*. Durham: Duke, 1994.
- Bolton, Charles C. and Scott P. Culclasure, eds., *The Confessions of Edward Isham: A Poor White Life of the Old South*. Athens: Georgia, 1998.
- Brenner, Robert. "Agrarian Class Structure and Economic Development in Pre-Industrial Europe." *Past and Present* 70 (Feb. 1976): 30-75.
- Brewer, John. *The Pleasures of the Imagination: English Culture in the Eighteenth Century*. New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1997.
- Brewer, John and John Styles, eds. *An Ungovernable People: The English and their Law in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries*. New Brunswick: Rutgers, 1980.
- Brewer, William M. "Poor Whites and Negroes in the South since the Civil War." *Journal of Negro History* 15, No. 1 (Jan. 1930): 26-37.
- Brown, David. "A Vagabond's Tale: Poor Whites, Herrenvolk Democracy, and the Value of Whiteness in the Late Antebellum South." *Journal of Southern History* 79, No. 4 (Nov. 2013): 799-840.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Hinton Rowan Helper: The Logical Outcome of the Non-Slaveholders' Philosophy." *Historical Journal* 46, I (2003): 39-58.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Southern Outcast: Hinton Rowan Helper and the Impending Crisis of the South*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana, 2006.
- Brown, Kathleen M. *Good Wives, Nasty Wenches, and Anxious Patriarchs: Gender, Race, and Power in Colonial Virginia*. Chapel Hill: North Carolina, 1996.
- Brown, W.O. "Role of Poor Whites in Race Contracts of the South." *Social Forces* 19, No.2 (Dec. 1940): 258-268.
- Browning, Judkin. *Shifting Loyalties: The Union Occupation of Eastern North Carolina*. Chapel Hill: North Carolina, 2011.
- Buck, Paul H. "The Poor Whites of the Ante-Bellum South." *American Historical Review* 31, No. 1 (Oct. 1925): 41-54.
- Burke, Peter. *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe*. London: T. Smith, 1978.
- Burton, Orville Vernon. *In My Father's House Are Many Mansions: Family and Community in Edgefield, South Carolina*. Chapel Hill: North Carolina, 1985.

- Bynum, Victoria. *The Free State of Jones: Mississippi's Longest Civil War*. Chapel Hill: North Carolina, 2003.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Long Shadow of the Civil War: Southern Dissent and its Legacies*. Chapel Hill: North Carolina, 2010.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Unruly Women: The Politics of Social and Sexual Control in the Old South*. Chapel Hill: North Carolina, 1992.
- Byrne, Frank J. *Becoming Bourgeois: Merchant Culture in the South, 1820-1861*. Lexington: Kentucky, 2006.
- Callen, Shirley. "Planter and Poor White in *Absalom, Absalom!* and *The Mind of the South*." *South Central Bulletin* 23, No. 4 (Winter 1963): 24-36.
- Campbell, James M. *Slavery on Trial: Race, Class, and Criminal Justice in Antebellum Richmond, Virginia*. Gainesville: Florida, 2007.
- Canny, Nicholas. *Europeans on the Move: Studies on European Migration, 1500-1800*. New York: Oxford, 1994.
- Carlson, Douglas W. "'Drinks He to His Own Undoing': Temperance Ideology in the Deep South." *Journal of the Early Republic* 18, No. 4 (Winter, 1998): 659-691.
- Carter, Dan T. *When the War was Over: The Failure of Self-Reconstruction in the South, 1865-1867*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana, 1985.
- Cash, W.J. *The Mind of the South*. 1941; reprint, New York: Vintage, 1991.
- Cecil-Fronsman, Bill. *Common Whites: Class and Culture in Antebellum North Carolina*. Lexington: Kentucky, 1992.
- Cell, John W. *The Highest Stage of White Supremacy: The Origins of Segregation in South Africa and the American South*. New York: Cambridge, 1982.
- Chambliss, William J. "A Sociological Analysis of the Law of Vagrancy." *Social Problems* 12, No. 1 (Summer 1964): 67-77.
- Channing, Steven A. *Crisis of Fear: Secession in South Carolina*. New York: Norton, 1974.
- Chartier, Roger. *Cultural History: Between Practice and Representation*. Trans. by Lydia G. Cochrane. Ithaca: Cornell, 1988.
- Cobb, James C. *Away Down South: A History of Southern Identity*. New York: Oxford, 2005.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Georgia Odyssey*. Athens: Georgia, 1997.

- \_\_\_\_\_. *Industrialization and Southern Society: 1877-1984*. Lexington: Kentucky, 1984.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "“On the Pinnacle in Yankeeland’: C. Vann as a [Southern] Renaissance Man.” *Journal of Southern History* 67, No. 4 (Nov. 2001): 715-740.
- Cohen, David W. and Jack P. Greene, eds. *Neither Slave Nor Free: The Freedmen of African Descent in the Slave Societies of the New World*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1972.
- Coleman, Peter J. *Debtors and Creditors in America: Insolvency, Imprisonment for Debt, and Bankruptcy, 1607-1900*. Washington, D.C.: Beard Books, 1999.
- Craven, Avery O. "Poor Whites and Negroes in the Antebellum South." *Journal of Negro History* 15, No.1 (Jan. 1930): 14-25.
- Daniel, Pete. *Breaking the Land: The Transformation of Cotton, Tobacco, and Rice Cultures since 1880*. Urbana: Illinois, 1985.
- Davis, Angela Y. *Are Prisons Obsolete?* New York: Seven Stories, 2003.
- Davis, Karen F. "The Position of Poor Whites in a Color-Class Hierarchy: A Diachronic Study of Ethnic Boundaries in Barbados." Ph.D. Diss., Wayne State University, 1978.
- Davis, Natalie Zemon. *Society and Culture in Early Modern France*. Stanford: Stanford, 1975.
- Debats, Donald A. *Elites and Masses: Political Structure, Communication, and Behavior in Antebellum Georgia*. New York: Garland, 1990.
- Delfino, Susanna and Michele Gillespie, eds., *Neither Lady Nor Slave: Working Women of the Old South*. Chapel Hill: North Carolina, 2002.
- Den Hollander, A.N.J. "The Tradition of ‘Poor Whites.’" In W.T. Couch, ed., *Culture in the South*. Chapel Hill: North Carolina, 1935.
- Denham, James M. "A Rogue’s Paradise": *Crime and Punishment in Antebellum Florida, 1821-1861*. Tuscaloosa: Alabama, 1997.
- Diner, Hasia. *Erin’s Daughters in America: Irish Immigrant Women in the Nineteenth Century*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1983.
- Donald, David H. "The Scalawag in Mississippi Reconstruction." *Journal of Southern History* 10 (Nov. 1944): 447-60.
- Dorman, Lewy. *Party Politics in Alabama from 1850 through 1860*. Wetumpka, AL: Wetumka, 1935.

- Downing, David C. *A South Divided: Portraits of Dissent in the Confederacy*. Nashville: Cumberland House, 2007.
- Downs, Jim. *Sick from Freedom: African-Americans Illness and Suffering during the Civil War and Reconstruction*. New York: Oxford, 2012.
- DuBois, W.E.B. *Black Reconstruction in America: An Essay toward a History of the Part which Black Folk Played in the Attempt to Reconstruct Democracy in America, 1860-1880*. 1935; reprint, New York: Free Press, 1992.
- Eaton, Clement. "Class Differences in the Old South." *Virginia Quarterly Review* 33 (1957): 357-370.
- Edwards, Laura F. *Gendered Strife and Confusion: The Political Culture of Reconstruction*. Urbana: Illinois, 1997.
- Elkins, Stanley. *Slavery, a Problem in Institutional and Intellectual Life*. New York: Universal, 1963.
- Ellem, Warren A. "Who Were the Mississippi Scalawags?" *Journal of Southern History* 38, No. 2 (May 1972): 217-240.
- Ely, James W. Jr. "'There are Few Subjects in Political Economy of Greater Difficulty': The Poor Laws of the Antebellum South." *American Bar Foundation Research Journal* 10, No. 4 (Autumn, 1985): 849-879.
- Engels, Friedrich. *The Condition of the Working Class in England*. Ed. by David McLellan. 1844; reprint, New York: Oxford, 1993.
- Escott, Paul D. *After Secession: Jefferson Davis and the Failure of Confederate Nationalism*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana, 1978.
- Eslinger, Ellen. "Antebellum Liquor Reform in Lexington, Virginia: The Story of a Small Southern Town." *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 99, No. 2 (Apr., 1991): 163-186.
- Farmer-Kaiser, Mary. "'Are they not in some sorts vagrants?': Gender and the Efforts of the Freedman's Bureau to Combat Vagrancy in the Reconstruction South." *Georgia Historical Quarterly* 68, No. 1 (Spring 2004): 25-49.
- Faust, Drew Gilpin. *The Creation of Confederate Nationalism: Ideology and Identity in the Civil War South*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana, 1988.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *James Henry Hammond and the Old South: A Design for Mastery*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana, 1982.

- \_\_\_\_\_. *Mothers of Invention: Women in the Slaveholding South in the American Civil War*. Chapel Hill: North Carolina, 1996.
- Feldman, Glenn. *The Disfranchisement Myth: Poor Whites and Suffrage Restriction in Alabama*. Athens: Georgia, 2004.
- Fields, Barbara J. "Ideology and Race in American History." In J. Morgan Kousser and James M. McPherson, eds. *Region, Race and Reconstruction: Essays in Honor of C. Vann Woodward*. New York: Oxford, 1982, 143-177.
- Finzsch, Norbert and Robert Jutte, eds. *Institutions of Confinement: Hospitals, Asylums, and Prisons in Western Europe and North America, 1500-1950*. Washington, D.C.: Cambridge, 1996.
- Fischer, David Hackett. *Albion's Seed: Four British Folkways in America*. New York: Oxford, 1989.
- Flynt, J. Wayne. *Dixie's Forgotten People: The South's Poor Whites*. Bloomington: Indiana, 1979.
- Flynt, Wayne, *Poor but Proud: Alabama's Poor Whites*. Tuscaloosa: Alabama, 1989.
- Fogel, Robert W. and Stanley L. Engerman. *Time on the Cross: The Economics of American Negro Slavery*. Boston: Little, Brown, & Co., 1974.
- Foner, Eric. *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men: The Ideology of the Republican Party before the Civil War*. New York: Oxford, 1970.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Nothing But Freedom: Emancipation and Its Legacy*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana, 1983.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877*. New York: Perennial, 1988.
- Ford, Lacy K. *Origins of Southern Radicalism: The South Carolina Upcountry, 1800-1860*. New York: Oxford, 1988.
- Forret, Jeff. *Race Relations at the Margins: Slaves and Poor Whites in the Antebellum Southern Countryside*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana, 2006.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Slaves, Poor Whites, and the Underground Economy of the Rural Carolinas," *Journal of Southern History* 70, No.4 (Nov. 2004): 783-824.
- Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Trans. by Alan Sheridan. 1975; reprint, New York: Random House, 1995.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*. Trans. by Richard Howard. 1965; reprint, New York: Pantheon, 1988.

- Fox-Genovese, Elizabeth. *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women in the Old South*. Chapel Hill: North Carolina, 1989.
- Franklin, John Hope. "Mirror for Americans: A Century of Reconstruction History," *American Historical Review* 85, No. 1 (Feb. 1980): 1-14.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Militant South, 1800-1861*. 1956; reprint, Boston: Beacon, 1970.
- Fredrickson, George M. *The Black Image in the White Mind: The Debate on Afro-American Character and Destiny, 1817-1914*. New York: Harper and Row, 1971.
- Freehling, William W. *The South vs. the South: How Anti-Confederate Southerners Shaped the Course of the Civil War*. New York: Oxford, 2001.
- Friedman, Lawrence M. *Crime and Punishment in American History*. New York: Basic Books, 1993.
- Gallagher, Gary W. *The Confederate War: How Popular Will, Nationalism, and Military Strategy Could Not Stave Off Defeat*. Cambridge: Harvard, 1997.
- Gans, Herbert J. *The War against the Poor: The Underclass and Antipoverty Policy*. New York: Basic Books, 1995.
- Genovese, Eugene D. *The Political Economy of Slavery: Studies of the Economy and Society of the Slave South*. New York: Random House, 1965.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "‘Rather Be a Nigger Than a Poor White Man’: Slave Perceptions of Southern Yeomen and Poor Whites," in Hans L. Trefousse, ed. *Toward a New View of America: Essays in Honor of Arthur C. Cole*. New York: B. Franklin, 1977, 79-96.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made*. New York: Vintage, 1974.
- Genovese, Eugene and Elizabeth Fox-Genovese. *Fruits of Merchant Capital: Slavery and Bourgeois Property in the Rise and Expansion of Capitalism*. New York: Oxford, 1983.
- Gillespie, Michele. *Free Labor in an Unfree World: White Artisans in Slaveholding Georgia, 1789-1860*. Athens: Georgia, 2000.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "To Harden a Lady's Hand: Gender Politics, Racial Realities, and Women Millworkers in Antebellum Georgia," in Susanna Delfino and Michele Gillespie, eds., *Neither Lady Nor Slave: working Women of the Old South* (Chapel Hill: North Carolina, 2002).
- Gilmore, Glenda. *Gender and Jim Crow: Women and the Politics of White Supremacy in North Carolina, 1896-1920*. Chapel Hill: North Carolina, 1996.

- Gilmour, Robert Arthur. "The Other Emancipation: Studies in the Society and Economy of Alabama Whites during Reconstruction." Ph.D. Diss., Johns Hopkins, 1972.
- Glatthaar, Joseph T. *General Lee's Army: From Victory to Defeat*. New York: The Free Press, 2008.
- Gleeson, David T. *The Irish in the South, 1815-1877*. Chapel Hill: North Carolina, 2001.
- Glickstein, Jonathan A., *American Exceptionalism, American Anxiety: Wages, Competition, and Degraded Labor in the United States*. Charlottesville: Virginia, 2002.
- Goleman, Daniel, narrator. *Destructive Emotions: How Can We Overcome Them? A Scientific Dialogue with the Dalai Lama*. New York: Bantam, 2003.
- Goodwyn, Lawrence. *Democratic Promise: The Populist Moment in America*. New York: Oxford, 1976.
- Goody, Jack. *The Power of the Written Tradition*. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian, 2000.
- Gorn, Elliott J. "'Gouge and Bite, Pull Hair and Scratch': The Social Significance of Fighting in the Southern Backcountry," *American Historical Review* 90, Supplement to Vol. 90 (Feb. 1985), 18-43.
- Griffin, Richard W. "Poor White Laborers in Southern Cotton Factories, 1789-1865," *South Carolina Historical Magazine* 61, No. 1 (Jan. 1960), 26-40.
- Hadden, Sally. *Slave Patrols: Law and Violence in Virginia and the Carolinas*. Cambridge: Harvard, 2001.
- Hahn, Steven. *A Nation under our Feet: Black Political Struggles in the Rural South from Slavery to the Great Migration*. Cambridge: Harvard, 2003.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Roots of Southern Populism: Yeomen Farmers and the Transformation of the Georgia Upcountry, 1850-1890*. New York: Oxford, 1983.
- Hale, Grace. *Making Whiteness: The Culture of Segregation in the South, 1890-1940*. New York: Pantheon, 1998.
- Harris, J. William. *Plain Folk and Gentry in a Slave Society: White Liberty and Black Slavery in Augusta's Hinterland*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana, 1985.
- Harris, William C. "A Reconsideration of the Mississippi Scalawag," *Journal of Mississippi History* 32 (Feb. 1970): 3-42.
- Hay, Douglas, ed. *Albion's Fatal Tree: Crime and Society in Eighteenth Century England*. London: A. Lane, 1975.

- Henderson, Tony. *Disorderly Women in Eighteenth-Century London: Prostitution and Control in the Metropolis, 1730-1830*. New York: Longman, 1999.
- Hindus, Michael S. *Prison and Plantation: Crime, Justice, and Authority in Massachusetts and South Carolina, 1767-1878*. Chapel Hill: North Carolina, 1980.
- Hodes, Martha. *White Women, Black Men: Illicit Sex in the Nineteenth Century South*. New Haven: Yale, 1997.
- Holt, Thomas. *Black over White: Negro Political Leadership in South Carolina during Reconstruction*. Urbana: Illinois, 1977.
- Holton, Woody. *Forced Founders: Indians, Debtors, Slaves, and the Making of the American Revolution in Virginia*. Chapel Hill: North Carolina, 1999.
- Horowitz, Morton J. *The Transformation of American Law, 1780-1860*. Cambridge: Harvard, 1977.
- Hunter, Tera W. *To 'Joy My Freedom: Southern Black Women's Lives and Labors after the Civil War*. Cambridge: Harvard, 1997.
- Hyman, Rubin III. *South Carolina Scalawags*. (Columbia: South Carolina, 2006).
- Ignatiev, Noel. *How the Irish became White*. New York: Routledge, 1995.
- Inscoc, John C., ed. *Appalachians and Race: The Mountain South from Slavery to Segregation*. Lexington: Kentucky, 2001.
- \_\_\_\_\_. and Robert C. Kenzer, eds. *Enemies of the Country: New Perspectives on Unionists in the Civil War South*. Athens: Georgia, 2001.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Mountain Masters: Slavery and the Sectional Crisis in Western North Carolina*. Knoxville: Tennessee, 1989.
- Isaac, Rhys. *The Transformation of Virginia: 1740-1790*. Chapel Hill: North Carolina, 1982.
- Jacobson, Matthew Frye. *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race*. Cambridge: Harvard, 1998.
- Johnson, Guion Griffis. *Ante-Bellum North Carolina: A Social History*. Chapel Hill: North Carolina, 1937. Web.
- Johnson, James Hugo. *Race Relations in Virginia and Miscegenation in the South, 1776-1860*. Amherst: Massachusetts, 1970.

- Johnson, Michael P. *Toward a Patriarchal Republic: The Secession of Georgia*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana, 1977.
- Johnson, Walter. "On Agency." *Journal of Social History* 31, No.1 (2003): 113-124.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Soul by Soul: Life inside the Antebellum Slave Market*. Cambridge: Harvard, 1999.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "The Slave Trader, the White Slave, and the Politics of Racial Determination in the 1850s." *Journal of American History* 87, No. 1 (June 2000): 13-38.
- Jones, Jacqueline. "Encounters, Likely and Unlikely, Between Black and Poor White Women in the Rural South, 1865-1940." *Georgia Historical Quarterly* 76, No.2 (Summer 1992): 333-353.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work, and the Family from Slavery to the Present*. New York: Basic, 1985.
- Jordan, Winthrop D. *White over Black: American Attitudes Toward the Negro, 1550-1812*. 1968; reprint, New York: Norton, 1977.
- Jutte, Robert. *Poverty and Deviance in Early Modern Europe*. New York: Cambridge, 1994.
- Kahrl, Andrew W. *The Land Was Ours: African American Beaches from Jim Crow to the Sunbelt South*. Cambridge: Harvard, 2012.
- Kellar, Herbert. "A Journey through the South in 1836: Diary of James D. Davidson." *Journal of Southern History* 1 (Aug. 1935): 345-377.
- Kerber, Linda. *No Constitutional Right to be Ladies: Women and the Obligations of Citizenship*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1998.
- Kolchin, Peter. "Scalawags, Carpetbaggers, and Reconstruction: A Quantitative Look at Southern Congressional Politics, 1868-1872," *Journal of Southern History* 45 (Feb. 1979): 63-76.
- Korobkin, Russell. "The Politics of Disfranchisement in Georgia," *Georgia Historical Quarterly* 74, No. 1 (Spring 1990): 20-58.
- Kousser, J. Morgan. *The Shaping of Southern Politics: Suffrage Restrictions and the Establishment of the One-Party South, 1880-1910*. Yale University Press, 1974.
- Kulikoff, Allan. *From British Peasants to Colonial American Farmers*. Chapel Hill: North Carolina, 2000.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Agrarian Origins of American Capitalism*. Charlottesville: Virginia, 1992.

- \_\_\_\_\_. *Tobacco and Slaves: The Development of Southern Cultures in the Chesapeake, 1680-1800*. Chapel Hill: North Carolina, 1986.
- Lacey, Forrest W. "Vagrancy and Other Crimes of Personal Condition." *Harvard Law Review* 66, No. 7 (May 1953): 1203-1226.
- Lebergott, Stanley. "Wage Trends, 1800-1900," in The Conference on Research in Income and Wealth, eds., *Trends in the American Economy in the Nineteenth Century*. Princeton: Princeton, 1960.
- Levine, Lawrence W. *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom*. New York: Oxford, 1977.
- Leyburn, James G. *The Scotch Irish: A Social History*. Chapel Hill: North Carolina, 1962.
- Lichtenstein, Alex. "'That Disposition To Theft, With Which They Have Been Branded': Moral Economy, Slave Management, and the Law." *Journal of Social History* 21 (Spring 1998): 413-40.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Twice the Work of Free Labor: The Political Economy of Convict Labor in the New South*. New York: Verso, 1996.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Was the Emancipated Slave a Proletarian?" *Reviews in American History* 26, No. 1 (1998): 124-145.
- Linebaugh, Peter. *The London Hanged: Crime and Civil Society in the Eighteenth Century*. New York: Cambridge, 1992.
- Lipset, Seymore M. "The Emergence of the One-Party South—The Election of 1860." *Political Man*. New York: Anchor, 1960.
- Lockley, Timothy James. *Lines in the Sand: Race and Class in Lowcountry Georgia, 1750-1860*. Athens: Georgia, 2001.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Partners in Crime: African Americans and Non-slaveholding Whites in Antebellum Georgia." In Matt Wray and Annalee Newitz, eds., *White Trash: Race and Class in America*. New York: Routledge, 1997.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Spheres of Influence: Working White and Black Women in Antebellum Savannah," in Susanna Delfino and Michele Gillespie, eds., *Neither Lady Nor Slave: working Women of the Old South*. Chapel Hill: North Carolina, 2002.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Welfare and Charity in the Antebellum South*. Gainesville: Florida, 2007.

- MacKenzie, Scott A. "The Slaveholders' War: The Secession Crisis in Kanawha County, Western Virginia, 1860-1861." *West Virginia History*, New Series, Vol. 4, No. 1 (Spring 2010): 33-57.
- Mandel, Jay R. *The Roots of Black Poverty: The Southern Plantation Economy after the Civil War*. Durham: Duke, 1978.
- Mani, Anandi, et. al., "Poverty Impedes Cognitive Function," *Science* 341, No. 976 (Aug. 2013): 976-980.
- Margo, Robert A., ed., *Wages and Labor Markets in the United States, 1820-1860*. Chicago: Chicago, 2000.
- Martin, Edgar W. *The Standard of Living in 1860: American Consumption Levels on the Eve of the Civil War*. Chicago: Illinois, 1942.
- Marx, Karl and Friedrich Engels. *The Communist Manifesto*. 1888; reprint, New York: Bantam, 1992.
- McCoy, Drew. *The Elusive Republic: Political Economy in Jeffersonian America*. Chapel Hill: North Carolina, 1980.
- McCurry, Stephanie. *Confederate Reckoning: Power and Politics in the Civil War South*. Cambridge: Harvard, 2010.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Masters of Small Worlds: Yeoman Households, Gender Relations, and the Political Culture of the Antebellum South Carolina Low Country*. New York: Oxford, 1995.
- McNair, Glenn. *Criminal Injustice: Slaves and Free Blacks in Georgia's Criminal Justice System*. Charlottesville: Virginia, 2009.
- McPherson, James M. *Abraham Lincoln and the Second American Revolution*. New York: Oxford, 2002.
- McWhiney, Grady. *Cracker Culture: Celtic Ways in the Old South*. Tuscaloosa: Alabama, 1988.
- Mell, Mildred Rutherford. "A Definitive Study of the Poor Whites of the South." Ph.D. Diss., University of North Carolina, 1938.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Poor Whites of the South." *Social Forces* 17, No. 2 (Dec. 1938), 153-167.
- Melton, James VanHorn. *The Rise of the Public in Enlightenment Europe*. New York: Cambridge, 2001.

- Merritt, Keri Leigh. "A Vile, Immoral, and Profligate Course of Life': Poor Whites and the Enforcement of Vagrancy Law in Antebellum Georgia." M.A. Thesis, University of Georgia, 2007.
- Mikalachi, Jodi. "Women's Networks and the Female Vagrant: A Hard Case," in Susan Frye and Karen Robertson, eds., *Maids and Mistresses, Cousins and Queens: Women's Alliances in Early Modern England*. New York: Oxford, 1999.
- Mitchell, Broadus. *The Rise of Cotton Mills in the South*. Columbia: South Carolina, 2001.
- Mitchell, Thomas W., et. al. "Forced Sale Risk: Class, Race, and the 'Double Discount.'" 37 *Florida State University Law Review* 589 (2010).
- Mitchell, Thomas W. "Growing Inequality and Racial Economic Gaps." 56 *Howard Law Journal* 849 (2013).
- Moch, Leslie P. *Moving Europeans: Migration in Western Europe since 1650*. Bloomington: Indiana, 1992.
- Montgomery, Horace. *Cracker Parties*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana, 1950.
- Morgan, Edmund S. *American Slavery, American Freedom: The Ordeal of Colonial Virginia*. New York: Norton, 1975.
- Morgan, Jennifer. *Laboring Women: Reproduction and Gender in New World Slavery*. Philadelphia: Pennsylvania, 2004.
- Morgan, Philip D. *Slave Counterpoint: Black Culture in the Eighteenth-Century Chesapeake & Lowcountry*. Chapel Hill: North Carolina, 1998.
- Morris, Richard M. "The Measure of Bondage in the Slave States." *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 41, No. 2 (Sept. 1954): 219-240.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "White Bondage in Ante-bellum South Carolina," *South Carolina Historical and Genealogical Magazine* 49, No. 4 (Oct. 1948): 191-207.
- Murray, John E. *The Charleston Orphan House: Children's Lives in the First Public Orphanage in America*. Chicago: Chicago, 2013.
- Nelson, Randy J., ed. *Biology of Aggression*. New York: Oxford, 2006.
- Niehoff, Debra. *The Biology of Violence: How Understanding the Brain, Behavior, and Environment Can Break the Vicious Cycle of Aggression*. New York: The Free Press, 1999.

- Noe, Kenneth W. and Shannon H. Wilson, eds. *The Civil War in Appalachia: Collected Essays*. Knoxville: Tennessee, 1997.
- Oakes, James. *The Ruling Race: A History of American Slaveholders*. New York: Norton, 1998.
- Olsen, Christopher J. *Political Culture and Secession in Mississippi: Masculinity, Honor, and the Antiparty Tradition, 1830-60*. New York: Oxford, 2000.
- Oshinsky, David M. *Worse than Slavery: Parchman Farm and the Ordeal of Jim Crow Justice*. New York: Free Press, 1996.
- Oubre, Claude F. *Forty Acres and A Mule: The Freedmen's Bureau and Black Land Ownership*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana, 1978.
- Ownby, Ted, ed. *Black and White Cultural Interaction in the Antebellum South*. Jackson: Mississippi, 1993.
- Owsley, Frank L. *Plain Folk of the Old South*. 1949; reprint, Baton Rouge: Louisiana, 1977.
- Owsley, Frank Lawrence. "The Irrepressible Conflict," in *Twelve Southerners. I'll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition*. 1930, reprint; Baton Rouge: Louisiana, 1977.
- Painter, Nell Irvin. *Southern History Across the Color Line*. Chapel Hill: North Carolina, 2002.
- Parenti, Christian. *Lockdown America: Police and Prisons in the Age of Crisis*. New York: Verso, 1998.
- Pearce, James T. "Folk Tales of the Southern Poor-White, 1820-1860." *Journal of American Folklore* 63, No. 250 (Oct.-Dec., 1950): 398-412.
- Penick, James L. *The Great Western Land Pirate: John A. Murrell in Legend and History*. Columbia: Missouri, 1982.
- Perman, Michael. *Road to Redemption: Southern Politics, 1869-1880*. Chapel Hill: North Carolina, 1984.
- Phillips, U.B. *American Negro Slavery: A Survey of the Supply, Employment, and Control of Negro Labor as Determined by the Plantation Regime*. 1918; reprint, Baton Rouge: Louisiana, 1966.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "The Slave Labor Problem in the Charleston District." *Political Science Quarterly* 22, No. 3 (Sept. 1907): 416-439.
- Planitzer, Walter Kyle. "A Dangerous Class of Men, Without Direct Interest in Slavery:

- A Proslavery Concern about Southern Nonslaveholders in the Late Antebellum Era.”  
Ph.D. Diss., Johns Hopkins, 2007.
- Postel, Charles. *The Populist Vision*. New York: Oxford, 2007.
- Potter, David. *The Impending Crisis, 1848-1861*. New York: Harper & Row, 1976.
- Price, Michael E. and Carol M. Andrews. “Georgia Humorists.” *New Georgia Encyclopedia*. 21 August 2013. Web.
- Quinlin, Kieran. *Strange Kin: Ireland and the American South*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana, 2005.
- Rable, George C. *But There Was No Peace: The Role of Violence in the Politics of Reconstruction*. Athens: Georgia, 1984.
- Rabinowitz, Howard N. *Race Relations in the Urban South, 1865-1890*. New York: Oxford, 1978.
- Raboteau, Albert J. *Slave Religion: The Invisible Institution in the Antebellum South*. Oxford: Oxford, 1980.
- Ransom, Roger L. and Richard Sutch, *One Kind of Freedom: The Economic Consequences of Emancipation*. New York: Cambridge, 1977.
- Reidy, Joseph P. “Review of James P. Schmidt’s *Free to Work: Labor Law, Emancipation, and Reconstruction*.” *Journal of the Early Republic* 19, No. 3 (Fall 1999): 568-72.
- Rhodes, James Ford. *History of the United States from the Compromise of 1850 to the McKinley-Bryan Campaign of 1896*. Vol. 1, 1850-1854. New York: Macmillan Company, 1920. Web.
- Robischeaux, Thomas. *Rural Society and the Search for Order in Early Modern Germany*. New York: Cambridge, 1989.
- Rockman, Seth. *Scraping By: Wage Labor, Slavery, and Survival in Early Baltimore*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 2009.
- Roediger, David R. *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class*. New York: Verso, 1999.
- Rorabaugh, W.J. *The Alcoholic Republic: An American Tradition*. New York: Oxford, 1979.
- Rosenheim, Margaret K. “Vagrancy Concepts in Welfare Law.” *California Law Review* 54, No. 2 (May 1966): 511-566.

- Rothman, Adam. *Slave Country: American Expansion and the Origins of the Deep South*. Cambridge: Harvard, 2005.
- Rothman, David J. *The Discovery of the Asylum: Social Order the Disorder in the New Republic*. Boston: Little and Brown, 1971.
- Rothman, Joshua D. *Flush Times and Fever Dreams: A Story of Capitalism and Slavery in the Age of Jackson*. Athens: Georgia, 2012.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "The Hazards of the Flush Times: Gambling, Mob Violence, and the Anxieties of America's Market Revolution." *Journal of American History* 95, No. 3 (Dec. 2008): 651-677.
- Ruff, Julius. *Violence in Early Modern Europe, 1500-1800*. New York: Cambridge, 2001.
- Russel, Robert R. "The Effects of Slavery upon Nonslaveholders in the Ante Bellum South." *Agricultural History* 15, No. 2 (April 1941): 112-126.
- Saville, Julie. *The Work of Reconstruction: From Slave to Wage Labor in South Carolina, 1860-1870*. New York: Cambridge, 1996.
- Schmidt, James P. *Free to Work: Labor Law, Emancipation, and Reconstruction, 1815-1880*. Athens: Georgia, 1998.
- Schwalm, Leslie A. *A Hard Fight for We: Women's Transition from Slavery to Freedom in South Carolina*. Urbana: Illinois, 1997.
- Scott, James C. *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*. New Haven: Yale, 1990.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Moral Economy of the Peasant: Subsistence and Rebellion in Southeast Asia*. New Haven: Yale, 1976.
- Sellers, Charles. *The Market Revolution: Jacksonian America, 1815-1846*. New York: Oxford, 1991.
- Shapiro, Thomas. *The Hidden Cost of Being African American: How Wealth Perpetuates Inequality*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2004.
- Sheehan-Dean, Aaron. *Why Confederates Fought: Family and Nation in Civil War Virginia*. Chapel Hill: North Carolina, 2007.
- Sherry, Arthur H. "Vagrants, Rogues and Vagabonds—Old Concepts in Need of Revision." *California Law Review* 48, No. 4 (Oct. 1960): 557-573.
- Shugg, Roger W. *Origins of Class Struggle in Louisiana: A Social History of White*

- Farmers and Laborers during Slavery and After, 1840-1875*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana, 1939.
- Siddell, Yvonne Robena. "The Forgotten Southerners: The Relationship between Blacks and Poor Whites during Reconstruction." M.A. Thesis, Florida Atlantic University, 1972.
- Sinha, Manisha. *The Counterrevolution of Slavery: Politics and Ideology in Antebellum South Carolina*. Chapel Hill: North Carolina, 2000.
- Slack, Paul A. "Vagrants and Vagrancy in England, 1598-1664." *Economic History Review*, New Series, Vol. 27, No.3 (Aug. 1974): 360-379.
- Smith, Mark M. *Mastered by the Clock: Time, Slavery, and Freedom in the American South*. Chapel Hill: North Carolina, 1997.
- Soltow, Lee. *Men and Wealth in the United States, 1850-1870*. New Haven: Yale, 1975.
- Spierenburg, Pieter. *The Broken Spell: A Cultural and Anthropological History of Preindustrial Europe*. New Brunswick: Rutgers, 1991.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Prison Experience: Disciplinary Institutions and their Inmates in Early Modern Europe*. New Brunswick: Rutgers, 1991.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Spectacle of Suffering: Executions and the Evolution of Repression: From a Pre-Industrial Metropolis to the European Experience*. New York: Cambridge, 1984.
- Stacey, Christopher L. "The Political Culture of Slavery and Public Poor Relief in the Antebellum South," *Journal of Mississippi History* 63, No. 2 (July 2001), 129-145.
- Stampf, Kenneth. *The Era of Reconstruction, 1865-1877*. New York: Knopf, 1965.
- Stanley, Amy Dru. *From Bondage to Contract: Wage Labor, Marriage, and the Market in the Age of Slave Emancipation*. New York: Cambridge, 1998.
- Stansell, Christine. *City of Women: Sex and Class in New York, 1789-1860*. New York: Knopf, 1986.
- Starobin, Robert S. *Industrial Slavery in the Old South*. New York: Oxford, 1970.
- Sutherland, Daniel E. *A Savage Conflict: The Decisive Role of Guerillas in the American Civil War*. Chapel Hill: North Carolina, 2009.
- Takaki, Ronald. "The Movement to Reopen the African Slave Trade in South Carolina," *South Carolina Historical Magazine* 66, No. 1 (Jan. 1965): 38-54.

- \_\_\_\_\_. *A Pro-Slavery Crusade: The Agitation to Reopen the African Slave Trade*. New York: The Free Press, 1971.
- Tatum, Georgia Lee. *Disloyalty in the Confederacy*. Chapel Hill: North Carolina, 1934.
- Taylor, George Rogers. *The Transportation Revolution, 1815-1860*. New York: Rinehart, 1951.
- Tenzer, Lawrence and A.D. Powell, "White Slavery, Maternal Descent, and the Politics of Slavery in the Antebellum United States." Paper presented at University of Nottingham Institute for the Study of Slavery, July/August 2004.
- Terrill, Tom E. et. al., "Eager Hands: Labor for Southern Textiles, 1850-1860," *Journal of Economic History* 36, No. 1 (Mar. 1976): 84-99.
- Thomas, Emory. *The Confederate Nation: 1861-1865*. New York: Harper & Row, 1979.
- Thompson, E.P. "Eighteenth-Century English Society: Class Struggle without Class?" *Social History* 3, No.2 (May 1978): 133-165.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Making of the English Working Class*. New York: Pantheon, 1963.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "The Moral Economy of the Crowd," in *Customs in Common*. London: Merlin, 1991.
- Thornton, J. Mills, III. *Politics and Power in a Slave Society: Alabama, 1800-1860*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana, 1978.
- Tracy, Susan J. *In the Master's Eye: Representations of Women, Blacks, and Poor Whites in Antebellum Southern Literature*. Amherst: Massachusetts, 1995.
- Trelease, Allen W. "Who Were the Scalawags?" *Journal of Southern History* 29 (Nov. 1963): 445-468.
- Tunnell, Ted. "Creating 'the Propaganda of History': Southern Editors and the Origins of Carpetbagger and Scalawag." *Journal of Southern History* 72, No. 4 (Nov. 2006): 789-822.
- Tyrrell, Ian R. "Drink and Temperance in the Antebellum South: An Overview and Interpretation." *Journal of Southern History* 48, No. 4 (Nov., 1982): 485-510.
- Walden, Donald Wayne. *The Southern Peasant: Poor Whites and the Yeoman Ideal*. Ph.D. Diss., University of Texas, 2000.
- Waldrep, Christopher. "Review of James P. Schmidt's *Free to Work: Labor Law, Emancipation, and Reconstruction*." *Journal of Southern History* 66, No.3 (Aug. 2000), 616-8.

- Waldrep, Christopher and Donald G. Nieman, eds. *Local Matters: Race, Crime, and Justice in the Nineteenth-Century South*. Athens: Georgia, 2001.
- Wallenstein, Peter. *From Slave South to New South: Public Policy in Nineteenth-Century Georgia*. Chapel Hill: North Carolina, 1987.
- Weatherington, Mark V. *Plain Folk's Fight: The Civil War and Reconstruction in Piney Woods Georgia*. Chapel Hill: North Carolina, 2005.
- Weisberger, Bernard A. "The Dark and Bloody Ground of Reconstruction Historiography," *Journal of Southern History* 25, No. 4 (Nov. 1959), 427-447.
- Weitz, Mark A. *A Higher Duty: Desertion among Georgia Troops during the Civil War*. Lincoln: Nebraska, 2000.
- Wells, Jonathan Daniel. *The Origins of the Southern Middle Class, 1800-1861*. Chapel Hill: North Carolina, 2006.
- West, Stephen A. *From Yeomen to Redneck in the South Carolina Upcountry, 1850-1915*. Charlottesville: Virginia, 2008.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Minute Men, Yeomen, and the Mobilization for Secession in the South Carolina Upcountry." *Journal of Southern History* 71, No.1 (Feb. 2005): 75-104.
- Wetta, Frank J. "'Bulldozing the Scalawags': Some Examples of the Persecution of Southern White Republicans in Louisiana during Reconstruction," *Louisiana History* 21, No. 1 (Winter, 1980): 43-58.
- White, Deborah Gray. *Ar'n't I a Woman?: Female Slaves in the Plantation South*. New York: Norton, 1985.
- Wiggins, Sarah Woolfork. *The Scalawag in Alabama Politics, 1865-1881*. (Tuscaloosa: Alabama, 1977).
- Wiley, Bell Irvin. *The Plain People of the Confederacy*. 1943; reprint, Columbia: South Carolina, 2000.
- Williams, David. *Bitterly Divided: The South's Inner Civil War*. New York: The New Press, 2008.
- Williams, Jack Kenny. *Vogues in Villany: Crime and Retribution in Ante-bellum South Carolina*. Columbia: South Carolina, 1959.
- Wish, Harvey, ed. *Antebellum Writings of George Fitzhugh and Hinton Rowan Helper on Slavery*. New York: Capricorn, 1960.

- \_\_\_\_\_. "The Revival of the African Slave Trade in the United States, 1856-1860," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 27, No. 4 (Mar. 1941): 569-588.
- Witt, John Fabian. "Review Essay: Narrating Bankruptcy/Narrating Risk," *Northwestern University Law Review* 8, No. 1 (2003): 303-333.
- Wood, Peter. *Black Majority: Negroes in South Carolina from 1670 through the Stono Rebellion*. New York: Norton, 1974.
- Woodward, C. Vann. *Origins of the New South, 1877-1913*. 1951; reprint, Baton Rouge: Louisiana, 1999.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Strange Career of Jim Crow*. 1955; reprint, New York: Oxford, 2001.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Tom Watson: Agrarian Rebel*. 1938; reprint, New York: Oxford, 1970.
- Wooster, Ralph A. *The People in Power: Courthouse and Statehouse in the Lower South, 1850-60*. Knoxville: Tennessee, 1969.
- Wray, Matt. *Not Quite White: White Trash and the Boundaries of Whiteness*. Durham: Duke, 2006.
- Wray, Matt and Annalee Newitz, eds., *White Trash: Race and Class in America*. New York: Routledge, 1997.
- Wright, Gavin. *Old South, New South: Revolutions in the Southern Economy Since the Civil War*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana, 1986.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Political Economy of the Cotton South Households, Markets, and Wealth in the Nineteenth Century*. New York: Norton, 1978.
- Wyatt-Brown, Bertram. *Honor and Violence in the Old South*. New York: Oxford, 1986.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Religion and the Formation of Folk Culture: Poor Whites of the Old South," in *The Americanization of the Gulf Coast, 1803-1850*, ed. Lucius F. Ellsworth. Pensacola: State of Florida, Department of State; Historical Pensacola Preservation Board, 1972.
- Yeamans, Robin. "Constitutional Attacks on Vagrancy Laws." *Stanford Law Review* 20, No. 4 (April 1968): 782-793.